

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

CHAPTER ONE

THE BOY WHO LIVED

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.

Mr. Dursley was the director of a firm called Grunnings, which made drills. He was a big, beefy man with hardly any neck, although he did have a very large mustache. Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors. The Dursleys had a small son called Dudley and in their opinion there was no finer boy anywhere.

The Dursleys had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret, and their greatest fear was that somebody would discover it. They didn't think they could bear it if anyone found out about the Potters. Mrs. Potter was Mrs. Dursley's sister, but they hadn't met for several years; in fact, Mrs. Dursley pretended she didn't have a sister, because her sister and her good-for-nothing husband were as unDursleyish as it was possible to be. The Dursleys shuddered to think what the neighbors would say if the Potters arrived in the street. The Dursleys knew that the Potters had a small son, too, but they had never even seen him. This boy was another good reason for keeping the Potters away; they didn't want Dudley mixing with a child like that.

When Mr. and Mrs. Dursley woke up on the dull, gray Tuesday our story starts, there was nothing about the cloudy sky outside to suggest that strange and mysterious things would soon be happening all over the country. Mr. Dursley hummed as he picked out his most boring tie for work, and Mrs. Dursley gossiped away happily as she wrestled a screaming Dudley into his high chair.

None of them noticed a large, tawny owl flutter past the window.

At half past eight, Mr. Dursley picked up his briefcase, pecked Mrs. Dursley on the cheek, and tried to kiss Dudley good-bye but missed, because Dudley was now having a tantrum and throwing his cereal at the walls. "Little tyke," chortled Mr. Dursley as he left the house. He got into his car and backed out of number four's drive.

It was on the corner of the street that he noticed the first sign of something peculiar -- a cat reading a map. For a second, Mr. Dursley didn't realize what he had seen -- then he jerked his head around to look again. There was a tabby cat standing on the corner of Privet Drive, but there wasn't a map in sight. What could he have been thinking of? It must have been a trick of the light. Mr. Dursley blinked and stared at the cat. It stared back. As Mr. Dursley drove around the corner and up the road, he watched the cat in his mirror. It was now reading the sign that said Privet Drive -- no, looking at the sign; cats couldn't read maps or signs. Mr. Dursley gave himself a little shake and put the cat out of his mind. As he drove toward town he thought of nothing except a large order of drills he was hoping to get that day.

But on the edge of town, drills were driven out of his mind by something else. As he sat in the usual morning traffic jam, he couldn't help noticing that there seemed to be a lot of strangely dressed people about. People in cloaks. Mr. Dursley couldn't bear people who dressed in funny clothes -- the getups you saw on young people! He supposed this was some stupid new fashion. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and his eyes fell on a huddle of these weirdos standing quite close by. They were whispering excitedly together. Mr. Dursley was enraged to see that a couple of them weren't young at all; why, that man had to be older than he was, and wearing an emerald-green cloak! The nerve of him! But then it struck Mr. Dursley that this was probably some silly stunt -- these people were obviously collecting for something... yes, that would be it. The traffic moved on and a few minutes later, Mr. Dursley arrived in the Grunnings parking lot, his mind back on drills.

Mr. Dursley always sat with his back to the window in his office on the ninth floor. If he hadn't, he might have found it harder to concentrate on drills that morning. He didn't see the owls swooping past in broad daylight, though people down in the street did; they pointed and gazed open-mouthed as owl after owl sped overhead. Most of them had never seen an owl even at nighttime. Mr. Dursley, however, had a perfectly normal, owl-free morning. He yelled at five different people. He made several important telephone calls and shouted a bit more. He was in a very good mood until lunchtime, when he thought he'd stretch his legs and walk across the road to buy himself a bun from the bakery.

He'd forgotten all about the people in cloaks until he passed a group of them next to the baker's. He eyed them angrily as he passed. He didn't know why, but they made him uneasy. This bunch were whispering excitedly, too, and he couldn't see a single collecting tin. It was on his way back past them, clutching a large doughnut in a bag, that he caught a few words of what they were saying.

"The Potters, that's right, that's what I heard yes, their son, Harry"

Mr. Dursley stopped dead. Fear flooded him. He looked back at the whisperers as if he wanted to say something to them, but thought better of it.

He dashed back across the road, hurried up to his office, snapped at his secretary not to disturb him, seized his telephone, and had almost finished dialing his home number when he changed his mind. He put the receiver back down and stroked his mustache, thinking... no, he was being stupid. Potter wasn't such an unusual name. He was sure there were lots of people called Potter who had a son called Harry. Come to think of it, he wasn't even sure his nephew was called Harry. He'd never even seen the boy. It might have been Harvey. Or Harold. There was no point in worrying Mrs. Dursley; she always got so upset at any mention of her sister. He didn't blame her -- if he'd had a sister like that... but all the same, those people in cloaks...

He found it a lot harder to concentrate on drills that afternoon and when he left the building at five o'clock, he was still so worried that he walked straight into someone just outside the door.

"Sorry," he grunted, as the tiny old man stumbled and almost fell. It was a few seconds before Mr. Dursley realized that the man was wearing a violet cloak. He didn't seem at all upset at being almost knocked to the ground. On the contrary, his face split into a wide smile and he said in a squeaky voice that made passersby stare, "Don't be sorry, my dear sir,

for nothing could upset me today! Rejoice, for You-Know-Who has gone at last! Even Muggles like yourself should be celebrating, this happy, happy day!"

And the old man hugged Mr. Dursley around the middle and walked off.

Mr. Dursley stood rooted to the spot. He had been hugged by a complete stranger. He also thought he had been called a Muggle, whatever that was. He was rattled. He hurried to his car and set off for home, hoping he was imagining things, which he had never hoped before, because he didn't approve of imagination.

As he pulled into the driveway of number four, the first thing he saw -- and it didn't improve his mood -- was the tabby cat he'd spotted that morning. It was now sitting on his garden wall. He was sure it was the same one; it had the same markings around its eyes.

"Shoo!" said Mr. Dursley loudly. The cat didn't move. It just gave him a stern look. Was this normal cat behavior? Mr. Dursley wondered. Trying to pull himself together, he let himself into the house. He was still determined not to mention anything to his wife.

Mrs. Dursley had had a nice, normal day. She told him over dinner all about Mrs. Next Door's problems with her daughter and how Dudley had learned a new word ("Won't!"). Mr. Dursley tried to act normally. When Dudley had been put to bed, he went into the living room in time to catch the last report on the evening news:

"And finally, bird-watchers everywhere have reported that the nation's owls have been behaving very unusually today. Although owls normally hunt at night and are hardly ever seen in daylight, there have been hundreds of sightings of these birds flying in every direction since sunrise. Experts are unable to explain why the owls have suddenly changed their sleeping pattern." The newscaster allowed himself a grin. "Most mysterious. And now, over to Jim McGuffin with the weather. Going to be any more showers of owls tonight, Jim?"

"Well, Ted," said the weatherman, "I don't know about that, but it's not only the owls that have been acting oddly today. Viewers as far apart as Kent, Yorkshire, and Dundee have been phoning in to tell me that instead of the rain I promised yesterday, they've had a downpour of shooting stars! Perhaps people have been celebrating Bonfire Night early -- it's not until next week, folks! But I can promise a wet night tonight."

Mr. Dursley sat frozen in his armchair. Shooting stars all over Britain? Owls flying by daylight? Mysterious people in cloaks all over the place? And a whisper, a whisper about the Potters...

Mrs. Dursley came into the living room carrying two cups of tea. It was no good. He'd have to say something to her. He cleared his throat nervously. "Er -- Petunia, dear -- you haven't heard from your sister lately, have you?"

As he had expected, Mrs. Dursley looked shocked and angry. After all, they normally pretended she didn't have a sister.

"No," she said sharply. "Why?"

"Funny stuff on the news," Mr. Dursley mumbled. "Owls... shooting stars... and there were a lot of funny-looking people in town today..."

"So?" snapped Mrs. Dursley.

"Well, I just thought... maybe... it was something to do with... you know... her crowd."

Mrs. Dursley sipped her tea through pursed lips. Mr. Dursley wondered whether he dared tell her he'd heard the name "Potter." He decided he didn't dare. Instead he said, as casually as he could, "Their son -- he'd be about Dudley's age now, wouldn't he?"

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Dursley stiffly.

"What's his name again? Howard, isn't it?"

"Harry. Nasty, common name, if you ask me."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Dursley, his heart sinking horribly. "Yes, I quite agree."

He didn't say another word on the subject as they went upstairs to bed. While Mrs. Dursley was in the bathroom, Mr. Dursley crept to the bedroom window and peered down into the front garden. The cat was still there. It was staring down Privet Drive as though it were waiting for something.

Was he imagining things? Could all this have anything to do with the Potters? If it did... if it got out that they were related to a pair of -- well, he didn't think he could bear it.

The Dursleys got into bed. Mrs. Dursley fell asleep quickly but Mr. Dursley lay awake, turning it all over in his mind. His last, comforting thought before he fell asleep was that even if the Potters were involved, there was no reason for them to come near him and Mrs. Dursley. The Potters knew very well what he and Petunia thought about them and their kind.... He couldn't see how he and Petunia could get mixed up in anything that might be going on -- he yawned and turned over -- it couldn't affect them....

How very wrong he was.

Mr. Dursley might have been drifting into an uneasy sleep, but the cat on the wall outside was showing no sign of sleepiness. It was sitting as still as a statue, its eyes fixed unblinkingly on the far corner of Privet Drive. It didn't so much as quiver when a car door slammed on the next street, nor when two owls swooped overhead. In fact, it was nearly midnight before the cat moved at all.

A man appeared on the corner the cat had been watching, appeared so suddenly and silently you'd have thought he'd just popped out of the ground. The cat's tail twitched and its eyes narrowed.

Nothing like this man had ever been seen on Privet Drive. He was tall, thin, and very old, judging by the silver of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to tuck into his belt. He was wearing long robes, a purple cloak that swept the ground, and high-heeled, buckled boots. His blue eyes were light, bright, and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles and his nose was very long and crooked, as though it had been broken at least twice. This man's name was Albus Dumbledore.

Albus Dumbledore didn't seem to realize that he had just arrived in a street where everything from his name to his boots was unwelcome. He was busy rummaging in his cloak, looking for something. But he did seem to realize he was being watched, because he looked up suddenly at the cat, which was still staring at him from the other end of the street. For some reason, the sight of the cat seemed to amuse him. He chuckled and muttered, "I should have known."

He found what he was looking for in his inside pocket. It seemed to be a silver cigarette lighter. He flicked it open, held it up in the air, and clicked it. The nearest street lamp went out with a little pop. He clicked it again -- the next lamp flickered into darkness. Twelve times he clicked the Put-Outer, until the only lights left on the whole street were two tiny pinpricks in the distance, which were the eyes of the cat watching him. If anyone looked out of their window now, even beady-eyed Mrs. Dursley, they wouldn't be able to see anything that was happening down on the pavement. Dumbledore slipped the Put-Outer back inside his cloak and set off down the street toward number four, where he sat down on the wall next to the cat. He didn't look at it, but after a moment he spoke to it.

"Fancy seeing you here, Professor McGonagall."

He turned to smile at the tabby, but it had gone. Instead he was smiling at a rather severe-looking woman who was wearing square glasses exactly the shape of the markings the cat had had around its eyes. She, too, was wearing a cloak, an emerald one. Her black hair was drawn into a tight bun. She looked distinctly ruffled.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked.

"My dear Professor, I 've never seen a cat sit so stiffly."

"You'd be stiff if you'd been sitting on a brick wall all day," said Professor McGonagall.

"All day? When you could have been celebrating? I must have passed a dozen feasts and parties on my way here."

Professor McGonagall sniffed angrily.

"Oh yes, everyone's celebrating, all right," she said impatiently. "You'd think they'd be a bit more careful, but no -- even the Muggles have noticed something's going on. It was on their news." She jerked her head back at the Dursleys' dark living-room window. "I heard it. Flocks of owls... shooting stars.... Well, they're not completely stupid. They were bound to notice something. Shooting stars down in Kent -- I'll bet that was Dedalus Diggle. He never had much sense."

"You can't blame them," said Dumbledore gently. "We've had precious little to celebrate for eleven years."

"I know that," said Professor McGonagall irritably. "But that's no reason to lose our heads. People are being downright careless, out on the streets in broad daylight, not even dressed in Muggle clothes, swapping rumors."

She threw a sharp, sideways glance at Dumbledore here, as though hoping he was going to tell her something, but he didn't, so she went on. "A fine thing it would be if, on the very day YouKnow-Who seems to have

disappeared at last, the Muggles found out about us all. I suppose he really has gone, Dumbledore?"

"It certainly seems so," said Dumbledore. "We have much to be thankful for. Would you care for a lemon drop?"

"A what?"

"A lemon drop. They're a kind of Muggle sweet I'm rather fond of"

"No, thank you," said Professor McGonagall coldly, as though she didn't think this was the moment for lemon drops. "As I say, even if You-Know-Who has gone -"

"My dear Professor, surely a sensible person like yourself can call him by his name? All this 'You-Know-Who' nonsense -- for eleven years I have been trying to persuade people to call him by his proper name: Voldemort." Professor McGonagall flinched, but Dumbledore, who was unsticking two lemon drops, seemed not to notice. "It all gets so confusing if we keep saying 'You-Know-Who.' I have never seen any reason to be frightened of saying Voldemort's name.

"I know you haven't, said Professor McGonagall, sounding half exasperated, half admiring. "But you're different. Everyone knows you're the only one You-Know-oh, all right, Voldemort, was frightened of."

"You flatter me," said Dumbledore calmly. "Voldemort had powers I will never have."

"Only because you're too -- well -- noble to use them."

"It's lucky it's dark. I haven't blushed so much since Madam Pomfrey told me she liked my new earmuffs."

Professor McGonagall shot a sharp look at Dumbledore and said, "The owls are nothing next to the rumors that are flying around. You know what everyone's saying? About why he's disappeared? About what finally stopped him?"

It seemed that Professor McGonagall had reached the point she was most anxious to discuss, the real reason she had been waiting on a cold, hard wall all day, for neither as a cat nor as a woman had she fixed Dumbledore with such a piercing stare as she did now. It was plain that whatever "everyone" was saying, she was not going to believe it until Dumbledore told her it was true. Dumbledore, however, was choosing another lemon drop and did not answer.

"What they're saying," she pressed on, "is that last night Voldemort turned up in Godric's Hollow. He went to find the Potters. The rumor is that Lily and James Potter are -- are -- that they're -- dead."

Dumbledore bowed his head. Professor McGonagall gasped.

"Lily and James... I can't believe it... I didn't want to believe it... Oh, Albus..."

Dumbledore reached out and patted her on the shoulder. "I know... I know..." he said heavily.

Professor McGonagall's voice trembled as she went on. "That's not all.

They're saying he tried to kill the Potter's son, Harry. But -- he couldn't. He couldn't kill that little boy. No one knows why, or how, but they're saying that when he couldn't kill Harry Potter, Voldemort's power somehow broke -- and that's why he's gone.

Dumbledore nodded glumly.

"It's -- it's true?" faltered Professor McGonagall. "After all he's done... all the people he's killed... he couldn't kill a little boy? It's just astounding... of all the things to stop him... but how in the name of heaven did Harry survive?"

"We can only guess," said Dumbledore. "We may never know."

Professor McGonagall pulled out a lace handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes beneath her spectacles. Dumbledore gave a great sniff as he took a golden watch from his pocket and examined it. It was a very odd watch. It had twelve hands but no numbers; instead, little planets were moving around the edge. It must have made sense to Dumbledore, though, because he put it back in his pocket and said, "Hagrid's late. I suppose it was he who told you I'd be here, by the way?"

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall. "And I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you're here, of all places?"

"I've come to bring Harry to his aunt and uncle. They're the only family he has left now."

"You don't mean -- you can't mean the people who live here?" cried Professor McGonagall, jumping to her feet and pointing at number four. "Dumbledore -- you can't. I've been watching them all day. You couldn't find two people who are less like us. And they've got this son -- I saw him kicking his mother all the way up the street, screaming for sweets. Harry Potter come and live here!"

"It's the best place for him," said Dumbledore firmly. "His aunt and uncle will be able to explain everything to him when he's older. I've written them a letter."

"A letter?" repeated Professor McGonagall faintly, sitting back down on the wall. "Really, Dumbledore, you think you can explain all this in a letter? These people will never understand him! He'll be famous -- a legend -- I wouldn't be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter day in the future -- there will be books written about Harry -- every child in our world will know his name!"

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, looking very seriously over the top of his half-moon glasses. "It would be enough to turn any boy's head. Famous before he can walk and talk! Famous for something he won't even remember! CarA you see how much better off he'll be, growing up away from all that until he's ready to take it?"

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, changed her mind, swallowed, and then said, "Yes -- yes, you're right, of course. But how is the boy getting here, Dumbledore?" She eyed his cloak suddenly as though she thought he might be hiding Harry underneath it.

"Hagrid's bringing him."

"You think it -- wise -- to trust Hagrid with something as important as

this?"

I would trust Hagrid with my life," said Dumbledore.

"I'm not saying his heart isn't in the right place," said Professor McGonagall grudgingly, "but you can't pretend he's not careless. He does tend to -- what was that?"

A low rumbling sound had broken the silence around them. It grew steadily louder as they looked up and down the street for some sign of a headlight; it swelled to a roar as they both looked up at the sky -- and a huge motorcycle fell out of the air and landed on the road in front of them.

If the motorcycle was huge, it was nothing to the man sitting astride it. He was almost twice as tall as a normal man and at least five times as wide. He looked simply too big to be allowed, and so wild - long tangles of bushy black hair and beard hid most of his face, he had hands the size of trash can lids, and his feet in their leather boots were like baby dolphins. In his vast, muscular arms he was holding a bundle of blankets.

"Hagrid," said Dumbledore, sounding relieved. "At last. And where did you get that motorcycle?"

"Borrowed it, Professor Dumbledore, sit," said the giant, climbing carefully off the motorcycle as he spoke. "Young Sirius Black lent it to me. I've got him, sir."

"No problems, were there?"

"No, sir -- house was almost destroyed, but I got him out all right before the Muggles started swarmin' around. He fell asleep as we was flyin' over Bristol."

Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall bent forward over the bundle of blankets. Inside, just visible, was a baby boy, fast asleep. Under a tuft of jet-black hair over his forehead they could see a curiously shaped cut, like a bolt of lightning.

"Is that where -?" whispered Professor McGonagall.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "He'll have that scar forever."

"Couldn't you do something about it, Dumbledore?"

"Even if I could, I wouldn't. Scars can come in handy. I have one myself above my left knee that is a perfect map of the London Underground. Well -- give him here, Hagrid -- we'd better get this over with."

Dumbledore took Harry in his arms and turned toward the Dursleys' house.

"Could I -- could I say good-bye to him, sir?" asked Hagrid. He bent his great, shaggy head over Harry and gave him what must have been a very scratchy, whiskery kiss. Then, suddenly, Hagrid let out a howl like a wounded dog.

"Shhh!" hissed Professor McGonagall, "you'll wake the Muggles!"

"S-s-sorry," sobbed Hagrid, taking out a large, spotted handkerchief and

burying his face in it. "But I c-c-can't stand it -- Lily an' James dead -- an' poor little Harry off ter live with Muggles --"

"Yes, yes, it's all very sad, but get a grip on yourself, Hagrid, or we'll be found," Professor McGonagall whispered, patting Hagrid gingerly on the arm as Dumbledore stepped over the low garden wall and walked to the front door. He laid Harry gently on the doorstep, took a letter out of his cloak, tucked it inside Harry's blankets, and then came back to the other two. For a full minute the three of them stood and looked at the little bundle; Hagrid's shoulders shook, Professor McGonagall blinked furiously, and the twinkling light that usually shone from Dumbledore's eyes seemed to have gone out.

"Well," said Dumbledore finally, "that's that. We've no business staying here. We may as well go and join the celebrations."

"Yeah," said Hagrid in a very muffled voice, "I'll be takin' Sirius his bike back. G'night, Professor McGonagall -- Professor Dumbledore, sir."

Wiping his streaming eyes on his jacket sleeve, Hagrid swung himself onto the motorcycle and kicked the engine into life; with a roar it rose into the air and off into the night.

"I shall see you soon, I expect, Professor McGonagall," said Dumbledore, nodding to her. Professor McGonagall blew her nose in reply.

Dumbledore turned and walked back down the street. On the corner he stopped and took out the silver Put-Outer. He clicked it once, and twelve balls of light sped back to their street lamps so that Privet Drive glowed suddenly orange and he could make out a tabby cat slinking around the corner at the other end of the street. He could just see the bundle of blankets on the step of number four.

"Good luck, Harry," he murmured. He turned on his heel and with a swish of his cloak, he was gone.

A breeze ruffled the neat hedges of Privet Drive, which lay silent and tidy under the inky sky, the very last place you would expect astonishing things to happen. Harry Potter rolled over inside his blankets without waking up. One small hand closed on the letter beside him and he slept on, not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous, not knowing he would be woken in a few hours' time by Mrs. Dursley's scream as she opened the front door to put out the milk bottles, nor that he would spend the next few weeks being prodded and pinched by his cousin Dudley... He couldn't know that at this very moment, people meeting in secret all over the country were holding up their glasses and saying in hushed voices: "To Harry Potter -- the boy who lived!"

CHAPTER TWO

THE VANISHING GLASS

Nearly ten years had passed since the Dursleys had woken up to find their nephew on the front step, but Privet Drive had hardly changed at all. The sun rose on the same tidy front gardens and lit up the brass number four on the Dursleys' front door; it crept into their living room, which was almost exactly the same as it had been on the night when Mr. Dursley had seen that fateful news report about the owls. Only the

photographs on the mantelpiece really showed how much time had passed. Ten years ago, there had been lots of pictures of what looked like a large pink beach ball wearing different-colored bonnets -- but Dudley Dursley was no longer a baby, and now the photographs showed a large blond boy riding his first bicycle, on a carousel at the fair, playing a computer game with his father, being hugged and kissed by his mother. The room held no sign at all that another boy lived in the house, too.

Yet Harry Potter was still there, asleep at the moment, but not for long. His Aunt Petunia was awake and it was her shrill voice that made the first noise of the day.

"Up! Get up! Now!"

Harry woke with a start. His aunt rapped on the door again.

"Up!" she screeched. Harry heard her walking toward the kitchen and then the sound of the frying pan being put on the stove. He rolled onto his back and tried to remember the dream he had been having. It had been a good one. There had been a flying motorcycle in it. He had a funny feeling he'd had the same dream before.

His aunt was back outside the door.

"Are you up yet?" she demanded.

"Nearly," said Harry.

"Well, get a move on, I want you to look after the bacon. And don't you dare let it burn, I want everything perfect on Duddy's birthday."

Harry groaned.

"What did you say?" his aunt snapped through the door.

"Nothing, nothing..."

Dudley's birthday -- how could he have forgotten? Harry got slowly out of bed and started looking for socks. He found a pair under his bed and, after pulling a spider off one of them, put them on. Harry was used to spiders, because the cupboard under the stairs was full of them, and that was where he slept.

When he was dressed he went down the hall into the kitchen. The table was almost hidden beneath all Dudley's birthday presents. It looked as though Dudley had gotten the new computer he wanted, not to mention the second television and the racing bike. Exactly why Dudley wanted a racing bike was a mystery to Harry, as Dudley was very fat and hated exercise -- unless of course it involved punching somebody. Dudley's favorite punching bag was Harry, but he couldn't often catch him. Harry didn't look it, but he was very fast.

Perhaps it had something to do with living in a dark cupboard, but Harry had always been small and skinny for his age. He looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was because all he had to wear were old clothes of Dudley's, and Dudley was about four times bigger than he was. Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose. The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that

was shaped like a bolt of lightning. He had had it as long as he could remember, and the first question he could ever remember asking his Aunt Petunia was how he had gotten it.

"In the car crash when your parents died," she had said. "And don't ask questions."

Don't ask questions -- that was the first rule for a quiet life with the Dursleys.

Uncle Vernon entered the kitchen as Harry was turning over the bacon.

"Comb your hair!" he barked, by way of a morning greeting.

About once a week, Uncle Vernon looked over the top of his newspaper and shouted that Harry needed a haircut. Harry must have had more haircuts than the rest of the boys in his class put

together, but it made no difference, his hair simply grew that way -- all over the place.

Harry was frying eggs by the time Dudley arrived in the kitchen with his mother. Dudley looked a lot like Uncle Vernon. He had a large pink face, not much neck, small, watery blue eyes, and thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. Aunt Petunia often said that Dudley looked like a baby angel -- Harry often said that Dudley looked like a pig in a wig.

Harry put the plates of egg and bacon on the table, which was difficult as there wasn't much room. Dudley, meanwhile, was counting his presents. His face fell.

"Thirty-six," he said, looking up at his mother and father. "That's two less than last year."

"Darling, you haven't counted Auntie Marge's present, see, it's here under this big one from Mommy and Daddy."

"All right, thirty-seven then," said Dudley, going red in the face. Harry, who could see a huge Dudley tantrum coming on, began wolfing down his bacon as fast as possible in case Dudley turned the table over.

Aunt Petunia obviously scented danger, too, because she said quickly, "And we'll buy you another two presents while we're out today. How's that, popkin? Two more presents. Is that all right?"

Dudley thought for a moment. It looked like hard work. Finally he said slowly, "So I'll have thirty ... thirty..."

"Thirty-nine, sweetums," said Aunt Petunia.

"Oh." Dudley sat down heavily and grabbed the nearest parcel. "All right then."

Uncle Vernon chuckled. "Little tyke wants his money's worth, just like his father. 'Atta boy, Dudley!" He ruffled Dudley's hair.

At that moment the telephone rang and Aunt Petunia went to answer it while Harry and Uncle Vernon watched Dudley unwrap the racing bike, a video camera, a remote control airplane, sixteen new computer games, and

a VCR. He was ripping the paper off a gold wristwatch when Aunt Petunia came back from the telephone looking both angry and worried.

"Bad news, Vernon," she said. "Mrs. Figg's broken her leg. She can't take him." She jerked her head in Harry's direction.

Dudley's mouth fell open in horror, but Harry's heart gave a leap. Every year on Dudley's birthday, his parents took him and a friend out for the day, to adventure parks, hamburger restaurants, or the movies. Every year, Harry was left behind with Mrs. Figg, a mad old lady who lived two streets away. Harry hated it there. The whole house smelled of cabbage and Mrs. Figg made him look at photographs of all the cats she'd ever owned.

"Now what?" said Aunt Petunia, looking furiously at Harry as though he'd planned this. Harry knew he ought to feel sorry that Mrs. Figg had broken her leg, but it wasn't easy when he reminded himself it would be a whole year before he had to look at Tibbles, Snowy, Mr. Paws, and Tufty again.

"We could phone Marge," Uncle Vernon suggested.

"Don't be silly, Vernon, she hates the boy."

The Dursleys often spoke about Harry like this, as though he wasn't there -- or rather, as though he was something very nasty that couldn't understand them, like a slug.

"What about what's-her-name, your friend -- Yvonne?"

"On vacation in Majorca," snapped Aunt Petunia.

"You could just leave me here," Harry put in hopefully (he'd be able to watch what he wanted on television for a change and maybe even have a go on Dudley's computer).

Aunt Petunia looked as though she'd just swallowed a lemon.

"And come back and find the house in ruins?" she snarled.

"I won't blow up the house," said Harry, but they weren't listening.

"I suppose we could take him to the zoo," said Aunt Petunia slowly, "... and leave him in the car...."

"That car's new, he's not sitting in it alone...."

Dudley began to cry loudly. In fact, he wasn't really crying -- it had been years since he'd really cried -- but he knew that if he screwed up his face and wailed, his mother would give him anything he wanted.

"Dinky Duddydums, don't cry, Mummy won't let him spoil your special day!" she cried, flinging her arms around him.

"I... don't... want... him... t-t-to come!" Dudley yelled between huge, pretend sobs. "He always sp- spoils everything!" He shot Harry a nasty grin through the gap in his mother's arms.

Just then, the doorbell rang -- "Oh, good Lord, they're here!" said Aunt Petunia frantically -- and a moment later, Dudley's best friend, Piers

Polkiss, walked in with his mother. Piers was a scrawny boy with a face like a rat. He was usually the one who held people's arms behind their backs while Dudley hit them. Dudley stopped pretending to cry at once.

Half an hour later, Harry, who couldn't believe his luck, was sitting in the back of the Dursleys' car with Piers and Dudley, on the way to the zoo for the first time in his life. His aunt and uncle hadn't been able to think of anything else to do with him, but before they'd left, Uncle Vernon had taken Harry aside.

"I'm warning you," he had said, putting his large purple face right up close to Harry's, "I'm warning you now, boy -- any funny business, anything at all -- and you'll be in that cupboard from now until Christmas."

"I'm not going to do anything," said Harry, "honestly..

But Uncle Vernon didn't believe him. No one ever did.

The problem was, strange things often happened around Harry and it was just no good telling the Dursleys he didn't make them happen.

Once, Aunt Petunia, tired of Harry coming back from the barbers looking as though he hadn't been at all, had taken a pair of kitchen scissors and cut his hair so short he was almost bald except for his bangs, which she left "to hide that horrible scar." Dudley had laughed himself silly at Harry, who spent a sleepless night imagining school the next day, where he was already laughed at for his baggy clothes and taped glasses. Next morning, however, he had gotten up to find his hair exactly as it had been before Aunt Petunia had sheared it off. He had been given a week in his cupboard for this, even though he had tried to explain that he couldn't explain how it had grown back so quickly.

Another time, Aunt Petunia had been trying to force him into a revolting old sweater of Dudley's (brown with orange puff balls) -- The harder she tried to pull it over his head, the smaller it seemed to become, until finally it might have fitted a hand puppet, but certainly wouldn't fit Harry. Aunt Petunia had decided it must have shrunk in the wash and, to his great relief, Harry wasn't punished.

On the other hand, he'd gotten into terrible trouble for being found on the roof of the school kitchens. Dudley's gang had been chasing him as usual when, as much to Harry's surprise as anyone else's, there he was sitting on the chimney. The Dursleys had received a very angry letter from Harry's headmistress telling them Harry had been climbing school buildings. But all he'd tried to do (as he shouted at Uncle Vernon through the locked door of his cupboard) was jump behind the big trash cans outside the kitchen doors. Harry supposed that the wind must have caught him in mid-jump.

But today, nothing was going to go wrong. It was even worth being with Dudley and Piers to be spending the day somewhere that wasn't school, his cupboard, or Mrs. Figg's cabbage-smelling living room.

While he drove, Uncle Vernon complained to Aunt Petunia. He liked to complain about things: people at work, Harry, the council, Harry, the bank, and Harry were just a few of his favorite subjects. This morning, it was motorcycles.

"... roaring along like maniacs, the young hoodlums," he said, as a

motorcycle overtook them.

"I had a dream about a motorcycle," said Harry, remembering suddenly. "It was flying."

Uncle Vernon nearly crashed into the car in front. He turned right around in his seat and yelled at Harry, his face like a gigantic beet with a mustache: "MOTORCYCLES DON'T FLY!"

Dudley and Piers sniggered.

"I know they don't," said Harry. "It was only a dream."

But he wished he hadn't said anything. If there was one thing the Dursleys hated even more than his asking questions, it was his talking about anything acting in a way it shouldn't, no matter if it was in a dream or even a cartoon -- they seemed to think he might get dangerous ideas.

It was a very sunny Saturday and the zoo was crowded with families. The Dursleys bought Dudley and Piers large chocolate ice creams at the entrance and then, because the smiling lady in the van had asked Harry what he wanted before they could hurry him away, they bought him a cheap lemon ice pop. It wasn't bad, either, Harry thought, licking it as they watched a gorilla scratching its head who looked remarkably like Dudley, except that it wasn't blond.

Harry had the best morning he'd had in a long time. He was careful to walk a little way apart from the Dursleys so that Dudley and Piers, who were starting to get bored with the animals by lunchtime, wouldn't fall back on their favorite hobby of hitting him. They ate in the zoo restaurant, and when Dudley had a tantrum because his knickerbocker glory didn't have enough ice cream on top, Uncle Vernon bought him another one and Harry was allowed to finish the first.

Harry felt, afterward, that he should have known it was all too good to last.

After lunch they went to the reptile house. It was cool and dark in there, with lit windows all along the walls. Behind the glass, all sorts of lizards and snakes were crawling and slithering over bits of wood and stone. Dudley and Piers wanted to see huge, poisonous cobras and thick, man-crushing pythons. Dudley quickly found the largest snake in the place. It could have wrapped its body twice around Uncle Vernon's car and crushed it into a trash can -- but at the moment it didn't look in the mood. In fact, it was fast asleep.

Dudley stood with his nose pressed against the glass, staring at the glistening brown coils.

"Make it move," he whined at his father. Uncle Vernon tapped on the glass, but the snake didn't budge.

"Do it again," Dudley ordered. Uncle Vernon rapped the glass smartly with his knuckles, but the snake just snoozed on.

"This is boring," Dudley moaned. He shuffled away.

Harry moved in front of the tank and looked intently at the snake. He wouldn't have been surprised if it had died of boredom itself -- no

company except stupid people drumming their fingers on the glass trying to disturb it all day long. It was worse than having a cupboard as a bedroom, where the only visitor was Aunt Petunia hammering on the door to wake you up; at least he got to visit the rest of the house.

The snake suddenly opened its beady eyes. Slowly, very slowly, it raised its head until its eyes were on a level with Harry's.

It winked.

Harry stared. Then he looked quickly around to see if anyone was watching. They weren't. He looked back at the snake and winked, too.

The snake jerked its head toward Uncle Vernon and Dudley, then raised its eyes to the ceiling. It gave Harry a look that said quite plainly:

"I get that all the time.

"I know," Harry murmured through the glass, though he wasn't sure the snake could hear him. "It must be really annoying."

The snake nodded vigorously.

"Where do you come from, anyway?" Harry asked.

The snake jabbed its tail at a little sign next to the glass. Harry peered at it.

Boa Constrictor, Brazil.

"Was it nice there?"

The boa constrictor jabbed its tail at the sign again and Harry read on: This specimen was bred in the zoo. "Oh, I see -- so you've never been to Brazil?"

As the snake shook its head, a deafening shout behind Harry made both of them jump.

"DUDLEY! MR. DURSLEY! COME AND LOOK AT THIS SNAKE! YOU WON'T BELIEVE WHAT IT'S DOING!"

Dudley came waddling toward them as fast as he could.

"Out of the way, you," he said, punching Harry in the ribs. Caught by surprise, Harry fell hard on the concrete floor. What came next happened so fast no one saw how it happened -- one second, Piers and Dudley were leaning right up close to the glass, the next, they had leapt back with howls of horror.

Harry sat up and gasped; the glass front of the boa constrictor's tank had vanished. The great snake was uncoiling itself rapidly, slithering out onto the floor. People throughout the reptile house screamed and started running for the exits.

As the snake slid swiftly past him, Harry could have sworn a low, hissing voice said, "Brazil, here I come.... Thanks, amigo."

The keeper of the reptile house was in shock.

"But the glass," he kept saying, "where did the glass go?"

The zoo director himself made Aunt Petunia a cup of strong, sweet tea while he apologized over and over again. Piers and Dudley could only gibber. As far as Harry had seen, the snake hadn't done anything except snap playfully at their heels as it passed, but by the time they were all back in Uncle Vernon's car, Dudley was telling them how it had nearly bitten off his leg, while Piers was swearing it had tried to squeeze him to death. But worst of all, for Harry at least, was Piers calming down enough to say, "Harry was talking to it, weren't you, Harry?"

Uncle Vernon waited until Piers was safely out of the house before starting on Harry. He was so angry he could hardly speak. He managed to say, "Go -- cupboard -- stay -- no meals," before he collapsed into a chair, and Aunt Petunia had to run and get him a large brandy.

Harry lay in his dark cupboard much later, wishing he had a watch. He didn't know what time it was and he couldn't be sure the Dursleys were asleep yet. Until they were, he couldn't risk sneaking to the kitchen for some food.

He'd lived with the Dursleys almost ten years, ten miserable years, as long as he could remember, ever since he'd been a baby and his parents had died in that car crash. He couldn't remember being in the car when his parents had died. Sometimes, when he strained his memory during long hours in his cupboard, he came up with a strange vision: a blinding flash of green light and a burning pain on his forehead. This, he supposed, was the crash, though he couldn't imagine where all the green light came from. He couldn't remember his parents at all. His aunt and uncle never spoke about them, and of course he was forbidden to ask questions. There were no photographs of them in the house.

When he had been younger, Harry had dreamed and dreamed of some unknown relation coming to take him away, but it had never happened; the Dursleys were his only family. Yet sometimes he thought (or maybe hoped) that strangers in the street seemed to know him. Very strange strangers they were, too. A tiny man in a violet top hat had bowed to him once while out shopping with Aunt Petunia and Dudley. After asking Harry furiously if he knew the man, Aunt Petunia had rushed them out of the shop without buying anything. A wild-looking old woman dressed all in green had waved merrily at him once on a bus. A bald man in a very long purple coat had actually shaken his hand in the street the other day and then walked away without a word. The weirdest thing about all these people was the way they seemed to vanish the second Harry tried to get a closer look.

At school, Harry had no one. Everybody knew that Dudley's gang hated that odd Harry Potter in his baggy old clothes and broken glasses, and nobody liked to disagree with Dudley's gang.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LETTERS FROM NO ONE

The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time

out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.

Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.

This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.

"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"

"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick." Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.

One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.

That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.

As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.

"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.

"Your new school uniform," she said.

Harry looked in the bowl again.

"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet."

"DotA be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old

things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished."

Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.

Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.

They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.

"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.

"Make Harry get it."

"Get the mail, Harry."

"Make Dudley get it."

"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley."

Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.

Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter

The Cupboard under the Stairs

4 Privet Drive

Little Whinging

Surrey

The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.

Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.

"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.

Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.

Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.

"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. --."

"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"

Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.

"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.

"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.

"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.

Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.

"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"

They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.

"I want to read that letter," he said loudly. "Want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine."

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.

Harry didn't move.

I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.

"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.

"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.

"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"

"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.

"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want --"

Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.

"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer... Yes, that's best... we won't do anything....

"But --"

"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"

That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.

"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"

"No one. it was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it."

"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it."

"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.

"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking... you're really getting a bit big for it... we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.

"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now."

The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.

From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there... I need that room... make him get out...."

Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.

Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in

shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.

When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive --'"

With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry.
"Dudley -- go -- just go."

Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.

The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.

He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --

Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!

Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.

I want --" he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes. Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.

"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up."

"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon."

"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.

Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.

On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.

"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.

On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.

"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today --"

Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one.

"Out! OUT!"

Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.

"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"

He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while. "Shake'em off... shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.

They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.

Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering....

They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.

"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk."

She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:

Mr. H. Potter

Room 17

Railview Hotel

Cokeworth

Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.

"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.

Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.

"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.

"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "

Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.

Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.

"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"

It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.

"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"

A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.

"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"

It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.

The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.

Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.

"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.

He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.

The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.

Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.

Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?

One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds... twenty ... ten... nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three... two... one...

BOOM.

The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE KEEPER OF THE KEYS

BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake. "Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.

There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands -- now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.

"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"

There was a pause. Then --

SMASH!

The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.

A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.

The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.

"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey..."

He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.

"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.

Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.

"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.

Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.

"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yet dad, but yeh've got yet mom's eyes."

Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.

I demand that you leave at once, sit!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"

"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.

Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.

"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right."

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.

Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"

The giant chuckled.

"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts."

He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.

"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind."

His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.

The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley."

The giant chuckled darkly.

"Yet great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry."

He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are."

The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.

Hagrid looked shocked.

"Sorry," Harry said quickly.

"Sony?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yet parents learned it all?"

"All what?" asked Harry.

"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"

He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.

"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"

Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.

"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff." But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world."

"What world?"

Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.

"DURSLEY!" he boomed.

Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble." Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.

"But yeh must know about yet mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous."

"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"

"Yeh don' know... yeh don' know..." Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.

"Yeh don' know what yeh are?" he said finally.

Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.

"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sit! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"

A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious

look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.

"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.

"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.

Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.

"Ah, go boil yet heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yet a wizard."

There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.

-- a what?" gasped Harry.

"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter."

Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.
Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall,

Deputy Headmistress

Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"

"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Given Harry his letter.

Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're Well.

Hagrid

Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.

Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.

"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.

"He's not going," he said.

Hagrid grunted.

"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.

"A what?" said Harry, interested.

"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like thern. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on."

"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"

"You knew?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"

"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that-that school-and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"

She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.

"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"

Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"

"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his

own story when every kid in our world knows his name!" "But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.

The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.

"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone 3 s gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'."

He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.

"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it...."

He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows --"

"Who? "

"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does."

"Why not?"

"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went... bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was..."

Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.

"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.

"Nah -can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches... terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.

"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before... probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em... maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an' --"

Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.

"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer

people yeh couldn't find -- anyway..."

"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a Powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived."

Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.

Hagrid was watching him sadly.

"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot..."

"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.

"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdos, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end --"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -I'm warning you -- one more word... "

In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.

"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.

Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.

"But what happened to Vol--, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"

"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see... he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?

"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don't believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don~ reckon they

could've done if he was comin' back.

"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right."

Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard."

To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.

"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"

Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it... every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry... chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach... dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back... and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?

Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.

"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts."

But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.

"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and --"

"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbledore--"

"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.

But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER," he thundered, "- INSULT- ALBUS- DUMBLEDORE- IN- FRONT- OF- ME!"

He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.

Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.

"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do."

He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.

"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job

"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.

"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore." "Why were you expelled?"

"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that."

He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.

"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' dormice in one o' the pockets."

CHAPTER FIVE

DIAGON ALLEY

Harry woke early the next morning. Although he could tell it was daylight, he kept his eyes shut tight.

"It was a dream, he told himself firmly. "I dreamed a giant called Hagrid came to tell me I was going to a school for wizards. When I open my eyes I'll be at home in my cupboard."

There was suddenly a loud tapping noise.

And there's Aunt Petunia knocking on the door, Harry thought, his heart sinking. But he still didn't open his eyes. It had been such a good dream.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"All right," Harry mumbled, "I'm getting up."

He sat up and Hagrid's heavy coat fell off him. The hut was full of sunlight, the storm was over, Hagrid himself was asleep on the collapsed sofa, and there was an owl rapping its claw on the window, a newspaper held in its beak.

Harry scrambled to his feet, so happy he felt as though a large balloon was swelling inside him. He went straight to the window and jerked it open. The owl swooped in and dropped the newspaper on top of Hagrid, who didn't wake up. The owl then fluttered onto the floor and began to attack Hagrid's coat.

"Don't do that."

Harry tried to wave the owl out of the way, but it snapped its beak fiercely at him and carried on savaging the coat.

"Hagrid!" said Harry loudly. "There's an owl

"Pay him," Hagrid grunted into the sofa.

"What?"

"He wants payin' fer deliverin' the paper. Look in the pockets." Hagrid's coat seemed to be made of nothing but pockets -- bunches of keys, slug pellets, balls of string, peppermint humbugs, teabags... finally, Harry pulled out a handful of strange-looking coins.

"Give him five Knuts," said Hagrid sleepily.

"Knuts?"

"The little bronze ones."

Harry counted out five little bronze coins, and the owl held out his leg so Harry could put the money into a small leather pouch tied to it. Then he flew off through the open window.

Hagrid yawned loudly, sat up, and stretched.

"Best be Off, Harry, lots ter do today, gotta get up ter London an' buy all yer stuff fer school."

Harry was turning over the wizard coins and looking at them. He had just thought of something that made him feel as though the happy balloon inside him had got a puncture.

"Um -- Hagrid?"

"Mm?" said Hagrid, who was pulling on his huge boots.

"I haven't got any money -- and you heard Uncle Vernon last night ... he won't pay for me to go and learn magic."

"Don't worry about that," said Hagrid, standing up and scratching his head. "D'yeh think yer parents didn't leave yeh anything?"

"But if their house was destroyed --"

"They didn' keep their gold in the house, boy! Nah, first stop fer us is Gringotts. Wizards' bank. Have a sausage, they're not bad cold -- an' I wouldn' say no teh a bit o' yer birthday cake, neither."

"Wizards have banks?"

"Just the one. Gringotts. Run by goblins."

Harry dropped the bit of sausage he was holding.

"Goblins?"

"Yeah -- so yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it, I'll tell yeh that. Never mess with goblins, Harry. Gringotts is the safest place in the world fer anything yeh want ter keep safe -- 'cept maybe Hogwarts. As a matter o' fact, I gotta visit Gringotts anyway. Fer Dumbledore. Hogwarts business." Hagrid drew himself up proudly. "He usually gets me ter do important stuff fer him. Fetchin' you gettin' things from Gringotts -- knows he can trust me, see."

"Got everythin'? Come on, then."

Harry followed Hagrid out onto the rock. The sky was quite clear now and the sea gleamed in the sunlight. The boat Uncle Vernon had hired was still there, with a lot of water in the bottom after the storm.

"How did you get here?" Harry asked, looking around for another boat.
"Flew," said Hagrid.

"Flew?"

"Yeah -- but we'll go back in this. Not s'pposed ter use magic now I've got yeh."

They settled down in the boat, Harry still staring at Hagrid, trying to imagine him flying.

"Seems a shame ter row, though," said Hagrid, giving Harry another of his sideways looks. "If I was ter -- er -- speed things up a bit, would yeh mind not mentionin' it at Hogwarts?"

"Of course not," said Harry, eager to see more magic. Hagrid pulled out the pink umbrella again, tapped it twice on the side of the boat, and they sped off toward land.

"Why would you be mad to try and rob Gringotts?" Harry asked.

"Spells -- enchantments," said Hagrid, unfolding his newspaper as he spoke. "They say there's dragons guardin' the highsecurity vaults. And then yeh gotta find yer way -- Gringotts is hundreds of miles under London, see. Deep under the Underground. Yeh'd die of hunger tryin' ter get out, even if yeh did manage ter get yer hands on summat."

Harry sat and thought about this while Hagrid read his newspaper, the Daily Prophet. Harry had learned from Uncle Vernon that people liked to be left alone while they did this, but it was very difficult, he'd never had so many questions in his life.

"Ministry o' Magic messin' things up as usual," Hagrid muttered, turning the page.

"There's a Ministry of Magic?" Harry asked, before he could stop himself.

"'Course," said Hagrid. "They wanted Dumbledore fer Minister, o' course, but he'd never leave Hogwarts, so old Cornelius Fudge got the job. Bungler if ever there was one. So he pelts Dumbledore with owls every morning, askin' fer advice."

"But what does a Ministry of Magic do?"

"Well, their main job is to keep it from the Muggles that there's still witches an' wizards up an' down the country."

"Why?"

"Why? Blimey, Harry, everyone'd be wantin' magic solutions to their problems. Nah, we're best left alone."

At this moment the boat bumped gently into the harbor wall. Hagrid folded up his newspaper, and they clambered up the stone steps onto the street.

Passersby stared a lot at Hagrid as they walked through the little town to the station. Harry couldn't blame them. Not only was Hagrid twice as tall as anyone else, he kept pointing at perfectly ordinary things like parking meters and saying loudly, "See that, Harry? Things these Muggles dream up, eh?"

"Hagrid," said Harry, panting a bit as he ran to keep up, "did you say there are dragons at Gringotts?"

"Well, so they say," said Hagrid. "Crikey, I'd like a dragon."

"You'd like one?"

"Wanted one ever since I was a kid -- here we go."

They had reached the station. There was a train to London in five minutes' time. Hagrid, who didn't understand "Muggle money," as he called it, gave the bills to Harry so he could buy their tickets.

People stared more than ever on the train. Hagrid took up two seats and sat knitting what looked like a canary-yellow circus tent.

"Still got yer letter, Harry?" he asked as he counted stitches. Harry took the parchment envelope out of his pocket.

"Good," said Hagrid. "There's a list there of everything yeh need."

Harry unfolded a second piece of paper he hadn't noticed the night before, and read:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)

2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear
3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)
4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)

Please note that all pupils' clothes should carry name tags

COURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:

The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1) by Miranda Goshawk

A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot

Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling

A Beginners' Guide to Transfiguration by Emetic Switch

One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore

Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by Newt Scamander

The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection by Quentin Trimble

OTHER EQUIPMENT

wand cauldron (pewter, standard size 2) set

glass or crystal phials

telescope set

brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad

PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS

"Can we buy all this in London?" Harry wondered aloud.

"If yeh know where to go," said Hagrid.

Harry had never been to London before. Although Hagrid seemed to know where he was going, he was obviously not used to getting there in an ordinary way. He got stuck in the ticket barrier on the Underground, and complained loudly that the seats were too small and the trains too slow.

"I don't know how the Muggles manage without magic," he said as they climbed a broken-down escalator that led up to a bustling road lined with shops.

Hagrid was so huge that he parted the crowd easily; all Harry had to do was keep close behind him. They passed book shops and music stores, hamburger restaurants and cinemas, but nowhere that looked as if it

could sell you a magic wand. This was just an ordinary street full of ordinary people. Could there really be piles of wizard gold buried miles beneath them? Were there really shops that sold spell books and broomsticks? Might this not all be some huge joke that the Dursleys had cooked up? If Harry hadn't known that the Dursleys had no sense of humor, he might have thought so; yet somehow, even though everything Hagrid had told him so far was unbelievable, Harry couldn't help trusting him.

"This is it," said Hagrid, coming to a halt, "the Leaky Cauldron. It's a famous place."

It was a tiny, grubby-looking pub. If Hagrid hadn't pointed it out, Harry wouldn't have noticed it was there. The people hurrying by didn't glance at it. Their eyes slid from the big book shop on one side to the record shop on the other as if they couldn't see the Leaky Cauldron at all. In fact, Harry had the most peculiar feeling that only he and Hagrid could see it. Before he could mention this, Hagrid had steered him inside.

For a famous place, it was very dark and shabby. A few old women were sitting in a corner, drinking tiny glasses of sherry. One of them was smoking a long pipe. A little man in a top hat was talking to the old bartender, who was quite bald and looked like a toothless walnut. The low buzz of chatter stopped when they walked in. Everyone seemed to know Hagrid; they waved and smiled at him, and the bartender reached for a glass, saying, "The usual, Hagrid?"

"Can't, Tom, I'm on Hogwarts business," said Hagrid, clapping his great hand on Harry's shoulder and making Harry's knees buckle.

"Good Lord," said the bartender, peering at Harry, "is this -- can this be --?"

The Leaky Cauldron had suddenly gone completely still and silent.

"Bless my soul," whispered the old bartender, "Harry Potter... what an honor."

He hurried out from behind the bar, rushed toward Harry and seized his hand, tears in his eyes.

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter, welcome back."

Harry didn't know what to say. Everyone was looking at him. The old woman with the pipe was puffing on it without realizing it had gone out. Hagrid was beaming.

Then there was a great scraping of chairs and the next moment, Harry found himself shaking hands with everyone in the Leaky Cauldron.

"Doris Crockford, Mr. Potter, can't believe I'm meeting you at last."

"So proud, Mr. Potter, I'm just so proud."

"Always wanted to shake your hand -- I'm all of a flutter."

"Delighted, Mr. Potter, just can't tell you, Diggle's the name, Dedalus

Diggle."

"I've seen you before!" said Harry, as Dedalus Diggle's top hat fell off in his excitement. "You bowed to me once in a shop."

"He remembers!" cried Dedalus Diggle, looking around at everyone. "Did you hear that? He remembers me!" Harry shook hands again and again -- Doris Crockford kept coming back for more.

A pale young man made his way forward, very nervously. One of his eyes was twitching.

"Professor Quirrell!" said Hagrid. "Harry, Professor Quirrell will be one of your teachers at Hogwarts."

"P-P-Potter," stammered Professor Quirrell, grasping Harry's hand, "c-can't t-tell you how p- pleased I am to meet you."

"What sort of magic do you teach, Professor Quirrell?"

"D-Defense Against the D-D-Dark Arts," muttered Professor Quirrell, as though he'd rather not think about it. "N-not that you n-need it, eh, P-P-Potter?" He laughed nervously. "You'll be g-getting all your equipment, I suppose? I've g-got to p-pick up a new b-book on vampires, m-myself." He looked terrified at the very thought.

But the others wouldn't let Professor Quirrell keep Harry to himself. It took almost ten minutes to get away from them all. At last, Hagrid managed to make himself heard over the babble.

"Must get on -- lots ter buy. Come on, Harry."

Doris Crockford shook Harry's hand one last time, and Hagrid led them through the bar and out into a small, walled courtyard, where there was nothing but a trash can and a few weeds.

Hagrid grinned at Harry.

"Told yeh, didn't I? Told yeh you was famous. Even Professor Quirrell was tremblin' ter meet yeh -- mind you, he's usually tremblin'."

"Is he always that nervous?"

"Oh, yeah. Poor bloke. Brilliant mind. He was fine while he was

studyin' outta books but then he took a year off ter get some firsthand experience.... They say he met vampires in the Black Forest, and there was a nasty bit o' trouble with a hag -- never been the same since. Scared of the students, scared of his own subject now, where's me umbrella?"

Vampires? Hags? Harry's head was swimming. Hagrid, meanwhile, was counting bricks in the wall above the trash can.

"Three up... two across he muttered. "Right, stand back, Harry."

He tapped the wall three times with the point of his umbrella.

The brick he had touched quivered -- it wriggled -- in the middle, a small hole appeared -- it grew wider and wider -- a second later they

were facing an archway large enough even for Hagrid, an archway onto a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight.

"Welcome," said Hagrid, "to Diagon Alley."

He grinned at Harry's amazement. They stepped through the archway. Harry looked quickly over his shoulder and saw the archway shrink instantly back into solid wall.

The sun shone brightly on a stack of cauldrons outside the nearest shop. Cauldrons -- All Sizes - Copper, Brass, Pewter, Silver -- Self-Stirring -- Collapsible, said a sign hanging over them.

"Yeah, you'll be needin' one," said Hagrid, "but we gotta get yer money first."

Harry wished he had about eight more eyes. He turned his head in every direction as they walked up the street, trying to look at everything at once: the shops, the things outside them, the people doing their shopping. A plump woman outside an Apothecary was shaking her head as they passed, saying, "Dragon liver, seventeen Sickles an ounce, they're mad...."

A low, soft hooting came from a dark shop with a sign saying Eeylops Owl Emporium -- Tawny, Screech, Barn, Brown, and Snowy. Several boys of about Harry's age had their noses pressed against a window with broomsticks in it. "Look," Harry heard one of them say, "the new Nimbus Two Thousand -- fastest ever --" There were shops selling robes, shops selling telescopes and strange silver instruments Harry had never seen before, windows stacked with barrels of bat spleens and eels' eyes, tottering piles of spell books, quills, and rolls of parchment, potion bottles, globes of the moon....

"Gringotts," said Hagrid.

They had reached a snowy white building that towered over the other little shops. Standing beside its burnished bronze doors, wearing a uniform of scarlet and gold, was -

"Yeah, that's a goblin," said Hagrid quietly as they walked up the white stone steps toward him. The goblin was about a head shorter than Harry. He had a swarthy, clever face, a pointed beard and, Harry noticed, very long fingers and feet. He bowed as they walked inside. Now they were facing a second pair of doors, silver this time, with words engraved upon them:

Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed,

For those who take, but do not earn,

Must pay most dearly in their turn.

So if you seek beneath our floors

A treasure that was never yours,

Thief, you have been warned, beware

of finding more than treasure there.

"Like I said, Yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it," said Hagrid.

A pair of goblins bowed them through the silver doors and they were in a vast marble hall. About a hundred more goblins were sitting on high stools behind a long counter, scribbling in large ledgers, weighing coins in brass scales, examining precious stones through eyeglasses. There were too many doors to count leading off the hall, and yet more goblins were showing people in and out of these. Hagrid and Harry made for the counter.

"Morning," said Hagrid to a free goblin. "We've come ter take some money outta Mr. Harry Potter's safe."

"You have his key, Sir?"

"Got it here somewhere," said Hagrid, and he started emptying his pockets onto the counter, scattering a handful of moldy dog biscuits over the goblin's book of numbers. The goblin wrinkled his nose. Harry watched the goblin on their right weighing a pile of rubies as big as glowing coals.

"Got it," said Hagrid at last, holding up a tiny golden key.

The goblin looked at it closely.

"That seems to be in order."

"An' I've also got a letter here from Professor Dumbledore," said Hagrid importantly, throwing out his chest. "It's about the YouKnow-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen."

The goblin read the letter carefully.

"Very well," he said, handing it back to Hagrid, "I will have Someone take you down to both vaults. Griphook!"

Griphook was yet another goblin. Once Hagrid had crammed all the dog biscuits back inside his pockets, he and Harry followed Griphook toward one of the doors leading off the hall.

"What's the You-Know-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen?" Harry asked.

"Can't tell yeh that," said Hagrid mysteriously. "Very secret. Hogwarts business. Dumbledore's trusted me. More'n my job's worth ter tell yeh that."

Griphook held the door open for them. Harry, who had expected more marble, was surprised. They were in a narrow stone passageway lit with flaming torches. It sloped steeply downward and there were little railway tracks on the floor. Griphook whistled and a small cart came hurtling up the tracks toward them. They climbed in -- Hagrid with some difficulty -- and were off.

At first they just hurtled through a maze of twisting passages. Harry tried to remember, left, right, right, left, middle fork, right, left, but it was impossible. The rattling cart seemed to know its own way, because Griphook wasn't steering.

Harry's eyes stung as the cold air rushed past them, but he kept them wide open. Once, he thought he saw a burst of fire at the end of a passage and twisted around to see if it was a dragon, but too late -- they plunged even deeper, passing an underground lake where huge stalactites and stalagmites grew from the ceiling and floor.

"I never know," Harry called to Hagrid over the noise of the cart, "what's the difference between a stalagmite and a stalactite?"

"Stalagmite's got an 'm' in it," said Hagrid. "An' don' ask me questions just now, I think I'm gonna be sick."

He did look very green, and when the cart stopped at last beside a small door in the passage wall, Hagrid got out and had to lean against the wall to stop his knees from trembling.

Griphook unlocked the door. A lot of green smoke came billowing out, and as it cleared, Harry gasped. Inside were mounds of gold coins. Columns of silver. Heaps of little bronze Knuts.

"All yours," smiled Hagrid.

All Harry's -- it was incredible. The Dursleys couldn't have known about this or they'd have had it from him faster than blinking. How often had they complained how much Harry cost them to keep? And all the time there had been a small fortune belonging to him, buried deep under London.

Hagrid helped Harry pile some of it into a bag.

"The gold ones are Galleons," he explained. "Seventeen silver Sickles to a Galleon and twenty-nine Knuts to a Sickle, it's easy enough. Right, that should be enough fer a couple o' terms, we'll keep the rest safe for yeh." He turned to Griphook. "Vault seven hundred and thirteen now, please, and can we go more slowly?"

"One speed only," said Griphook.

They were going even deeper now and gathering speed. The air became colder and colder as they hurtled round tight corners. They went rattling over an underground ravine, and Harry leaned over the side to try to see what was down at the dark bottom, but Hagrid groaned and pulled him back by the scruff of his neck.

Vault seven hundred and thirteen had no keyhole.

"Stand back," said Griphook importantly. He stroked the door gently with one of his long fingers and it simply melted away.

"If anyone but a Gringotts goblin tried that, they'd be sucked through the door and trapped in there," said Griphook.

"How often do you check to see if anyone's inside?" Harry asked.

"About once every ten years," said Griphook with a rather nasty grin.

Something really extraordinary had to be inside this top security vault, Harry was sure, and he leaned forward eagerly, expecting to see fabulous jewels at the very least -- but at first he thought it was empty. Then he noticed a grubby little package wrapped up in brown paper lying on

the floor. Hagrid picked it up and tucked it deep inside his coat. Harry longed to know what it was, but knew better than to ask.

"Come on, back in this infernal cart, and don't talk to me on the way back, it's best if I keep me mouth shut," said Hagrid.

One wild cart ride later they stood blinking in the sunlight outside Gringotts. Harry didn't know where to run first now that he had a bag full of money. He didn't have to know how many Galleons there were to a pound to know that he was holding more money than he'd had in his whole life -- more money than even Dudley had ever had.

"Might as well get yer uniform," said Hagrid, nodding toward Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. "Listen, Harry, would yeh mind if I slipped off fer a pick-me-up in the Leaky Cauldron? I hate them Gringotts carts." He did still look a bit sick, so Harry entered Madam Malkin's shop alone, feeling nervous.

Madam Malkin was a squat, smiling witch dressed all in mauve.

"Hogwarts, clear?" she said, when Harry started to speak. "Got the lot here -- another young man being fitted up just now, in fact. "

In the back of the shop, a boy with a pale, pointed face was standing on a footstool while a second witch pinned up his long black robes. Madam Malkin stood Harry on a stool next to him) slipped a long robe over his head, and began to pin it to the right length.

"Hello," said the boy, "Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"My father's next door buying my books and mother's up the street looking at wands," said the boy. He had a bored, drawling voice. "Then I'm going to drag them off to took at racing brooms. I don't see why first years can't have their own. I think I'll bully father into getting me one and I'll smuggle it in somehow."

Harry was strongly reminded of Dudley.

"Have you got your own broom?" the boy went on.

"No," said Harry.

"Play Quidditch at all?"

"No," Harry said again, wondering what on earth Quidditch could be.

"I do -- Father says it's a crime if I'm not picked to play for my house, and I must say, I agree. Know what house you'll be in yet?"

"No," said Harry, feeling more stupid by the minute.

"Well, no one really knows until they get there, do they, but I know I'll be in Slytherin, all our family have been -- imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?" "Mmm," said Harry, wishing he could say something a bit more interesting.

"I say, look at that man!" said the boy suddenly, nodding toward the front window. Hagrid was standing there, grinning at Harry and pointing

at two large ice creams to show he couldn't come in.

"That's Hagrid," said Harry, pleased to know something the boy didn't. "He works at Hogwarts."

"Oh," said the boy, "I've heard of him. He's a sort of servant, isn't he?"

"He's the gamekeeper," said Harry. He was liking the boy less and less every second.

"Yes, exactly. I heard he's a sort of savage -- lives in a hut on the school grounds and every now and then he gets drunk, tries to do magic, and ends up setting fire to his bed."

"I think he's brilliant," said Harry coldly.

"Do you?" said the boy, with a slight sneer. "Why is he with you? Where are your parents?"

"They're dead," said Harry shortly. He didn't feel much like going into the matter with this boy.

"Oh, sorry," said the other,. not sounding sorry at all. "But they were our kind, weren't they?"

"They were a witch and wizard, if that's what you mean."

"I really don't think they should let the other sort in, do you? They're just not the same, they've never been brought up to know our ways. Some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts until they get the letter, imagine. I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families. What's your surname, anyway?"

But before Harry could answer, Madam Malkin said, "That's you done, my dear," and Harry, not sorry for an excuse to stop talking to the boy, hopped down from the footstool.

"Well, I'll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose," said the drawling boy.

Harry was rather quiet as he ate the ice cream Hagrid had bought him (chocolate and raspberry with chopped nuts).

"What's up?" said Hagrid.

"Nothing," Harry lied. They stopped to buy parchment and quills. Harry cheered up a bit when he found a bottle of ink that changed color as you wrote. When they had left the shop, he said, "Hagrid, what's Quidditch?"

"Blimey, Harry, I keep forgettin' how little yeh know -- not knowin' about Quidditch!"

"Don't make me feel worse," said Harry. He told Hagrid about the pate boy in Madam Malkin's.

"--and he said people from Muggle families shouldn't even be allowed in."

"Yer not from a Muggle family. If he'd known who yeh were -- he's grown up knowin' yer name if his parents are wizardin' folk. You saw what

everyone in the Leaky Cauldron was like when they saw yeh. Anyway, what does he know about it, some o' the best I ever saw were the only ones with magic in 'em in a long line o' Muggles -- look at yer mum! Look what she had fer a sister!"

"So what is Quidditch?"

"It's our sport. Wizard sport. It's like -- like soccer in the Muggle world -- everyone follows Quidditch -- played up in the air on broomsticks and there's four balls -- sorta hard ter explain the rules." "And what are Slytherin and Hufflepuff?"

"School houses. There's four. Everyone says Hufflepuff are a lot o' duffers, but --"

"I bet I'm in Hufflepuff" said Harry gloomily.

"Better Hufflepuff than Slytherin," said Hagrid darkly. "There's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin. You-Know-Who was one."

"Vol-, sorry - You-Know-Who was at Hogwarts?"

"Years an' years ago," said Hagrid.

They bought Harry's school books in a shop called Flourish and Blotts where the shelves were stacked to the ceiling with books as large as paving stones bound in leather; books the size of postage stamps in covers of silk; books full of peculiar symbols and a few books with nothing in them at all. Even Dudley, who never read anything, would have been wild to get his hands on some of these. Hagrid almost had to drag Harry away from Curses and Countercurses (Bewitch Your Friends and Befuddle Your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue-Tying and Much, Much More) by Professor Vindictus Viridian.

"I was trying to find out how to curse Dudley."

"I'm not sayin' that's not a good idea, but yer not ter use magic in the Muggle world except in very special circumstances," said Hagrid. "An' anyway, yeh couldn't work any of them curses yet, yeh'll need a lot more study before yeh get ter that level."

Hagrid wouldn't let Harry buy a solid gold cauldron, either ("It says pewter on yer list"), but they got a nice set of scales for weighing potion ingredients and a collapsible brass telescope. Then they visited the Apothecary, which was fascinating enough to make up for its horrible smell, a mixture of bad eggs and rotted cabbages. Barrels of slimy stuff stood on the floor; jars of herbs, dried roots, and bright powders lined the walls; bundles of feathers, strings of fangs, and snarled claws hung from the ceiling. While Hagrid asked the man behind the counter for a supply of some basic potion ingredients for Harry, Harry himself examined silver unicorn horns at twenty-one Galleons each and minuscule, glittery-black beetle eyes (five Knuts a scoop).

Outside the Apothecary, Hagrid checked Harry's list again.

"Just yer wand left - A yeah, an' I still haven't got yeh a birthday present."

Harry felt himself go red.

"You don't have to --"

"I know I don't have to. Tell yeh what, I'll get yer animal. Not a toad, toads went outta fashion years ago, yeh'd be laughed at - an' I don't like cats, they make me sneeze. I'll get yer an owl. All the kids want owls, they're dead useful, carry yer mail an' everythin'."

Twenty minutes later, they left Eeylops Owl Emporium, which had been dark and full of rustling and flickering, jewel-bright eyes. Harry now carried a large cage that held a beautiful snowy owl, fast asleep with her head under her wing. He couldn't stop stammering his thanks, sounding just like Professor Quirrell.

"Don' mention it," said Hagrid gruffly. "Don' expect you've had a lotta presents from them Dursleys. Just Ollivanders left now - only place fer wands, Ollivanders, and yeh gotta have the best wand."

A magic wand... this was what Harry had been really looking forward to.

The last shop was narrow and shabby. Peeling gold letters over the door read Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C. A single wand lay on a faded purple cushion in the dusty window.

A tinkling bell rang somewhere in the depths of the shop as they stepped inside. It was a tiny place, empty except for a single, spindly chair that Hagrid sat on to wait. Harry felt strangely as though he had entered a very strict library; he swallowed a lot of new questions that had just occurred to him and looked instead at the thousands of narrow boxes piled neatly right up to the ceiling. For some reason, the back of his neck prickled. The very dust and silence in here seemed to tingle with some secret magic.

"Good afternoon," said a soft voice. Harry jumped. Hagrid must have jumped, too, because there was a loud crunching noise and he got quickly off the spindly chair.

An old man was standing before them, his wide, pale eyes shining like moons through the gloom of the shop.

"Hello," said Harry awkwardly.

"Ah yes," said the man. "Yes, yes. I thought I'd be seeing you soon. Harry Potter." It wasn't a question. "You have your mother's eyes. It seems only yesterday she was in here herself, buying her first wand. Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Nice wand for charm work."

Mr. Ollivander moved closer to Harry. Harry wished he would blink. Those silvery eyes were a bit creepy.

"Your father, on the other hand, favored a mahogany wand. Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for transfiguration. Well, I say your father favored it -- it's really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course."

Mr. Ollivander had come so close that he and Harry were almost nose to nose. Harry could see himself reflected in those misty eyes.

"And that's where..."

Mr. Ollivander touched the lightning scar on Harry's forehead with a long, white finger.

"I'm sorry to say I sold the wand that did it," he said softly.
"Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands... well, if I'd known what that wand was going out into the world to do...."

He shook his head and then, to Harry's relief, spotted Hagrid.

"Rubeus! Rubeus Hagrid! How nice to see you again.... Oak, sixteen inches, rather bendy, wasn't it?"

"It was, sir, yes," said Hagrid.

"Good wand, that one. But I suppose they snapped it in half when you got expelled?" said Mr. Ollivander, suddenly stern.

"Er -- yes, they did, yes," said Hagrid, shuffling his feet. "I've still got the pieces, though," he added brightly.

"But you don't use them?" said Mr. Ollivander sharply.

"Oh, no, sit," said Hagrid quickly. Harry noticed he gripped his pink umbrella very tightly as he spoke.

"Hmmm," said Mr. Ollivander, giving Hagrid a piercing look. "Well, now -- Mr. Potter. Let me see." He pulled a long tape measure with silver markings out of his pocket. "Which is your wand arm?"

"Er -- well, I'm right-handed," said Harry.

"Hold out your arm. That's it." He measured Harry from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round his head. As he measured, he said, "Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Mr. Potter. We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard's wand."

Harry suddenly realized that the tape measure, which was measuring between his nostrils, was doing this on its own. Mr. Ollivander was flitting around the shelves, taking down boxes.

"That will do," he said, and the tape measure crumpled into a heap on the floor. "Right then, Mr. Potter. Try this one. Beechwood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. just take it and give it a wave."

Harry took the wand and (feeling foolish) waved it around a bit, but Mr. Ollivander snatched it out of his hand almost at once.

"Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try --"

Harry tried -- but he had hardly raised the wand when it, too, was snatched back by Mr. Ollivander.

"No, no -here, ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy.

Go on, go on, try it out."

Harry tried. And tried. He had no idea what Mr. Ollivander was waiting for. The pile of tried wands was mounting higher and higher on the spindly chair, but the more wands Mr. Ollivander pulled from the shelves, the happier he seemed to become.

"Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here somewhere -- I wonder, now -- yes, why not -- unusual combination -- holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

Harry took the wand. He felt a sudden warmth in his fingers. He raised the wand above his head, brought it swishing down through the dusty air and a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light on to the walls. Hagrid whooped and clapped and Mr. Ollivander cried, "Oh, bravo! Yes, indeed, oh, very good. Well, well, well... how curious... how very curious..."

He put Harry's wand back into its box and wrapped it in brown paper, still muttering, "Curious... curious..."

"Sorry," said Harry, "but what's curious?"

Mr. Ollivander fixed Harry with his pale stare.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather -- just one other. It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother why, its brother gave you that scar."

Harry swallowed.

"Yes, thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember.... I think we must expect great things from you, Mr. Potter.... After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things -- terrible, yes, but great."

Harry shivered. He wasn't sure he liked Mr. Ollivander too much. He paid seven gold Galleons for his wand, and Mr. Ollivander bowed them from his shop.

The late afternoon sun hung low in the sky as Harry and Hagrid made their way back down Diagon Alley, back through the wall, back through the Leaky Cauldron, now empty. Harry didn't speak at all as they walked down the road; he didn't even notice how much people were gawking at them on the Underground, laden as they were with all their funny-shaped packages, with the snowy owl asleep in its cage on Harry's lap. Up another escalator, out into Paddington station; Harry only realized where they were when Hagrid tapped him on the shoulder.

"Got time fer a bite to eat before yer train leaves," he said.

He bought Harry a hamburger and they sat down on plastic seats to eat them. Harry kept looking around. Everything looked so strange, somehow.

"You all right, Harry? Yer very quiet," said Hagrid.

Harry wasn't sure he could explain. He'd just had the best birthday of his life -- and yet -- he chewed his hamburger, trying to find the

words.

"Everyone thinks I'm special," he said at last. "All those people in the Leaky Cauldron, Professor Quirrell, Mr. Ollivander... but I don't know anything about magic at all. How can they expect great things? I'm famous and I can't even remember what I'm famous for. I don't know what happened when Vol-, sorry -- I mean, the night my parents died."

Hagrid leaned across the table. Behind the wild beard and eyebrows he wore a very kind smile.

"Don' you worry, Harry. You'll learn fast enough. Everyone starts at the beginning at Hogwarts, you'll be just fine. just be yerself. I know it's hard. Yeh've been singled out, an' that's always hard. But yeh'll have a great time at Hogwarts -- I did -- still do, 'smatter of fact."

Hagrid helped Harry on to the train that would take him back to the Dursleys, then handed him an envelope.

"Yer ticket fer Hogwarts, " he said. "First o' September -- King's Cross -- it's all on yer ticket. Any problems with the Dursleys, send me a letter with yer owl, she'll know where to find me.... See yeh soon, Harry."

The train pulled out of the station. Harry wanted to watch Hagrid until he was out of sight; he rose in his seat and pressed his nose against the window, but he blinked and Hagrid had gone.

CHAPTER SIX

THE JOURNEY FROM PLATFORM NINE AND THREE-QUARTERS

Harry's last month with the Dursleys wasn't fun. True, Dudley was now so scared of Harry he wouldn't stay in the same room, while Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon didn't shut Harry in his cupboard, force him to do anything, or shout at him -- in fact, they didn't speak to him at all. Half terrified, half furious, they acted as though any chair with Harry in it were empty. Although this was an improvement in many ways, it did become a bit depressing after a while.

Harry kept to his room, with his new owl for company. He had decided to call her Hedwig, a name he had found in A History of Magic. His school books were very interesting. He lay on his bed reading late into the night, Hedwig swooping in and out of the open window as she pleased. It was lucky that Aunt Petunia didn't come in to vacuum anymore, because Hedwig kept bringing back dead mice. Every night before he went to sleep, Harry ticked off another day on the piece of paper he had pinned to the wall, counting down to September the first.

On the last day of August he thought he'd better speak to his aunt and uncle about getting to King's Cross station the next day, so he went down to the living room where they were watching a quiz show on television. He cleared his throat to let them know he was there, and Dudley screamed and ran from the room.

"Er -- Uncle Vernon?"

Uncle Vernon grunted to show he was listening.

"Er -- I need to be at King's Cross tomorrow to -- to go to Hogwarts."

Uncle Vernon grunted again.

"Would it be all right if you gave me a lift?"

Grunt. Harry supposed that meant yes.

"Thank you."

He was about to go back upstairs when Uncle Vernon actually spoke.

"Funny way to get to a wizards' school, the train. Magic carpets all got punctures, have they?"

Harry didn't say anything.

"Where is this school, anyway?"

"I don't know," said Harry, realizing this for the first time. He pulled the ticket Hagrid had given him out of his pocket.

"I just take the train from platform nine and three-quarters at eleven o'clock," he read.

His aunt and uncle stared.

"Platform what?"

"Nine and three-quarters."

"Don't talk rubbish," said Uncle Vernon. "There is no platform nine and three-quarters."

"It's on my ticket."

"Barking," said Uncle Vernon, "howling mad, the lot of them. You'll see. You just wait. All right, we'll take you to King's Cross. We're going up to London tomorrow anyway, or I wouldn't bother."

"Why are you going to London?" Harry asked, trying to keep things friendly.

"Taking Dudley to the hospital," growled Uncle Vernon. "Got to have that ruddy tail removed before he goes to Smeltings."

Harry woke at five o'clock the next morning and was too excited and nervous to go back to sleep. He got up and pulled on his jeans because he didn't want to walk into the station in his wizard's robes -- he'd change on the train. He checked his Hogwarts list yet again to make sure he had everything he needed, saw that Hedwig was shut safely in her cage, and then paced the room, waiting for the Dursleys to get up. Two hours later, Harry's huge, heavy trunk had been loaded into the Dursleys' car, Aunt Petunia had talked Dudley into sitting next to Harry, and they had set off.

They reached King's Cross at half past ten. Uncle Vernon dumped Harry's trunk onto a cart and wheeled it into the station for him. Harry thought this was strangely kind until Uncle Vernon stopped dead, facing the platforms with a nasty grin on his face.

"Well, there you are, boy. Platform nine -- platform ten. Your platform should be somewhere in the middle, but they don't seem to have built it yet, do they?"

He was quite right, of course. There was a big plastic number nine over one platform and a big plastic number ten over the one next to it, and in the middle, nothing at all.

"Have a good term," said Uncle Vernon with an even nastier smile. He left without another word. Harry turned and saw the Dursleys drive away. All three of them were laughing. Harry's mouth went rather dry. What on earth was he going to do? He was starting to attract a lot of funny looks, because of Hedwig. He'd have to ask someone.

He stopped a passing guard, but didn't dare mention platform nine and three-quarters. The guard had never heard of Hogwarts and when Harry couldn't even tell him what part of the country it was in, he started to get annoyed, as though Harry was being stupid on purpose. Getting desperate, Harry asked for the train that left at eleven o'clock, but the guard said there wasn't one. In the end the guard strode away, muttering about time wasters. Harry was now trying hard not to panic. According to the large clock over the arrivals board, he had ten minutes left to get on the train to Hogwarts and he had no idea how to do it; he was stranded in the middle of a station with a trunk he could hardly lift, a pocket full of wizard money, and a large owl.

Hagrid must have forgotten to tell him something you had to do, like tapping the third brick on the left to get into Diagon Alley. He wondered if he should get out his wand and start tapping the ticket inspector's stand between platforms nine and ten.

At that moment a group of people passed just behind him and he caught a few words of what they were saying.

"-- packed with Muggles, of course --"

Harry swung round. The speaker was a plump woman who was talking to four boys, all with flaming red hair. Each of them was pushing a trunk like Harry's in front of him -- and they had an owl.

Heart hammering, Harry pushed his cart after them. They stopped and so did he, just near enough to hear what they were saying.

"Now, what's the platform number?" said the boys' mother.

"Nine and three-quarters!" piped a small girl, also red-headed, who was holding her hand, "Mom, can't I go... "

"You're not old enough, Ginny, now be quiet. All right, Percy, you go first."

What looked like the oldest boy marched toward platforms nine and ten. Harry watched, careful not to blink in case he missed it -- but just as the boy reached the dividing barrier between the two platforms, a large crowd of tourists came swarming in front of him and by the time the last backpack had cleared away, the boy had vanished.

"Fred, you next," the plump woman said.

"I'm not Fred, I'm George," said the boy. "Honestly, woman, you call yourself our mother? CanA you tell I'm George?"

"Sorry, George, dear."

"Only joking, I am Fred," said the boy, and off he went. His twin called after him to hurry up, and he must have done so, because a second later, he had gone -- but how had he done it?

Now the third brother was walking briskly toward the barrier he was almost there -- and then, quite suddenly, he wasn't anywhere.

There was nothing else for it.

"Excuse me," Harry said to the plump woman.

"Hello, dear," she said. "First time at Hogwarts? Ron's new, too."

She pointed at the last and youngest of her sons. He was tall, thin, and gangling, with freckles, big hands and feet, and a long nose.

"Yes," said Harry. "The thing is -- the thing is, I don't know how to --"

"How to get onto the platform?" she said kindly, and Harry nodded.

"Not to worry," she said. "All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous. Go on, go now before Ron."

"Er -- okay," said Harry.

He pushed his trolley around and stared at the barrier. It looked very solid.

He started to walk toward it. People jostled him on their way to platforms nine and ten. Harry walked more quickly. He was going to smash right into that barrier and then he'd be in trouble -- leaning forward on his cart, he broke into a heavy run -- the barrier was coming nearer and nearer -- he wouldn't be able to stop -- the cart was out of control -- he was a foot away -- he closed his eyes ready for the crash --

It didn't come... he kept on running... he opened his eyes. A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people. A sign overhead said Hogwarts Express, eleven O'clock. Harry looked behind him and saw a wrought-iron archway where the barrier had been, with the words Platform Nine and Three-Quarters on it, He had done it.

Smoke from the engine drifted over the heads of the chattering crowd, while cats of every color wound here and there between their legs. Owls hooted to one another in a disgruntled sort of way over the babble and the scraping of heavy trunks.

The first few carriages were already packed with students, some hanging out of the window to talk to their families, some fighting over seats. Harry pushed his cart off down the platform in search of an empty seat. He passed a round-faced boy who was saying, "Gran, I've lost my toad again."

"Oh, Neville," he heard the old woman sigh.

A boy with dreadlocks was surrounded by a small crowd.

"Give us a look, Lee, go on."

The boy lifted the lid of a box in his arms, and the people around him shrieked and yelled as something inside poked out a long, hairy leg.

Harry pressed on through the crowd until he found an empty compartment near the end of the train. He put Hedwig inside first and then started to shove and heave his trunk toward the train door. He tried to lift it up the steps but could hardly raise one end and twice he dropped it painfully on his foot.

"Want a hand?" It was one of the red-haired twins he'd followed through the barrier.

"Yes, please," Harry panted.

"Oy, Fred! C'mere and help!"

With the twins' help, Harry's trunk was at last tucked away in a corner of the compartment.

"Thanks," said Harry, pushing his sweaty hair out of his eyes.

"What's that?" said one of the twins suddenly, pointing at Harry's lightning scar.

"Blimey," said the other twin. "Are you

"He is," said the first twin. "Aren't you?" he added to Harry.

"What?" said Harry.

"Harry Potter," chorused the twins.

"Oh, him," said Harry. "I mean, yes, I am."

The two boys gawked at him, and Harry felt himself turning red. Then, to his relief, a voice came floating in through the train's open door.

"Fred? George? Are you there?"

"Coming, Mom."

With a last look at Harry, the twins hopped off the train.

Harry sat down next to the window where, half hidden, he could watch the red-haired family on the platform and hear what they were saying. Their mother had just taken out her handkerchief.

"Ron, you've got something on your nose."

The youngest boy tried to jerk out of the way, but she grabbed him and began rubbing the end of his nose.

"Mom -- geroff" He wriggled free.

"Aaah, has ickle Ronnie got somefink on his nosie?" said one of the twins.

"Shut up," said Ron.

"Where's Percy?" said their mother.

"He's coming now."

The oldest boy came striding into sight. He had already changed into his billowing black Hogwarts robes, and Harry noticed a shiny silver badge on his chest with the letter P on it.

"Can't stay long, Mother," he said. "I'm up front, the prefects have got two compartments to themselves --"

"Oh, are you a prefect, Percy?" said one of the twins, with an air of great surprise. "You should have said something, we had no idea."

"Hang on, I think I remember him saying something about it," said the other twin. "Once --"

"Or twice --"

"A minute --"

"All summer --"

"Oh, shut up," said Percy the Prefect.

"How come Percy gets new robes, anyway?" said one of the twins.

"Because he's a prefect," said their mother fondly. "All right, dear, well, have a good term -- send me an owl when you get there."

She kissed Percy on the cheek and he left. Then she turned to the twins.

"Now, you two -- this year, you behave yourselves. If I get one more owl telling me you've -- you've blown up a toilet or --"

"Blown up a toilet? We've never blown up a toilet."

"Great idea though, thanks, Mom."

"It's not funny. And look after Ron."

"Don't worry, ickle Ronnienkins is safe with us."

"Shut up," said Ron again. He was almost as tall as the twins already and his nose was still pink where his mother had rubbed it.

"Hey, Mom, guess what? Guess who we just met on the train?"

Harry leaned back quickly so they couldn't see him looking.

"You know that black-haired boy who was near us in the station? Know who he is?"

"Who?"

"Harry Potter!"

Harry heard the little girl's voice.

"Oh, Mom, can I go on the train and see him, Mom, eh please...."

"You've already seen him, Ginny, and the poor boy isn't something you goggle at in a zoo. Is he really, Fred? How do you know?"

"Asked him. Saw his scar. It's really there - like lightning."

"Poor dear - no wonder he was alone, I wondered. He was ever so polite when he asked how to get onto the platform."

"Never mind that, do you think he remembers what You-Know-Who looks like?"

Their mother suddenly became very stern.

"I forbid you to ask him, Fred. No, don't you dare. As though he needs reminding of that on his first day at school."

"All right, keep your hair on."

A whistle sounded.

"Hurry up!" their mother said, and the three boys clambered onto the train. They leaned out of the window for her to kiss them good-bye, and their younger sister began to cry.

"Don't, Ginny, we'll send you loads of owls."

"We'll send you a Hogwarts toilet seat."

"George!"

"Only joking, Mom."

The train began to move. Harry saw the boys' mother waving and their sister, half laughing, half crying, running to keep up with the train until it gathered too much speed, then she fell back and waved.

Harry watched the girl and her mother disappear as the train rounded the corner. Houses flashed past the window. Harry felt a great leap of excitement. He didn't know what he was going to but it had to be better than what he was leaving behind.

The door of the compartment slid open and the youngest redheaded boy came in.

"Anyone sitting there?" he asked, pointing at the seat opposite Harry.
"Everywhere else is full."

Harry shook his head and the boy sat down. He glanced at Harry and then looked quickly out of the window, pretending he hadn't looked. Harry saw he still had a black mark on his nose.

"Hey, Ron."

The twins were back.

"Listen, we're going down the middle of the train -- Lee Jordan's got a giant tarantula down there."

"Right," mumbled Ron.

"Harry," said the other twin, "did we introduce ourselves? Fred and George Weasley. And this is Ron, our brother. See you later, then."

"Bye," said Harry and Ron. The twins slid the compartment door shut behind them.

"Are you really Harry Potter?" Ron blurted out.

Harry nodded.

"Oh -well, I thought it might be one of Fred and George's jokes," said Ron. "And have you really got -- you know..."

He pointed at Harry's forehead.

Harry pulled back his bangs to show the lightning scar. Ron stared.

"So that's where You-Know-Who

"Yes," said Harry, "but I can't remember it."

"Nothing?" said Ron eagerly.

"Well -- I remember a lot of green light, but nothing else."

"Wow," said Ron. He sat and stared at Harry for a few moments, then, as though he had suddenly realized what he was doing, he looked quickly out of the window again.

"Are all your family wizards?" asked Harry, who found Ron just as interesting as Ron found him.

"Er -- Yes, I think so," said Ron. "I think Mom's got a second cousin who's an accountant, but we never talk about him."

"So you must know loads of magic already."

The Weasleys were clearly one of those old wizarding families the pale boy in Diagon Alley had talked about.

"I heard you went to live with Muggles," said Ron. "What are they like?"

"Horrible -well, not all of them. My aunt and uncle and cousin are, though. Wish I'd had three wizard brothers."

"Five," said Ron. For some reason, he was looking gloomy. "I'm the sixth in our family to go to Hogwarts. You could say I've got a lot to live up to. Bill and Charlie have already left -- Bill was head boy and Charlie was captain of Quidditch. Now Percy's a prefect. Fred and George mess around a lot, but they still get really good marks and everyone thinks they're really funny. Everyone expects me to do as well as the others, but if I do, it's no big deal, because they did it first. You never get anything new, either, with five brothers. I've got Bill's old robes, Charlie's old wand, and Percy's old rat."

Ron reached inside his jacket and pulled out a fat gray rat, which was asleep.

"His name's Scabbers and he's useless, he hardly ever wakes up. Percy got an owl from my dad for being made a prefect, but they couldn't afford -- I mean, I got Scabbers instead."

Ron's ears went pink. He seemed to think he'd said too much, because he went back to staring out of the window.

Harry didn't think there was anything wrong with not being able to afford an owl. After all, he'd never had any money in his life until a month ago, and he told Ron so, all about having to wear Dudley's old clothes and never getting proper birthday presents. This seemed to cheer Ron up.

"... and until Hagrid told me, I didn't know anything about being a wizard or about my parents or Voldemort"

Ron gasped.

"What?" said Harry.

"You said You-Know-Who's name!" said Ron, sounding both shocked and impressed. "I'd have thought you, of all people --"

"I'm not trying to be brave or anything, saying the name," said Harry, I just never knew you shouldn't. See what I mean? I've got loads to learn.... I bet," he added, voicing for the first time something that had been worrying him a lot lately, "I bet I'm the worst in the class."

"You won't be. There's loads of people who come from Muggle families and they learn quick enough."

While they had been talking, the train had carried them out of London. Now they were speeding past fields full of cows and sheep. They were quiet for a time, watching the fields and lanes flick past.

Around half past twelve there was a great clattering outside in the corridor and a smiling, dimpled woman slid back their door and said, "Anything off the cart, dears?"

Harry, who hadn't had any breakfast, leapt to his feet, but Ron's ears went pink again and he muttered that he'd brought sandwiches. Harry went out into the corridor.

He had never had any money for candy with the Dursleys, and now that he had pockets rattling with gold and silver he was ready to buy as many Mars Bars as he could carry -- but the woman didn't have Mars Bars. What she did have were Bettie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs. Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Licorice Wands, and a number of other strange things Harry had never seen in his life. Not wanting to miss anything, he got some of everything and paid the woman eleven silver Sickles and seven bronze Knuts.

Ron stared as Harry brought it all back in to the compartment and tipped it onto an empty seat.

"Hungry, are you?"

"Starving," said Harry, taking a large bite out of a pumpkin pasty.

Ron had taken out a lumpy package and unwrapped it. There were four sandwiches inside. He pulled one of them apart and said, "She always forgets I don't like corned beef."

"Swap you for one of these," said Harry, holding up a pasty. "Go on --"

"You don't want this, it's all dry," said Ron. "She hasn't got much time," he added quickly, "you know, with five of us."

"Go on, have a pasty," said Harry, who had never had anything to share before or, indeed, anyone to share it with. It was a nice feeling, sitting there with Ron, eating their way through all Harry's pasties, cakes, and candies (the sandwiches lay forgotten).

"What are these?" Harry asked Ron, holding up a pack of Chocolate Frogs. "They're not really frogs, are they?" He was starting to feel that nothing would surprise him.

"No," said Ron. "But see what the card is. I'm missing Agrippa."

"What?"

"Oh, of course, you wouldn't know -- Chocolate Frogs have cards, inside them, you know, to collect -- famous witches and wizards. I've got about five hundred, but I haven't got Agrippa or Ptolemy."

Harry unwrapped his Chocolate Frog and picked up the card. It showed a man's face. He wore half-moon glasses, had a long, crooked nose, and flowing silver hair, beard, and mustache. Underneath the picture was the name Albus Dumbledore.

"So this is Dumbledore!" said Harry.

"Don't tell me you'd never heard of Dumbledore!" said Ron. "Can I have a frog? I might get Agrippa -- thanks

Harry turned over his card and read:

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

CURRENTLY HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTS

Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.

Harry turned the card back over and saw, to his astonishment, that Dumbledore's face had disappeared.

"He's gone!"

"Well, you can't expect him to hang around all day," said Ron. "He'll be back. No, I've got Morgana again and I've got about six of her... do you want it? You can start collecting."

Ron's eyes strayed to the pile of Chocolate Frogs waiting to be unwrapped.

"Help yourself," said Harry. "But in, you know, the Muggle world, people just stay put in photos."

"Do they? What, they don't move at all?" Ron sounded amazed. "weird!"

Harry stared as Dumbledore sidled back into the picture on his card and gave him a small smile. Ron was more interested in eating the frogs than looking at the Famous Witches and Wizards cards, but Harry couldn't keep his eyes off them. Soon he had not only Dumbledore and Morgana, but Hengist of Woodcroft, Alberic Grunnion, Circe, Paracelsus, and Merlin. He finally tore his eyes away from the druidess Cliodna, who was scratching her nose, to open a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans.

"You want to be careful with those," Ron warned Harry. "When they say every flavor, they mean every flavor -- you know, you get all the ordinary ones like chocolate and peppermint and mar- malade, but then you can get spinach and liver and tripe. George reckons he had a booger-flavored one once."

Ron picked up a green bean, looked at it carefully, and bit into a corner.

"Bleaaargh -- see? Sprouts."

They had a good time eating the Every Flavor Beans. Harry got toast, coconut, baked bean, strawberry, curry, grass, coffee, sardine, and was even brave enough to nibble the end off a funny gray one Ron wouldn't touch, which turned out to be pepper.

The countryside now flying past the window was becoming wilder. The neat fields had gone. Now there were woods, twisting rivers, and dark green hills.

There was a knock on the door of their compartment and the round-faced boy Harry had passed on platform nine and threequarters came in. He looked tearful.

"Sorry," he said, "but have you seen a toad at all?"

When they shook their heads, he wailed, "I've lost him! He keeps getting away from me!"

"He'll turn up," said Harry.

"Yes," said the boy miserably. "Well, if you see him..."

He left.

"Don't know why he's so bothered," said Ron. "If I'd brought a toad I'd lose it as quick as I could. Mind you, I brought Scabbers, so I can't talk."

The rat was still snoozing on Ron's lap.

"He might have died and you wouldn't know the difference," said Ron in disgust. "I tried to turn him yellow yesterday to make him more interesting, but the spell didn't work. I'll show you, look..."

He rummaged around in his trunk and pulled out a very battered-looking wand. It was chipped in places and something white was glinting at the end.

"Unicorn hair's nearly poking out. Anyway

He had just raised his 'wand when the compartment door slid open again. The toadless boy was back, but this time he had a girl with him. She was already wearing her new Hogwarts robes.

"Has anyone seen a toad? Neville's lost one," she said. She had a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth.

"We've already told him we haven't seen it," said Ron, but the girl wasn't listening, she was looking at the wand in his hand.

"Oh, are you doing magic? Let's see it, then."

She sat down. Ron looked taken aback.

"Er -- all right."

He cleared his throat.

"Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow, Turn this stupid, fat rat yellow."

He waved his wand, but nothing happened. Scabbers stayed gray and fast asleep.

"Are you sure that's a real spell?" said the girl. "Well, it's not very good, is it? I've tried a few simple spells just for practice and it's all worked for me. Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard -- I've learned all our course books by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough -- I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you.

She said all this very fast.

Harry looked at Ron, and was relieved to see by his stunned face that he hadn't learned all the course books by heart either.

"I'm Ron Weasley," Ron muttered.

"Harry Potter," said Harry.

"Are you really?" said Hermione. "I know all about you, of course -- I got a few extra books. for background reading, and you're in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century.

"Am I?" said Harry, feeling dazed.

"Goodness, didn't you know, I'd have found out everything I could if it was me," said Hermione. "Do either of you know what house you'll be in? I've been asking around, and I hope I'm in Gryffindor, it sounds by far the best; I hear Dumbledore himself was in it, but I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad.... Anyway, we'd better go and look for Neville's toad. You two had better change, you know, I expect we'll be there

soon."

And she left, taking the toadless boy with her.

"Whatever house I'm in, I hope she's not in it," said Ron. He threw his wand back into his trunk. "Stupid spell -- George gave it to me, bet he knew it was a dud."

"What house are your brothers in?" asked Harry.

"Gryffindor," said Ron. Gloom seemed to be settling on him again. "Mom and Dad were in it, too. I don't know what they'll say if I'm not. I don't suppose Ravenclaw would be too bad, but imagine if they put me in Slytherin."

"That's the house Vol-, I mean, You-Know-Who was in?"

"Yeah," said Ron. He flopped back into his seat, looking depressed.

"You know, I think the ends of Scabbers' whiskers are a bit lighter," said Harry, trying to take Ron's mind off houses. "So what do your oldest brothers do now that they've left, anyway?"

Harry was wondering what a wizard did once he'd finished school.

"Charlie's in Romania studying dragons, and Bill's in Africa doing something for Gringotts," said Ron. "Did you hear about

Gringotts? It's been all over the Daily Prophet, but I don't suppose you get that with the Muggles -- someone tried to rob a high security vault."

Harry stared.

"Really? What happened to them?"

"Nothing, that's why it's such big news. They haven't been caught. My dad says it must've been a powerful Dark wizard to get round Gringotts, but they don't think they took anything, that's what's odd. 'Course, everyone gets scared when something like this happens in case You-Know-Who's behind it."

Harry turned this news over in his mind. He was starting to get a prickle of fear every time You-Know-Who was mentioned. He supposed this was all part of entering the magical world, but it had been a lot more comfortable saying "Voldemort" without worrying.

"What's your Quidditch team?" Ron asked.

"Er -- I don't know any," Harry confessed.

"What!" Ron looked dumbfounded. "Oh, you wait, it's the best game in the world --" And he was off, explaining all about the four balls and the positions of the seven players, describing famous games he'd been to with his brothers and the broomstick he'd like to get if he had the money. He was just taking Harry through the finer points of the game when the compartment door slid open yet again, but it wasn't Neville the toadless boy, or Hermione Granger this time.

Three boys entered, and Harry recognized the middle one at once: it was

the pale boy from Madam Malkin's robe shop. He was looking at Harry with a lot more interest than he'd shown back in Diagon Alley.

"Is it true?" he said. "They're saying all down the train that Harry Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, is it?"

"Yes," said Harry. He was looking at the other boys. Both of them were thickset and looked extremely mean. Standing on either side of the pale boy, they looked like bodyguards.

"Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle," said the pale boy carelessly, noticing where Harry was looking. "And my name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."

Ron gave a slight cough, which might have been hiding a snigget. Draco Malfoy looked at him.

"Think my name's funny, do you? No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford."

He turned back to Harry. "You'll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

He held out his hand to shake Harry's, but Harry didn't take it.

"I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks," he said coolly.

Draco Malfoy didn't go red, but a pink tinge appeared in his pale cheeks.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter," he said slowly. "Unless you're a bit politer you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them, either. You hang around with riffraff like the Weasleys and that Hagrid, and it'll rub off on you."

Both Harry and Ron stood up.

"Say that again," Ron said, his face as red as his hair.

"Oh, you're going to fight us, are you?" Malfoy sneered.

"Unless you get out now," said Harry, more bravely than he felt, because Crabbe and Goyle were a lot bigger than him or Ron.

"But we don't feet like leaving, do we, boys? We've eaten all our food and you still seem to have some."

Goyle reached toward the Chocolate Frogs next to Ron - Ron leapt forward, but before he'd so much as touched Goyle, Goyle let out a horrible yell.

Scabbers the rat was hanging off his finger, sharp little teeth sunk deep into Goyle's knuckle - Crabbe and Malfoy backed away as Goyle swung Scabbers round and round, howling, and when Scabberts finally flew off and hit the window, all three of them disappeared at once. Perhaps they thought there were more rats lurking among the sweets, or perhaps they'd heard footsteps, because a second later, Hermione Granger had come in.

"What has been going on?" she said, looking at the sweets all over the floor and Ron picking up Scabbers by his tail.

I think he's been knocked out," Ron said to Harry. He looked closer at Scabbers. "No -- I don't believe it -- he's gone back to sleep--"

And so he had.

"You've met Malfoy before?"

Harry explained about their meeting in Diagon Alley.

"I've heard of his family," said Ron darkly. "They were some of the first to come back to our side after You-Know-Who disappeared. Said they'd been bewitched. My dad doesn't believe it. He says Malfoy's father didn't need an excuse to go over to the Dark Side." He turned to Hermione. "Can we help you with something?"

"You'd better hurry up and put your robes on, I've just been up to the front to ask the conductor, and he says we're nearly there. You haven't been fighting, have you? You'll be in trouble before we even get there!"

"Scabbers has been fighting, not us," said Ron, scowling at her. "Would you mind leaving while we change?"

"All right -- I only came in here because people outside are behaving very childishly, racing up and down the corridors," said Hermione in a sniffy voice. "And you've got dirt on your nose, by the way, did you know?"

Ron glared at her as she left. Harry peered out of the window. It was getting dark. He could see mountains and forests under a deep purple sky. The train did seem to be slowing down.

He and Ron took off their jackets and pulled on their long black robes. Ron's were a bit short for him, you could see his sneakers underneath them.

A voice echoed through the train: "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately."

Harry's stomach lurched with nerves and Ron, he saw, looked pale under his freckles. They crammed their pockets with the last of the sweets and joined the crowd thronging the corridor.

The train slowed right down and finally stopped. People pushed their way toward the door and out on to a tiny, dark platform. Harry shivered in the cold night air. Then a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students, and Harry heard a familiar voice: "Firs' years! Firs' years over here! All right there, Harry?"

Hagrid's big hairy face beamed over the sea of heads.

"C'mon, follow me -- any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

Slipping and stumbling, they followed Hagrid down what seemed to be a steep, narrow path. It was so dark on either side of them that Harry thought there must be thick trees there. Nobody spoke much. Neville, the

boy who kept losing his toad, sniffed once or twice.

"Ye' all get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec," Hagrid called over his shoulder, "jus' round this bend here."

There was a loud "Oooooh!"

The narrow path had opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black take. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid called, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore. Harry and Ron were followed into their boat by Neville and Hermione. "Everyone in?" shouted Hagrid, who had a boat to himself. "Right then -- FORWARD!"

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood.

"Heads down!" yelled Hagrid as the first boats reached the cliff; they all bent their heads and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbor, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

"Oy, you there! Is this your toad?" said Hagrid, who was checking the boats as people climbed out of them.

"Trevor!" cried Neville blissfully, holding out his hands. Then they clambered up a passageway in the rock after Hagrid's lamp, coming out at last onto smooth, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle.

They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge, Oak front door.

"Everyone here? You there, still got yer toad?"

Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SORTING HAT

The door swung open at once. A tall, black-haired witch in emerald-green robes stood there. She had a very stern face and Harry's first thought was that this was not someone to cross.

"The firs' years, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

She pulled the door wide. The entrance hall was so big you could have fit the whole of the Dursleys' house in it. The stone walls were lit with flaming torches like the ones at Gringotts, the ceiling was too high to make out, and a magnificent marble staircase facing them led to

the upper floors.

They followed Professor McGonagall across the flagged stone floor. Harry could hear the drone of hundreds of voices from a doorway to the right -- the rest of the school must already be here -- but Professor McGonagall showed the first years into a small, empty chamber off the hall. They crowded in, standing rather closer together than they would usually have done, peering about nervously.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room."

"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rulebreaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the house cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours."

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting."

Her eyes lingered for a moment on Neville's cloak, which was fastened under his left ear, and on Ron's smudged nose. Harry nervously tried to flatten his hair.

"I shall return when we are ready for you," said Professor McGonagall. "Please wait quietly."

She left the chamber. Harry swallowed.

"How exactly do they sort us into houses?" he asked Ron.

"Some sort of test, I think. Fred said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking."

Harry's heart gave a horrible jolt. A test? In front of the whole school? But he didn't know any magic yet -- what on earth would he have to do? He hadn't expected something like this the moment they arrived. He looked around anxiously and saw that everyone else looked terrified, too. No one was talking much except Hermione Granger, who was whispering very fast about all the spells she'd learned and wondering which one she'd need. Harry tried hard not to listen to her. He'd never been more nervous, never, not even when he'd had to take a school report home to the Dursleys saying that he'd somehow turned his teacher's wig blue. He kept his eyes fixed on the door. Any second now, Professor McGonagall would come back and lead him to his doom.

Then something happened that made him jump about a foot in the air -- several people behind him screamed.

"What the --?"

He gasped. So did the people around him. About twenty ghosts had just streamed through the back wall. Pearly-white and slightly transparent, they glided across the room talking to one another and hardly glancing at the first years. They seemed to be arguing. What looked like a fat little monk was saying: "Forgive and forget, I say, we ought to give him a second chance --"

"My dear Friar, haven't we given Peeves all the chances he deserves? He gives us all a bad name and you know, he's not really even a ghost -- I say, what are you all doing here?"

A ghost wearing a ruff and tights had suddenly noticed the first years.

Nobody answered.

"New students!" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them. "About to be Sorted, I suppose?"

A few people nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old house, you know."

"Move along now," said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

Professor McGonagall had returned. One by one, the ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.

"Now, form a line," Professor McGonagall told the first years, "and follow me."

Feeling oddly as though his legs had turned to lead, Harry got into line behind a boy with sandy hair, with Ron behind him, and they walked out of the chamber, back across the hall, and through a pair of double doors into the Great Hall.

Harry had never even imagined such a strange and splendid place. It was lit by thousands and thousands of candles that were floating in midair over four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the top of the hall was another long table where the teachers were sitting. Professor McGonagall led the first years up here, so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them. The hundreds of faces staring at them looked like pale lanterns in the flickering candlelight. Dotted here and there among the students, the ghosts shone misty silver. Mainly to avoid all the staring eyes, Harry looked upward and saw a velvety black ceiling dotted with stars. He heard

Hermione whisper, "It's bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in Hogwarts, A History."

It was hard to believe there was a ceiling there at all, and that the Great Hall didn't simply open on to the heavens.

Harry quickly looked down again as Professor McGonagall silently placed a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the stool she put a pointed wizard's hat. This hat was patched and frayed and extremely dirty. Aunt Petunia wouldn't have let it in the house.

Maybe they had to try and get a rabbit out of it, Harry thought wildly, that seemed the sort of thing -- noticing that everyone in the hall was now staring at the hat, he stared at it, too. For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth -- and the hat began to sing:

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,
But don't judge on what you see,
I'll eat myself if you can find
A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,
Your top hats sleek and tall,
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat
And I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head
The Sorting Hat can't see,
So try me on and I will tell you
Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry Set Gryffindors apart;
You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true And unafraid of toil;
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
if you've a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid!

And don't get in a flap!

You're in safe hands (though I have none)

For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The whole hall burst into applause as the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quite still again.

"So we've just got to try on the hat!" Ron whispered to Harry. "I'll kill Fred, he was going on about wrestling a troll."

Harry smiled weakly. Yes, trying on the hat was a lot better than having to do a spell, but he did wish they could have tried it on without everyone watching. The hat seemed to be asking rather a lot; Harry didn't feel brave or quick-witted or any of it at the moment. If only the hat had mentioned a house for people who felt a bit queasy, that would have been the one for him.

Professor McGonagall now stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said. "Abbott, Hannah!"

A pink-faced girl with blonde pigtailed stumbled out of line, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes, and sat down. A moments pause --

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat.

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. Harry saw the ghost of the Fat Friar waving merrily at her.

"Bones, Susan!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat again, and Susan scuttled off to sit next to Hannah.

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

The table second from the left clapped this time; several Ravenclaws stood up to shake hands with Terry as he joined them.

"Brocklehurst, Mandy" went to Ravenclaw too, but "Brown, Lavender" became the first new Gryffindor, and the table on the far left exploded with cheers; Harry could see Ron's twin brothers catcalling.

"Bulstrode, Millicent" then became a Slytherin. Perhaps it was Harry's imagination, after all he'd heard about Slytherin, but he thought they looked like an unpleasant lot. He was starting to feel definitely sick now. He remembered being picked for teams during gym at his old school. He had always been last to be chosen, not because he was no good, but because no one wanted Dudley to think they liked him.

"Finch-Fletchley, Justin!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

Sometimes, Harry noticed, the hat shouted out the house at once, but at others it took a little while to decide. "Finnigan, Seamus," the sandy-haired boy next to Harry in the line, sat on the stool for almost a whole minute before the hat declared him a Gryffindor.

"Granger, Hermione!"

Hermione almost ran to the stool and jammed the hat eagerly on her head.

"GRYFFINDOR!" shouted the hat. Ron groaned.

A horrible thought struck Harry, as horrible thoughts always do when you're very nervous. What if he wasn't chosen at all? What if he just sat there with the hat over his eyes for ages, until Professor McGonagall jerked it off his head and said there had obviously been a mistake and he'd better get back on the train?

When Neville Longbottom, the boy who kept losing his toad, was called, he fell over on his way to the stool. The hat took a long time to decide with Neville. When it finally shouted, "GRYFFINDOR," Neville ran off still wearing it, and had to jog back amid gales of laughter to give it to "MacDougal, Morag."

Malfoy swaggered forward when his name was called and got his wish at once: the hat had barely touched his head when it screamed, "SLYTHERIN!"

Malfoy went to join his friends Crabbe and Goyle, looking pleased with himself.

There weren't many people left now. "Moon" "Nott" "Parkinson" then a pair of twin girls, "Patil" and "Patil" then "Perks, Sally-Anne" and then, at last -- "Potter, Harry!"

As Harry stepped forward, whispers suddenly broke out like little hissing fires all over the hall.

"Potter, did she say?"

The Harry Potter?"

The last thing Harry saw before the hat dropped over his eyes was the hall full of people craning to get a good look at him. Next second he was looking at the black inside of the hat. He waited.

Hmm," said a small voice in his ear. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, A my goodness, yes -- and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting.... So where shall I put you?"

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought, Not Slytherin, not Slytherin.

"Not Slytherin, eh?" said the small voice. "Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that -- no? Well, if you're sure -- better be GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry heard the hat shout the last word to the whole hall. He took off the hat and walked shakily toward the Gryffindor table. He was so relieved to have been chosen and not put in Slytherin, he hardly noticed that he was getting the loudest cheer yet. Percy the Prefect got up and shook his hand vigorously, while the Weasley twins yelled, "We got Potter! We got Potter!" Harry sat down opposite the ghost in the ruff he'd seen earlier. The ghost patted his arm, giving Harry the sudden, horrible feeling he'd just plunged it into a bucket of ice-cold water.

He could see the High Table properly now. At the end nearest him sat Hagrid, who caught his eye and gave him the thumbs up. Harry grinned back. And there, in the center of the High Table, in a large gold chair, sat Albus Dumbledore. Harry recognized him at once from the card he'd gotten out of the Chocolate Frog on the train. Dumbledore's silver hair was the only thing in the whole hall that shone as brightly as the ghosts. Harry spotted Professor Quirrell, too, the nervous young man from the Leaky Cauldron. He was looking very peculiar in a large purple turban.

And now there were only three people left to be sorted. "Thomas, Dean," a Black boy even taller than Ron, joined Harry at the Gryffindor table. "Turpin, Lisa," became a Ravenclaw and then it was Ron's turn. He was pale green by now. Harry crossed his fingers under the table and a second later the hat had shouted, "GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry clapped loudly with the rest as Ron collapsed into the chair next to him.

"Well done, Ron, excellent," said Percy Weasley Pompously across Harry as "Zabini, Blaise," was made a Slytherin. Professor McGonagall rolled up her scroll and took the Sorting Hat away.

Harry looked down at his empty gold plate. He had only just realized how hungry he was. The pumpkin pasties seemed ages ago.

Albus Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was beaming at the students, his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there.

"Welcome," he said. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!"

"Thank you!"

He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not.

"Is he -- a bit mad?" he asked Percy uncertainly.

"Mad?" said Percy airily. "He's a genius! Best wizard in the world! But he is a bit mad, yes. Potatoes, Harry?"

Harry's mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were now piled with food. He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, fries, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup, and, for some strange reason, peppermint humbugs.

The Dursleys had never exactly starved Harry, but he'd never been allowed to eat as much as he liked. Dudley had always taken anything that Harry really wanted, even if it made him sick. Harry piled his plate with a bit of everything except the peppermints and began to eat. It was all delicious.

"That does look good," said the ghost in the ruff sadly, watching Harry cut up his steak,

"Can't you --?"

I haven't eaten for nearly four hundred years," said the ghost. "I don't need to, of course, but one does miss it. I don't think I've introduced myself? Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington at your service. Resident ghost of Gryffindor Tower."

"I know who you are!" said Ron suddenly. "My brothers told me about you -- you're Nearly Headless Nick!"

"I would prefer you to call me Sir Nicholas de Mimsy --" the ghost began stiffly, but sandy-haired Seamus Finnigan interrupted.

"Nearly Headless? How can you be nearly headless?"

Sir Nicholas looked extremely miffed, as if their little chat wasn't going at all the way he wanted.

"Like this," he said irritably. He seized his left ear and pulled. His whole head swung off his neck and fell onto his shoulder as if it was on a hinge. Someone had obviously tried to behead him, but not done it properly. Looking pleased at the stunned looks on their faces, Nearly Headless Nick flipped his head back onto his neck, coughed, and said, "So -- new Gryffindors! I hope you're going to help us win the house championship this year? Gryffindors have never gone so long without winning. Slytherins have got the cup six years in a row! The Bloody Baron's becoming almost unbearable -- he's the Slytherin ghost."

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and saw a horrible ghost sitting there, with blank staring eyes, a gaunt face, and robes stained with silver blood. He was right next to Malfoy who, Harry was pleased to see, didn't look too pleased with the seating arrangements.

"How did he get covered in blood?" asked Seamus with great interest.

"I've never asked," said Nearly Headless Nick delicately.

When everyone had eaten as much as they could, the remains of the food faded from the plates, leaving them sparkling clean as before. A moment later the desserts appeared. Blocks of ice cream in every flavor you could think of, apple pies, treacle tarts, chocolate eclairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, Jell-O, rice pudding -- "

As Harry helped himself to a treacle tart, the talk turned to their families.

"I'm half-and-half," said Seamus. "Me dad's a Muggle. Mom didn't tell him she was a witch 'til after they were married. Bit of a nasty shock for him."

The others laughed.

"What about you, Neville?" said Ron.

"Well, my gran brought me up and she's a witch," said Neville, "but the family thought I was all- Muggle for ages. My Great Uncle Algie kept trying to catch me off my guard and force some magic out of me -- he pushed me off the end of Blackpool pier once, I nearly drowned -- but nothing happened until I was eight. Great Uncle Algie came round for dinner, and he was hanging me out of an upstairs window by the ankles when my Great Auntie Enid offered him a meringue and he accidentally let go. But I bounced -- all the way down the garden and into the road. They were all really pleased, Gran was crying, she was so happy. And you should have seen their faces when I got in here -- they thought I might not be magic enough to come, you see. Great Uncle Algie was so pleased he bought me my toad."

On Harry's other side, Percy Weasley and Hermione were talking about lessons ("I do hope they start right away, there's so much to learn, I'm particularly interested in Transfiguration, you know, turning something into something else, of course, it's supposed to be very difficult-"; "You'll be starting small, just matches into needles and that sort of thing -- ").

Harry, who was starting to feel warm and sleepy, looked up at the High Table again. Hagrid was drinking deeply from his goblet. Professor McGonagall was talking to Professor Dumbledore. Professor Quirrell, in his absurd turban, was talking to a teacher with greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin.

It happened very suddenly. The hook-nosed teacher looked past Quirrell's turban straight into Harry's eyes -- and a sharp, hot pain shot across the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Ouch!" Harry clapped a hand to his head.

"What is it?" asked Percy.

"N-nothing."

The pain had gone as quickly as it had come. Harder to shake off was the feeling Harry had gotten from the teacher's look -- a feeling that he didn't like Harry at all.

"Who's that teacher talking to Professor Quirrell?" he asked Percy.

"Oh, you know Quirrell already, do you? No wonder he's looking so nervous, that's Professor Snape. He teaches Potions, but he doesn't want to -- everyone knows he's after Quirrell's job. Knows an awful lot about the Dark Arts, Snape."

Harry watched Snape for a while, but Snape didn't look at him again.

At last, the desserts too disappeared, and Professor Dumbledore got to his feet again. The hall fell silent.

"Ahern -- just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you.

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to

all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well."

Dumbledore's twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Weasley twins.

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch.

"And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

Harry laughed, but he was one of the few who did.

"He's not serious?" he muttered to Percy.

"Must be," said Percy, frowning at Dumbledore. "It's odd, because he usually gives us a reason why we're not allowed to go somewhere -- the forest's full of dangerous beasts, everyone knows that. I do think he might have told us prefects, at least."

"And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!" cried Dumbledore. Harry noticed that the other teachers' smiles had become rather fixed.

Dumbledore gave his wand a little flick, as if he was trying to get a fly off the end, and a long golden ribbon flew out of it, which rose high above the tables and twisted itself, snakelike, into words.

"Everyone pick their favorite tune," said Dumbledore, "and off we go!" And the school bellowed:

"Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,

Teach us something please,

Whether we be old and bald

Or young with scabby knees,

Our heads could do with filling

With some interesting stuff,

For now they're bare and full of air,

Dead flies and bits of fluff,

So teach us things worth knowing,

Bring back what we've forgot,

just do your best, we'll do the rest,

And learn until our brains all rot.

Everybody finished the song at different times. At last, only the Weasley twins were left singing along to a very slow funeral march. Dumbledore conducted their last few lines with his wand and when they had finished, he was one of those who clapped loudest.

"Ah, music," he said, wiping his eyes. "A magic beyond all we do here! And now, bedtime. Off you trot!"

The Gryffindor first years followed Percy through the chattering crowds, out of the Great Hall, and up the marble staircase. Harry's legs were like lead again, but only because he was so tired and full of food. He was too sleepy even to be surprised that the people in the portraits along the corridors whispered and pointed as they passed, or that twice Percy led them through doorways hidden behind sliding panels and hanging tapestries. They climbed more staircases, yawning and dragging their feet, and Harry was just wondering how much farther they had to go when they came to a sudden halt.

A bundle of walking sticks was floating in midair ahead of them, and as Percy took a step toward them they started throwing themselves at him.

"Peeves," Percy whispered to the first years. "A poltergeist." He raised his voice, "Peeves -- show yourself"

A loud, rude sound, like the air being let out of a balloon, answered.

"Do you want me to go to the Bloody Baron?"

There was a pop, and a little man with wicked, dark eyes and a wide mouth appeared, floating cross-legged in the air, clutching the walking sticks.

"Oooooooh!" he said, with an evil cackle. "Ickle Firsties! What fun!"

He swooped suddenly at them. They all ducked.

"Go away, Peeves, or the Baron'll hear about this, I mean it!" barked Percy.

Peeves stuck out his tongue and vanished, dropping the walking sticks on Neville's head. They heard him zooming away, rattling coats of armor as he passed.

"You want to watch out for Peeves," said Percy, as they set off again. "The Bloody Baron's the only one who can control him, he won't even listen to us prefects. Here we are."

At the very end of the corridor hung a portrait of a very fat woman in a pink silk dress.

"Password?" she said. "Caput Draconis," said Percy, and the portrait swung forward to reveal a round hole in the wall. They all scrambled through it -- Neville needed a leg up -- and found themselves in the Gryffindor common room, a cozy, round room full of squashy armchairs.

Percy directed the girls through one door to their dormitory and the boys through another. At the top of a spiral staircase -- they were obviously in one of the towers -- they found their beds at last: five four-posters hung with deep red, velvet curtains. Their trunks had already been brought up. Too tired to talk much, they pulled on their

pajamas and fell into bed.

"Great food, isn't it?" Ron muttered to Harry through the hangings.
"Get off, Scabbers! He's chewing my sheets."

Harry was going to ask Ron if he'd had any of the treacle tart, but he fell asleep almost at once.

Perhaps Harry had eaten a bit too much, because he had a very strange dream. He was wearing Professor Quirrell's turban, which kept talking to him, telling him he must transfer to Slytherin at once, because it was his destiny. Harry told the turban he didn't want to be in Slytherin; it got heavier and heavier; he tried to pull it off but it tightened painfully -- and there was Malfoy, laughing at him as he struggled with it -then Malfoy turned into the hook-nosed teacher, Snape, whose laugh became high and cold -- there was a burst of green light and Harry woke, sweating and shaking.

He rolled over and fell asleep again, and when he woke next day, he didn't remember the dream at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE POTIONS MASTER

There, look."

"Where?"

"Next to the tall kid with the red hair."

"Wearing the glasses?"

"Did you see his face?"

"Did you see his scar?"

Whispers followed Harry from the moment he left his dormitory the next day. People lining up outside classrooms stood on tiptoe to get a look at him, or doubled back to pass him in the corridors again, staring. Harry wished they wouldn't, because he was trying to concentrate on finding his way to classes.

There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. Then there were doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place, and doors that weren't really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending. It was also very hard to remember where anything was, because it all seemed to move around a lot. The people in the portraits kept going to visit each other, and Harry was sure the coats of armor could walk.

The ghosts didn't help, either. It was always a nasty shock when one of them glided suddenly through a door you were trying to open. Nearly Headless Nick was always happy to point new Gryffindors in the right direction, but Peeves the Poltergeist was worth two locked doors and a trick staircase if you met him when you were late for class. He would drop wastepaper baskets on your head, pull rugs from under your feet,

pelt you with bits of chalk, or sneak up behind you, invisible, grab your nose, and screech, "GOT YOUR CONK!"

Even worse than Peeves, if that was possible, was the caretaker, Argus Filch. Harry and Ron managed to get on the wrong side of him on their very first morning. Filch found them trying to force their way through a door that unluckily turned out to be the entrance to the out-of-bounds corridor on the third floor. He wouldn't believe they were lost, was sure they were trying to break into it on purpose, and was threatening to lock them in the dungeons when they were rescued by Professor Quirrell, who was passing.

Filch owned a cat called Mrs. Norris, a scrawny, dust-colored creature with bulging, lamp like eyes just like Filch's. She patrolled the corridors alone. Break a rule in front of her, put just one toe out of line, and she'd whisk off for Filch, who'd appear, wheezing, two seconds later. Filch knew the secret passageways of the school better than anyone (except perhaps the Weasley twins) and could pop up as suddenly as any of the ghosts. The students all hated him, and it was the dearest ambition of many to give Mrs. Norris a good kick.

And then, once you had managed to find them, there were the classes themselves. There was a lot more to magic, as Harry quickly found out, than waving your wand and saying a few funny words.

They had to study the night skies through their telescopes every Wednesday at midnight and learn the names of different stars and the movements of the planets. Three times a week they went out to the greenhouses behind the castle to study Herbology, with a dumpy little witch called Professor Sprout, where they learned how to take care of all the strange plants and fungi, and found out what they were used for.

Easily the most boring class was History of Magic, which was the only one taught by a ghost. Professor Binns had been very old

indeed when he had fallen asleep in front of the staff room fire and got up next morning to teach, leaving his body behind him. Binns droned on and on while they scribbled down names and dates, and got Emetic the Evil and Uriac the Oddball mixed up.

Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was a tiny little wizard who had to stand on a pile of books to see over his desk. At the start of their first class he took the roll call, and when he reached Harry's name he gave an excited squeak and toppled out of sight.

Professor McGonagall was again different. Harry had been quite right to think she wasn't a teacher to cross. Strict and clever, she gave them a talking-to the moment they sat down in her first class.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," she said. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Then she changed her desk into a pig and back again. They were all very impressed and couldn't wait to get started, but soon realized they weren't going to be changing the furniture into animals for a long time. After taking a lot of complicated notes, they were each given a match and started trying to turn it into a needle. By the end of the lesson, only Hermione Granger had made any difference to her match; Professor McGonagall showed the class how it had gone all silver and pointy and

gave Hermione a rare smile.

The class everyone had really been looking forward to was Defense Against the Dark Arts, but Quirrell's lessons turned out to be a bit of a joke. His classroom smelled strongly of garlic, which everyone said was to ward off a vampire he'd met in Romania and was afraid would be coming back to get him one of these days. His turban, he told them, had been given to him by an African prince as a thank-you for getting rid of a troublesome zombie, but they weren't sure they believed this story. For one thing, when Seamus Finnigan asked eagerly to hear how Quirrell had fought off the zombie, Quirrell went pink and started talking about the weather; for another, they had noticed that a funny smell hung around the turban, and the Weasley twins insisted that it was stuffed full of garlic as well, so that Quirrell was protected wherever he went.

Harry was very relieved to find out that he wasn't miles behind everyone else. Lots of people had come from Muggle families and, like him, hadn't had any idea that they were witches and wizards. There was so much to learn that even people like Ron didn't have much of a head start.

Friday was an important day for Harry and Ron. They finally managed to find their way down to the Great Hall for breakfast without getting lost once.

"What have we got today?" Harry asked Ron as he poured sugar on his porridge.

"Double Potions with the Slytherins," said Ron. "Snape's Head of Slytherin House. They say he always favors them -- we'll be able to see if it's true."

"Wish McGonagall favored us," said Harry. Professor McGonagall was head of Gryffindor House, but it hadn't stopped her from giving them a huge pile of homework the day before.

Just then, the mail arrived. Harry had gotten used to this by now, but it had given him a bit of a shock on the first morning, when about a hundred owls had suddenly streamed into the Great Hall during breakfast, circling the tables until they saw their owners, and dropping letters and packages onto their laps.

Hedwig hadn't brought Harry anything so far. She sometimes flew in to nibble his ear and have a bit of toast before going off to sleep in the owlery with the other school owls. This morning, however, she fluttered down between the marmalade and the sugar bowl and dropped a note onto Harry's plate. Harry tore it open at once. It said, in a very untidy scrawl:

Dear Harry,

I know you get Friday afternoons off, so would you like to come and have a cup of tea with me around three?

I want to hear all about your first week. Send us an answer back with Hedwig.

Hagrid

Harry borrowed Ron's quill, scribbled Yes, please, see you later on the back of the note, and sent Hedwig off again.

It was lucky that Harry had tea with Hagrid to look forward to, because the Potions lesson turned out to be the worst thing that had happened to him so far.

At the start-of-term banquet, Harry had gotten the idea that Professor Snape disliked him. By the end of the first Potions lesson, he knew he'd been wrong. Snape didn't dislike Harry -- he hated him.

Potions lessons took place down in one of the dungeons. It was colder here than up in the main castle, and would have been quite creepy enough without the pickled animals floating in glass jars all around the walls.

Snape, like Flitwick, started the class by taking the roll call, and like Flitwick, he paused at Harry's name.

"Ah, Yes," he said softly, "Harry Potter. Our new -- celebrity."

Draco Malfoy and his friends Crabbe and Goyle sniggered behind their hands. Snape finished calling the names and looked up at the class. His eyes were black like Hagrid's, but they had none of Hagrid's warmth. They were cold and empty and made you think of dark tunnels.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potionmaking," he began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word -- like Professor McGonagall, Snape had y caught every word -- like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses.... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death -- if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

More silence followed this little speech. Harry and Ron exchanged looks with raised eyebrows. Hermione Granger was on the edge of her seat and looked desperate to start proving that she wasn't a dunderhead.

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Powdered root of what to an infusion of what? Harry glanced at Ron, who looked as stumped as he was; Hermione's hand had shot into the air.

"I don't know, sit," said Harry.

Snape's lips curled into a sneer.

"Tut, tut -- fame clearly isn't everything."

He ignored Hermione's hand.

"Let's try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

Hermione stretched her hand as high into the air as it would go without her leaving her seat, but Harry didn't have the faintest idea what a

bezoar was. He tried not to look at Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were shaking with laughter.

"I don't know, sit." "Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming, eh, Potter?" Harry forced himself to keep looking straight into those cold eyes. He had looked through his books at the Dursleys', but did Snape expect him to remember everything in One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi?

Snape was still ignoring Hermione's quivering hand.

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

At this, Hermione stood up, her hand stretching toward the dungeon ceiling.

"I don't know," said Harry quietly. "I think Hermione does, though, why don't you try her?"

A few people laughed; Harry caught Seamus's eye, and Seamus winked. Snape, however, was not pleased.

"Sit down," he snapped at Hermione. "For your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons. As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite. Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

There was a sudden rummaging for quills and parchment. Over the noise, Snape said, "And a point will be taken from Gryffindor House for your cheek, Potter."

Things didn't improve for the Gryffindors as the Potions lesson continued. Snape put them all into pairs and set them to mixing up a simple potion to cure boils. He swept around in his long black cloak, watching them weigh dried nettles and crush snake fangs, criticizing almost everyone except Malfoy, whom he seemed to like. He was just telling everyone to look at the perfect way Malfoy had stewed his horned slugs when clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. Neville had somehow managed to melt Seamus's cauldron into a twisted blob, and their potion was seeping across the stone floor, burning holes in people's shoes. Within seconds, the whole class was standing on their stools while Neville, who had been drenched in the potion when the cauldron collapsed, moaned in pain as angry red boils sprang up all over his arms and legs.

"Idiot boy!" snarled Snape, clearing the spilled potion away with one wave of his wand. "I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?"

Neville whimpered as boils started to pop up all over his nose.

"Take him up to the hospital wing," Snape spat at Seamus. Then he rounded on Harry and Ron, who had been working next to Neville.

"You -- Potter -- why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Gryffindor."

This was so unfair that Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Ron kicked him behind their cauldron.

"Doi* push it," he muttered, "I've heard Snape can turn very nasty."

As they climbed the steps out of the dungeon an hour later, Harry's mind was racing and his spirits were low. He'd lost two points for Gryffindor in his very first week -- why did Snape hate him so much? "Cheer up," said Ron, "Snape's always taking points off Fred and George. Can I come and meet Hagrid with you?"

At five to three they left the castle and made their way across the grounds. Hagrid lived in a small wooden house on the edge of the forbidden forest. A crossbow and a pair of galoshes were outside the front door.

When Harry knocked they heard a frantic scrabbling from inside and several booming barks. Then Hagrid's voice rang out, saying, "Back, Fang -- back."

Hagrid's big, hairy face appeared in the crack as he pulled the door open.

"Hang on," he said. "Back, Fang."

He let them in, struggling to keep a hold on the collar of an enormous black boarhound.

There was only one room inside. Hams and pheasants were hanging from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire, and in the corner stood a massive bed with a patchwork quilt over it.

"Make yerselves at home," said Hagrid, letting go of Fang, who bounded straight at Ron and started licking his ears. Like Hagrid, Fang was clearly not as fierce as he looked.

"This is Ron," Harry told Hagrid, who was pouring boiling water into a large teapot and putting rock cakes onto a plate.

"Another Weasley, eh?" said Hagrid, glancing at Ron's freckles. I spent half me life chasin' yer twin brothers away from the forest."

The rock cakes were shapeless lumps with raisins that almost broke their teeth, but Harry and Ron pretended to be enjoying them as they told Hagrid all about their first -lessons. Fang rested his head on Harry's knee and drooled all over his robes.

Harry and Ron were delighted to hear Hagrid call Fitch "that old git."

"An' as fer that cat, Mrs. Norris, I'd like ter introduce her to Fang sometime. D'yeh know, every time I go up ter the school, she follows me everywhere? Can't get rid of her -- Fitch puts her up to it."

Harry told Hagrid about Snape's lesson. Hagrid, like Ron, told Harry not to worry about it, that Snape liked hardly any of the students.

"But he seemed to really hate me."

"Rubbish!" said Hagrid. "Why should he?"

Yet Harry couldn't help thinking that Hagrid didn't quite meet his eyes when he said that.

"How's yer brother Charlie?" Hagrid asked Ron. "I liked him a lot -- great with animals."

Harry wondered if Hagrid had changed the subject on purpose. While Ron told Hagrid all about Charlie's work with dragons, Harry picked up a piece of paper that was lying on the table under the tea cozy. It was a cutting from the Daily Prophet:

GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on 31 July, widely believed to be the work of Dark wizards or witches unknown.

Gringotts goblins today insisted that nothing had been taken. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied the same day.

"But we're not telling you what was in there, so keep your noses out if you know what's good for you," said a Gringotts spoksgoblin this afternoon.

Harry remembered Ron telling him on the train that someone had tried to rob Gringotts, but Ron hadn't mentioned the date.

"Hagrid!" said Harry, "that Gringotts break-in happened on my birthday! It might've been happening while we were there!"

There was no doubt about it, Hagrid definitely didn't meet Harry's eyes this time. He grunted and offered him another rock cake. Harry read the story again. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied earlier that same day. Hagrid had emptied vault seven hundred and thirteen, if you could call it emptying, taking out that grubby little package. Had that been what the thieves were looking for?

As Harry and Ron walked back to the castle for dinner, their pockets weighed down with rock cakes they'd been too polite to refuse, Harry thought that none of the lessons he'd had so far had given him as much to think about as tea with Hagrid. Had Hagrid collected that package just in time? Where was it now? And did Hagrid know something about Snape that he didn't want to tell Harry?

CHAPTER NINE

THE MIDNIGHT DUEL

Harry had never believed he would meet a boy he hated more than Dudley, but that was before he met Draco Malfoy. Still, first-year Gryffindors only had Potions with the Slytherins, so they didn't have to put up with Malfoy much. Or at least, they didn't until they spotted a notice pinned up in the Gryffindor common room that made them all groan. Flying lessons would be starting on Thursday -- and Gryffindor and Slytherin would be learning together.

"Typical," said Harry darkly. "Just what I always wanted. To make a fool of myself on a broomstick in front of Malfoy."

He had been looking forward to learning to fly more than anything else.

"You don't know that you'll make a fool of yourself," said Ron reasonably. "Anyway, I know Malfoy's always going on about how good he is at Quidditch, but I bet that's all talk."

Malfay certainly did talk about flying a lot. He complained loudly about first years never getting on the house Quidditch teams and told long, boastful stories that always seemed to end with him narrowly escaping Muggles in helicopters. He wasn't the only one, though: the way Seamus Finnigan told it, he'd spent most of his childhood zooming around the countryside on his broomstick. Even Ron would tell anyone who'd listen about the time he'd almost hit a hang glider on Charlie's old broom. Everyone from wizarding families talked about Quidditch constantly. Ron had already had a big argument with Dean Thomas, who shared their dormitory, about soccer. Ron couldn't see what was exciting about a game with only one ball where no one was allowed to fly. Harry had caught Ron prodding Dean's poster of West Ham soccer team, trying to make the players move.

Neville had never been on a broomstick in his life, because his grandmother had never let him near one. Privately, Harry felt she'd had good reason, because Neville managed to have an extraordinary number of accidents even with both feet on the ground.

Hermione Granger was almost as nervous about flying as Neville was. This was something you couldn't learn by heart out of a book -- not that she hadn't tried. At breakfast on Thursday she bored them all stupid with flying tips she'd gotten out of a library book called *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Neville was hanging on to her every word, desperate for anything that might help him hang on to his broomstick later, but everybody else was very pleased when Hermione's lecture was interrupted by the arrival of the mail.

Harry hadn't had a single letter since Hagrid's note, something that Malfoy had been quick to notice, of course. Malfoy's eagle owl was always bringing him packages of sweets from home, which he opened gloatingly at the Slytherin table.

A barn owl brought Neville a small package from his grandmother. He opened it excitedly and showed them a glass ball the size of a large marble, which seemed to be full of white smoke.

"It's a Remembrall!" he explained. "Gran knows I forget things -- this tells you if there's something you've forgotten to do. Look, you hold it tight like this and if it turns red -- oh..." His face fell, because the Remembrall had suddenly glowed scarlet,

"You've forgotten something..."

Neville was trying to remember what he'd forgotten when Draco Malfoy, who was passing the Gryffindor table, snatched the Remembrall out of his hand.

Harry and Ron jumped to their feet. They were half hoping for a reason to fight Malfay, but Professor McGonagall, who could spot trouble quicker than any teacher in the school, was there in a flash.

"What's going on?"

"Malfoy's got my Remembrall, Professor."

Scowling, Malfoy quickly dropped the Remembrall back on the table.

"Just looking," he said, and he sloped away with Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

At three-thirty that afternoon, Harry, Ron, and the other Gryffindors hurried down the front steps onto the grounds for their first flying lesson. It was a clear, breezy day, and the grass rippled under their feet as they marched down the sloping lawns toward a smooth, flat lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the forbidden forest, whose trees were swaying darkly in the distance.

The Slytherins were already there, and so were twenty broomsticks lying in neat lines on the ground. Harry had heard Fred and George Weasley complain about the school brooms, saying that some of them started to vibrate if you flew too high, or always flew slightly to the left.

Their teacher, Madam Hooch, arrived. She had short, gray hair, and yellow eyes like a hawk.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she barked. "Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

Harry glanced down at his broom. It was old and some of the twigs stuck out at odd angles.

"Stick out your right hand over your broom," called Madam Hooch at the front, "and say 'Up!'"

"UP!" everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once, but it was one of the few that did. Hermione Granger's had simply rolled over on the ground, and Neville's hadn't moved at all. Perhaps brooms, like horses, could tell when you were afraid, thought Harry; there was a quaver in Neville's voice that said only too clearly that he wanted to keep his feet on the ground.

Madam Hooch then showed them how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, and walked up and down the rows correcting their grips. Harry and Ron were delighted when she told Malfoy he'd been doing it wrong for years.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," said Madam Hooch. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle -- three -- two --"

But Neville, nervous and jumpy and frightened of being left on the ground, pushed off hard before the whistle had touched Madam Hooch's lips.

"Come back, boy!" she shouted, but Neville was rising straight up like a cork shot out of a bottle -- twelve feet -- twenty feet. Harry saw his scared white face look down at the ground falling away, saw him gasp, slip sideways off the broom and --

WHAM -- a thud and a nasty crack and Neville lay facedown on the grass in a heap. His broomstick was still rising higher and higher, and

started to drift lazily toward the forbidden forest and out of sight.

Madam Hooch was bending over Neville, her face as white as his.

"Broken wrist," Harry heard her mutter. "Come on, boy -- it's all right, up you get.".

She turned to the rest of the class.

"None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come on, dear."

Neville, his face tear-streaked, clutching his wrist, hobbled off with Madam Hooch, who had her arm around him.

No sooner were they out of earshot than Malfoy burst into laughter.

"Did you see his face, the great lump?"

The other Slytherins joined in.

"Shut up, Malfoy," snapped Parvati Patil.

"Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?" said Pansy Parkinson, a hard-faced Slytherin girl. "Never thought you'd like fat little crybabies, Parvati."

"Look!" said Malfoy, darting forward and snatching something out of the grass. "It's that stupid thing Longbottom's gran sent him."

The Remembrall glittered in the sun as he held it up.

"Give that here, Malfoy," said Harry quietly. Everyone stopped talking to watch.

Malfoy smiled nastily.

"I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find -- how about -- up a tree?"

"Give it here!" Harry yelled, but Malfoy had leapt onto his broomstick and taken off. He hadn't been lying, he could fly well. Hovering level with the topmost branches of an oak he called, "Come and get it, Potter!"

Harry grabbed his broom.

"No!" shouted Hermione Granger. "Madam Hooch told us not to move -- you'll get us all into trouble."

Harry ignored her. Blood was pounding in his ears. He mounted the broom and kicked hard against the ground and up, up he soared; air rushed through his hair, and his robes whipped out behind him -and in a rush of fierce joy he realized he'd found something he could do without being taught -- this was easy, this was wonderful. He pulled his broomstick up a little to take it even higher, and heard screams and gasps of girls back on the ground and an admiring whoop from Ron.

He turned his broomstick sharply to face Malfoy in midair. Malfoy looked

stunned.

"Give it here," Harry called, "or I'll knock you off that broom!" "Oh, yeah?" said Malfoy, trying to sneer, but looking worried.

Harry knew, somehow, what to do. He leaned forward and grasped the broom tightly in both hands, and it shot toward Malfoy like a javelin. Malfoy only just got out of the way in time; Harry made a sharp about-face and held the broom steady. A few people below were clapping.

"No Crabbe and Goyle up here to save your neck, Malfoy," Harry called.

The same thought seemed to have struck Malfoy.

"Catch it if you can, then!" he shouted, and he threw the glass ball high into the air and streaked back toward the ground.

Harry saw, as though in slow motion, the ball rise up in the air and then start to fall. He leaned forward and pointed his broom handle down -- next second he was gathering speed in a steep dive, racing the ball -- wind whistled in his ears, mingled with the screams of people watching -- he stretched out his hand -- a foot from the ground he caught it, just in time to pull his broom straight, and he toppled gently onto the grass with the Remembrall clutched safely in his fist.

"HARRY POTTER!"

His heart sank faster than he'd just dived. Professor McGonagall was running toward them. He got to his feet, trembling.

"Never -- in all my time at Hogwarts --"

Professor McGonagall was almost speechless with shock, and her glasses flashed furiously, "-- how dare you -- might have broken your neck --"

"It wasn't his fault, Professor --"

"Be quiet, Miss Patil

"But Malfoy --"

"That's enough, Mr. Weasley. Potter, follow me, now."

Harry caught sight of Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle's triumphant faces as he left, walking numbly in Professor McGonagall's wake as she strode toward the castle. He was going to be expelled, he just knew it. He wanted to say something to defend himself, but there seemed to be something wrong with his voice. Professor McGonagall was sweeping along without even looking at him; he had to jog to keep up. Now he'd done it. He hadn't even lasted two weeks. He'd be packing his bags in ten minutes. What would the Dursleys say when he turned up on the doorstep?

Up the front steps, up the marble staircase inside, and still Professor McGonagall didn't say a word to him. She wrenched open doors and marched along corridors with Harry trotting miserably behind her. Maybe she was taking him to Dumbledore. He thought of Hagrid, expelled but allowed to stay on as gamekeeper. Perhaps he could be Hagrid's assistant. His stomach twisted as he imagined it, watching Ron and the others becoming wizards, while he stumped around the grounds carrying Hagrid's bag.

Professor McGonagall stopped outside a classroom. She opened the door and poked her head inside.

"Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, could I borrow Wood for a moment?"

Wood? thought Harry, bewildered; was Wood a cane she was going to use on him?

But Wood turned out to be a person, a burly fifth-year boy who came out of Flitwicles class looking confused.

"Follow me, you two," said Professor McGonagall, and they marched on up the corridor, Wood looking curiously at Harry.

"In here."

Professor McGonagall pointed them into a classroom that was empty except for Peeves, who was busy writing rude words on the blackboard.

"Out, Peeves!" she barked. Peeves threw the chalk into a bin, which clanged loudly, and he swooped out cursing. Professor McGonagall slammed the door behind him and turned to face the two boys.

"Potter, this is Oliver Wood. Wood -- I've found you a Seeker."

Wood's expression changed from puzzlement to delight.

"Are you serious, Professor?"

"Absolutely," said Professor McGonagall crisply. "The boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it. Was that your first time on a broomstick, Potter?"

Harry nodded silently. He didn't have a clue what was going on, but he didn't seem to be being expelled, and some of the feeling started coming back to his legs.

"He caught that thing in his hand after a fifty-foot dive," Professor McGonagall told Wood. "Didn't even scratch himself. Charlie Weasley couldn't have done it."

Wood was now looking as though all his dreams had come true at once.

"Ever seen a game of Quidditch, Potter?" he asked excitedly.

"Wood's captain of the Gryffindor team," Professor McGonagall explained.

"He's just the build for a Seeker, too," said Wood, now walking around Harry and staring at him. "Light -- speedy -- we'll have to get him a decent broom, Professor -- a Nimbus Two Thousand or a Cleansweep Seven, I'd say."

I shall speak to Professor Dumbledore and see if we can't bend the first-year rule. Heaven knows, we need a better team than last year. Flattened in that last match by Slytherin, I couldn't look Severus Snape in the face for weeks...."

Professor McGonagall peered sternly over her glasses at Harry.

"I want to hear you're training hard, Potter, or I may change my mind

about punishing you."

Then she suddenly smiled.

"Your father would have been proud," she said. "He was an excellent Quidditch player himself."

"You're joking."

It was dinnertime. Harry had just finished telling Ron what had happened when he'd left the grounds with Professor McGonagall. Ron had a piece of steak and kidney pie halfway to his mouth, but he'd forgotten all about it.

"Seeker?" he said. "But first years never -- you must be the youngest house player in about a century, said Harry, shoveling pie into his mouth. He felt particularly hungry after the excitement of the afternoon. "Wood told me."

Ron was so amazed, so impressed, he just sat and gaped at Harry.

"I start training next week," said Harry. "Only don't tell anyone, Wood wants to keep it a secret."

Fred and George Weasley now came into the hall, spotted Harry, and hurried over.

"Well done," said George in a low voice. "Wood told us. We're on the team too -- Beaters."

"I tell you, we're going to win that Quidditch cup for sure this year," said Fred. "We haven't won since Charlie left, but this year's team is going to be brilliant. You must be good, Harry, Wood was almost skipping when he told us."

"Anyway, we've got to go, Lee Jordan reckons he's found a new secret passageway out of the school."

"Bet it's that one behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy that we found in our first week. See you."

Fred and George had hardly disappeared when someone far less welcome turned up: Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Having a last meal, Potter? When are you getting the train back to the Muggles?"

"You're a lot braver now that you're back on the ground and you've got your little friends with you," said Harry coolly. There was of course nothing at all little about Crabbe and Goyle, but as the High Table was full of teachers, neither of them could do more than crack their knuckles and scowl.

"I'd take you on anytime on my own," said Malfoy. "Tonight, if you want. Wizard's duel. Wands only -- no contact. What's the matter? Never heard of a wizard's duel before, I suppose?"

"Of course he has," said Ron, wheeling around. "I'm his second, who's yours?"

Malfoy looked at Crabbe and Goyle, sizing them up.

"Crabbe," he said. "Midnight all right? We'll meet you in the trophy room; that's always unlocked."

When Malfoy had gone, Ron and Harry looked at each other. "What is a wizard's duel?" said Harry. "And what do you mean, you're my second?"

"Well, a second's there to take over if you die," said Ron casually, getting started at last on his cold pie. Catching the look on Harry's face, he added quickly, "But people only die in proper duels, you know, with real wizards. The most you and Malfoy'll be able to do is send sparks at each other. Neither of you knows enough magic to do any real damage. I bet he expected you to refuse, anyway."

"And what if I wave my wand and nothing happens?"

"Throw it away and punch him on the nose," Ron suggested. "Excuse me."

They both looked up. It was Hermione Granger.

"Can't a person eat in peace in this place?" said Ron.

Hermione ignored him and spoke to Harry.

"I couldn't help overhearing what you and Malfoy were saying --"

"Bet you could," Ron muttered.

--and you mustn't go wandering around the school at night, think of the points you'll lose Gryffindor if you're caught, and you're bound to be. It's really very selfish of you."

"And it's really none of your business," said Harry.

"Good-bye," said Ron.

All the same, it wasn't what you'd call the perfect end to the day, Harry thought, as he lay awake much later listening to Dean and Seamus falling asleep (Neville wasn't back from the hospital wing). Ron had spent all evening giving him advice such as "If he tries to curse you, you'd better dodge it, because I can't remember how to block them." There was a very good chance they were going to get caught by Filch or Mrs. Norris, and Harry felt he was pushing his luck, breaking another school rule today. On the other hand, Malfoys sneering face kept looming up out of the darkness - this was his big chance to beat Malfoy face-to-face. He couldn't miss it.

"Half-past eleven," Ron muttered at last, "we'd better go."

They pulled on their bathrobes, picked up their wands, and crept across the tower room, down the spiral staircase, and into the Gryffindor common room. A few embers were still glowing in the fireplace, turning all the armchairs into hunched black shadows. They had almost reached the portrait hole when a voice spoke from the chair nearest them, "I can't believe you're going to do this, Harry."

A lamp flickered on. It was Hermione Granger, wearing a pink bathrobe and a frown.

"You!" said Ron furiously. "Go back to bed!"

"I almost told your brother," Hermione snapped, "Percy -- he's a prefect, he'd put a stop to this."

Harry couldn't believe anyone could be so interfering.

"Come on," he said to Ron. He pushed open the portrait of the Fat Lady and climbed through the hole.

Hermione wasn't going to give up that easily. She followed Ron through the portrait hole, hissing at them like an angry goose.

"Don't you care about Gryffindor, do you only care about yourselves, I don't want Slytherin to win the house cup, and you'll lose all the points I got from Professor McGonagall for knowing about Switching Spells."

"Go away." "All right, but I warned you, you just remember what I said when you're on the train home tomorrow, you're so --"

But what they were, they didn't find out. Hermione had turned to the portrait of the Fat Lady to get back inside and found herself facing an empty painting. The Fat Lady had gone on a nighttime visit and Hermione was locked out of Gryffindor tower.

"Now what am I going to do?" she asked shrilly.

"That's your problem," said Ron. "We've got to go, we're going to be late."

They hadn't even reached the end of the corridor when Hermione caught up with them.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"You are not."

"D'you think I'm going to stand out here and wait for Filch to catch me? If he finds all three of us I'll tell him the truth, that I was trying to stop you, and you can back me up."

"You've got some nerve --" said Ron loudly.

"Shut up, both of you!" said Harry sharply. I heard something."

It was a sort of snuffling.

"Mrs. Norris?" breathed Ron, squinting through the dark.

It wasn't Mrs. Norris. It was Neville. He was curled up on the floor, fast asleep, but jerked suddenly awake as they crept nearer.

"Thank goodness you found me! I've been out here for hours, I couldn't remember the new password to get in to bed."

"Keep your voice down, Neville. The password's 'Pig snout' but it won't help you now, the Fat Lady's gone off somewhere."

"How's your arm?" said Harry.

"Fine," said Neville, showing them. "Madam Pomfrey mended it in about a minute."

"Good - well, look, Neville, we've got to be somewhere, we'll see you later --"

"Don't leave me!" said Neville, scrambling to his feet, "I don't want to stay here alone, the Bloody Baron's been past twice already."

Ron looked at his watch and then glared furiously at Hermione and Neville.

"If either of you get us caught, I'll never rest until I've learned that Curse of the Bogies Quirrell told us about, and used it on you."

Hermione opened her mouth, perhaps to tell Ron exactly how to use the Curse of the Bogies, but Harry hissed at her to be quiet and beckoned them all forward.

They flitted along corridors striped with bars of moonlight from the high windows. At every turn Harry expected to run into Filch or Mrs. Norris, but they were lucky. They sped up a staircase to the third floor and tiptoed toward the trophy room.

Malfoy and Crabbe weren't there yet. The crystal trophy cases glimmered where the moonlight caught them. Cups, shields, plates, and statues winked silver and gold in the darkness. They edged along the walls, keeping their eyes on the doors at either end of the room. Harry took out his wand in case Malfoy leapt in and started at once. The minutes crept by.

"He's late, maybe he's chickened out," Ron whispered.

Then a noise in the next room made them jump. Harry had only just raised his wand when they heard someone speak -and it wasn't Malfoy.

"Sniff around, my sweet, they might be lurking in a corner."

It was Filch speaking to Mrs. Norris. Horror-struck, Harry waved madly at the other three to follow him as quickly as possible; they scurried silently toward the door, away from Filch's voice. Neville's robes had barely whipped round the corner when they heard Filch enter the trophy room.

"They're in here somewhere," they heard him mutter, "probably hiding."

"This way!" Harry mouthed to the others and, petrified, they began to creep down a long gallery full of suits of armor. They could hear Filch getting nearer. Neville suddenly let out a frightened squeak and broke into a run -he tripped, grabbed Ron around the waist, and the pair of them toppled right into a suit of armor.

The clanging and crashing were enough to wake the whole castle.

"RUN!" Harry yelled, and the four of them sprinted down the gallery, not looking back to see whether Filch was following -- they swung around the doorpost and galloped down one corridor then another, Harry in the lead, without any idea where they were or where they were going -- they ripped through a tapestry and found themselves in a hidden passageway, hurtled

along it and came out near their Charms classroom, which they knew was miles from the trophy room.

"I think we've lost him," Harry panted, leaning against the cold wall and wiping his forehead. Neville was bent double, wheezing and spluttering.

I -- told -you," Hermione gasped, clutching at the stitch in her chest, "I -- told -- you."

"We've got to get back to Gryffindor tower," said Ron, "quickly as possible."

"Malfoy tricked you," Hermione said to Harry. "You realize that, don't you? He was never going to meet you -- Filch knew someone was going to be in the trophy room, Malfoy must have tipped him off."

Harry thought she was probably right, but he wasn't going to tell her that.

"Let's go."

It wasn't going to be that simple. They hadn't gone more than a dozen paces when a doorknob rattled and something came shooting out of a classroom in front of them.

It was Peeves. He caught sight of them and gave a squeal of delight.

"Shut up, Peeves -- please -- you'll get us thrown out."

Peeves cackled.

"Wandering around at midnight, Ickle Firsties? Tut, tut, tut. Naughty, naughty, you'll get caughty."

"Not if you don't give us away, Peeves, please."

"Should tell Filch, I should," said Peeves in a saintly voice, but his eyes glittered wickedly. "It's for your own good, you know."

"Get out of the way," snapped Ron, taking a swipe at Peeves this was a big mistake.

"STUDENTS OUT OF BED!" Peeves bellowed, "STUDENTS OUT OF BED DOWN THE CHARMS CORRIDOR"

Ducking under Peeves, they ran for their lives, right to the end of the corridor where they slammed into a door -- and it was locked.

"This is it!" Ron moaned, as they pushed helplessly at the door, "We're done for! This is the end!" They could hear footsteps, Filch running as fast as he could toward Peeves's shouts.

"Oh, move over," Hermione snarled. She grabbed Harry's wand, tapped the lock, and whispered, 'Alohomora!"

The lock clicked and the door swung open -- they piled through it, shut it quickly, and pressed their ears against it, listening.

"Which way did they go, Peeves?" Filch was saying. "Quick, tell me."

"Say 'please.'"

"Don't mess with me, Peeves, now where did they go?"

"Shan't say nothing if you don't say please," said Peeves in his annoying singsong voice.

"All right -please."

"NOTHING! Ha haaa! Told you I wouldn't say nothing if you didn't say please! Ha ha! Haaaaaaa!" And they heard the sound of Peeves whooshing away and Filch cursing in rage.

"He thinks this door is locked," Harry whispered. "I think we'll be okay -- get off, Neville!" For Neville had been tugging on the sleeve of Harry's bathrobe for the last minute. "What?"

Harry turned around -- and saw, quite clearly, what. For a moment, he was sure he'd walked into a nightmare -- this was too much, on top of everything that had happened so far.

They weren't in a room, as he had supposed. They were in a corridor. The forbidden corridor on the third floor. And now they knew why it was forbidden.

They were looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog that filled the whole space between ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes; three noses, twitching

and quivering in their direction; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs.

It was standing quite still, all six eyes staring at them, and Harry knew that the only reason they weren't already dead was that their sudden appearance had taken it by surprise, but it was quickly getting over that, there was no mistaking what those thunderous growls meant.

Harry groped for the doorknob -- between Filch and death, he'd take Filch.

They fell backward -- Harry slammed the door shut, and they ran, they almost flew, back down the corridor. Filch must have hurried off to look for them somewhere else, because they didn't see him anywhere, but they hardly cared -- all they wanted to do was put as much space as possible between them and that monster. They didn't stop running until they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady on the seventh floor.

"Where on earth have you all been?" she asked, looking at their bathrobes hanging off their shoulders and their flushed, sweaty faces.

"Never mind that -- pig snout, pig snout," panted Harry, and the portrait swung forward. They scrambled into the common room and collapsed, trembling, into armchairs.

It was a while before any of them said anything. Neville, indeed, looked as if he'd never speak again.

"What do they think they're doing, keeping a thing like that locked up in a school?" said Ron finally. "If any dog needs exercise, that one

does."

Hermione had got both her breath and her bad temper back again. "You don't use your eyes, any of you, do you?" she snapped. "Didn't you see what it was standing on.

"The floor?" Harry suggested. "I wasn't looking at its feet, I was too busy with its heads."

"No, not the floor. It was standing on a trapdoor. It's obviously guarding something."

She stood up, glaring at them.

I hope you're pleased with yourselves. We could all have been killed -- or worse, expelled. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to bed."

Ron stared after her, his mouth open.

"No, we don't mind," he said. "You'd think we dragged her along, wouldn't you.

But Hermione had given Harry something else to think about as he climbed back into bed. The dog was guarding something.... What had Hagrid said? Gringotts was the safest place in the world for something you wanted to hide -- except perhaps Hogwarts.

It looked as though Harry had found out where the grubby little package from vault seven hundred and thirteen was.

CHAPTER TEN

HALLOWEEN

Malfoy couldn't believe his eyes when he saw that Harry and Ron were still at Hogwarts the next day, looking tired but perfectly cheerful. Indeed, by the next morning Harry and Ron thought that meeting the three-headed dog had been an excellent adventure, and they were quite keen to have another one. In the meantime, Harry filled Ron in about the package that seemed to have been moved from Gringotts to Hogwarts, and they spent a lot of time wondering what could possibly need such heavy protection. "It's either really valuable or really dangerous," said Ron. "Or both," said Harry.

But as all they knew for sure about the mysterious object was that it was about two inches long, they didn't have much chance of guessing what it was without further clues.

Neither Neville nor Hermione showed the slightest interest in what lay underneath the dog and the trapdoor. All Neville cared about was never going near the dog again.

Hermione was now refusing to speak to Harry and Ron, but she was such a bossy know-it-all that they saw this as an added bonus. All they really wanted now was a way of getting back at Malfoy, and to their great delight, just such a thing arrived in the mail about a week later.

As the owls flooded into the Great Hall as usual, everyone's attention

was caught at once by a long, thin package carried by six large screech owls. Harry was just as interested as everyone else to see what was in this large parcel, and was amazed when the owls soared down and dropped it right in front of him, knocking his bacon to the floor. They had hardly fluttered out of the way when another owl dropped a letter on top of the parcel.

Harry ripped open the letter first, which was lucky, because it said:

DO NOT OPEN THE PARCEL AT THE TABLE.

It contains your new Nimbus Two Thousand, but I don't want everybody knowing you've got a broomstick or they'll all want one. Oliver Wood will meet you tonight on the Quidditch field at seven o'clock for your first training session.

Professor McGonagall

Harry had difficulty hiding his glee as he handed the note to Ron to read.

"A Nimbus Two Thousand!" Ron moaned enviously. "I've never even touched one."

They left the hall quickly, wanting to unwrap the broomstick in private before their first class, but halfway across the entrance hall they found the way upstairs barred by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy seized the package from Harry and felt it.

"That's a broomstick," he said, throwing it back to Harry with a mixture of jealousy and spite on his face. "You'll be in for it this time, Potter, first years aren't allowed them."

Ron couldn't resist it.

"It's not any old broomstick," he said, "it's a Nimbus Two Thousand. What did you say you've got at home, Malfoy, a Comet Two Sixty?" Ron grinned at Harry. "Comets look flashy, but they're not in the same league as the Nimbus."

"What would you know about it, Weasley, you couldn't afford half the handle," Malfoy snapped back. "I suppose you and your brothers have to save up twig by twig."

Before Ron could answer, Professor Flitwick appeared at Malfoy's elbow.

"Not arguing, I hope, boys?" he squeaked.

"Potter's been sent a broomstick, Professor," said Malfoy quickly.

"Yes, yes, that's right," said Professor Flitwick, beaming at Harry. "Professor McGonagall told me all about the special circumstances, Potter. And what model is it?"

"A Nimbus Two Thousand, sit," said Harry, fighting not to laugh at the look of horror on Malfoy's face. "And it's really thanks to Malfoy here that I've got it," he added.

Harry and Ron headed upstairs, smothering their laughter at Malfoy's

obvious rage and confusion. "Well, it's true," Harry chortled as they reached the top of the marble staircase, "If he hadn't stolen Neville's Remembrall I wouln't be on the team...."

"So I suppose you think that's a reward for breaking rules?" came an angry voice from just behind them. Hermione was stomping up the stairs, looking disapprovingly at the package in Harry's hand.

"I thought you weren't speaking to us?" said Harry.

"Yes, don't stop now," said Ron, "it's doing us so much good."

Hermione marched away with her nose in the air.

Harry had a lot of trouble keeping his mind on his lessons that day. It kept wandering up to the dormitory where his new broomstick was lying under his bed, or straying off to the Quidditch field where he'd be learning to play that night. He bolted his dinner that evening without noticing what he was eating, and then rushed upstairs with Ron to unwrap the Nimbus Two Thousand at last.

"Wow," Ron sighed, as the broomstick rolled onto Harry's bedspread.

Even Harry, who knew nothing about the different brooms, thought it looked wonderful. Sleek and shiny, with a mahogany handle, it had a long tail of neat, straight twigs and Nimbus Two Thousand written in gold near the top.

As seven o'clock drew nearer, Harry left the castle and set off in the dusk toward the Quidditch field. He'd never been inside the stadium before. Hundreds of seats were raised in stands around the field so that the spectators were high enough to see what was going on. At either end of the field were three golden poles with hoops on the end. They reminded Harry of the little plastic sticks Muggle

children blew bubbles through, except that they were fifty feet high.

Too eager to fly again to wait for Wood, Harry mounted his broomstick and kicked off from the ground. What a feeling -- he swooped in and out of the goal posts and then sped up and down the field. The Nimbus Two Thousand turned wherever he wanted at his lightest touch.

"Hey, Potter, come down!"

Oliver Wood had arrived. He was carrying a large wooden crate under his arm. Harry landed next to him.

"Very nice," said Wood, his eyes glinting. "I see what McGonagall meant... you really are a natural. I'm just going to teach you the rules this evening, then you'll be joining team practice three times a week."

He opened the crate. Inside were four different-sized balls.

"Right," said Wood. "Now, Quidditch is easy enough to understand, even if it's not too easy to play. There are seven players on each side. Three of them are called Chasers."

"Three Chasers," Harry repeated, as Wood took out a bright red ball about the size of a soccer ball.

"This ball's called the Quaffle," said Wood. "The Chasers throw the Quaffle to each other and try and get it through one of the hoops to score a goal. Ten points every time the Quaffle goes through one of the hoops. Follow me?"

"The Chasers throw the Quaffle and put it through the hoops to score," Harry recited. "So -- that's sort of like basketball on broomsticks with six hoops, isn't it?"

"What's basketball?" said Wood curiously. "Never mind," said Harry quickly.

"Now, there's another player on each side who's called the Keeper -I'm Keeper for Gryffindor. I have to fly around our hoops and stop the other team from scoring."

"Three Chasers, one Keeper," said Harry, who was determined to remember it all. "And they play with the Quaffle. Okay, got that. So what are they for?" He pointed at the three balls left inside the box.

"I'll show you now," said Wood. "Take this."

He handed Harry a small club, a bit like a short baseball bat.

"I'm going to show you what the Bludgers do," Wood said. "These two are the Bludgers."

He showed Harry two identical balls, jet black and slightly smaller than the red Quaffle. Harry noticed that they seemed to be straining to escape the straps holding them inside the box.

"Stand back," Wood warned Harry. He bent down and freed one of the Bludgers.

At once, the black ball rose high in the air and then pelted straight at Harry's face. Harry swung at it with the bat to stop it from breaking his nose, and sent it zigzagging away into the air -- it zoomed around their heads and then shot at Wood, who dived on top of it and managed to pin it to the ground.

"See?" Wood panted, forcing the struggling Bludger back into the crate and strapping it down safely. "The Bludgers rocket around, trying to knock players off their brooms. That's why you have two Beaters on each team -- the Weasley twins are ours -- it's their job to protect their side from the Bludgers and try and knock them toward the other team. So -- think you've got all that?"

"Three Chasers try and score with the Quaffle; the Keeper guards the goal posts; the Beaters keep the Bludgers away from their team," Harry reeled off.

"Very good," said Wood.

"Er -- have the Bludgers ever killed anyone?" Harry asked, hoping he sounded offhand.

"Never at Hogwarts. We've had a couple of broken jaws but nothing worse than that. Now, the last member of the team is the

Seeker. That's you. And you don't have to worry about the Quaffle or the

Bludgers unless they crack my head open."

"Don't worry, the Weasleys are more than a match for the Bludgers -- I mean, they're like a pair of human Bludgers themselves."

Wood reached into the crate and took out the fourth and last ball. Compared with the Quaffle and the Bludgers, it was tiny, about the size of a large walnut. It was bright gold and had little fluttering silver wings.

"This," said Wood, "is the Golden Snitch, and it's the most important ball of the lot. It's very hard to catch because it's so fast and difficult to see. It's the Seeker's job to catch it. You've got to weave in and out of the Chasers, Beaters, Bludgers, and Quaffle to get it before the other team's Seeker, because whichever Seeker catches the Snitch wins his team an extra hundred and fifty points, so they

nearly always win. That's why Seekers get fouled so much. A game of Quidditch only ends when the Snitch is caught, so it can go on for ages -- I think the record is three months, they had to keep bringing on substitutes so the players could get some sleep. "Well, that's it -- any questions?"

Harry shook his head. He understood what he had to do all right, it was doing it that was going to be the problem.

"We won't practice with the Snitch yet," said Wood, carefully shutting it back inside the crate, "it's too dark, we might lose it. Let's try you out with a few of these."

He pulled a bag of ordinary golf balls out of his pocket and a few minutes later, he and Harry were up in the air, Wood throwing the golf balls as hard as he could in every direction for Harry to catch.

Harry didn't miss a single one, and Wood was delighted. After half an hour, night had really fallen and they couldn't carry on.

"That Quidditch cup'll have our name on it this year," said Wood happily as they trudged back up to the castle. "I wouldn't be surprised if you turn out better than Charlie Weasley, and he could have played for England if he hadn't gone off chasing dragons."

Perhaps it was because he was now so busy, what with Quidditch practice three evenings a week on top of all his homework, but Harry could hardly believe it when he realized that he'd already been at Hogwarts two months. The castle felt more like home than Privet Drive ever had. His lessons, too, were becoming more and more interesting now that they had mastered the basics.

On Halloween morning they woke to the delicious smell of baking pumpkin wafting through the corridors. Even better, Professor Flitwick announced in Charms that he thought they were ready to start making objects fly, something they had all been dying to try since they'd seen him make Neville's toad zoom around the classroom. Professor Flitwick put the class into pairs to practice. Harry's partner was Seamus Finnigan (which was a relief, because Neville had been trying to catch his eye). Ron, however, was to be working with Hermione Granger. It was hard to tell whether Ron or Hermione was angrier about this. She hadn't spoken to either of them since the day Harry's broomstick had arrived.

"Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of his pile of books as usual. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too -- never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest."

It was very difficult. Harry and Seamus swished and flicked, but the feather they were supposed to be sending skyward just lay on the desktop. Seamus got so impatient that he prodded it with his wand and set fire to it -- Harry had to put it out with his hat.

Ron, at the next table, wasn't having much more luck.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" he shouted, waving his long arms like a windmill.

"You're saying it wrong," Harry heard Hermione snap. "It's Wing-gar-dium Levi-o-sa, make the 'gar' nice and long."

"You do it, then, if you're so clever," Ron snarled.

Hermione rolled up the sleeves of her gown, flicked her wand, and said, "Wingardium Leviosa!"

Their feather rose off the desk and hovered about four feet above their heads.

"Oh, well done!" cried Professor Flitwick, clapping. "Everyone see here, Miss Granger's done it!"

Ron was in a very bad mood by the end of the class. "It's no wonder no one can stand her," he said to Harry as they pushed their way into the crowded corridor, "she's a nightmare, honestly."

Someone knocked into Harry as they hurried past him. It was Hermione. Harry caught a glimpse of her face -- and was startled to see that she was in tears.

"I think she heard you."

"So?" said Ron, but he looked a bit uncomfortable. "She must've noticed she's got no friends."

Hermione didn't turn up for the next class and wasn't seen all afternoon. On their way down to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast, Harry and Ron overheard Parvati Patil telling her friend Lavender that Hermione was crying in the girls' bathroom and wanted to be left alone. Ron looked still more awkward at this, but a moment later they had entered the Great Hall, where the Halloween decorations put Hermione out of their minds.

A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceiling while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles in the pumpkins stutter. The feast appeared suddenly on the golden plates, as it had at the start-of-term banquet.

Harry was just helping himself to a baked potato when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore's chair, slumped

against the table, and gasped, "Troll -- in the dungeons -- thought you ought to know."

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

There was an uproar. It took several purple firecrackers exploding from the end of Professor Dumbledore's wand to bring silence.

"Prefects," he rumbled, "lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

Percy was in his element.

"Follow me! Stick together, first years! No need to fear the troll if you follow my orders! Stay close behind me, now. Make way, first years coming through! Excuse me, I'm a prefect!"

"How could a troll get in?" Harry asked as they climbed the stairs.

"Don't ask me, they're supposed to be really stupid," said Ron. "Maybe Peeves let it in for a Halloween joke."

They passed different groups of people hurrying in different directions. As they jostled their way through a crowd of confused Hufflepuffs, Harry suddenly grabbed Ron's arm.

"I've just thought -- Hermione."

"What about her?"

"She doesn't know about the troll."

Ron bit his lip.

"Oh, all right," he snapped. "But Percy'd better not see us."

Ducking down, they joined the Hufflepuffs going the other way, slipped down a deserted side corridor, and hurried off toward the girls' bathroom. They had just turned the corner when they heard quick footsteps behind them.

"Percy!" hissed Ron, pulling Harry behind a large stone griffin.

Peering around it, however, they saw not Percy but Snape. He crossed the corridor and disappeared from view.

"What's he doing?" Harry whispered. "Why isn't he down in the dungeons with the rest of the teachers?"

"Search me."

Quietly as possible, they crept along the next corridor after Snape's fading footsteps.

"He's heading for the third floor," Harry said, but Ron held up his hand.

"Can you smell something?"

Harry sniffed and a foul stench reached his nostrils, a mixture of old

socks and the kind of public toilet no one seems to clean.

And then they heard it -- a low grunting, and the shuffling footfalls of gigantic feet. Ron pointed -- at the end of a passage to the left, something huge was moving toward them. They shrank into the shadows and watched as it emerged into a patch of moonlight.

It was a horrible sight. Twelve feet tall, its skin was a dull, granite gray, its great lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched on top like a coconut. It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. The smell coming from it was incredible. It was holding a huge wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.

The troll stopped next to a doorway and peered inside. It waggled its long ears, making up its tiny mind, then slouched slowly into the room.

"The keys in the lock," Harry muttered. "We could lock it in."

"Good idea," said Ron nervously.

They edged toward the open door, mouths dry, praying the troll wasn't about to come out of it. With one great leap, Harry managed to grab the key, slam the door, and lock it.

'Yes!"

Flushed with their victory, they started to run back up the passage, but as they reached the corner they heard something that made their hearts stop -- a high, petrified scream -- and it was coming from the chamber they'd just chained up.

"Oh, no," said Ron, pale as the Bloody Baron.

"It's the girls' bathroom!" Harry gasped.

"Hermione!" they said together.

It was the last thing they wanted to do, but what choice did they have? Wheeling around, they sprinted back to the door and turned the key, fumbling in their panic. Harry pulled the door open and they ran inside.

Hermione Granger was shrinking against the wall opposite, looking as if she was about to faint. The troll was advancing on her, knocking the sinks off the walls as it went.

"Confuse it!" Harry said desperately to Ron, and, seizing a tap, he threw it as hard as he could against the wall.

The troll stopped a few feet from Hermione. It lumbered around, blinking stupidly, to see what had made the noise. Its mean little eyes saw Harry. It hesitated, then made for him instead, lifting its club as it went.

"Oy, pea-brain!" yelled Ron from the other side of the chamber, and he threw a metal pipe at it. The troll didn't even seem to notice the pipe hitting its shoulder, but it heard the yell and paused again, turning its ugly snout toward Ron instead, giving Harry time to run around it.

"Come on, run, run!" Harry yelled at Hermione, trying to pull her toward

the door, but she couldn't move, she was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror.

The shouting and the echoes seemed to be driving the troll berserk. It roared again and started toward Ron, who was nearest and had no way to escape.

Harry then did something that was both very brave and very stupid: He took a great running jump and managed to fasten his arms around the troll's neck from behind. The troll couldn't feel Harry hanging there, but even a troll will notice if you stick a long bit of wood up its nose, and Harry's wand had still been in his hand when he'd jumped -- it had gone straight up one of the troll's nostrils.

Howling with pain, the troll twisted and flailed its club, with Harry clinging on for dear life; any second, the troll was going to rip him off or catch him a terrible blow with the club.

Hermione had sunk to the floor in fright; Ron pulled out his own wand -- not knowing what he was going to do he heard himself cry the first spell that came into his head: "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The club flew suddenly out of the troll's hand, rose high, high up into the air, turned slowly over -- and dropped, with a sickening crack, onto its owner's head. The troll swayed on the spot and then fell flat on its face, with a thud that made the whole room tremble.

Harry got to his feet. He was shaking and out of breath. Ron was standing there with his wand still raised, staring at what he had done.

It was Hermione who spoke first.

"Is it -- dead?"

I don't think so," said Harry, I think it's just been knocked out."

He bent down and pulled his wand out of the troll's nose. It was covered in what looked like lumpy gray glue.

"Urgh -- troll boogers."

He wiped it on the troll's trousers.

A sudden slamming and loud footsteps made the three of them look up. They hadn't realized what a racket they had been making, but of course, someone downstairs must have heard the crashes and the troll's roars. A moment later, Professor McGonagall had come bursting into the room, closely followed by Snape, with Quirrell bringing up the rear. Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper, and sat quickly down on a toilet, clutching his heart.

Snape bent over the troll. Professor McGonagall was looking at Ron and Harry. Harry had never seen her look so angry. Her lips were white. Hopes of winning fifty points for Gryffindor faded quickly from Harry's mind.

"What on earth were you thinking of?" said Professor McGonagall, with cold fury in her voice. Harry looked at Ron, who was still standing with his wand in the air. "You're lucky you weren't killed. Why aren't you in your dormitory?"

Snape gave Harry a swift, piercing look. Harry looked at the floor. He wished Ron would put his wand down.

Then a small voice came out of the shadows.

"Please, Professor McGonagall -- they were looking for me."

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione had managed to get to her feet at last.

I went looking for the troll because I -- I thought I could deal with it on my own -- you know, because I've read all about them."

Ron dropped his wand. Hermione Granger, telling a downright lie to a teacher? "If they hadn't found me, I'd be dead now. Harry stuck his wand up its nose and Ron knocked it out with its own club. They didn't have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they arrived."

Harry and Ron tried to look as though this story wasn't new to them.

"Well -- in that case..." said Professor McGonagall, staring at the three of them, "Miss Granger, you foolish girl, how could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?"

Hermione hung her head. Harry was speechless. Hermione was the last person to do anything against the rules, and here she was, pretending she had, to get them out of trouble. It was as if Snape had started handing out sweets.

"Miss Granger, five points will be taken from Gryffindor for this," said Professor McGonagall. "I'm very disappointed in you. If you're not hurt at all, you'd better get off to Gryffindor tower. Students are finishing the feast in their houses."

Hermione left.

Professor McGonagall turned to Harry and Ron.

"Well, I still say you were lucky, but not many first years could have taken on a full-grown mountain troll. You each win Gryffindor five points. Professor Dumbledore will be informed of this. You may go."

They hurried out of the chamber and didn't speak at all until they had climbed two floors up. It was a relief to be away from the smell of the troll, quite apart from anything else.

"We should have gotten more than ten points," Ron grumbled.

"Five, you mean, once she's taken off Hermione's."

"Good of her to get us out of trouble like that," Ron admitted. "Mind you, we did save her."

"She might not have needed saving if we hadn't locked the thing in with her," Harry reminded him.

They had reached the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Pig snout," they said and entered.

The common room was packed and noisy. Everyone was eating the food that had been sent up. Hermione, however, stood alone by the door, waiting for them. There was a very embarrassed pause. Then, none of them looking at each other, they all said "Thanks," and hurried off to get plates.

But from that moment on, Hermione Granger became their friend. There are some things you can't share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

QUIDDITCH

As they entered November, the weather turned very cold. The mountains around the school became icy gray and the lake like chilled steel. Every morning the ground was covered in frost. Hagrid could be seen from the upstairs windows defrosting broomsticks on the Quidditch field, bundled up in a long moleskin overcoat, rabbit fur gloves, and enormous beaverskin boots.

The Quidditch season had begun. On Saturday, Harry would be playing in his first match after weeks of training: Gryffindor versus Slytherin. If Gryffindor won, they would move up into second place in the house championship.

Hardly anyone had seen Harry play because Wood had decided that, as their secret weapon, Harry should be kept, well, secret. But the news that he was playing Seeker had leaked out somehow, and Harry didn't know which was worse -- people telling him he'd be brilliant or people telling him they'd be running around underneath him holding a mattress.

It was really lucky that Harry now had Hermoine as a friend. He didn't know how he'd have gotten through all his homework without her, what with all the last-minute Quidditch practice Wood was making them do. She had also lent him *Quidditch Through the Ages*, which turned out to be a very interesting read.

Harry learned that there were seven hundred ways of committing a Quidditch foul and that all of them had happened during a World Cup match in 1473; that Seekers were usually the smallest and fastest players, and that most serious Quidditch accidents seemed to happen to them; that although people rarely died playing Quidditch, referees had been known to vanish and turn up months later in the Sahara Desert.

Hermione had become a bit more relaxed about breaking rules since Harry and Ron had saved her from the mountain troll, and she was much nicer for it. The day before Harry's first Quidditch match the three of them were out in the freezing courtyard during break, and she had conjured them up a bright blue fire that could be carried around in a jam jar. They were standing with their backs to it, getting warm, when Snape crossed the yard. Harry noticed at once that Snape was limping. Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved closer together to block the fire from view; they were sure it wouldn't be allowed. Unfortunately, something about their guilty faces caught Snape's eye. He limped over. He hadn't seen the fire, but he seemed to be looking for a reason to tell them off anyway.

"What's that you've got there, Potter?"

It was Quidditch Through the Ages. Harry showed him.

"Library books are not to be taken outside the school," said Snape.
"Give it to me. Five points from Gryffindor."

"He's just made that rule up," Harry muttered angrily as Snape limped away. "Wonder what's wrong with his leg?"

"Dunno, but I hope it's really hurting him," said Ron bitterly.

The Gryffindor common room was very noisy that evening. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat together next to a window. Hermione was checking Harry and Ron's Charms homework for them. She would never let them copy ("How will you learn?"), but by asking her to read it through, they got the right answers anyway.

Harry felt restless. He wanted Quidditch Through the Ages back, to take his mind off his nerves about tomorrow. Why should he be afraid of Snape? Getting up, he told Ron and Hermione he was going to ask Snape if he could have it.

"Better you than me," they said together, but Harry had an idea that Snape wouldn't refuse if there were other teachers listening.

He made his way down to the staffroom and knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again. Nothing.

Perhaps Snape had left the book in there? It was worth a try. He pushed the door ajar and peered inside -- and a horrible scene met his eyes.

Snape and Filch were inside, alone. Snape was holding his robes above his knees. One of his legs was bloody and mangled. Filch was handing Snape bandages.

"Blasted thing*," Snape was saying. "How are you supposed to keep your eyes on all three heads at once?"

Harry tried to shut the door quietly, but --

"POTTER!"

Snape's face was twisted with fury as he dropped his robes quickly to hide his leg. Harry gulped.

"I just wondered if I could have my book back."

"GET OUT! OUT!"

Harry left, before Snape could take any more points from Gryffindor. He sprinted back upstairs.

"Did you get it?" Ron asked as Harry joined them. "What's the matter?"

In a low whisper, Harry told them what he'd seen.

"You know what this means?" he finished breathlessly. "He tried to get past that three-headed dog at Halloween! That's where he was going when

we saw him -- he's after whatever it's guarding! And I'd bet my broomstick he let that troll in, to make a diversion!"

Hermione's eyes were wide.

"No -- he wouldn't, she said. "I know he's not very nice, but he wouldn't try and steal something Dumbledore was keeping safe."

"Honestly, Hermione, you think all teachers are saints or something," snapped Ron. "I'm with Harry. I wouldn't put anything past Snape. But what's he after? What's that dog guarding?"

Harry went to bed with his head buzzing with the same question. Neville was snoring loudly, but Harry couldn't sleep. He tried to empty his mind -- he needed to sleep, he had to, he had his first Quidditch match in a few hours -- but the expression on Snape's face when Harry had seen his leg wasn't easy to forget.

The next morning dawned very bright and cold. The Great Hall was full of the delicious smell of fried sausages and the cheerful chatter of everyone looking forward to a good Quidditch match.

"You've got to eat some breakfast."

"I don't want anything."

"Just a bit of toast," wheedled Hermione.

"I'm not hungry."

Harry felt terrible. In an hour's time he'd be walking onto the field.

"Harry, you need your strength," said Seamus Finnigan. "Seekers are always the ones who get clobbered by the other team."

"Thanks, Seamus," said Harry, watching Seamus pile ketchup on his sausages.

By eleven o'clock the whole school seemed to be out in the stands around the Quidditch pitch. Many students had binoculars. The seats might be raised high in the air, but it was still difficult to see what was going on sometimes.

Ron and Hermione joined Neville, Seamus, and Dean the West Ham fan up in the top row. As a surprise for Harry, they had painted a large banner on one of the sheets Scabbers had ruined. It said Potter for President, and Dean, who was good at drawing, had done a large Gryffindor lion underneath. Then Hermione had performed a tricky little charm so that the paint flashed different colors.

Meanwhile, in the locker room, Harry and the rest of the team were changing into their scarlet Quidditch robes (Slytherin would be playing in green).

Wood cleared his throat for silence.

"Okay, men," he said.

"And women," said Chaser Angelina Johnson.

"And women," Wood agreed. "This is it."

"The big one," said Fred Weasley.

"The one we've all been waiting for," said George.

"We know Oliver's speech by heart," Fred told Harry, "we were on the team last year."

"Shut up, you two," said Wood. "This is the best team Gryffindor's had in years. We're going to win. I know it."

He glared at them all as if to say, "Or else."

"Right. It's time. Good luck, all of you."

Harry followed Fred and George out of the locker room and, hoping his knees weren't going to give way, walked onto the field to loud cheers.

Madam Hooch was refereeing. She stood in the middle of the field waiting for the two teams, her broom in her hand.

"Now, I want a nice fair game, all of you," she said, once they were all gathered around her. Harry noticed that she seemed to be speaking particularly to the Slytherin Captain, Marcus Flint, a sixth year. Harry thought Flint looked as if he had some troll blood in him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the fluttering banner high above, flashing Potter for President over the crowd. His heart skipped. He felt braver.

"Mount your brooms, please."

Harry clambered onto his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Madam Hooch gave a loud blast on her silver whistle.

Fifteen brooms rose up, high, high into the air. They were off. "And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor -- what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too --"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor."

The Weasley twins' friend, Lee Jordan, was doing the commentary for the match, closely watched by Professor McGonagall.

"And she's really belting along up there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood's, last year only a reserve -- back to Johnson and -- no, the Slytherins have taken the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes -- Flint flying like an eagle up there -- he's going to sc- no, stopped by an excellent move by Gryffindor Keeper Wood and the Gryffindors take the Quaffle -- that's Chaser Katie Bell of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field and -- OUCH -- that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a Bludger -- Quaffle taken by the Slytherins -- that's Adrian Pucey speeding off toward the goal posts, but he's blocked by a second Bludger -- sent his way by Fred or George Weasley, can't tell which -- nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, anyway, and Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead and off she goes -- she's really flying -- dodges a speeding Bludger -- the goal posts are ahead

-- come on, now, Angelina -- Keeper Bletchley dives -- misses --
GRYFFINDORS SCORE!"

Gryffindor cheers filled the cold air, with howls and moans from the Slytherins.

"Budge up there, move along."

"Hagrid!"

Ron and Hermione squeezed together to give Hagrid enough space to join them.

"Bin watchin' from me hut," said Hagrid, patting a large pair of binoculars around his neck, "But it isn't the same as bein' in the crowd. No sign of the Snitch yet, eh?"

"Nope," said Ron. "Harry hasn't had much to do yet."

"Kept outta trouble, though, that's somethin'," said Hagrid, raising his binoculars and peering skyward at the speck that was Harry.

Way up above them, Harry was gliding over the game, squinting about for some sign of the Snitch. This was part of his and Wood's game plan.

"Keep out of the way until you catch sight of the Snitch," Wood had said. "We don't want you attacked before you have to be."

When Angelina had scored, Harry had done a couple of loop-the-loops to let off his feelings. Now he was back to staring around for the Snitch. Once he caught sight of a flash of gold, but it was just a reflection from one of the Weasleys' wristwatches, and once a Bludger decided to come pelting his way, more like a cannonball than anything, but Harry dodged it and Fred Weasley came chasing after it.

"All right there, Harry?" he had time to yell, as he beat the Bludger furiously toward Marcus Flint.

"Slytherin in possession," Lee Jordan was saying, "Chaser Pucey ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys, and Chaser Bell, and speeds toward the -- wait a moment -- was that the Snitch?"

A murmur ran through the crowd as Adrian Pucey dropped the Quaffle, too busy looking over his shoulder at the flash of gold that had passed his left ear.

Harry saw it. In a great rush of excitement he dived downward after the streak of gold. Slytherin Seeker Terence Higgs had seen it, too. Neck and neck they hurtled toward the Snitch -all the Chasers seemed to have forgotten what they were supposed to be doing as they hung in midair to watch.

Harry was faster than Higgs -- he could see the little round ball, wings fluttering, darting up ahead -- he put on an extra spurt of speed --

WHAM! A roar of rage echoed from the Gryffindors below -- Marcus Flint had blocked Harry on purpose, and Harry's broom spun off course, Harry holding on for dear life.

"Foul!" screamed the Gryffindors.

Madam Hooch spoke angrily to Flint and then ordered a free shot at the goal posts for Gryffindor. But in all the confusion, of course, the Golden Snitch had disappeared from sight again.

Down in the stands, Dean Thomas was yelling, "Send him off, ref! Red card!"

"What are you talking about, Dean?" said Ron.

"Red card!" said Dean furiously. "In soccer you get shown the red card and you're out of the game!"

"But this isn't soccer, Dean," Ron reminded him.

Hagrid, however, was on Dean's side.

"They oughta change the rules. Flint coulda knocked Harry outta the air."

Lee Jordan was finding it difficult not to take sides.

"So -- after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating

"Jordan!" growled Professor McGonagall.

"I mean, after that open and revolting foul

'Jordan, I'm warning you --"

"All right, all right. Flint nearly kills the Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone, I'm sure, so a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinner, who puts it away, no trouble, and we continue play, Gryffindor still in possession."

It was as Harry dodged another Bludger, which went spinning dangerously past his head, that it happened. His broom gave a sudden, frightening lurch. For a split second, he thought he was going to fall. He gripped the broom tightly with both his hands and knees. He'd never felt anything like that.

It happened again. It was as though the broom was trying to buck him off. But Nimbus Two Thousands did not suddenly decide to buck their riders off. Harry tried to turn back toward the Gryffindor goal- posts -- he had half a mind to ask Wood to call time-out -- and then he realized that his broom was completely out of his control. He couldn't turn it. He couldn't direct it at all. It was zigzagging through the air, and every now and then making violent swishing movements that almost unseated him.

Lee was still commentating.

"Slytherin in possession -- Flint with the Quaffle -- passes Spinnet -- passes Bell -- hit hard in the face by a Bludger, hope it broke his nose -- only joking, Professor -- Slytherins score -- A no..."

The Slytherins were cheering. No one seemed to have noticed that Harry's broom was behaving strangely. It was carrying- him slowly higher, away from the game, jerking and twitching as it went.

"Dunno what Harry thinks he's doing," Hagrid mumbled. He stared through his binoculars. "If I didn't know better, I'd say he'd lost control of his broom... but he can't have...."

Suddenly, people were pointing up at Harry all over the stands. His broom had started to roll over and over, with him only just managing to hold on. Then the whole crowd gasped. Harry's broom had given a wild jerk and Harry swung off it. He was now dangling from it, holding on with only one hand.

"Did something happen to it when Flint blocked him?" Seamus whispered.

"Can't have," Hagrid said, his voice shaking. "Can't nothing interfere with a broomstick except powerful Dark magic -- no kid could do that to a Nimbus Two Thousand."

At these words, Hermione seized Hagrid's binoculars, but instead of looking up at Harry, she started looking frantically at the crowd.

"What are you doing?" moaned Ron, gray-faced.

"I knew it," Hermione gasped, "Snape -- look."

Ron grabbed the binoculars. Snape was in the middle of the stands opposite them. He had his eyes fixed on Harry and was muttering nonstop under his breath.

"He's doing something -- jinxing the broom," said Hermione.

"What should we do?"

"Leave it to me."

Before Ron could say another word, Hermione had disappeared. Ron turned the binoculars back on Harry. His broom was vibrating so hard, it was almost impossible for him to hang on much longer. The whole crowd was on its feet, watching, terrified, as the Weasleys flew up to try and pull Harry safely onto one of their brooms, but it was no good -- every time they got near him, the broom would jump higher still. They dropped lower and circled beneath him, obviously hoping to catch him if he fell.

Marcus

Flint seized the Quaffle and scored five times without anyone noticing.

"Come on, Hermione," Ron muttered desperately.

Hermione had fought her way across to the stand where Snape stood, and was now racing along the row behind him; she didn't even stop to say sorry as she knocked Professor Quirrell headfirst into the row in front. Reaching Snape, she crouched down, pulled out her wand, and whispered a few, well-chosen words. Bright blue flames shot from her wand onto the hem of Snape's robes.

It took perhaps thirty seconds for Snape to realize that he was on fire. A sudden yelp told her she had done her job. Scooping the fire off him into a little jar in her pocket, she scrambled back along the row -- Snape would never know what had happened.

It was enough. Up in the air, Harry was suddenly able to clamber back on to his broom.

"Neville, you can look!" Ron said. Neville had been sobbing into Hagrid's jacket for the last five minutes.

Harry was speeding toward the ground when the crowd saw him clap his hand to his mouth as though he was about to be sick -- he hit the field on all fours -- coughed -- and something gold fell into his hand.

"I've got the Snitch!" he shouted, waving it above his head, and the game ended in complete confusion.

"He didn't catch it, he nearly swallowed it," Flint was still howling twenty minutes later, but it made no difference -- Harry hadn't broken any rules and Lee Jordan was still happily shouting the results -- Gryffindor had won by one hundred and seventy points to sixty. Harry heard none of this, though. He was being made a cup of strong tea back in Hagrid's hut, with Ron and Hermione.

"It was Snape," Ron was explaining, "Hermione and I saw him. He was cursing your broomstick, muttering, he wouldn't take his eyes off you."

"Rubbish," said Hagrid, who hadn't heard a word of what had gone on next to him in the stands. "Why would Snape do somethin' like that?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another, wondering what to tell him. Harry decided on the truth.

"I found out something about him," he told Hagrid. "He tried to get past that three-headed dog on Halloween. It bit him. We think he was trying to steal whatever it's guarding."

Hagrid dropped the teapot.

"How do you know about Fluffy?" he said.

"Fluffy?"

"Yeah -- he's mine -- bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year -- I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the

"Yes?" said Harry eagerly.

"Now, don't ask me anymore," said Hagrid gruffly. "That's top secret, that is."

"But Snape's trying to steal it."

"Rubbish," said Hagrid again. "Snape's a Hogwarts teacher, he'd do nothin' of the sort."

"So why did he just try and kill Harry?" cried Hermione.

The afternoon's events certainly seemed to have changed her mind about Snape.

I know a jinx when I see one, Hagrid, I've read all about them!

You've got to keep eye contact, and Snape wasn't blinking at all, I saw him!"

"I'm tellin' yeh, yer wrong!" said Hagrid hotly. "I don' know why Harry's broom acted like that, but Snape wouldn' try an' kill a student! Now, listen to me, all three of yeh -- yer meddlin' in things that don' concern yeh. It's dangerous. You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guardin', that's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel --"

"Aha!" said Harry, "so there's someone called Nicolas Flamel involved, is there?"

Hagrid looked furious with himself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE MIRROR OF ERISED

Christmas was coming. One morning in mid-December, Hogwarts woke to find itself covered in several feet of snow. The lake froze solid and the Weasley twins were punished for bewitching several snowballs so that they followed Quirrell around, bouncing off the back of his turban. The few owls that managed to battle their way through the stormy sky to deliver mail had to be nursed back to health by Hagrid before they could fly off again.

No one could wait for the holidays to start. While the Gryffindor common room and the Great Hall had roaring fires, the drafty corridors had become icy and a bitter wind rattled the windows in the classrooms. Worst of all were Professor Snape's classes down in the dungeons, where their breath rose in a mist before them and they kept as close as possible to their hot cauldrons.

"I do feel so sorry," said Draco Malfoy, one Potions class, "for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they're not wanted at home."

He was looking over at Harry as he spoke. Crabbe and Goyle chuckled. Harry, who was measuring out powdered spine of lionfish, ignored them. Malfoy had been even more unpleasant than usual since the Quidditch match. Disgusted that the Slytherins had lost, he had tried to get everyone laughing at how a wide-mouthed tree frog would be replacing Harry as Seeker next. Then he'd realized that nobody found this funny, because they were all so impressed at the way Harry had managed to stay on his bucking broomstick. So Malfoy, jealous and angry, had gone back to taunting Harry about having no proper family.

It was true that Harry wasn't going back to Privet Drive for Christmas. Professor McGonagall had come around the week before, making a list of students who would be staying for the holidays, and Harry had signed up at once. He didn't feel sorry for himself at all; this would probably be the best Christmas he'd ever had. Ron and his brothers were staying, too, because Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were going to Romania to visit Charlie.

When they left the dungeons at the end of Potions, they found a large fir tree blocking the corridor ahead. Two enormous feet sticking out at the bottom and a loud puffing sound told them that Hagrid was behind it.

"Hi, Hagrid, want any help?" Ron asked, sticking his head through the branches.

"Nah, I'm all right, thanks, Ron."

"Would you mind moving out of the way?" came Malfoys cold drawl from behind them. "Are you trying to earn some extra money, Weasley? Hoping to be gamekeeper yourself when you leave Hogwarts, I suppose -- that hut of Hagrid's must seem like a palace compared to what your family's used to."

Ron dived at Malfoy just as Snape came up the stairs.

"WEASLEY!"

Ron let go of the front of Malfoy's robes.

"He was provoked, Professor Snape," said Hagrid, sticking his huge hairy face out from behind the tree. "Malfoy was insultin' his family."

"Be that as it may, fighting is against Hogwarts rules, Hagrid," said Snape silkily. "Five points from Gryffindor, Weasley, and be grateful it isn't more. Move along, all of you."

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle pushed roughly past the tree, scattering needles everywhere and smirking.

"I'll get him," said Ron, grinding his teeth at Malfoy's back, "one of these days, I'll get him --"

"I hate them both," said Harry, "Malfoy and Snape."

"Come on, cheer up, it's nearly Christmas," said Hagrid. "Tell yeh what, come with me an' see the Great Hall, looks a treat."

So the three of them followed Hagrid and his tree off to -the Great Hall, where Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick were busy with the Christmas decorations.

"Ah, Hagrid, the last tree -- put it in the far corner, would you?"

The hall looked spectacular. Festoons of holly and mistletoe hung all around the walls, and no less than twelve towering Christmas trees stood around the room, some sparkling with tiny icicles, some glittering with hundreds of candles.

"How many days you got left until yer holidays?" Hagrid asked.

"Just one," said Hermione. "And that reminds me -Harry, Ron, we've got half an hour before lunch, we should be in the library."

"Oh yeah, you're right," said Ron, tearing his eyes away from Professor Flitwick, who had golden bubbles blossoming out of his wand and was trailing them over the branches of the new tree.

"The library?" said Hagrid, following them out of the hall. "Just before the holidays? Bit keen, aren't yeh?"

"Oh, we're not working," Harry told him brightly. "Ever since you mentioned Nicolas Flamel we've been trying to find out who he is."

"You what?" Hagrid looked shocked. "Listen here -- I've told yeh -- drop

it. It's nothin' to you what that dog's guardin'."

"We just want to know who Nicolas Flamel is, that's all," said Hermione.

"Unless you'd like to tell us and save us the trouble?" Harry added. "We must've been through hundreds of books already and we can't find him anywhere -- just give us a hint -- I know I've read his name somewhere."

"I'm sayin' nothin,' said Hagrid flatly.

"Just have to find out for ourselves, then," said Ron, and they left Hagrid looking disgruntled and hurried off to the library.

They had indeed been searching books for Flamel's name ever since Hagrid had let it slip, because how else were they going to find out what Snape was trying to steal? The trouble was, it was very hard to know where to begin, not knowing what Flamel might have done to get himself into a book. He wasn't in Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century, or Notable Magical Names of Our Time; he was missing, too, from Important Modern Magical Discoveries, and A Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry. And then, of course, there was the sheer size of the library; tens of thousands of books; thousands of shelves; hundreds of narrow rows.

Hermione took out a list of subjects and titles she had decided to search while Ron strode off down a row of books and started pulling them off the shelves at random. Harry wandered over to the Restricted Section. He had been wondering for a while if Flamel wasn't somewhere in there. Unfortunately, you needed a specially signed note from one of the teachers to look in any of the restricted books, and he knew he'd never get one. These were the books containing powerful Dark Magic never taught at Hogwarts, and only read by older students studying advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"What are you looking for, boy?"

"Nothing," said Harry.

Madam Pince the librarian brandished a feather duster at him.

"You'd better get out, then. Go on -- out!"

Wishing he'd been a bit quicker at thinking up some story, Harry left the library. He, Ron, and Hermione had already agreed they'd better not ask Madam Pince where they could find Flamel. They were sure she'd be able to tell them, but they couldn't risk Snape hearing what they were up to.

Harry waited outside in the corridor to see if the other two had found anything, but he wasn't very hopeful. They had been looking for two weeks, after A, but as they only had odd moments between lessons it wasn't surprising they'd found nothing. What they really needed was a nice long search without Madam Pince breathing down their necks.

Five minutes later, Ron and Hermione joined him, shaking their heads. They went off to lunch.

"You will keep looking while I'm away, won't you?" said Hermione. "And send me an owl if you find anything."

"And you could ask your parents if they know who Flamel is," said Ron.

"It'd be safe to ask them."

"Very safe, as they're both dentists," said Hermione.

Once the holidays had started, Ron and Harry were having too good a time to think much about Flamel. They had the dormitory to themselves and the common room was far emptier than usual, so they were able to get the good armchairs by the fire. They sat by the hour eating anything they could spear on a toasting fork -- bread, English muffins, marshmallows -- and plotting ways of getting Malfoy expelled, which were fun to talk about even if they wouldn't work.

Ron also started teaching Harry wizard chess. This was exactly like Muggle chess except that the figures were alive, which made it a lot like directing troops in battle. Ron's set was very old and battered. Like everything else he owned, it had once belonged to someone else in his family -- in this case, his grandfather. However, old chessmen weren't a drawback at all. Ron knew them so well he never had trouble getting them to do what he wanted.

Harry played with chessmen Seamus Finnigan had lent him, and they didn't trust him at all. He wasn't a very good player yet and they kept shouting different bits of advice at him, which was confusing. "Don't send me there, can't you see his knight? Send him, we can afford to lose him." On Christmas Eve, Harry went to bed looking forward to the next day for the food and the fun, but not expecting any presents at all. When he woke early in the morning, however, the first thing he saw was a small pile of packages at the foot of his bed.

"Merry Christmas," said Ron sleepily as Harry scrambled out of bed and pulled on his bathrobe.

"You, too," said Harry. "Will you look at this? I've got some presents!"

"What did you expect, turnips?" said Ron, turning to his own pile, which was a lot bigger than Harry's.

Harry picked up the top parcel. It was wrapped in thick brown paper and scrawled across it was To Harry, from Hagrid. Inside was a roughly cut wooden flute. Hagrid had obviously whittled it himself. Harry blew it -- it sounded a bit like an owl.

A second, very small parcel contained a note.

We received your message and enclose your Christmas present. From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. Taped to the note was a fifty-pence piece.

"That's friendly," said Harry.

Ron was fascinated by the fifty pence.

"Weird!" he said, 'NMat a shape! This is money?"

"You can keep it," said Harry, laughing at how pleased Ron was. "Hagrid and my aunt and uncle -- so who sent these?"

"I think I know who that one's from," said Ron, turning a bit pink and pointing to a very lumpy parcel. "My mom. I told her you didn't expect any presents and -- oh, no," he groaned, "she's made you a Weasley sweater."

Harry had torn open the parcel to find a thick, hand-knitted sweater in emerald green and a large box of homemade fudge.

"Every year she makes us a sweater," said Ron, unwrapping his own, "and mine's always maroon."

"That's really nice of her," said Harry, trying the fudge, which was very tasty.

His next present also contained candy -- a large box of Chocolate Frogs from Hermione.

This only left one parcel. Harry picked it up and felt it. It was very light. He unwrapped it.

Something fluid and silvery gray went slithering to the floor where it lay in gleaming folds. Ron gasped.

"I've heard of those," he said in a hushed voice, dropping the box of Every Flavor Beans he'd gotten from Hermione. "If that's what I think it is -- they're really rare, and really valuable."

"What is it?"

Harry picked the shining, silvery cloth off the floor. It was strange to the touch, like water woven into material.

"It's an invisibility cloak," said Ron, a look of awe on his face. "I'm sure it is -- try it on."

Harry threw the cloak around his shoulders and Ron gave a yell.

"It is! Look down!"

Harry looked down at his feet, but they were gone. He dashed to the mirror. Sure enough, his reflection looked back at him, just his head suspended in midair, his body completely invisible. He pulled the cloak over his head and his reflection vanished completely.

"There's a note!" said Ron suddenly. "A note fell out of it!"

Harry pulled off the cloak and seized the letter. Written in narrow, loopy writing he had never seen before were the following words: Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.

A Very Merry Christmas to you.

There was no signature. Harry stared at the note. Ron was admiring the cloak.

"I'd give anything for one of these," he said. "Anything. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Harry. He felt very strange. Who had sent the cloak? Had it really once belonged to his father?

Before he could say or think anything else, the dormitory door was flung

open and Fred and George Weasley bounded in. Harry stuffed the cloak quickly out of sight. He didn't feel like sharing it with anyone else yet.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Hey, look -- Harry's got a Weasley sweater, too!"

Fred and George were wearing blue sweaters, one with a large yellow F on it, the other a G.

"Harry's is better than ours, though," said Fred, holding up Harry's sweater. "She obviously makes more of an effort if you're not family."

"Why aren't you wearing yours, Ron?" George demanded. "Come on, get it on, they're lovely and warm."

"I hate maroon," Ron moaned halfheartedly as he pulled it over his head.

"You haven't got a letter on yours," George observed. "I suppose she thinks you don't forget your name. But we're not stupid -- we know we're called Gred and Forge."

"What's all this noise.

Percy Weasley stuck his head through the door, looking disapproving. He had clearly gotten halfway through unwrapping his presents as he, too, carried a lumpy sweater over his arm, which

Fred seized.

"P for prefect! Get it on, Percy, come on, we're all wearing ours, even Harry got one."

"I -- don't -- want said Percy thickly, as the twins forced the sweater over his head, knocking his glasses askew.

"And you're not sitting with the prefects today, either," said

George. "Christmas is a time for family."

They frog-marched Percy from the room, his arms pinned to his side by his sweater.

Harry had never in all his life had such a Christmas dinner. A hundred fat, roast turkeys; mountains of roast and boiled potatoes; platters of chipolatas; tureens of buttered peas, silver boats of thick, rich gravy and cranberry sauce -- and stacks of wizard crackers every few feet along the table. These fantastic party favors were nothing like the feeble Muggle ones the Dursleys usually bought, with their little plastic toys and their flimsy paper hats inside. Harry pulled a wizard cracker with Fred and it didn't just bang, it went off with a blast like a cannon and engulfed them all in a cloud of blue smoke, while from the inside exploded a rear admiral's hat and several live, white mice. Up at the High Table, Dumbledore had swapped his pointed wizard's hat for a flowered bonnet, and was chuckling merrily at a joke Professor Flitwick had just read him.

Flaming Christmas puddings followed the turkey. Percy nearly broke his teeth on a silver sickle embedded in his slice. Harry watched Hagrid

getting redder and redder in the face as he called for more wine, finally kissing Professor McGonagall on the cheek, who, to Harry's amazement, giggled and blushed, her top hat lopsided.

When Harry finally left the table, he was laden down with a stack of things out of the crackers, including a pack of nonexplodable, luminous balloons, a Grow-Your-Own-Warts kit, and his own new wizard chess set. The white mice had disappeared and Harry had a nasty feeling they were going to end up as Mrs. Norris's Christmas dinner.

Harry and the Weasleys spent a happy afternoon having a furious snowball fight on the grounds. Then, cold, wet, and gasping for breath, they returned to the fire in the Gryffindor common room, where Harry broke in his new chess set by losing spectacularly to Ron. He suspected he wouldn't have lost so badly if Percy hadn't tried to help him so much.

After a meal of turkey sandwiches, crumpets, trifle, and Christmas cake, everyone felt too full and sleepy to do much before bed except sit and watch Percy chase Fred and George all over Gryffindor tower because they'd stolen his prefect badge.

It had been Harry's best Christmas day ever. Yet something had been nagging at the back of his mind all day. Not until he climbed into bed was he free to think about it: the invisibility cloak and whoever had sent it.

Ron, full of turkey and cake and with nothing mysterious to bother him, fell asleep almost as soon as he'd drawn the curtains of his four-poster. Harry leaned over the side of his own bed and pulled the cloak out from under it.

His father's... this had been his father's. He let the material flow over his hands, smoother than silk, light as air. Use it well, the note had said.

He had to try it, now. He slipped out of bed and wrapped the cloak around himself. Looking down at his legs, he saw only moonlight and shadows. It was a very funny feeling.

Use it well.

Suddenly, Harry felt wide-awake. The whole of Hogwarts was open to him in this cloak. Excitement flooded through him as he stood there in the dark and silence. He could go anywhere in this, anywhere, and Filch would never know.

Ron grunted in his sleep. Should Harry wake him? Something held him back -- his father's cloak -- he felt that this time -- the first time -- he wanted to use it alone.

He crept out of the dormitory, down the stairs, across the common room, and climbed through the portrait hole.

"Who's there?" squawked the Fat Lady. Harry said nothing. He walked quickly down the corridor.

Where should he go? He stopped, his heart racing, and thought. And then it came to him. The Restricted Section in the library. He'd be able to read as long as he liked, as long as it took to find out who Flamel was. He set off, drawing the invisibility cloak tight around him as he

walked.

The library was pitch-black and very eerie. Harry lit a lamp to see his way along the rows of books. The lamp looked as if it was floating along in midair, and even though Harry could feel his arm supporting it, the sight gave him the creeps.

The Restricted Section was right at the back of the library. Step ping carefully over the rope that separated these books from the rest of the library, he held up his lamp to read the titles.

They didn't tell him much. Their peeling, faded gold letters spelled words in languages Harry couldn't understand. Some had no title at all. One book had a dark stain on it that looked horribly like blood. The hairs on the back of Harry's neck prickled. Maybe he was imagining it, maybe not, but he thought a faint whispering was coming from the books, as though they knew someone was there who shouldn't be.

He had to start somewhere. Setting the lamp down carefully on the floor, he looked along the bottom shelf for an interestinglooking book. A large black and silver volume caught his eye. He pulled it out with difficulty, because it was very heavy, and, balancing it on his knee, let it fall open.

A piercing, bloodcurdling shriek split the silence -- the book was screaming! Harry snapped it shut, but the shriek went on and on, one high, unbroken, earsplitting note. He stumbled backward and knocked over his lamp, which went out at once. Panicking, he heard footsteps coming down the corridor outside -- stuffing the shrieking book back on the shelf, he ran for it. He passed Filch in the doorway; Filch's pale, wild eyes looked straight through him, and Harry slipped under Filch's outstretched arm and streaked off up the corridor, the book's shrieks still ringing in his ears.

He came to a sudden halt in front of a tall suit of armor. He had been so busy getting away from the library, he hadn't paid attention to where he was going. Perhaps because it was dark, he didn't recognize where he was at all. There was a suit of armor near the kitchens, he knew, but he must be five floors above there.

"You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night, and somebody's been in the library Restricted Section."

Harry felt the blood drain out of his face. Wherever he was, Filch must know a shortcut, because his soft, greasy voice was getting nearer, and to his horror, it was Snape who replied, "The Restricted Section? Well, they can't be far, we'll catch them."

Harry stood rooted to the spot as Filch and Snape came around the corner ahead. They couldn't see him, of course, but it was a narrow corridor and if they came much nearer they'd knock right into him -- the cloak didn't stop him from being solid.

He backed away as quietly as he could. A door stood ajar to his left. It was his only hope. He squeezed through it, holding his breath, trying not to move it, and to his relief he managed to get inside the room without their noticing anything. They walked straight past, and Harry leaned against the wall, breathing deeply, listening to their footsteps dying away. That had been close, very close. It was a few seconds before

he noticed anything about the room he had hidden in.

It looked like an unused classroom. The dark shapes of desks and chairs were piled against the walls, and there was an upturned wastepaper basket -- but propped against the wall facing him was something that didn't look as if it belonged there, something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way.

It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi. His panic fading now that there was no sound of Filch and Snape, Harry moved nearer to the mirror, wanting to look at himself but see no reflection again. He stepped in front of it.

He had to clap his hands to his mouth to stop himself from screaming. He whirled around. His heart was pounding far more furiously than when the book had screamed -- for he had seen not only himself in the mirror, but a whole crowd of people standing right behind him.

But the room was empty. Breathing very fast, he turned slowly back to the mirror.

There he was, reflected in it, white and scared-looking, and there, reflected behind him, were at least ten others. Harry looked over his shoulder -- but still, no one was there. Or were they all invisible, too? Was he in fact in a room full of invisible people and this mirror's trick was that it reflected them, invisible or not?

He looked in the mirror again. A woman standing right behind his reflection was smiling at him and waving. He reached out a hand and felt the air behind him. If she was really there, he'd touch her, their reflections were so close together, but he felt only air -- she and the others existed only in the mirror.

She was a very pretty woman. She had dark red hair and her eyes -- her eyes are just like mine, Harry thought, edging a little closer to the glass. Bright green -- exactly the same shape, but then he noticed that she was crying; smiling, but crying at the same time. The tall, thin, black-haired man standing next to her put his arm around her. He wore glasses, and his hair was very untidy. It stuck up at the back, just as Harry's did.

Harry was so close to the mirror now that his nose was nearly touching that of his reflection.

"Mom?" he whispered. "Dad?"

They just looked at him, smiling. And slowly, Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror, and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry's knobbly knees -- Harry was looking at his family, for the first time in his life.

The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.

How long he stood there, he didn't know. The reflections did not fade

and he looked and looked until a distant noise brought him back to his senses. He couldn't stay here, he had to find his way back to bed. He tore his eyes away from his mother's face, whispered, "I'll come back," and hurried from the room.

"You could have woken me up," said Ron, crossly.

"You can come tonight, I'm going back, I want to show you the mirror.

"I'd like to see your mom and dad," Ron said eagerly.

"And I want to see all your family, all the Weasleys, you'll be able to show me your other brothers and everyone."

"You can see them any old time," said Ron. "Just come round my house this summer. Anyway, maybe it only shows dead people. Shame about not finding Flamel, though. Have some bacon or something, why aren't you eating anything?"

Harry couldn't eat. He had seen his parents and would be seeing them again tonight. He had almost forgotten about Flamel. It didn't seem very important anymore. Who cared what the three headed dog was guarding? What did it matter if Snape stole it, really?

"Are you all right?" said Ron. "You look odd."

What Harry feared most was that he might not be able to find the mirror room again. With Ron covered in the cloak, too, they had to walk much more slowly the next night. They tried retracing Harry's route from the library, wandering around the dark passageways for nearly an hour.

"I'm freezing," said Ron. "Let's forget it and go back."

"No!" Harry hissed. I know it's here somewhere."

They passed the ghost of a tall witch gliding in the opposite direction, but saw no one else. just as Ron started moaning that his feet were dead with cold, Harry spotted the suit of armor.

"It's here -- just here -- yes!"

They pushed the door open. Harry dropped the cloak from around his shoulders and ran to the mirror.

There they were. His mother and father beamed at the sight of him.

"See?" Harry whispered.

"I can't see anything."

"Look! Look at them all... there are loads of them...."

"I can only see you."

"Look in it properly, go on, stand where I am."

Harry stepped aside, but with Ron in front of the mirror, he couldn't see his family anymore, just Ron in his paisley pajamas.

Ron, though, was staring transfixed at his image.

"Look at me!" he said.

"Can you see all your family standing around you?"

"No -- I'm alone -- but I'm different -- I look older -- and I'm head boy!"

"What?"

"I am -- I'm wearing the badge like Bill used to -- and I'm holding the house cup and the Quidditch cup -- I'm Quidditch captain, too."

Ron tore his eyes away from this splendid sight to look excitedly at Harry.

"Do you think this mirror shows the future?"

"How can it? All my family are dead -- let me have another look --"

"You had it to yourself all last night, give me a bit more time."

"You're only holding the Quidditch cup, what's interesting about that? I want to see my parents."

"Don't push me --"

A sudden noise outside in the corridor put an end to their discussion. They hadn't realized how loudly they had been talking.

"Quick!"

Ron threw the cloak back over them as the luminous eyes of Mrs. Norris came round the door. Ron and Harry stood quite still, both thinking the same thing -- did the cloak work on cats? After what seemed an age, she turned and left.

"This isn't safe -- she might have gone for Filch, I bet she heard us. Come on."

And Ron pulled Harry out of the room.

The snow still hadn't melted the next morning.

"Want to play chess, Harry?" said Ron.

"No."

"Why don't we go down and visit Hagrid?"

"No... you go..."

"I know what you're thinking about, Harry, that mirror. Don't go back tonight."

"Why not?"

"I dunno, I've just got a bad feeling about it -- and anyway, you've had too many close shaves already. Filch, Snape, and Mrs. Norris are wandering around. So what if they can't see you? What if they walk into

you? What if you knock something over?"

"You sound like Hermione."

"I'm serious, Harry, don't go."

But Harry only had one thought in his head, which was to get back in front of the mirror, and Ron wasn't going to stop him.

That third night he found his way more quickly than before. He was walking so fast he knew he was making more noise than was wise, but he didn't meet anyone.

And there were his mother and father smiling at him again, and one of his grandfathers nodding happily. Harry sank down to sit on the floor in front of the mirror. There was nothing to stop him from staying here all night with his family. Nothing at all.

Except --

"So -- back again, Harry?"

Harry felt as though his insides had turned to ice. He looked behind him. Sitting on one of the desks by the wall was none other than Albus Dumbledore. Harry must have walked straight past him, so desperate to get to the mirror he hadn't noticed him.

" -- I didn't see you, sir."

"Strange how nearsighted being invisible can make you," said Dumbledore, and Harry was relieved to see that he was smiling.

"So," said Dumbledore, slipping off the desk to sit on the floor with Harry, "you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

"I didn't know it was called that, Sir."

"But I expect you've realized by now what it does?"

"It -- well -- it shows me my family --"

"And it showed your friend Ron himself as head boy."

"How did you know --?"

"I don't need a cloak to become invisible," said Dumbledore gently.
"Now, can you think what the Mirror of Erised shows us all?"

Harry shook his head.

"Let me explain. The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Does that help?"

Harry thought. Then he said slowly, "It shows us what we want... whatever we want..."

"Yes and no," said Dumbledore quietly. "It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have

never known your family, see them standing around you. Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.

"The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Harry, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. If you ever do run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, why don't you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed?"

Harry stood up.

"Sir -- Professor Dumbledore? Can I ask you something?"

"Obviously, you've just done so," Dumbledore smiled. "You may ask me one more thing, however."

"What do you see when you look in the mirror?"

"I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks."

Harry stared.

"One can never have enough socks," said Dumbledore. "Another Christmas has come and gone and I didn't get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books."

It was only when he was back in bed that it struck Harry that Dumbledore might not have been quite truthful. But then, he thought, as he shoved Scabbers off his pillow, it had been quite a personal question.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NICOLAS FLAMEL

Dumbledore had convinced Harry not to go looking for the Mirror of Erised again, and for the rest of the Christmas holidays the invisibility cloak stayed folded at the bottom of his trunk. Harry wished he could forget what he'd seen in the mirror as easily, but he couldn't. He started having nightmares. Over and over again he dreamed about his parents disappearing in a flash of green light, while a high voice cackled with laughter.

"You see, Dumbledore was right, that mirror could drive you mad," said Ron, when Harry told him about these dreams.

Hermione, who came back the day before term started, took a different view of things. She was torn between horror at the idea of Harry being out of bed, roaming the school three nights in a row ("If Filch had caught you!"), and disappointment that he hadn't at least found out who Nicolas Flamel was.

They had almost given up hope of ever finding Flamel in a library book, even though Harry was still sure he'd read the name somewhere. Once term had started, they were back to skimming through books for ten minutes during their breaks. Harry had even less time than the other

two, because Quidditch practice had started again.

Wood was working the team harder than ever. Even the endless rain that had replaced the snow couldn't dampen his spirits. The Weasleys complained that Wood was becoming a fanatic, but Harry was on Wood's side. If they won their next match, against Hufflepuff, they would overtake Slytherin in the house championship for the first time in seven years. Quite apart from wanting to win, Harry found that he had fewer nightmares when he was tired out after training.

Then, during one particularly wet and muddy practice session, Wood gave the team a bit of bad news. He'd just gotten very angry with the Weasleys, who kept dive-bombing each other and pretending to fall off their brooms.

"Will you stop messing around!" he yelled. "That's exactly the sort of thing that'll lose us the match! Snape's refereeing this time, and he'll be looking for any excuse to knock points off Gryffindor!"

George Weasley really did fall off his broom at these words.

"Snape's refereeing?" he spluttered through a mouthful of mud. "When's he ever refereed a Quidditch match? He's not going to be fair if we might overtake Slytherin."

The rest of the team landed next to George to complain, too.

"It's not my fault," said Wood. "We've just got to make sure we play a clean game, so Snape hasn't got an excuse to pick on us."

Which was all very well, thought Harry, but he had another reason for not wanting Snape near him while he was playing Quidditch....

The rest of the team hung back to talk to one another as usual at the end of practice, but Harry headed straight back to the Gryffindor common room, where he found Ron and Hermione playing chess. Chess was the only thing Hermione ever lost at, something Harry and Ron thought was very good for her.

"Don't talk to me for a moment," said Ron when Harry sat down next to him, "I need to concen --" He caught sight of Harry's face. "What's the matter with you? You look terrible."

Speaking quietly so that no one else would hear, Harry told the other two about Snape's sudden, sinister desire to be a Quidditch referee.

"Don't play," said Hermione at once.

"Say you're ill," said Ron.

"Pretend to break your leg," Hermione suggested.

"Really break your leg," said Ron.

"I can't," said Harry. "There isn't a reserve Seeker. If I back out, Gryffindor can't play at all."

At that moment Neville toppled into the common room. How he had managed to climb through the portrait hole was anyone's guess, because his legs had been stuck together with what they recognized at once as the

Leg-Locker Curse. He must have had to bunny hop all the way up to Gryffindor tower.

Everyone fell over laughing except Hermione, who leapt up and performed the countercurse. Neville's legs sprang apart and he got to his feet, trembling. "What happened?" Hermione asked him, leading him over to sit with Harry and Ron.

"Malfoy," said Neville shakily. "I met him outside the library. He said he'd been looking for someone to practice that on."

"Go to Professor McGonagall!" Hermione urged Neville. "Report him!"

Neville shook his head.

"I don't want more trouble," he mumbled.

"You've got to stand up to him, Neville!" said Ron. "He's used to walking all over people, but that's no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier."

"There's no need to tell me I'm not brave enough to be in Gryffindor, Malfoy's already done that," Neville choked out.

Harry felt in the pocket of his robes and pulled out a Chocolate Frog, the very last one from the box Hermione had given him for Christmas. He gave it to Neville, who looked as though he might cry.

"You're worth twelve of Malfoy," Harry said. "The Sorting Hat chose you for Gryffindor, didn't it? And where's Malfoy? In stinking Slytherin."

Neville's lips twitched in a weak smile as he unwrapped the frog.

"Thanks, Harry... I think I'll go to bed.... D'you want the card, you collect them, don't you?"

As Neville walked away, Harry looked at the Famous Wizard card.

"Dumbledore again," he said, "He was the first one I ever-"

He gasped. He stared at the back of the card. Then he looked up at Ron and Hermione.

"I've found him!" he whispered. "I've found Flamel! I told you I'd read the name somewhere before, I read it on the train coming here -- listen to this: 'Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel'!"

Hermione jumped to her feet. She hadn't looked so excited since they'd gotten back the marks for their very first piece of homework.

"Stay there!" she said, and she sprinted up the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Harry and Ron barely had time to exchange mystified looks before she was dashing back, an enormous old book in her arms.

"I never thought to look in here!" she whispered excitedly. "I got this out of the library weeks ago for a bit of light reading."

"Light?" said Ron, but Hermione told him to be quiet until she'd looked something up, and started flicking frantically through the pages, muttering to herself.

At last she found what she was looking for.

"I knew it! I knew it!"

"Are we allowed to speak yet?" said Ron grumpily. Hermione ignored him.

"Nicolas Flamel," she whispered dramatically, "is the only known maker of the Sorcerer's Stone!"

This didn't have quite the effect she'd expected.

"The what?" said Harry and Ron.

"Oh, honestly, don't you two read? Look -- read that, there."

She pushed the book toward them, and Harry and Ron read: The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Sorcerer's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Sorcerer's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

"See?" said Hermione, when Harry and Ron had finished. "The dog must be guarding Flamel's Sorcerer's Stone! I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him, because they're friends and he knew someone was after it, that's why he wanted the Stone moved out of Gringotts!"

"A stone that makes gold and stops you from ever dying!" said Harry. "No wonder Snape's after it! Anyone would want it."

"And no wonder we couldn't find Flamel in that Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry," said Ron. "He's not exactly recent if he's six hundred and sixty-five, is he?"

The next morning in Defense Against the Dark Arts, while copying down different ways of treating werewolf bites, Harry and Ron were still discussing what they'd do with a Sorcerer's Stone if they had one. It wasn't until Ron said he'd buy his own Quidditch team that Harry remembered about Snape and the coming match.

"I'm going to play," he told Ron and Hermione. "If I don't, all the Slytherins will think I'm just too scared to face Snape. I'll show them... it'll really wipe the smiles off their faces if we win."

"Just as long as we're not wiping you off the field," said Hermione.

As the match drew nearer, however, Harry became more and more nervous, whatever he told Ron and Hermione. The rest of the team wasn't too calm, either. The idea of overtaking Slytherin in the house championship was wonderful, no one had done it for seven years, but would they be allowed to, with such a biased referee?

Harry didn't know whether he was imagining it or not, but he seemed to keep running into Snape wherever he went. At times, he even wondered whether Snape was following him, trying to catch him on his own. Potions lessons were turning into a sort of weekly torture, Snape was so horrible to Harry. Could Snape possibly know they'd found out about the Sorcerer's Stone? Harry didn't see how he could -- yet he sometimes had the horrible feeling that Snape could read minds.

Harry knew, when they wished him good luck outside the locker rooms the next afternoon, that Ron and Hermione were wondering whether they'd ever see him alive again. This wasn't what you'd call comforting. Harry hardly heard a word of Wood's pep talk as he pulled on his Quidditch robes and picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Ron and Hermione, meanwhile, had found a place in the stands next to Neville, who couldn't understand why they looked so grim and worried, or why they had both brought their wands to the match. Little did Harry know that Ron and Hermione had been secretly practicing the Leg-Locker Curse. They'd gotten the idea from Malfoy using it on Neville, and were ready to use it on Snape if he showed any sign of wanting to hurt Harry.

"Now, don't forget, it's Locomotor Mortis," Hermione muttered as Ron slipped his wand up his sleeve.

"I know," Ron snapped. "Don't nag."

Back in the locker room, Wood had taken Harry aside.

"Don't want to pressure you, Potter, but if we ever need an early capture of the Snitch it's now. Finish the game before Snape can favor Hufflepuff too much."

"The whole school's out there!" said Fred Weasley, peering out of the door. "Even -- blimey -- Dumbledore's come to watch!"

Harry's heart did a somersault.

"Dumbledore?" he said, dashing to the door to make sure. Fred was right. There was no mistaking that silver beard.

Harry could have laughed out loud with relief. He was safe. There was simply no way that Snape would dare to try to hurt him if Dumbledore was watching.

Perhaps that was why Snape was looking so angry as the teams marched onto the field, something that Ron noticed, too.

"I've never seen Snape look so mean," he told Hermione. "Look -they're off Ouch!"

Someone had poked Ron in the back of the head. It was Malfoy.

"Oh, sorry, Weasley, didn't see you there."

Malfoy grinned broadly at Crabbe and Goyle.

"Wonder how long Potter's going to stay on his broom this time? Anyone want a bet? What about you, Weasley?"

Ron didn't answer; Snape had just awarded Hufflepuff a penalty because George Weasley had hit a Bludger at him. Hermione, who had all her fingers crossed in her lap, was squinting fixedly at Harry, who was circling the game like a hawk, looking for the Snitch.

"You know how I think they choose people for the Gryffindor team?" said Malfoy loudly a few minutes later, as Snape awarded Hufflepuff another penalty for no reason at all. "It's people they feel sorry for. See, there's Potter, who's got no parents, then there's the Weasleys, who've got no money -- you should be on the team, Longbottom, you've got no brains."

Neville went bright red but turned in his seat to face Malfoy.

"I'm worth twelve of you, Malfoy," he stammered.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle howled with laughter, but Ron, still not daring to take his eyes from the game, said, "You tell him, Neville."

"Longbottom, if brains were gold you'd be poorer than Weasley, and that's saying something."

Ron's nerves were already stretched to the breaking point with anxiety about Harry.

"I'm warning you, Malfoy -- one more word

"Ron!" said Hermione suddenly, "Harry --"

"What? Where?"

Harry had suddenly gone into a spectacular dive, which drew gasps and cheers from the crowd. Hermione stood up, her crossed fingers in her mouth, as Harry streaked toward the ground like a bullet.

"You're in luck, Weasley, Potter's obviously spotted some money on the ground!" said Malfoy.

Ron snapped. Before Malfoy knew what was happening, Ron was on top of him, wrestling him to the ground. Neville hesitated, then clambered over the back of his seat to help.

"Come on, Harry!" Hermione screamed, leaping onto her seat to watch as Harry sped straight at Snape -- she didn't even notice Malfoy and Ron rolling around under her seat, or the scuffles and yelps coming from the whirl of fists that was Neville, Crabbe, and Goyle.

Up in the air, Snape turned on his broomstick just in time to see something scarlet shoot past him, missing him by inches -- the next second, Harry had pulled out of the dive, his arm raised in triumph, the Snitch clasped in his hand.

The stands erupted; it had to be a record, no one could ever remember the Snitch being caught so quickly.

"Ron! Ron! Where are you? The game's over! Harry's won! We've won! Gryffindor is in the lead!" shrieked Hermione, dancing up and down on her seat and hugging Parvati Patil in the row in front.

Harry jumped off his broom, a foot from the ground. He couldn't believe

it. He'd done it -- the game was over; it had barely lasted five minutes. As Gryffindors came spilling onto the field, he saw Snape land nearby, white-faced and tight-lipped -- then Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up into Dumbledore's smiling face.

"Well done," said Dumbledore quietly, so that only Harry could hear. "Nice to see you haven't been brooding about that mirror... been keeping busy... excellent..."

Snape spat bitterly on the ground.

Harry left the locker room alone some time later, to take his Nimbus Two Thousand back to the broomshed. He couldn't ever remember feeling happier. He'd really done something to be proud of now -- no one could say he was just a famous name any more. The evening air had never smelled so sweet. He walked over the damp grass, reliving the last hour in his head, which was a happy blur: Gryffindors running to lift him onto their shoulders; Ron and Hermione in the distance, jumping up and down, Ron cheering through a heavy nosebleed.

Harry had reached the shed. He leaned against the wooden door and looked up at Hogwarts, with its windows glowing red in the setting sun. Gryffindor in the lead. He'd done it, he'd shown Snape....

And speaking of Snape...

A hooded figure came swiftly down the front steps of the castle. Clearly not wanting to be seen, it walked as fast as possible toward the forbidden forest. Harry's victory faded from his mind as he watched. He recognized the figure's prowling walk. Snape, sneaking into the forest while everyone else was at dinner -- what was going on?

Harry jumped back on his Nimbus Two Thousand and took off. Gliding silently over the castle he saw Snape enter the forest at a run. He followed.

The trees were so thick he couldn't see where Snape had gone. He flew in circles, lower and lower, brushing the top branches of trees until he heard voices. He glided toward them and landed noiselessly in a towering beech tree.

He climbed carefully along one of the branches, holding tight to his broomstick, trying to see through the leaves. Below, in a shadowy clearing, stood Snape, but he wasn't alone. Quirrell was there, too. Harry couldn't make out the look on his face, but he was stuttering worse than ever. Harry strained to catch what they were saying.

"... d-don't know why you wanted t-t-to meet here of all p-places, Severus..."

"Oh, I thought we'd keep this private," said Snape, his voice icy. "Students aren't supposed to know about the Sorcerer's Stone, after all."

Harry leaned forward. Quirrell was mumbling something. Snape interrupted him.

"Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid's yet?"

"B-b-but Severus, I --"

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell," said Snape, taking a step toward him.

"I-I don't know what you

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

An owl hooted loudly, and Harry nearly fell out of the tree. He steadied himself in time to hear Snape say, "-- your little bit of hocus-pocus. I'm waiting."

"B-but I d-d-don't --"

"Very well," Snape cut in. "We'll have another little chat soon, when you've had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie."

He threw his cloak over his head and strode out of the clearing. It was almost dark now, but Harry could see Quirrell, standing quite still as though he was petrified.

"Harry, where have you been?" Hermione squeaked.

"We won! You won! We won!" shouted Ron, thumping Harry on the back. "And I gave Malfoy a black eye, and Neville tried to take on Crabbe and Goyle single-handed! He's still out cold but Madam Pomfrey says he'll be all right - talk about showing Slytherin! Everyone's waiting for you in the common room, we're having a party, Fred and George stole some cakes and stuff from the kitchens."

"Never mind that now," said Harry breathlessly. "Let's find an empty room, you wait 'til you hear this...."

He made sure Peeves wasn't inside before shutting the door behind them, then he told them what he'd seen and heard.

"So we were right, it is the Sorcerer's Stone, and Snape's trying to force Quirrell to help him get it. He asked if he knew how to get past Fluffy - and he said something about Quirrell's 'hocus pocuss-- I reckon there are other things guarding the stone apart from Fluffy, loads of enchantments, probably, and Quirrell would have done some anti-Dark Arts spell that Snape needs to break through --"

"So you mean the Stone's only safe as long as Quirrell stands up to Snape?" said Hermione in alarm.

"It'll be gone by next Tuesday," said Ron.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NORBERT THE NORWEGIAN RIDGEBACK

Quirrell, however, must have been braver than they'd thought. In the weeks that followed he did seem to be getting paler and thinner, but it didn't look as though he'd cracked yet.

Every time they passed the third-floor corridor, Harry, Ron, and Hermione would press their ears to the door to check that Fluffy was

still growling inside. Snape was sweeping about in his usual bad temper, which surely meant that the Stone was still safe. Whenever Harry passed Quirrell these days he gave him an encouraging sort of smile, and Ron had started telling people off for laughing at Quirrell's stutter.

Hermione, however, had more on her mind than the Sorcerer's Stone. She had started drawing up study schedules and colorcoding all her notes. Harry and Ron wouldn't have minded, but she kept nagging them to do the same.

"Hermione, the exams are ages away."

"Ten weeks," Hermione snapped. "That's not ages, that's like a second to Nicolas Flamel."

"But we're not six hundred years old," Ron reminded her. "Anyway, what are you studying for, you already know it A."

"What am I studying for? Are you crazy? You realize we need to pass these exams to get into the second year? They're very important, I should have started studying a month ago, I don't know what's gotten into me...."

Unfortunately, the teachers seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Hermione. They piled so much homework on them that the Easter holidays weren't nearly as much fun as the Christmas ones. It was hard to relax with Hermione next to you reciting the twelve uses of dragon's blood or practicing wand movements. Moaning and yawning, Harry and Ron spent most of their free time in the library with her, trying to get through all their extra work.

"I'll never remember this," Ron burst out one afternoon, throwing down his quill and looking longingly out of the library window. It was the first really fine day they'd had in months. The sky was a clear, forget-me-not blue, and there was a feeling in the air of summer coming.

Harry, who was looking up "Dittany" in One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi, didn't look up until he heard Ron say, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?"

Hagrid shuffled into view, hiding something behind his back. He looked very out of place in his moleskin overcoat.

"Jus' lookin'," he said, in a shifty voice that got their interest at once. "An' what're you lot up ter?" He looked suddenly suspicious. "Yer not still lookin' fer Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?" "Oh, we found out who he is ages ago," said Ron impressively. "And we know what that dog's guarding, it's a Sorcerer's St --"

"Shhhh!" Hagrid looked around quickly to see if anyone was listening. "Don' go shoutin' about it, what's the matter with yeh?"

"There are a few things we wanted to ask you, as a matter of fact," said Harry, "about what's guarding the Stone apart from Fluffy --"

"SHHHH!" said Hagrid again. "Listen - come an' see me later, I'm not promisin' I'll tell yeh anythin', mind, but don' go rabbitin' about it in here, students aren' s'posed ter know. They'll think I've told yeh --"

"See you later, then," said Harry.

Hagrid shuffled off.

"What was he hiding behind his back?" said Hermione thoughtfully.

"Do you think it had anything to do with the Stone?"

"I'm going to see what section he was in," said Ron, who'd had enough of working. He came back a minute later with a pile of books in his arms and slammed them down on the table.

"Dragons!" he whispered. "Hagrid was looking up stuff about dragons! Look at these: Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland; From Egg to Inferno, A Dragon Keeper's Guide."

"Hagrid's always wanted a dragon, he told me so the first time I ever met him," said Harry.

"But it's against our laws," said Ron. "Dragon breeding was outlawed by the Warlocks' Convention of 1709, everyone knows that. It's hard to stop Muggles from noticing us if we're keeping dragons in the back garden - anyway, you can't tame dragons, it's dangerous. You should see the burns Charlie's got off wild ones in Romania."

"But there aren't wild dragons in Britain?" said Harry.

"Of course there are," said Ron. "Common Welsh Green and Hebridean Blacks. The Ministry of Magic has a job hushing them up, I can tell you. Our kind have to keep putting spells on Muggles who've spotted them, to make them forget."

"So what on earths Hagrid up to?" said Hermione.

When they knocked on the door of the gamekeeper's hut an hour later, they were surprised to see that all the curtains were closed. Hagrid called "Who is it?" before he let them in, and then shut the door quickly behind them.

It was stifling hot inside. Even though it was such a warm day, there was a blazing fire in the grate. Hagrid made them tea and offered them stoat sandwiches, which they refused.

"So -- yeh wanted to ask me somethin'?"

"Yes," said Harry. There was no point beating around the bush. "We were wondering if you could tell us what's guarding the Sorcerer's Stone apart from Fluffy."

Hagrid frowned at him.

"O' course I cant, he said. "Number one, I don' know meself. Number two, yeh know too much already, so I wouldn' tell yeh if I could. That Stone's here fer a good reason. It Was almost stolen outta Gringotts - I s'pose yeh've worked that out an' all? Beats me how yeh even know abou' Fluffy."

"Oh, come on, Hagrid, you might not want to tell us, but you do know, you know everything that goes on round here," said Hermione in a warm, flattering voice. Hagrid's beard twitched and they could tell he was

smiling. "We only wondered who had done the guarding, really." Hermione went on. "We wondered who Dumbledore had trusted enough to help him, apart from you."

Hagrid's chest swelled at these last words. Harry and Ron beamed at Hermione.

"Well, I don' s'pose it could hurt ter tell yeh that... let's see... he borrowed Fluffy from me... then some o' the teachers did enchantments... Professor Sprout -- Professor Flitwick -- Professor McGonagall --" he ticked them off on his fingers, "Professor Quirrell -- an' Dumbledore himself did somethin', o' course. Hang on, I've forgotten someone. Oh yeah, Professor Snape."

"Snape?"

"Yeah -- yer not still on abou' that, are yeh? Look, Snape helped protect the Stone, he's not about ter steal it."

Harry knew Ron and Hermione were thinking the same as he was. If Snape had been in on protecting the Stone, it must have been easy to find out how the other teachers had guarded it. He probably knew everything -- except, it seemed, Quirrell's spell and how to get past Fluffy.

"You're the only one who knows how to get past Fluffy. aren't you, Hagrid?" said Harry anxiously. "And you wouldn't tell anyone, would you? Not even one of the teachers?"

"Not a soul knows except me an' Dumbledore," said Hagrid proudly.

"Well, that's something," Harry muttered to the others. "Hagrid, can we have a window open? I'm boiling."

"Can't, Harry, sorry," said Hagrid. Harry noticed him glance at the fire. Harry looked at it, too.

"Hagrid -- what's that?"

But he already knew what it was. In the very heart of the fire, underneath the kettle, was a huge, black egg.

"Ah," said Hagrid, fiddling nervously with his beard, "That's er..."

"Where did you get it, Hagrid?" said Ron, crouching over the fire to get a closer look at the egg. "It must've cost you a fortune."

"Won it," said Hagrid. "Las' night. I was down in the village havin' a few drinks an' got into a game o' cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest."

"But what are you going to do with it when it's hatched?" said Hermione.

"Well, I've bin doin' some readin', said Hagrid, pulling a large book from under his pillow. "Got this outta the library -- Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit -- it's a bit outta date, o' course, but it's all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mothers breathe on I em, see, an' when it hatches, feed it on a bucket o' brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An' see here -- how ter recognize diff'rent eggs -- what I got there's a Norwegian Ridgeback. They're rare, them."

He looked very pleased with himself, but Hermione didn't.

"Hagrid, you live in a wooden house," she said.

But Hagrid wasn't listening. He was humming merrily as he stoked the fire.

So now they had something else to worry about: what might happen to Hagrid if anyone found out he was hiding an illegal dragon in his hut. "Wonder what it's like to have a peaceful life," Ron sighed, as evening after evening they struggled through all the extra homework they were getting. Hermione had now started making study schedules for Harry and Ron, too. It was driving them nuts.

Then, one breakfast time, Hedwig brought Harry another note from Hagrid. He had written only two words: It's hatching.

Ron wanted to skip Herbology and go straight down to the hut. Hermione wouldn't hear of it.

"Hermione, how many times in our lives are we going to see a dragon hatching?"

"We've got lessons, we'll get into trouble, and that's nothing to what Hagrid's going to be in when someone finds out what he's doing --"

"Shut up!" Harry whispered.

Malfoy was only a few feet away and he had stopped dead to listen. How much had he heard? Harry didn't like the look on Malfoy's face at all.

Ron and Hermione argued all the way to Herbology and in the end, Hermione agreed to run down to Hagrid's with the other two during morning break. When the bell sounded from the castle at the end of their lesson, the three of them dropped their trowels at once and hurried through the grounds to the edge of the forest. Hagrid greeted them, looking flushed and excited.

"It's nearly out." He ushered them inside.

The egg was lying on the table. There were deep cracks in it. Something was moving inside; a funny clicking noise was coming from it.

They all drew their chairs up to the table and watched with bated breath.

All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn't exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body, it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes.

It sneezed. A couple of sparks flew out of its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmured. He reached out a hand to stroke the dragon's head. It snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs.

"Bless him, look, he knows his mommy!" said Hagrid.

"Hagrid," said Hermione, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?"

Hagrid was about to answer when the color suddenly drained from his face -- he leapt to his feet and ran to the window.

"What's the matter?"

"Someone was lookin' through the gap in the curtains -- it's a kid -- he's runnin' back up ter the school."

Harry bolted to the door and looked out. Even at a distance there was no mistaking him.

Malfoy had seen the dragon.

Something about the smile lurking on Malfoy's face during the next week made Harry, Ron, and Hermione very nervous. They spent most of their free time in Hagrid's darkened hut, trying to reason with him.

"Just let him go," Harry urged. "Set him free."

"I can't," said Hagrid. "He's too little. He'd die."

They looked at the dragon. It had grown three times in length in just a week. Smoke kept furling out of its nostrils. Hagrid hadn't been doing his gamekeeping duties because the dragon was keeping him so busy. There were empty brandy bottles and chicken feathers all over the floor.

"I've decided to call him Norbert," said Hagrid, looking at the dragon with misty eyes. "He really knows me now, watch. Norbert! Norbert! Where's Mommy?"

"He's lost his marbles," Ron muttered in Harry's ear.

"Hagrid," said Harry loudly, "give it two weeks and Norbert's going to be as long as your house. Malfoy could go to Dumbledore at any moment."

Hagrid bit his lip.

"I -- I know I can't keep him forever, but I can't jus' dump him, I can't."

Harry suddenly turned to Ron. Charlie, he said.

"You're losing it, too," said Ron. "I'm Ron, remember?"

"No -- Charlie -- your brother, Charlie. In Romania. Studying dragons. We could send Norbert to him. Charlie can take care of him and then put him back in the wild!"

"Brilliant!" said Ron. "How about it, Hagrid?"

And in the end, Hagrid agreed that they could send -an owl to Charlie to ask him.

The following week dragged by. Wednesday night found Hermione and Harry sitting alone in the common room, long after everyone else had gone to bed. The clock on the wall had just

chimed midnight when the portrait hole burst open. Ron appeared out of nowhere as he pulled off Harry's invisibility cloak. He had been down at Hagrid's hut, helping him feed Norbert, who was now eating dead rats by the crate.

"It bit me!" he said, showing them his hand, which was wrapped in a bloody handkerchief. "I'm not going to be able to hold a quill for a week. I tell you, that dragon's the most horrible animal I've ever met, but the way Hagrid goes on about it, you'd think it was a fluffy little bunny rabbit. When it bit me he told me off for frightening it. And when I left, he was singing it a lullaby."

There was a tap on the dark window.

"It's Hedwig!" said Harry, hurrying to let her in. "She'll have Charlie's answer!"

The three of them put their heads together to read the note.

Dear Ron,

How are you? Thanks for the letter -- I'd be glad to take the Norwegian Ridgeback, but it won't be easy getting him here. I think the best thing will be to send him over with some friends of mine who are coming to visit me next week. Trouble is, they mustn't be seen carrying an illegal dragon.

Could you get the Ridgeback up the tallest tower at midnight on Saturday? They can meet you there and take him away while it's still dark.

Send me an answer as soon as possible.

Love,

Charlie

They looked at one another.

"We've got the invisibility cloak," said Harry. "It shouldn't be too difficult -- I think the cloaks big enough to cover two of us and Norbert."

It was a mark of how bad the last week had been that the other two agreed with him. Anything to get rid of Norbert -- and Malfoy.

There was a hitch. By the next morning, Ron's bitten hand had swollen to twice its usual size. He didn't know whether it was safe to go to Madam Pomfrey -- would she recognize a dragon bite? By the afternoon, though, he had no choice. The cut had turned a nasty shade of green. It looked as if Norbert's fangs were poisonous.

Harry and Hermione rushed up to the hospital wing at the end of the day to find Ron in a terrible state in bed.

"It's not just my hand," he whispered, "although that feels like it's about to fall off. Malfoy told Madam Pomfrey he wanted to borrow one of my books so he could come and have a good laugh at me. He kept threatening to tell her what really bit me -- I've told her it was a dog, but I don't think she believes me -I shouldn't have hit him at the

Quidditch match, that's why he's doing this."

Harry and Hermione tried to calm Ron down.

"It'll all be over at midnight on Saturday," said Hermione, but this didn't soothe Ron at all. On the contrary, he sat bolt upright and broke into a sweat.

"Midnight on Saturday!" he said in a hoarse voice. "Oh no oh no -- I've just remembered -- Charlie's letter was in that book Malfoy took, he's going to know we're getting rid of Norbert."

Harry and Hermione didn't get a chance to answer. Madam Pomfrey came over at that moment and made them leave, saying Ron needed sleep.

"It's too late to change the plan now," Harry told Hermione. "We haven't got time to send Charlie another owl, and this could be our only chance to get rid of Norbert. We'll have to risk it. And we have got the invisibility cloak, Malfoy doesn't know about that."

They found Fang, the boarhound, sitting outside with a bandaged tail when they went to tell Hagrid, who opened a window to talk to them.

"I won't let you in," he puffed. "Norbert's at a tricky stage -- nothin' I can't handle."

When they told him about Charlie's letter, his eyes filled with tears, although that might have been because Norbert had just bitten him on the leg.

"Aargh! It's all right, he only got my boot -- jus' playin' -- he's only a baby, after all."

The baby banged its tail on the wall, making the windows rattle. Harry and Hermione walked back to the castle feeling Saturday couldn't come quickly enough.

They would have felt sorry for Hagrid when the time came for him to say good-bye to Norbert if they hadn't been so worried about what they had to do. It was a very dark, cloudy night, and they were a bit late arriving at Hagrid's hut because they'd had to wait for Peeves to get out of their way in the entrance hall, where he'd been playing tennis against the wall. Hagrid had Norbert packed and ready in a large crate.

"He's got lots o' rats an' some brandy fer the journey," said Hagrid in a muffled voice. "An' I've packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely."

From inside the crate came ripping noises that sounded to Harry as though the teddy was having his head torn off.

"Bye-bye, Norbert!" Hagrid sobbed, as Harry and Hermione covered the crate with the invisibility cloak and stepped underneath it themselves. "Mommy will never forget you!"

How they managed to get the crate back up to the castle, they never knew. Midnight ticked nearer as they heaved Norbert up the marble staircase in the entrance hall and along the dark corridors. UP another staircase, then another -- even one of Harry's shortcuts didn't make the work much easier.

"Nearly there!" Harry panted as they reached the corridor beneath the tallest tower.

Then a sudden movement ahead of them made them almost drop the crate. Forgetting that they were already invisible, they shrank into the shadows, staring at the dark outlines of two people grappling with each other ten feet away. A lamp flared.

Professor McGonagall, in a tartan bathrobe and a hair net, had Malfoy by the ear.

"Detention!" she shouted. "And twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how dare you --"

"You don't understand, Professor. Harry Potter's coming -- he's got a dragon!"

"What utter rubbish! How dare you tell such lies! Come on -- I shall see Professor Snape about you, Malfoy!"

The steep spiral staircase up to the top of the tower seemed the easiest thing in the world after that. Not until they'd stepped out into the cold night air did they throw off the cloak, glad to be able to breathe properly again. Hermione did a sort of jig.

"Malfoy's got detention! I could sing!"

"Don't," Harry advised her.

Chuckling about Malfoy, they waited, Norbert thrashing about in his crate. About ten minutes later, four broomsticks came swooping down out of the darkness.

Charlie's friends were a cheery lot. They showed Harry and Hermione the harness they'd rigged up, so they could suspend Norbert between them. They all helped buckle Norbert safely into it and then Harry and Hermione shook hands with the others and thanked them very much.

At last, Norbert was going... going... gone.

They slipped back down the spiral staircase, their hearts as light as their hands, now that Norbert was off them. No more dragon -- Malfoy in detention -- what could spoil their happiness?

The answer to that was waiting at the foot of the stairs. As they stepped into the corridor, Filch's face loomed suddenly out of the darkness.

"Well, well, well," he whispered, "we are in trouble."

They'd left the invisibility cloak on top of the tower.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE FORIBIDDEN FOREST

Things couldn't have been worse.

Filch took them down to Professor McGonagall's study on the first floor, where they sat and waited without saying a word to each other. Hermione was trembling. Excuses, alibis, and wild cover-up stories chased each other around Harry's brain, each more feeble than the last. He couldn't see how they were going to get out of trouble this time. They were cornered. How could they have been so stupid as to forget the cloak? There was no reason on earth that Professor McGonagall would accept for their being out of bed and creeping around the school in the dead of night, let alone being up the tallest astronomy tower, which was out-of-bounds except for classes. Add Norbert and the invisibility cloak, and they might as well be packing their bags already.

Had Harry thought that things couldn't have been worse? He was wrong. When Professor McGonagall appeared, she was leading Neville.

"Harry!" Neville burst out, the moment he saw the other two. "I was trying to find you to warn you, I heard Malfoy saying he was going to catch you, he said you had a drag --"

Harry shook his head violently to shut Neville up, but Professor McGonagall had seen. She looked more likely to breathe fire than Norbert as she towered over the three of them.

"I would never have believed it of any of you. Mr. Filch says you were up in the astronomy tower. It's one o'clock in the morning. Explain yourselves."

It was the first time Hermione had ever failed to answer a teacher's question. She was staring at her slippers, as still as a statue.

"I think I've got a good idea of what's been going on," said Professor McGonagall. "It doesn't take a genius to work it out. You fed Draco Malfoy some cock-and-bull story about a dragon, trying to get him out of bed and into trouble. I've already caught him. I suppose you think it's funny that Longbottom here heard the story and believed it, too?"

Harry caught Neville's eye and tried to tell him without words that this wasn't true, because Neville was looking stunned and hurt. Poor, blundering Neville -- Harry knew what it must have cost him to try and find them in the dark, to warn them.

"I'm disgusted," said Professor McGonagall. "Four students out of bed in one night! I've never heard of such a thing before! You, Miss Granger, I thought you had more sense. As for you, Mr. Potter, I thought Gryffindor meant more to you than this. All three of you will receive detentions -- yes, you too, Mr. Longbottom, nothing gives you the right to walk around school at night, especially these days, it's very dangerous -- and fifty points will be taken from Gryffindor."

"Fifty?" Harry gasped -- they would lose the lead, the lead he'd won in the last Quidditch match.

"Fifty points each," said Professor McGonagall, breathing heavily through her long, pointed nose.

"Professor -- please

"You can't --"

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Potter. Now get back to bed, all

of you. I've never been more ashamed of Gryffindor students."

A hundred and fifty points lost. That put Gryffindor in last place. In one night, they'd ruined any chance Gryffindor had had for the house cup. Harry felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach. How could they ever make up for this?

Harry didn't sleep all night. He could hear Neville sobbing into his pillow for what seemed like hours. Harry couldn't think of anything to say to comfort him. He knew Neville, like himself, was dreading the dawn. What would happen when the rest of Gryffindor found out what they'd done?

At first, Gryffindors passing the giant hourglasses that recorded the house points the next day thought there'd been a mistake. How could they suddenly have a hundred and fifty points fewer than yesterday? And then the story started to spread: Harry Potter, the famous Harry Potter, their hero of two Quidditch matches, had lost them all those points, him and a couple of other stupid first years.

From being one of the most popular and admired people at the school, Harry was suddenly the most hated. Even Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs turned on him, because everyone had been longing to see Slytherin lose the house cup. Everywhere Harry went, people pointed and didn't trouble to lower their voices as they insulted him. Slytherins, on the other hand, clapped as he walked past them, whistling and cheering, "Thanks Potter, we owe you one!"

Only Ron stood by him.

"They'll all forget this in a few weeks. Fred and George have lost loads of points in all the time they've been here, and people still like them."

"They've never lost a hundred and fifty points in one go, though, have they?" said Harry miserably.

"Well -- no," Ron admitted.

It was a bit late to repair the damage, but Harry swore to himself not to meddle in things that weren't his business from now on. He'd had it with sneaking around and spying. He felt so ashamed of himself that he went to Wood and offered to resign from the Quidditch team.

"Resign?" Wood thundered. "What good'll that do? How are we going to get any points back if we can't win at Quidditch?"

But even Quidditch had lost its fun. The rest of the team wouldn't speak to Harry during practice, and if they had to speak about him, they called him "the Seeker."

Hermione and Neville were suffering, too. They didn't have as bad a time as Harry, because they weren't as well-known, but nobody would speak to them, either. Hermione had stopped drawing attention to herself in class, keeping her head down and working in silence.

Harry was almost glad that the exams weren't far away. All the studying he had to do kept his mind off his misery. He, Ron, and Hermione kept to themselves, working late into the night, trying to remember the ingredients in complicated potions, learn charms and spells by heart,

memorize the dates of magical discoveries and goblin rebellions....

Then, about a week before the exams were due to start, Harry's new resolution not to interfere in anything that didn't concern him was put to an unexpected test. Walking back from the library on his own one afternoon, he heard somebody whimpering from a classroom up ahead. As he drew closer, he heard Quirrell's voice.

"No -- no -- not again, please --"

It sounded as though someone was threatening him. Harry moved closer.

"All right -- all right --" he heard Quirrell sob.

Next second, Quirrell came hurrying out of the classroom straightening his turban. He was pale and looked as though he was about to cry. He strode out of sight; Harry didn't think Quirrell had even noticed him. He waited until Quirrell's footsteps had disappeared, then peered into the classroom. It was empty, but a door stood ajar at the other end. Harry was halfway toward it before he remembered what he'd promised himself about not meddling.

All the same, he'd have gambled twelve Sorcerer's Stones that Snape had just left the room, and from what Harry had just heard, Snape would be walking with a new spring in his step -- Quirrell seemed to have given in at last.

Harry went back to the library, where Hermione was testing Ron on Astronomy. Harry told them what he'd heard.

"Snape's done it, then!" said Ron. "If Quirrell's told him how to break his Anti-Dark Force spell --"

"There's still Fluffy, though," said Hermione.

"Maybe Snape's found out how to get past him without asking Hagrid," said Ron, looking up at the thousands of books surrounding them. "I bet there's a book somewhere in here telling you how to get past a giant three-headed dog. So what do we do, Harry?"

The light of adventure was kindling again in Ron's eyes, but Hermione answered before Harry could.

"Go to Dumbledore. That's what we should have done ages ago. If we try anything ourselves we'll be thrown out for sure."

"But we've got no proof!" said Harry. "Quirrell's too scared to back us up. Snape's only got to say he doesn't know how the troll got in at Halloween and that he was nowhere near the third floor -- who do you think they'll believe, him or us? It's not exactly a secret we hate him, Dumbledore'll think we made it up to get him sacked. Filch wouldn't help us if his life depended on it, he's too friendly with Snape, and the more students get thrown out, the better, he'll think. And don't forget, we're not supposed to know about the Stone or Fluffy. That'll take a lot of explaining."

Hermione looked convinced, but Ron didn't.

"If we just do a bit of poking around --"

"No," said Harry flatly, "we've done enough poking around."

He pulled a map of Jupiter toward him and started to learn the names of its moons.

The following morning, notes were delivered to Harry, Hermione, and Neville at the breakfast table. They were all the same:

Your detention will take place at eleven o'clock tonight. Meet Mr. Filch in the entrance hall.

Professor McGonagall Harry had forgotten they still had detentions to do in the furor over the points they'd lost. He half expected Hermione to complain that this was a whole night of studying lost, but she didn't say a word. Like Harry, she felt they deserved what they'd got.

At eleven o'clock that night, they said good-bye to Ron in the common room and went down to the entrance hall with Neville. Filch was already there -- and so was Malfoy. Harry had also forgotten that Malfoy had gotten a detention, too.

"Follow me," said Filch, lighting a lamp and leading them outside.

I bet you'll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won't you, eh?" he said, leering at them. "Oh yes... hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me.... It's just a pity they let the old punishments die out... hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I've got the chains still in my office, keep 'em well oiled in case they're ever needed.... Right, off we go, and don't think of running off, now, it'll be worse for you if you do."

They marched off across the dark grounds. Neville kept sniffing. Harry wondered what their punishment was going to be. It must be something really horrible, or Filch wouldn't be sounding so delighted.

The moon was bright, but clouds scudding across it kept throwing them into darkness. Ahead, Harry could see the lighted windows of Hagrid's hut. Then they heard a distant shout.

"Is that you, Filch? Hurry up, I want ter get started."

Harry's heart rose; if they were going to be working with Hagrid it wouldn't be so bad. His relief must have showed in his -face, because Filch said, "I suppose you think you'll be enjoying yourself with that oaf? Well, think again, boy -- it's into the forest you're going and I'm much mistaken if you'll all come out in one piece."

At this, Neville let out a little moan, and Malfoy stopped dead in his tracks.

"The forest?" he repeated, and he didn't sound quite as cool as usual. "We can't go in there at night -- there's all sorts of things in there -- werewolves, I heard."

Neville clutched the sleeve of Harry's robe and made a choking noise.

"That's your problem, isn't it?" said Filch, his voice cracking with glee. "Should've thought of them werewolves before you got in trouble, shouldn't you?"

Hagrid came striding toward them out of the dark, Fang at his heel. He was carrying his large crossbow, and a quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder.

"Abou' time," he said. "I bin waitin' fer half an hour already. All right, Harry, Hermione?"

"I shouldn't be too friendly to them, Hagrid," said Filch coldly, they're here to be punished, after all."

"That's why yer late, is it?" said Hagrid, frowning at Filch. "Bin lecturin' them, eh? 'Snot your place ter do that. Yeh've done yer bit, I'll take over from here."

"I'll be back at dawn," said Filch, "for what's left of them," he added nastily, and he turned and started back toward the castle, his lamp bobbing away in the darkness.

Malfoy now turned to Hagrid.

"I'm not going in that forest, he said, and Harry was pleased to hear the note of panic in his voice.

"Yeh are if yeh want ter stay at Hogwarts," said Hagrid fiercely. "Yeh've done wrong an' now yehve got ter pay fer it."

"But this is servant stuff, it's not for students to do. I thought we'd be copying lines or something, if my father knew I was doing this, he'd tell yer that's how it is at Hogwarts," Hagrid growled. "Copyin' lines! What good's that ter anyone? Yeh'll do summat useful or Yeh'll get out. If yeh think yer father'd rather you were expelled, then get back off ter the castle an' pack. Go on!"

Malfoy didn't move. He looked at Hagrid furiously, but then dropped his gaze.

"Right then," said Hagrid, "now, listen carefully, 'cause it's dangerous what we're gonna do tonight, an' I don't want no one takin' risks. Follow me over here a moment."

He led them to the very edge of the forest. Holding his lamp up high, he pointed down a narrow, winding earth track that disappeared into the thick black trees. A light breeze lifted their hair as they looked into the forest.

"Look there," said Hagrid, "see that stuff shinin' on the ground? Silvery stuff? That's unicorn blood. There's a unicorn in there bin hurt badly by summat. This is the second time in a week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We're gonna try an' find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery."

"And what if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?" said Malfoy, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

"There's nothin' that lives in the forest that'll hurt yeh if yer with me or Fang," said Hagrid. "An' keep ter the path. Right, now, we're gonna split inter two parties an' follow the trail in diff'rent directions. There's blood all over the place, it must've bin staggerin' around since last night at least."

"I want Fang," said Malfoy quickly, looking at Fang's long teeth.

"All right, but I warn yeh, he's a coward," said Hagrid. "So me, Harry, an' Hermione'll go one way an' Draco, Neville, an' Fang'll go the other. Now, if any of us finds the unicorn, we'll send up green sparks, right? Get yer wands out an' practice now -- that's it -- an' if anyone gets in trouble, send up red sparks, an' we'll all come an' find yeh -- so, be careful -- let's go."

The forest was black and silent. A little way into it they reached a fork in the earth path, and Harry, Hermione, and Hagrid took the left path while Malfoy, Neville, and Fang took the right.

They walked in silence, their eyes on the ground. Every now and then a ray of moonlight through the branches above lit a spot of silver-blue blood on the fallen leaves.

Harry saw that Hagrid looked very worried.

"Could a werewolf be killing the unicorns?" Harry asked.

"Not fast enough," said Hagrid. "It's not easy ter catch a unicorn, they're powerful magic creatures. I never knew one ter be hurt before."

They walked past a mossy tree stump. Harry could hear running water; there must be a stream somewhere close by. There were still spots of unicorn blood here and there along the winding path.

"You all right, Hermione?" Hagrid whispered. "Don' worry, it can't've gone far if it's this badly hurt, an' then we'll be able ter -- GET BEHIND THAT TREE!"

Hagrid seized Harry and Hermione and hoisted them off the path behind a towering oak. He pulled out an arrow and fitted it into his crossbow, raising it, ready to fire. The three of them listened. Something was slithering over dead leaves nearby: it sounded like a cloak trailing along the ground. Hagrid was squinting up the dark path, but after a few seconds, the sound faded away.

"I knew it, " he murmured. "There's summat in here that shouldn't be."

"A werewolf?" Harry suggested.

"That wasn't no werewolf an' it wasn't no unicorn, neither," said Hagrid grimly. "Right, follow me, but careful, now."

They walked more slowly, ears straining for the faintest sound. Suddenly, in a clearing ahead, something definitely moved.

"Who's there?" Hagrid called. "Show yerself -- I'm armed!"

And into the clearing came -- was it a man, or a horse? To the waist, a man, with red hair and beard, but below that was a horse's gleaming chestnut body with a long, reddish tail. Harry and Hermione's jaws dropped.

"Oh, it's you, Ronan," said Hagrid in relief. "How are yeh?"

He walked forward and shook the centaur's hand.

"Good evening to you, Hagrid," said Ronan. He had a deep, sorrowful voice. "Were you going to shoot me?"

"Can't be too careful, Ronan," said Hagrid, patting his crossbow. "There's summat bad loose in this forest. This is Harry Potter an' Hermione Granger, by the way. Students up at the school. An' this is Ronan, you two. He's a centaur.))

"We'd noticed," said Hermione faintly.

"Good evening," said Ronan. "Students, are you? And do you learn much, up at the school?"

"Erm --"

"A bit," said Hermione timidly.

"A bit. Well, that's something." Ronan sighed. He flung back his head and stared at the sky. "Mars is bright tonight."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, glancing up, too. "Listen, I'm glad we've run inter yeh, Ronan, 'cause there's a unicorn bin hurt -- you seen anythin'?"

Ronan didn't answer immediately. He stared unblinkingly upward, then sighed again.

"Always the innocent are the first victims," he said. "So it has been for ages past, so it is now."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, "but have yeh seen anythin', Ronan? Anythin' unusual?"

"Mars is bright tonight," Ronan repeated, while Hagrid watched him impatiently. "Unusually bright."

"Yeah, but I was meanin' anythin' unusual a bit nearer home, said Hagrid. "So yeh haven't noticed anythin' strange?"

Yet again, Ronan took a while to answer. At last, he said, "The forest hides many secrets."

A movement in the trees behind Ronan made Hagrid raise his bow again, but it was only a second centaur, black-haired and -bodied and wilder-looking than Ronan.

"Hullo, Bane," said Hagrid. "All right?"

"Good evening, Hagrid, I hope you are well?"

"Well enough. Look, I've jus' bin askin' Ronan, you seen anythin' odd in here lately? There's a unicorn bin injured -- would yeh know anythin' about it?"

Bane walked over to stand next to Ronan. He looked skyward. "Mars is bright tonight," he said simply.

"We've heard," said Hagrid grumpily. "Well, if either of you do see anythin', let me know, won't yeh? We'll be off, then."

Harry and Hermione followed him out of the clearing, staring over their shoulders at Ronan and Bane until the trees blocked their view.

"Never," said Hagrid irritably, "try an' get a straight answer out of a centaur. Ruddy stargazers. Not interested in anythin' closer'n the moon."

"Are there many of them in here?" asked Hermione.

"Oh, a fair few... Keep themselves to themselves mostly, but they're good enough about turnin' up if ever I want a word. They're deep, mind, centaurs... they know things... jus' don' let on much."

"D'you think that was a centaur we heard earlier?" said Harry.

"Did that sound like hooves to you? Nah, if yeh ask me, that was what's bin killin' the unicorns -- never heard anythin' like it before."

They walked on through the dense, dark trees. Harry kept looking nervously over his shoulder. He had the nasty feeling they were being watched. He was very glad they had Hagrid and his crossbow with them. They had just passed a bend in the path when Hermione grabbed Hagrid's arm.

"Hagrid! Look! Red sparks, the others are in trouble!"

"You two wait here!" Hagrid shouted. "Stay on the path, I'll come back for yeh!"

They heard him crashing away through the undergrowth and stood looking at each other, very scared, until they couldn't hear anything but the rustling of leaves around them.

"You don't think they've been hurt, do you?" whispered Hermione.

"I don't care if Malfoy has, but if something's got Neville... it's our fault he's here in the first place."

The minutes dragged by. Their ears seemed sharper than usual. Harry's seemed to be picking up every sigh of the wind, every cracking twig. What was going on? Where were the others?

At last, a great crunching noise announced Hagrid's return. Malfoy, Neville, and Fang were with him. Hagrid was fuming. Malfoy, it seemed, had sneaked up behind Neville and grabbed him as a joke. Neville had panicked and sent up the sparks.

"We'll be lucky ter catch anythin' now, with the racket you two were makin'. Right, we're changin' groups -- Neville, you stay with me an' Hermione, Harry, you go with Fang an' this idiot. I'm sorry," Hagrid added in a whisper to Harry, "but he'll have a harder time frightenin' you, an' we've gotta get this done."

So Harry set off into the heart of the forest with Malfoy and Fang. They walked for nearly half an hour, deeper and deeper into the forest, until the path became almost impossible to follow because the trees were so thick. Harry thought the blood seemed to be getting thicker. There were splashes on the roots of a tree, as though the poor creature had been thrashing around in pain close by. Harry could see a clearing ahead, through the tangled branches of an ancient oak.

"Look --" he murmured, holding out his arm to stop Malfoy.

Something bright white was gleaming on the ground. They inched closer.

It was the unicorn all right, and it was dead. Harry had never seen anything so beautiful and sad. Its long, slender legs were stuck out at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane was spread pearly-white on the dark leaves.

Harry had taken one step toward it when a slithering sound made him freeze where he stood. A bush on the edge of the clearing quivered.... Then, out of the shadows, a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast. Harry, Malfoy, and Fang stood transfixed. The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, lowered its head over the wound in the animal's side, and began to drink its blood.

"AAAAAAAARGH!"

Malfoy let out a terrible scream and bolted -- so did Fang. The hooded figure raised its head and looked right at Harry -- unicorn blood was dribbling down its front. It got to its feet and came swiftly toward Harry -- he couldn't move for fear.

Then a pain like he'd never felt before pierced his head; it was as though his scar were on fire. Half blinded, he staggered backward. He heard hooves behind him, galloping, and something jumped clean over Harry, charging at the figure.

The pain in Harry's head was so bad he fell to his knees. It took a minute or two to pass. When he looked up, the figure had gone. A centaur was standing over him, not Ronan or Bane; this one looked younger; he had white-blond hair and a palomino body.

"Are you all right?" said the centaur, pulling Harry to his feet.

"Yes -- thank you -- what was that?"

The centaur didn't answer. He had astonishingly blue eyes, like pale sapphires. He looked carefully at Harry, his eyes lingering on the scar that stood out, livid, on Harry's forehead.

"You are the Potter boy," he said. "You had better get back to Hagrid. The forest is not safe at this time -- especially for you. Can you ride? It will be quicker this way."

"My name is Firenze," he added, as he lowered himself on to his front legs so that Harry could clamber onto his back.

There was suddenly a sound of more galloping from the other side of the clearing. Ronan and Bane came bursting through the trees, their flanks heaving and sweaty.

"Firenze!" Bane thundered. "What are you doing? You have a human on your back! Have you no shame? Are you a common mule?"

"Do you realize who this is?" said Firenze. "This is the Potter boy. The quicker he leaves this forest, the better."

"What have you been telling him?" growled Bane. "Remember, Firenze, we

are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens. Have we not read what is to come in the movements of the planets?"

Ronan pawed the ground nervously. "I'm sure Firenze thought he was acting for the best, " he said in his gloomy voice.

Bane kicked his back legs in anger.

"For the best! What is that to do with us? Centaurs are concerned with what has been foretold! It is not our business to run around like donkeys after stray humans in our forest!"

Firenze suddenly reared on to his hind legs in anger, so that Harry had to grab his shoulders to stay on.

"Do you not see that unicorn?" Firenze bellowed at Bane. "Do you not understand why it was killed? Or have the planets not let you in on that secret? I set myself against what is lurking in this forest, Bane, yes, with humans alongside me if I must."

And Firenze whisked around; with Harry clutching on as best he could, they plunged off into the trees, leaving Ronan and Bane behind them.

Harry didn't have a clue what was going on.

"Why's Bane so angry?" he asked. "What was that thing you saved me from, anyway?"

Firenze slowed to a walk, warned Harry to keep his head bowed in case of low-hanging branches, but did not answer Harry's question. They made their way through the trees in silence for so long that Harry thought Firenze didn't want to talk to him anymore. They were passing through a particularly dense patch of trees, however, when Firenze suddenly stopped.

"Harry Potter, do you know what unicorn blood is used -for?"

"No," said Harry, startled by the odd question. "We've only used the horn and tail hair in Potions."

"That is because it is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn," said Firenze. "Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips."

Harry stared at the back of Firenze's head, which was dappled silver in the moonlight.

"But who'd be that desperate?" he wondered aloud. "If you're going to be cursed forever, deaths better, isn't it?"

"It is," Firenze agreed, "unless all you need is to stay alive long enough to drink something else -- something that will bring you back to full strength and power -- something that will mean you 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 unicorn's 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 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 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.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THROUGH THE TRAPDOOR

In 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 AntiCheating 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 tapdance 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.

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 selfstirring 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. "No more studying," Ron sighed happily, stretching out on the grass. "You could look more cheerful, Harry, we've got a week before we find out how badly we've done, there's no need to worry yet."

Harry was rubbing his forehead.

"I wish I knew what this means!" he burst out angrily. "My scar keeps hurting -- it's happened before, but never as often as this."

"Go to Madam Pomfrey," Hermione suggested.

"I'm not ill," said Harry. "I think it's a warning... it means danger's coming...."

Ron couldn't get worked up, it was too hot.

"Harry, relax, Hermione's right, the Stone's safe as long as Dumbledore's around. Anyway, we've never had any proof Snape found out how to get past Fluffy. He nearly had his leg ripped off once, he's not going to try it again in a hurry. And Neville will play Quidditch for England before Hagrid lets Dumbledore down."

Harry nodded, but he couldn't shake off a lurking feeling that there was something he'd forgotten to do, something important. When he tried to explain this, Hermione said, "That's just the exams. I woke up last night and was halfway through my Transfiguration notes before I remembered we'd done that one."

Harry was quite sure the unsettled feeling didn't have anything to do with work, though. He watched an owl flutter toward the school across the bright blue sky, a note clamped in its mouth. Hagrid was the only one who ever sent him letters. Hagrid would never betray Dumbledore. Hagrid would never tell anyone how to get past Fluffy... never... but --

Harry suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Where're you going?" said Ron sleepily.

"I've just thought of something," said Harry. He had turned white. "We've got to go and see Hagrid, now."

"Why?" panted Hermione, hurrying to keep up.

"Don't you think it's a bit odd," said Harry, scrambling up the grassy slope, "that what Hagrid wants more than anything else is a dragon, and a stranger turns up who just happens to have an egg in his pocket? How many people wander around with dragon eggs if it's against wizard law? Lucky they found Hagrid, don't you think? Why didn't I see it before?"

"What are you talking about?" said Ron, but Harry, sprinting across the grounds toward the forest, didn't answer.

Hagrid was sitting in an armchair outside his house; his trousers and sleeves were rolled up, and he was shelling peas into a large bowl.

"Hullo," he said, smiling. "Finished yer exams? Got time fer a drink?"

"Yes, please," said Ron, but Harry cut him off.

"No, we're in a hurry. Hagrid, I've got to ask you something. You know that night you won Norbert? What did the stranger you were playing cards with look like?"

"Dunno," said Hagrid casually, "he wouldn't take his cloak off."

He saw the three of them look stunned and raised his eyebrows.

"It's not that unusual, yeh get a lot o' funny folk in the Hog's Head -- that's the pub down in the village. Mighta bin a dragon dealer, mightn' he? I never saw his face, he kept his hood up."

Harry sank down next to the bowl of peas. "What did you talk to him about, Hagrid? Did you mention Hogwarts at all?"

"Mighta come up," said Hagrid, frowning as he tried to remember. "Yeah... he asked what I did, an' I told him I was gamekeeper here.... He asked a bit about the sorta creatures I took after... so I told him... an' I said what I'd always really wanted was a dragon... an' then... I can't remember too well, 'cause he kept buyin' me drinks.... Let's see... yeah, then he said he had the dragon egg an' we could play cards fer it if I wanted... but he had ter be sure I could handle it, he didn't want it ter go ter any old home.... So I told him, after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy..."

"And did he -- did he seem interested in Fluffy?" Harry asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Well -- yeah -- how many three-headed dogs d'ye meet, even around Hogwarts? So I told him, Fluffy's a piece o' cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus' play him a bit o' music an' he'll go straight off ter sleep --"

Hagrid suddenly looked horrified.

"I shouldn'ta told yeh that!" he blurted out. "Forget I said it! Hey -- where're yeh goin'?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione didn't speak to each other at all until they came to a halt in the entrance hall, which seemed very cold and gloomy after the grounds.

"We've got to go to Dumbledore," said Harry. "Hagrid told that stranger how to get past Fluffy, and it was either Snape or Voldemort under that cloak -- it must've been easy, once he'd got Hagrid drunk. I just hope Dumbledore believes us. Firenze might back us up if Bane doesn't stop him. Where's Dumbledore's office?"

They looked around, as if hoping to see a sign pointing them in the right direction. They had never been told where Dumbledore lived, nor did they know anyone who had been sent to see him.

"We'll just have to --" Harry began, but a voice suddenly rang across the hall.

"What are you three doing inside?"

It was Professor McGonagall, carrying a large pile of books.

"We want to see Professor Dumbledore," said Hermione, rather bravely, Harry and Ron thought.

"See Professor Dumbledore?" Professor McGonagall repeated, as though this was a very fishy thing to want to do. "Why?"

Harry swallowed -- now what?

"It's sort of secret," he said, but he wished at once he hadn't, because Professor McGonagall's nostrils flared.

"Professor Dumbledore left ten minutes ago," she said coldly. "He received an urgent owl from the Ministry of Magic and flew off for London at once."

"He's gone?" said Harry frantically. "Now?"

"Professor Dumbledore is a very great wizard, Potter, he has many demands on his time --"

"But this is important."

"Something you have to say is more important than the Ministry of Magic, Potter.

"Look," said Harry, throwing caution to the winds, "Professor -- it's about the Sorcerer's tone --"

Whatever Professor McGonagall had expected, it wasn't that. The books she was carrying tumbled out of her arms, but she didn't pick them up. "How do you know --?" she spluttered.

"Professor, I think -- I know -- that Sn- that someone's going to try and steal the Stone. I've got to talk to Professor Dumbledore."

She eyed him with a mixture of shock and suspicion.

"Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow," she said finally. I don't know how you found out about the Stone, but rest assured, no one can possibly steal it, it's too well protected."

"But Professor --"

"Potter, I know what I'm talking about," she said shortly. She bent down and gathered up the fallen books. I suggest you all go back outside and enjoy the sunshine."

But they didn't.

"It's tonight," said Harry, once he was sure Professor McGonagall was out of earshot. "Snape's going through the trapdoor tonight. He's found out everything he needs, and now he's got Dumbledore out of the way. He sent that note, I bet the Ministry of Magic will get a real shock when

Dumbledore turns up."

"But what can we --"

Hermione gasped. Harry and Ron wheeled round.

Snape was standing there.

"Good afternoon," he said smoothly.

They stared at him.

"You shouldn't be inside on a day like this," he said, with an odd, twisted smile.

"We were --" Harry began, without any idea what he was going to say.

"You want to be more careful," said Snape. "Hanging around like this, people will think you're up to something. And Gryffindor really can't afford to lose any more points, can it?"

Harry flushed. They turned to go outside, but Snape called them back.

"Be warned, Potter -- any more nighttime wanderings and I will personally make sure you are expelled. Good day to you."

He strode off in the direction of the staffroom.

Out on the stone steps, Harry turned to the others.

"Right, here's what we've got to do," he whispered urgently. "One of us has got to keep an eye on Snape -- wait outside the staff room and follow him if he leaves it. Hermione, you'd better do that."

"Why me?"

"It's obvious," said Ron. "You can pretend to be waiting for Professor Flitwick, you know." He put on a high voice, "'Oh Professor Flitwick, I'm so worried, I think I got question fourteen b wrong....'"

"Oh, shut up," said Hermione, but she agreed to go and watch out for Snape.

"And we'd better stay outside the third-floor corridor," Harry told Ron. "Come on."

But that part of the plan didn't work. No sooner had they reached the door separating Fluffy from the rest of the school than Professor McGonagall turned up again and this time, she lost her temper.

"I suppose you think you're harder to get past than a pack of enchantments!" she stormed. "Enough of this nonsense! If I hear you 've come anywhere near here again, I'll take another fifty points from Gryffindor! Yes, Weasley, from my own house!" Harry and Ron went back to the common room, Harry had just said, "At least Hermione's on Snape's tail," when the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and Hermione came in.

"I'm sorry, Harry!" she wailed. "Snape came out and asked me what I was

doing, so I said I was waiting for Flitwick, and Snape went to get him, and I've only just got away, I don't know where Snape went."

"Well, that's it then, isn't it?" Harry said.

The other two stared at him. He was pale and his eyes were glittering.

"I'm going out of here tonight and I'm going to try and get to the Stone first."

"You're mad!" said Ron.

"You can't!" said Hermione. "After what McGonagall and Snape have said? You'll be expelled!"

"SO WHAP" Harry shouted. "Don't you understand? If Snape gets hold of the Stone, Voldemort's coming back! Haven't you heard what it was like when he was trying to take over? There won't be any Hogwarts to get expelled from! He'll flatten it, or turn it into a school for the Dark Arts! Losing points doesn't matter anymore, can't you see? D'you think he'll leave you and your families alone if Gryffindor wins the house cup? If I get caught before I can get to the Stone, well, I'll have to go back to the Dursleys and wait for Voldemort to find me there, it's only dying a bit later than I would have, because I'm never going over to the Dark Side! I'm going through that trapdoor tonight and nothing you two say is going to stop me! Voldemort killed my parents, remember?"

He glared at them.

"You're right Harry," said Hermione in a small voice.

"I'll use the invisibility cloak," said Harry. "It's just lucky I got it back."

"But will it cover all three of us?" said Ron.

"All -- all three of us?"

"Oh, come off it, you don't think we'd let you go alone?"

"Of course not," said Hermione briskly. "How do you think you'd get to the Stone without us? I'd better go and took through my books, there might be something useful..."

"But if we get caught, you two will be expelled, too."

"Not if I can help it," said Hermione grimly. "Flitwick told me in secret that I got a hundred and twelve percent on his exam. They're not throwing me out after that."

After dinner the three of them sat nervously apart in the common room. Nobody bothered them; none of the Gryffindors had anything to say to Harry any more, after all. This was the first night he hadn't been upset by it. Hermione was skimming through all her notes, hoping to come across one of the enchantments they were about to try to break. Harry and Ron didn't talk much. Both of them were thinking about what they were about to do.

Slowly, the room emptied as people drifted off to bed.

"Better get the cloak," Ron muttered, as Lee Jordan finally left, stretching and yawning. Harry ran upstairs to their dark dormitory. He putted out the cloak and then his eyes fell on the flute Hagrid had given him for Christmas. He pocketed it to use on Fluffy -- he didn't feel much like singing.

He ran back down to the common room.

"We'd better put the cloak on here, and make sure it covers all three of us -- if Filch spots one of our feet wandering along on its own --"

"What are you doing?" said a voice from the corner of the room. Neville appeared from behind an armchair, clutching Trevor the toad, who looked as though he'd been making another bid for freedom.

"Nothing, Neville, nothing," said Harry, hurriedly putting the cloak behind his back.

Neville stared at their guilty faces.

"You're going out again," he said.

"No, no, no," said Hermione. "No, we're not. Why don't you go to bed, Neville?"

Harry looked at the grandfather clock by the door. They couldn't afford to waste any more time, Snape might even now be playing Fluffy to sleep.

"You can't go out," said Neville, "you'll be caught again. Gryffindor will be in even more trouble."

"You don't understand," said Harry, "this is important."

But Neville was clearly steeling himself to do something desperate.

I won't let you do it," he said, hurrying to stand in front of the portrait hole. "I'll -- I'll fight you!"

"Neville, "Ron exploded, "get away from that hole and don't be an idiot --"

"Don't you call me an idiot!" said Neville. I don't think you should be breaking any more rules! And you were the one who told me to stand up to people!"

"Yes, but not to us," said Ron in exasperation. "Neville, you don't know what you're doing."

He took a step forward and Neville dropped Trevor the toad, who leapt out of sight.

"Go on then, try and hit me!" said Neville, raising his fists. "I'm ready!"

Harry turned to Hermione.

"Do something," he said desperately.

Hermione stepped forward.

"Neville," she said, "I'm really, really sorry about this."

She raised her wand.

"Petrificus Totalus!" she cried, pointing it at Neville.

Neville's arms snapped to his sides. His legs sprang together. His whole body rigid, he swayed where he stood and then fell flat on his face, stiff as a board.

Hermione ran to turn him over. Neville's jaws were jammed together so he couldn't speak. Only his eyes were moving, looking at them in horror.

"What've you done to him?" Harry whispered.

"It's the full Body-Bind," said Hermione miserably. "Oh, Neville, I'm so sorry."

"We had to, Neville, no time to explain," said Harry.

"You'll understand later, Neville," said Ron as they stepped over him and pulled on the invisibility cloak.

But leaving Neville lying motionless on the floor didn't feel like a very good omen. In their nervous state, every statue's shadow looked like Filch, every distant breath of wind sounded like Peeves swooping down on them. At the foot of the first set of stairs, they spotted Mrs. Norris skulking near the top.

"Oh, let's kick her, just this once," Ron whispered in Harry's ear, but Harry shook his head. As they climbed carefully around her, Mrs. Norris turned her lamplike eyes on them, but didn't do anything.

They didn't meet anyone else until they reached the staircase up to the third floor. Peeves was bobbing halfway up, loosening the carpet so that people would trip.

"Who's there?" he said suddenly as they climbed toward him. He narrowed his wicked black eyes. "Know you're there, even if I can't see you. Are you ghoulie or ghostie or wee student beastie?"

He rose up in the air and floated there, squinting at them.

"Should call Filch, I should, if something's a-creeping around unseen."

Harry had a sudden idea.

"Peeves," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "the Bloody Baron has his own reasons for being invisible."

Peeves almost fell out of the air in shock. He caught himself in time and hovered about a foot off the stairs.

"So sorry, your bloodiness, Mr. Baron, Sir," he said greasily. "My mistake, my mistake -- I didn't see you -- of course I didn't, you're invisible -- forgive old Peevsie his little joke, sir."

"I have business here, Peeves," croaked Harry. "Stay away from this place tonight."

"I will, sir, I most certainly will," said Peeves, rising up in the air again. "Hope your business goes well, Baron, I'll not bother you."

And he scooted off

"Brilliant, Harry!" whispered Ron.

A few seconds later, they were there, outside the third-floor corridor -- and the door was already ajar.

"Well, there you are," Harry said quietly, "Snape's already got past Fluffy."

Seeing the open door somehow seemed to impress upon all three of them what was facing them. Underneath the cloak, Harry turned to the other two.

"If you want to go back, I won't blame you," he said. "You can take the cloak, I won't need it now."

"Don't be stupid," said Ron.

"We're coming," said Hermione.

Harry pushed the door open.

As the door creaked, low, rumbling growls met their ears. All three of the dog's noses sniffed madly in their direction, even though it couldn't see them.

"What's that at its feet?" Hermione whispered.

"Looks like a harp," said Ron. "Snape must have left it there."

"It must wake up the moment you stop playing," said Harry. "Well, here goes..."

He put Hagrid's flute to his lips and blew. It wasn't really a tune, but from the first note the beast's eyes began to droop. Harry hardly drew breath. Slowly, the dog's growls ceased -- it tottered on its paws and fell to its knees, then it slumped to the ground, fast asleep.

"Keep playing," Ron warned Harry as they slipped out of the cloak and crept toward the trapdoor. They could feel the dog's hot, smelly breath as they approached the giant heads. "I think we'll be able to pull the door open," said Ron, peering over the dog's back. "Want to go first, Hermione?"

"No, I don't!"

"All right." Ron gritted his teeth and stepped carefully over the dog's legs. He bent and pulled the ring of the trapdoor, which swung up and open.

"What can you see?" Hermione said anxiously.

"Nothing -- just black -- there's no way of climbing down, we'll just have to drop."

Harry, who was still playing the flute, waved at Ron to get his

attention and pointed at himself.

"You want to go first? Are you sure?" said Ron. "I don't know how deep this thing goes. Give the flute to Hermione so she can keep him asleep."

Harry handed the flute over. In the few seconds' silence, the dog growled and twitched, but the moment Hermione began to play, it fell back into its deep sleep.

Harry climbed over it and looked down through the trapdoor. There was no sign of the bottom.

He lowered himself through the hole until he was hanging on by his fingertips. Then he looked up at Ron and said, "If anything happens to me, don't follow. Go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, right?"

"Right," said Ron.

"See you in a minute, I hope..."

And Harry let go. Cold, damp air rushed past him as he fell down, down, down and -- FLUMP. With a funny, muffled sort of thump he landed on something soft. He sat up and felt around, his eyes not used to the gloom. It felt as though he was sitting on some sort of plant.

"It's okay!" he called up to the light the size of a postage stamp, which was the open trapdoor, "it's a soft landing, you can jump!"

Ron followed right away. He landed, sprawled next to Harry.

"What's this stuff?" were his first words.

"Dunno, some sort of plant thing. I suppose it's here to break the fall. Come on, Hermione!"

The distant music stopped. There was a loud bark from the dog, but Hermione had already jumped. She landed on Harry's other side.

"We must be miles under the school , she said.

"Lucky this plant thing's here, really," said Ron.

"Lucky!" shrieked Hermione. "Look at you both!"

She leapt up and struggled toward a damp wall. She had to struggle because the moment she had landed, the plant had started to twist snakelike tendrils around her ankles. As for Harry and Ron, their legs had already been bound tightly in long creepers without their noticing.

Hermione had managed to free herself before the plant got a firm grip on her. Now she watched in horror as the two boys fought to pull the plant off them, but the more they strained against it, the tighter and faster the plant wound around them.

"Stop moving!" Hermione ordered them. "I know what this is -- it's Devil's Snare!"

"Oh, I'm so glad we know what it's called, that's a great help," snarled Ron, leaning back, trying to stop the plant from curling around his

neck. "Shut up, I'm trying to remember how to kill it!" said Hermione.

"Well, hurry up, I can't breathe!" Harry gasped, wrestling with it as it curled around his chest.

"Devil's Snare, Devil's Snare... what did Professor Sprout say? -- it likes the dark and the damp

"So light a fire!" Harry choked.

"Yes -- of course -- but there's no wood!" Hermione cried, wringing her hands.

"HAVE YOU GONE MAD?" Ron bellowed. "ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?"

"Oh, right!" said Hermione, and she whipped out her wand, waved it, muttered something, and sent a jet of the same bluebell flames she had used on Snape at the plant. In a matter of seconds, the two boys felt it loosening its grip as it cringed away from the light and warmth. Wriggling and flailing, it unraveled itself from their bodies, and they were able to pull free.

"Lucky you pay attention in Herbology, Hermione," said Harry as he joined her by the wall, wiping sweat off his face.

"Yeah," said Ron, "and lucky Harry doesn't lose his head in a crisis -- 'there's no wood,' honestly."

"This way," said Harry, pointing down a stone passageway, which was the only way forward.

All they could hear apart from their footsteps was the gentle drip of water trickling down the walls. The passageway sloped downward, and Harry was reminded of Gringotts. With an unpleasant jolt of the heart, he remembered the dragons said to be guarding vaults in the wizards' bank. If they met a dragon, a fully-grown dragon -- Norbert had been bad enough...

"Can you hear something?" Ron whispered.

Harry listened. A soft rustling and clinking seemed to be coming from up ahead.

"Do you think it's a ghost?"

"I don't know... sounds like wings to me."

"There's light ahead -- I can see something moving."

They reached the end of the passageway and saw before them a brilliantly lit chamber, its ceiling arching high above them. It was full of small, jewel-bright birds, fluttering and tumbling all around the room. On the opposite side of the chamber was a heavy wooden door.

"Do you think they'll attack us if we cross the room?" said Ron.

"Probably," said Harry. "They don't look very vicious, but I suppose if they all swooped down at once... well, there's no other choice... I'll run."

He took a deep breath, covered his face with his arms, and sprinted across the room. He expected to feel sharp beaks and claws tearing at him any second, but nothing happened. He reached the door untouched. He pulled the handle, but it was locked.

The other two followed him. They tugged and heaved at the door, but it wouldn't budge, not even when Hermione tried her Alohomora charm.

"Now what?" said Ron.

"These birds... they can't be here just for decoration," said Hermione.

They watched the birds soaring overhead, glittering -- glittering?

"They're not birds!" Harry said suddenly. "They're keys! Winged keys -- look carefully. So that must mean..." he looked around the chamber while the other two squinted up at the flock of keys. "... yes -- look! Broomsticks! We've got to catch the key to the door!"

"But there are hundreds of them!"

Ron examined the lock on the door.

"We're looking for a big, old-fashioned one -- probably silver, like the handle."

They each seized a broomstick and kicked off into the air, soaring into the midst of the cloud of keys. They grabbed and snatched, but the bewitched keys darted and dived so quickly it was almost impossible to catch one.

Not for nothing, though, was Harry the youngest Seeker in a century. He had a knack for spotting things other people didn't. After a minute's weaving about through the whirl of rainbow feathers, he noticed a large silver key that had a bent wing, as if it had already been caught and stuffed roughly into the keyhole.

"That one!" he called to the others. "That big one -- there -- no, there -- with bright blue wings -- the feathers are all crumpled on one side."

Ron went speeding in the direction that Harry was pointing, crashed into the ceiling, and nearly fell off his broom.

"We've got to close in on it!" Harry called, not taking his eyes off the key with the damaged wing. "Ron, you come at it from above -- Hermione, stay below and stop it from going down and I'll try and catch it. Right, NOW!"

Ron dived, Hermione rocketed upward, the key dodged them both, and Harry streaked after it; it sped toward the wall, Harry leaned forward and with a nasty, crunching noise, pinned it against the stone with one hand. Ron and Hermione's cheers echoed around the high chamber.

They landed quickly, and Harry ran to the door, the key struggling in his hand. He rammed it into the lock and turned -- it worked. The moment the lock had clicked open, the key took flight again, looking very battered now that it had been caught twice.

"Ready?" Harry asked the other two, his hand on the door handle. They nodded. He pulled the door open.

The next chamber was so dark they couldn't see anything at all. But as they stepped into it, light suddenly flooded the room to reveal an astonishing sight.

They were standing on the edge of a huge chessboard, behind the black chessmen, which were all taller than they were and carved from what looked like black stone. Facing them, way across the chamber, were the white pieces. Harry, Ron and Hermione shivered slightly -- the towering white chessmen had no faces.

"Now what do we do?" Harry whispered.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" said Ron. "We've got to play our way across the room."

Behind the white pieces they could see another door.

"How?" said Hermione nervously.

"I think," said Ron, "we're going to have to be chessmen."

He walked up to a black knight and put his hand out to touch the knight's horse. At once, the stone sprang to life. The horse pawed the ground and the knight turned his helmeted head to look down at Ron.

"Do we -- er -- have to join you to get across?" The black knight nodded. Ron turned to the other two.

"This needs thinking about he said. I suppose we've got to take the place of three of the black pieces...."

Harry and Hermione stayed quiet, watching Ron think. Finally he said, "Now, don't be offended or anything, but neither of you are that good at chess --"

"We're not offended," said Harry quickly. "Just tell us what to do."

"Well, Harry, you take the place of that bishop, and Hermione, YOU 90 next to him instead of that castle."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to be a knight," said Ron.

The chessmen seemed to have been listening, because at these words a knight, a bishop, and a castle turned their backs on the white pieces and walked off the board, leaving three empty squares that Harry, Ron, and Hermione took.

"White always plays first in chess," said Ron, peering across the board.
"Yes... look..."

A white pawn had moved forward two squares.

Ron started to direct the black pieces. They moved silently wherever he sent them. Harry's knees were trembling. What if they lost?

"Harry -- move diagonally four squares to the right."

Their first real shock came when their other knight was taken. The white queen smashed him to the floor and dragged him off the board, where he lay quite still, facedown.

"Had to let that happen," said Ron, looking shaken. "Leaves you free to take that bishop, Hermione, go on."

Every time one of their men was lost, the white pieces showed no mercy. Soon there was a huddle of limp black players slumped along the wall. Twice, Ron only just noticed in time that Harry and Hermione were in danger. He himself darted around the board, taking almost as many white pieces as they had lost black ones.

"We're nearly there," he muttered suddenly. "Let me think let me think..."

The white queen turned her blank face toward him.

"Yes..." said Ron softly, "It's the only way... I've got to be taken."

"NO!" Harry and Hermione shouted.

"That's chess!" snapped Ron. "You've got to make some sacrifices! I take one step forward and she'll take me -- that leaves you free to checkmate the king, Harry!"

"But --"

"Do you want to stop Snape or not?"

"Ron --"

"Look, if you don't hurry up, he'll already have the Stone!"

There was no alternative.

"Ready?" Ron called, his face pale but determined. "Here I go - now, don't hang around once you've won."

He stepped forward, and the white queen pounced. She struck Ron hard across the head with her stone arm, and he crashed to the floor - Hermione screamed but stayed on her square - the white queen dragged Ron to one side. He looked as if he'd been knocked out.

Shaking, Harry moved three spaces to the left.

The white king took off his crown and threw it at Harry's feet. They had won. The chessmen parted and bowed, leaving the door ahead clear. With one last desperate look back at Ron, Harry and Hermione charged through the door and up the next passageway.

"What if he's --?"

"He'll be all right," said Harry, trying to convince himself. "What do you reckon's next?"

"We've had Sprout's, that was the Devil's Snare; Flitwick must've put charms on the keys; McGonagall transfigured the chessmen to make them alive; that leaves Quirrell's spell, and Snape's."

They had reached another door.

"All right?" Harry whispered.

"Go on."

Harry pushed it open.

A disgusting smell filled their nostrils, making both of them pull their robes up over their noses. Eyes watering, they saw, flat on the floor in front of them, a troll even larger than the one they had tackled, out cold with a bloody lump on its head.

"I'm glad we didn't have to fight that one," Harry whispered as they stepped carefully over one of its massive legs. "Come on, I can't breathe."

He pulled open the next door, both of them hardly daring to look at what came next - but there was nothing very frightening in here, just a table with seven differently shaped bottles standing on it in a line.

"Snape's," said Harry. "What do we have to do?"

They stepped over the threshold, and immediately a fire sprang up behind them in the doorway. It wasn't ordinary fire either; it was purple. At the same instant, black flames shot up in the doorway leading onward. They were trapped.

"Look!" Hermione seized a roll of paper lying next to the bottles. Harry looked over her shoulder to read it:

Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,

Two of us will help you, which ever you would find,

One among us seven will let you move ahead,

Another will transport the drinker back instead,

Two among our number hold only nettle wine,

Three of us are killers, waiting bidden in line.

Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,

To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:

First, however slyly the poison tries to hide

You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;

Second, different are those who stand at either end,

But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;

Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,

Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;

Fourth, the second left and the second on the right

Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.

Hermione let out a great sigh and Harry, amazed, saw that she was smiling, the very last thing he felt like doing.

"Brilliant," said Hermione. "This isn't magic -- it's logic -- a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic, they'd be stuck in here forever."

"But so will we, won't we?" "Of course not," said Hermione. "Everything we need is here on this paper. Seven bottles: three are poison; two are wine; one will get us safely through the black fire, and one will get us back through the purple."

"But how do we know which to drink?"

"Give me a minute."

Hermione read the paper several times. Then she walked up and down the line of bottles, muttering to herself and pointing at them. At last, she clapped her hands.

"Got it," she said. "The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire -- toward the Stone."

Harry looked at the tiny bottle.

"There's only enough there for one of us," he said. "That's hardly one swallow."

They looked at each other.

"Which one will get you back through the purple flames?"

Hermione pointed at a rounded bottle at the right end of the line.

"You drink that," said Harry. "No, listen, get back and get Ron. Grab brooms from the flying-key room, they'll get you out of the trapdoor and past Fluffy -- go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, we need him. I might be able to hold Snape off for a while, but I'm no match for him, really."

"But Harry -- what if You-Know-Who's with him?"

"Well -- I was lucky once, wasn't I?" said Harry, pointing at his scar. "I might get lucky again."

Hermione's lip trembled, and she suddenly dashed at Harry and threw her arms around him.

"Hermione!"

"Harry -- you're a great wizard, you know."

"I'm not as good as you," said Harry, very embarrassed, as she let go of him.

"Me!" said Hermione. "Books! And cleverness! There are more important things -- friendship and bravery and -- oh Harry -- be careful!"

"You drink first," said Harry. "You are sure which is which, aren't you?"

"Positive," said Hermione. She took a long drink from the round bottle at the end, and shuddered.

"It's not poison?" said Harry anxiously.

"No -- but it's like ice."

"Quick, go, before it wears off."

"Good luck -- take care."

"GO!"

Hermione turned and walked straight through the purple fire.

Harry took a deep breath and picked up the smallest bottle. He turned to face the black flames.

"Here I come," he said, and he drained the little bottle in one gulp.

It was indeed as though ice was flooding his body. He put the bottle down and walked forward; he braced himself, saw the black flames licking his body, but couldn't feel them -- for a moment he could see nothing but dark fire -- then he was on the other side, in the last chamber.

There was already someone there -- but it wasn't Snape. It wasn't even Voldemort.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE MAN WITH TWO FACES

It was Quirrell.

"You!" gasped Harry.

Quirrell smiled. His face wasn't twitching at all.

"Me," he said calmly. "I wondered whether I'd be meeting you here, Potter."

"But I thought -- Snape --"

"Severus?" Quirrell laughed, and it wasn't his usual quivering treble, either, but cold and sharp. "Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?"

Harry couldn't take it in. This couldn't be true, it couldn't.

"But Snape tried to kill me!"

"No, no, no. I tried to kill you. Your friend Miss Granger accidentally knocked me over as she rushed to set fire to Snape at that Quidditch match. She broke my eye contact with you. Another few seconds and I'd

have got you off that broom. I'd have managed it before then if Snape hadn't been muttering a countercurse, trying to save you."

"Snape was trying to save me?"

"Of course," said Quirrell coolly. "\Why do you think he wanted to referee your next match? He was trying to make sure I didn't do it again. Funny, really... he needn't have bothered. I couldn't do anything with Dumbledore watching. All the other teachers thought Snape was trying to stop Gryffindor from winning, he did make himself unpopular... and what a waste of time, when after all that, I'm going to kill you tonight."

Quirrell snapped his fingers. Ropes sprang out of thin air and wrapped themselves tightly around Harry.

"You're too nosy to live, Potter. Scurrying around the school on Halloween like that, for all I knew you'd seen me coming to look at what was guarding the Stone."

"You let the troll in?"

"Certainly. I have a special gift with trolls -- you must have seen what I did to the one in the chamber back there? Unfortunately, while everyone else was running around looking for it, Snape, who already suspected me, went straight to the third floor to head me off -- and not only did my troll fail to beat you to death, that three-headed dog didn't even manage to bite Snape's leg off properly.

"Now, wait quietly, Potter. I need to examine this interesting mirror.

It was only then that Harry realized what was standing behind Quirrell. It was the Mirror of Erised.

"This mirror is the key to finding the Stone," Quirrell murmured, tapping his way around the frame. "Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this... but he's in London... I'll be far away by the time he gets back...."

All Harry could think of doing was to keep Quirrell talking and stop him from concentrating on the mirror.

"I saw you and Snape in the forest --" he blurted out.

"Yes," said Quirrell idly, walking around the mirror to look at the back. "He was on to me by that time, trying to find out how far I'd got. He suspected me all along. Tried to frighten me - as though he could, when I had Lord Voldemort on my side...."

Quirrell came back out from behind the mirror and stared hungrily into it.

"I see the Stone... I'm presenting it to my master... but where is it?"

Harry struggled against the ropes binding him, but they didn't give. He had to keep Quirrell from giving his whole attention to the mirror.

"But Snape always seemed to hate me so much."

"Oh, he does," said Quirrell casually, "heavens, yes. He was at Hogwarts

with your father, didn't you know? They loathed each other. But he never wanted you dead."

"But I heard you a few days ago, sobbing -- I thought Snape was threatening you...."

For the first time, a spasm of fear flitted across Quirrell's face.

"Sometimes," he said, "I find it hard to follow my master's instructions -- he is a great wizard and I am weak --"

"You mean he was there in the classroom with you?" Harry gasped.

"He is with me wherever I go," said Quirrell quietly. "I met him when I traveled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it.... Since then, I have served him faithfully, although I have let him down many times. He has had to be very hard on me."

Quirrell shivered suddenly. "He does not forgive mistakes easily. When I failed to steal the stone from Gringotts, he was most displeased. He punished me... decided he would have to keep a closer watch on me...."

Quirrell's voice trailed away. Harry was remembering his trip to Diagon Alley -how could he have been so stupid? He'd seen Quirrell there that very day, shaken hands with him in the Leaky Cauldron.

Quirrell cursed under his breath.

"I don't understand... is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?"

Harry's mind was racing.

What I want more than anything else in the world at the moment, he thought, is to find the Stone before Quirrell does. So if I look in the mirror, I should see myself finding it -- which means I'll see where it's hidden! But how can I look without Quirrell realizing what I'm up to?

He tried to edge to the left, to get in front of the glass without Quirrell noticing, but the ropes around his ankles were too tight: he tripped and fell over. Quirrell ignored him. He was still talking to himself. "What does this mirror do? How does it work? Help me, Master!"

And to Harry's horror, a voice answered, and the voice seemed to come from Quirrell himself

"Use the boy... Use the boy..."

Quirrell rounded on Harry.

"Yes -- Potter -- come here."

He clapped his hands once, and the ropes binding Harry fell off. Harry got slowly to his feet.

"Come here," Quirrell repeated. "Look in the mirror and tell me what you see."

Harry walked toward him.

I must lie, he thought desperately. I must look and lie about what I see, that's all.

Quirrell moved close behind him. Harry breathed in the funny smell that seemed to come from Quirrell's turban. He closed his eyes, stepped in front of the mirror, and opened them again.

He saw his reflection, pale and scared-looking at first. But a moment later, the reflection smiled at him. It put its hand into its pocket and pulled out a blood-red stone. It winked and put the Stone back in its pocket -- and as it did so, Harry felt something heavy drop into his real pocket. Somehow -- incredibly -- he'd gotten the Stone.

"Well?" said Quirrell impatiently. "What do you see?"

Harry screwed up his courage.

"I see myself shaking hands with Dumbledore," he invented. "I -- I've won the house cup for Gryffindor."

Quirrell cursed again.

"Get out of the way," he said. As Harry moved aside, he felt the Sorcerer's Stone against his leg. Dare he make a break for it?

But he hadn't walked five paces before a high voice spoke, though Quirrell wasn't moving his lips.

"He lies... He lies..."

"Potter, come back here!" Quirrell shouted. "Tell me the truth! What did you just see?"

The high voice spoke again.

"Let me speak to him... face-to-face..."

"Master, you are not strong enough!"

"I have strength enough... for this...."

Harry felt as if Devil's Snare was rooting him to the spot. He couldn't move a muscle. Petrified, he watched as Quirrell reached up and began to unwrap his turban. What was going on? The turban fell away. Quirrell's head looked strangely small without it. Then he turned slowly on the spot.

Harry would have screamed, but he couldn't make a sound. Where there should have been a back to Quirrell's head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake.

"Harry Potter..." it whispered.

Harry tried to take a step backward but his legs wouldn't move.

"See what I have become?" the face said. "Mere shadow and vapor ... I have form only when I can share another's body... but there have always

been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds.... Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks... you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the forest... and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own.... Now... why don't you give me that Stone in your pocket?"

So he knew. The feeling suddenly surged back into Harry's legs. He stumbled backward.

"Don't be a fool," snarled the face. "Better save your own life and join me... or you'll meet the same end as your parents.... They died begging me for mercy..."

"LIAR!" Harry shouted suddenly.

Quirrell was walking backward at him, so that Voldemort could still see him. The evil face was now smiling.

"How touching..." it hissed. "I always value bravery... Yes, boy, your parents were brave.... I killed your father first; and he put up a courageous fight... but your mother needn't have died... she was trying to protect you.... Now give me the Stone, unless you want her to have died in vain."

"NEVER!"

Harry sprang toward the flame door, but Voldemort screamed "SEIZE HIM!" and the next second, Harry felt Quirrell's hand close on his wrist. At once, a needle-sharp pain seared across Harry's scar; his head felt as though it was about to split in two; he yelled, struggling with all his might, and to his surprise, Quirrell let go of him. The pain in his head lessened -- he looked around wildly to see where Quirrell had gone, and saw him hunched in pain, looking at his fingers -- they were blistering before his eyes.

"Seize him! SEIZE HIM!" shrieked Voldemort again, and Quirrell lunged, knocking Harry clean off his feet' landing on top of him, both hands around Harry's neck -- Harry's scar was almost blinding him with pain, yet he could see Quirrell howling in agony.

"Master, I cannot hold him -- my hands -- my hands!"

And Quirrell, though pinning Harry to the ground with his knees, let go of his neck and stared, bewildered, at his own palms -- Harry could see they looked burned, raw, red, and shiny.

"Then kill him, fool, and be done!" screeched Voldemort.

Quirrell raised his hand to perform a deadly curse, but Harry, by instinct, reached up and grabbed Quirrell's face --

"AAAARGH!"

Quirrell rolled off him, his face blistering, too, and then Harry knew: Quirrell couldn't touch his bare skin, not without suffering terrible pain -- his only chance was to keep hold of Quirrell, keep him in enough pain to stop him from doing a curse.

Harry jumped to his feet, caught Quirrell by the arm, and hung on as tight as he could. Quirrell screamed and tried to throw Harry off -- the

pain in Harry's head was building -- he couldn't see -- he could only hear Quirrell's terrible shrieks and Voldemort's yells of, "KILL HIM! KILL HIM!" and other voices, maybe in Harry's own head, crying, "Harry! Harry!"

He felt Quirrell's arm wrenched from his grasp, knew all was lost, and fell into blackness, down ... down... down...

Something gold was glinting just above him. The Snitch! He tried to catch it, but his arms were too heavy.

He blinked. It wasn't the Snitch at all. It was a pair of glasses. How strange.

He blinked again. The smiling face of Albus Dumbledore swam into view above him.

"Good afternoon, Harry," said Dumbledore. Harry stared at him. Then he remembered: "Sir! The Stone! It was Quirrell! He's got the Stone! Sir, quick --"

"Calm yourself, dear boy, you are a little behind the times," said Dumbledore. "Quirrell does not have the Stone."

"Then who does? Sir, I --"

"Harry, please relax, or Madam Pomfrey will have me thrown out.

Harry swallowed and looked around him. He realized he must be in the hospital wing. He was lying in a bed with white linen sheets, and next to him was a table piled high with what looked like half the candy shop.

"Tokens from your friends and admirers," said Dumbledore, beaming. "What happened down in the dungeons between you and Professor Quirrell is a complete secret, so, naturally, the whole school knows. I believe your friends Fred and George Weasley were responsible for trying to send you a toilet seat. No doubt they thought it would amuse you. Madam Pomfrey, however, felt it might not be very hygienic, and confiscated it."

"How long have I been in here?"

"Three days. Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Granger will be most relieved you have come round, they have been extremely worried."

"But sit, the Stone

I see you are not to be distracted. Very well, the Stone. Professor Quirrell did not manage to take it from you. I arrived in time to prevent that, although you were doing very well on your own, I must say.

"You got there? You got Hermione's owl?"

"We must have crossed in midair. No sooner had I reached London than it became clear to me that the place I should be was the one I had just left. I arrived just in time to pull Quirrell off you."

"It was you."

"I feared I might be too late."

"You nearly were, I couldn't have kept him off the Stone much longer --"

"Not the Stone, boy, you -- the effort involved nearly killed you. For one terrible moment there, I was afraid it had. As for the Stone, it has been destroyed."

"Destroyed?" said Harry blankly. "But your friend -- Nicolas Flamel --"

"Oh, you know about Nicolas?" said Dumbledore, sounding quite delighted. "You did do the thing properly, didn't you? Well, Nicolas and I have had a little chat, and agreed it's all for the best."

"But that means he and his wife will die, won't they?"

"They have enough Elixir stored to set their affairs in order and then, yes, they will die."

Dumbledore smiled at the look of amazement on Harry's face.

"To one as young as you, I'm sure it seems incredible, but to Nicolas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. You know, the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all -- the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them." Harry lay there, lost for words. Dumbledore hummed a little and smiled at the ceiling.

"Sir?" said Harry. "I've been thinking... sir -- even if the Stone's gone, Vol-, I mean, You-Know- Who --"

"Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."

"Yes, sir. Well, Voldemort's going to try other ways of coming back, isn't he? I mean, he hasn't gone, has he?"

"No, Harry, he has not. He is still out there somewhere, perhaps looking for another body to share... not being truly alive, he cannot be killed. He left Quirrell to die; he shows just as little mercy to his followers as his enemies. Nevertheless, Harry, while you may only have delayed his return to power, it will merely take someone else who is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle next time -- and if he is delayed again, and again, why, he may never return to power."

Harry nodded, but stopped quickly, because it made his head hurt. Then he said, "Sir, there are some other things I'd like to know, if you can tell me... things I want to know the truth about...."

"The truth." Dumbledore sighed. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution. However, I shall answer your questions unless I have a very good reason not to, in which case I beg you'll forgive me. I shall not, of course, lie."

"Well... Voldemort said that he only killed my mother because she tried to stop him from killing me. But why would he want to kill me in the first place?"

Dumbledore sighed very deeply this time.

"Alas, the first thing you ask me, I cannot tell you. Not today. Not now. You will know, one day... put it from your mind for now, Harry. When you are older... I know you hate to hear this... when you are ready, you will know."

And Harry knew it would be no good to argue.

"But why couldn't Quirrell touch me?"

"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good."

Dumbledore now became very interested in a bird out on the windowsill, which gave Harry time to dry his eyes on the sheet. When he had found his voice again, Harry said, "And the invisibility cloak - do you know who sent it to me?"

"Ah - your father happened to leave it in my possession, and I thought you might like it." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Useful things... your father used it mainly for sneaking off to the kitchens to steal food when he was here."

"And there's something else..."

"Fire away."

"Quirrell said Snape --"

"Professor Snape, Harry." "Yes, him -- Quirrell said he hates me because he hated my father. Is that true?"

"Well, they did rather detest each other. Not unlike yourself and Mr. Malfoy. And then, your father did something Snape could never forgive."

"What?"

"He saved his life."

"What?"

"Yes..." said Dumbledore dreamily. "Funny, the way people's minds work, isn't it? Professor Snape couldn't bear being in your father's debt.... I do believe he worked so hard to protect you this year because he felt that would make him and your father even. Then he could go back to hating your father's memory in peace...."

Harry tried to understand this but it made his head pound, so he stopped.

"And sir, there's one more thing..."

"Just the one?"

"How did I get the Stone out of the mirror?"

"Ah, now, I'm glad you asked me that. It was one of my more brilliant ideas, and between you and me, that's saying something. You see, only one who wanted to find the Stone -- find it, but not use it -- would be able to get it, otherwise they'd just see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life. My brain surprises even me sometimes.... Now, enough questions. I suggest you make a start on these sweets. Ah! Bettie Bott's Every Flavor Beans! I was unfortunate enough in my youth to come across a vomitflavored one, and since then I'm afraid I've rather lost my liking for them -- but I think I'll be safe with a nice toffee, don't you?"

He smiled and popped the golden-brown bean into his mouth. Then he choked and said, "Alas! Ear wax!"

Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, was a nice woman, but very strict.

"Just five minutes," Harry pleaded.

"Absolutely not."

"You let Professor Dumbledore in..."

"Well, of course, that was the headmaster, quite different. You need rest."

"I am resting, look, lying down and everything. Oh, go on, Madam Pomfrey..."

"Oh, very well," she said. "But five minutes only."

And she let Ron and Hermione in.

"Harry!"

Hermione looked ready to fling her arms around him again, but Harry was glad she held herself in as his head was still very sore.

"Oh, Harry, we were sure you were going to -- Dumbledore was so worried --"

"The whole school's talking about it," said Ron. "What really happened?"

It was one of those rare occasions when the true story is even more strange and exciting than the wild rumors. Harry told them everything: Quirrell; the mirror; the Stone; and Voldemort. Ron and Hermione were a very good audience; they gasped in all the right places, and when Harry told them what was under Quirrell's turban, Hermione screamed out loud.

"So the Stone's gone?" said Ron finally. "Flamel's just going to die?"

"That's what I said, but Dumbledore thinks that -- what was it? -- 'to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure.'

"I always said he was off his rocker," said Ron, looking quite impressed at how crazy his hero was.

"So what happened to you two?" said Harry.

"Well, I got back all right," said Hermione. "I brought Ron round -- that took a while -- and we were dashing up to the owlery to contact Dumbledore when we met him in the entrance hall -- he already knew -- he just said, 'Harry's gone after him, hasn't he?' and hurtled off to the third floor."

"D'you think he meant you to do it?" said Ron. "Sending you your father's cloak and everything?"

"Well, " Hermione exploded, "if he did -- I mean to say that's terrible -- you could have been killed."

"No, it isn't," said Harry thoughtfully. "He's a funny man, Dumbledore. I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance. I think he knows more or less everything that goes on here, you know. I reckon he had a pretty good idea we were going to try, and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help. I don't think it was an accident he let me find out how the mirror worked. It's almost like he thought I had the right to face Voldemort if I could...."

"Yeah, Dumbledore's off his rocker, all right," said Ron proudly. "Listen, you've got to be up for the end-of-year feast tomorrow. The points are all in and Slytherin won, of course -- you missed the last Quidditch match, we were steamrollered by Ravenclaw without you -- but the food'll be good."

At that moment, Madam Pomfrey bustled over.

"You've had nearly fifteen minutes, now OUT" she said firmly.

After a good night's sleep, Harry felt nearly back to normal.

I want to go to the feast," he told Madam Pomfrey as she straightened his many candy boxes. I can, can't I?"

"Professor Dumbledore says you are to be allowed to go," she said stiffly, as though in her opinion Professor Dumbledore didn't realize how risky feasts could be. "And you have another visitor."

"Oh, good," said Harry. "Who is it?"

Hagrid sidled through the door as he spoke. As usual when he was indoors, Hagrid looked too big to be allowed. He sat down next to Harry, took one look at him, and burst into tears.

"It's -- all -- my -- ruddy -- fault!" he sobbed, his face in his hands. I told the evil git how ter get past Fluffy! I told him! It was the only thing he didn't know, an' I told him! Yeh could've died! All fer a dragon egg! I'll never drink again! I should be chucked out an' made ter live as a Muggle!"

"Hagrid!" said Harry, shocked to see Hagrid shaking with grief and remorse, great tears leaking down into his beard. "Hagrid, he'd have found out somehow, this is Voldemort we're talking about, he'd have found out even if you hadn't told him."

"Yeh could've died!" sobbed Hagrid. "An' don' say the name!"

"VOLDEMORT!" Harry bellowed, and Hagrid was so shocked, he stopped

crying. "I've met him and I'm calling him by his name. Please cheer up, Hagrid, we saved the Stone, it's gone, he can't use it. Have a Chocolate Frog, I've got loads...."

Hagrid wiped his nose on the back of his hand and said, "That reminds me. I've got yeh a present."

"It's not a stoat sandwich, is it?" said Harry anxiously, and at last Hagrid gave a weak chuckle. "Nah. Dumbledore gave me the day off yesterday ter fix it. 'Course, he shoulda sacked me instead -- anyway, got yeh this..."

It seemed to be a handsome, leather-covered book. Harry opened it curiously. It was full of wizard photographs. Smiling and waving at him from every page were his mother and father.

"Sent owls off ter all yer parents' old school friends, askin' fer photos... knew yeh didn't have any... d'ye like it?"

Harry couldn't speak, but Hagrid understood.

Harry made his way down to the end-of-year feast alone that night. He had been held up by Madam Pomfrey's fussing about, insisting on giving him one last checkup, so the Great Hall was already full. It was decked out in the Slytherin colors of green and silver to celebrate Slytherin's winning the house cup for the seventh year in a row. A huge banner showing the Slytherin serpent covered the wall behind the High Table.

When Harry walked in there was a sudden hush, and then everybody started talking loudly at once. He slipped into a seat between Ron and Hermione at the Gryffindor table and tried to ignore the fact that people were standing up to look at him.

Fortunately, Dumbledore arrived moments later. The babble died away.

"Another year gone!" Dumbledore said cheerfully. "And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are all a little fuller than they were... you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts....

"Now, as I understand it, the house cup here needs awarding, and the points stand thus: In fourth place, Gryffindor, with three hundred and twelve points; in third, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two; Ravenclaw has four hundred and twenty-six and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy- two."

A storm of cheering and stamping broke out from the Slytherin table. Harry could see Draco Malfoy banging his goblet on the table. It was a sickening sight.

"Yes, Yes, well done, Slytherin," said Dumbledore. "However, recent events must be taken into account."

The room went very still. The Slytherins' smiles faded a little.

"Ahem," said Dumbledore. "I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes..."

"First -- to Mr. Ronald Weasley..."

Ron went purple in the face; he looked like a radish with a bad sunburn.

"...for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Gryffindor cheers nearly raised the bewitched ceiling; the stars overhead seemed to quiver. Percy could be heard telling the other prefects, "My brother, you know! My youngest brother! Got past McGonagall's giant chess set!"

At last there was silence again.

"Second -- to Miss Hermione Granger... for the use of cool logic in the face of fire, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Hermione buried her face in her arms; Harry strongly suspected she had burst into tears. Gryffindors up and down the table were beside themselves -- they were a hundred points up. "Third -- to Mr. Harry Potter..." said Dumbledore. The room went deadly quiet for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house sixty points."

The din was deafening. Those who could add up while yelling themselves hoarse knew that Gryffindor now had four hundred and seventy-two points -- exactly the same as Slytherin. They had tied for the house cup -- if only Dumbledore had given Harry just one more point.

Dumbledore raised his hand. The room gradually fell silent.

"There are all kinds of courage," said Dumbledore, smiling. "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom."

Someone standing outside the Great Hall might well have thought some sort of explosion had taken place, so loud was the noise that erupted from the Gryffindor table. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood up to yell and cheer as Neville, white with shock, disappeared under a pile of people hugging him. He had never won so much as a point for Gryffindor before. Harry, still cheering, nudged Ron in the ribs and pointed at Malfoy, who couldn't have looked more stunned and horrified if he'd just had the Body-Bind Curse put on him.

"Which means, Dumbledore called over the storm of applause, for even Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were celebrating the downfall of Slytherin, "we need a little change of decoration."

He clapped his hands. In an instant, the green hangings became scarlet and the silver became gold; the huge Slytherin serpent vanished and a towering Gryffindor lion took its place. Snape was shaking Professor McGonagall's hand, with a horrible, forced smile. He caught Harry's eye and Harry knew at once that Snape's feelings toward him hadn't changed one jot. This didn't worry Harry. It seemed as though life would be back to normal next year, or as normal as it ever was at Hogwarts.

It was the best evening of Harry's life, better than winning at Quidditch, or Christmas, or knocking out mountain trolls... he would never, ever forget tonight.

Harry had almost forgotten that the exam results were still to come, but

come they did. To their great surprise, both he and Ron passed with good marks; Hermione, of course, had the best grades of the first years. Even Neville scraped through, his good Herbology mark making up for his abysmal Potions one. They had hoped that Goyle, who was almost as stupid as he was mean, might be thrown out, but he had passed, too. It was a shame, but as Ron said, you couldn't have everything in life.

And suddenly, their wardrobes were empty, their trunks were packed, Neville's toad was found lurking in a corner of the toilets; notes were handed out to all students, warning them not to use magic over the holidays ("I always hope they'll forget to give us these," said Fred Weasley sadly); Hagrid was there to take them down to the fleet of boats that sailed across the lake; they were boarding the Hogwarts Express; talking and laughing as the countryside became greener and tidier; eating Bettie Bott's Every Flavor Beans as they sped past Muggle towns; pulling off their wizard robes and putting on jackets and coats; pulling into platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross Station.

It took quite a while for them all to get off the platform. A wizened old guard was up by the ticket barrier, letting them go through the gate in twos and threes so they didn't attract attention by all bursting out of a solid wall at once and alarming the Muggles.

"You must come and stay this summer," said Ron, "both of you -- I'll send you an owl."

"Thanks," said Harry, "I'll need something to look forward to." People jostled them as they moved forward toward the gateway back to the Muggle world. Some of them called:

"Bye, Harry!"

"See you, Potter!"

"Still famous," said Ron, grinning at him.

"Not where I'm going, I promise you," said Harry.

He, Ron, and Hermione passed through the gateway together. "There he is, Mom, there he is, look!"

It was Ginny Weasley, Ron's younger sister, but she wasn't pointing at Ron.

"Harry Potter!" she squealed. "Look, Mom! I can see

"Be quiet, Ginny, and it's rude to point."

Mrs. Weasley smiled down at them.

"Busy year?" she said.

"Very," said Harry. "Thanks for the fudge and the sweater, Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, it was nothing, dear."

"Ready, are you?"

It was Uncle Vernon, still purple-faced, still mustached, still looking

furious at the nerve of Harry, carrying an owl in a cage in a station full of ordinary people. Behind him stood Aunt Petunia and Dudley, looking terrified at the very sight of Harry.

"You must be Harry's family!" said Mrs. Weasley.

"In a manner of speaking," said Uncle Vernon. "Hurry up, boy, we haven't got all day." He walked away.

Harry hung back for a last word with Ron and Hermione.

"See you over the summer, then."

"Hope you have -- er -- a good holiday," said Hermione, looking uncertainly after Uncle Vernon, shocked that anyone could be so unpleasant.

"Oh, I will," said Harry, and they were surprised at the grin that was spreading over his face. "They don't know we're not allowed to use magic at home. I'm going to have a lot of fun with Dudley this summer...."

THE END

HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS
by J. K. Rowling

(this is BOOK 2 in the Harry Potter series)

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THE WORST BIRTHDAY

Not for the first time, an argument had broken out over breakfast at number four, Privet Drive. Mr. Vernon Dursley had been woken in the early hours of the morning by a loud, hooting noise from his nephew Harry's room.

"Third time this week!" he roared across the table. "If you can't control that owl, it'll have to go!"

Harry tried, yet again, to explain.

"She's bored," he said. "She's used to flying around outside. If I could just let her out at night -"

"Do I look stupid?" snarled Uncle Vernon, a bit of fried egg dangling from his bushy mustache. "I know what'll happen if that owl's let out."

He exchanged dark looks with his wife, Petunia.

Harry tried to argue back but his words were drowned by a long, loud belch from the Dursleys' son, Dudley.

1

"I want more bacon."

"There's more in the frying pan, sweetums," said Aunt Petunia, turning misty eyes on her massive son. "We must build you up while we've got the chance I don't like the sound of that school food

"Nonsense, Petunia, I never went hungry when I was at Smeltings," said Uncle Vernon heartily. "Dudley gets enough, don't you, son?"

Dudley, who was so large his bottom drooped over either side of the kitchen chair, grinned and turned to Harry.

"Pass the frying pan."

"You've forgotten the magic word," said Harry irritably.

The effect of this simple sentence on the rest of the family was incredible: Dudley gasped and fell off his chair with a crash that

shook the whole kitchen; Mrs. Dursley gave a small scream and clapped her hands to her mouth; Mr. Dursley jumped to his feet, veins throbbing in his temples.

"I meant 'please'!" said Harry quickly. "I didn't mean -"

"WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU," thundered his uncle, spraying spit over the table, "ABOUT SAYING THE 'M' WORD IN OUR HOUSE?"

"But I -"

"HOW DARE YOU THREATEN DUDLEY!" roared Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his fist.

"I just -"

"I WARNED YOU! I WILL NOT TOLERATE MENTION OF YOUR ABNORMALITY UNDER THIS ROOF!"

Harry stared from his purple-faced uncle to his pale aunt, who was trying to heave Dudley to his feet.

"All right," said Harry, "all right. . . "

Uncle Vernon sat back down, breathing like a winded rhinoceros and watching Harry closely out of the corners of his small, sharp eyes.

Ever since Harry had come home for the summer holidays, Uncle Vernon had been treating him like a bomb that might go off at any moment, because Harry Potter wasn't a normal boy. As a matter of fact, he was as not normal as it is possible to be.

Harry Potter was a wizard - a wizard fresh from his first year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And if the Dursleys were unhappy to have him back for the holidays, it was nothing to how Harry felt.

He missed Hogwarts so much it was like having a constant stomachache. He missed the castle, with its secret passageways and ghosts, his classes (though perhaps not Snape, the Potions master), the mail arriving by owl, eating banquets in the Great Hall, sleeping in his four-poster bed in the tower dormitory, visiting the gamekeeper, Hagrid, in his cabin next to the Forbidden Forest in the grounds, and, especially, Quidditch, the most popular sport in the wizarding world (six tall goal posts, four flying balls, and fourteen players on broomsticks).

All Harry's spellbooks, his wand, robes, cauldron, and top-of-the-line Nimbus Two Thousand broomstick had been locked in a cupboard under the stairs by Uncle Vernon the instant Harry had come home. What did the Dursleys care if Harry lost his place on the House Quidditch team because he hadn't practiced all summer? What was it to the Dursleys if Harry went back to school without any of his homework done? The Dursleys were what wizards called Muggles (not a drop of magical blood in their veins),

and as far as they were concerned, having a wizard in the family was a matter of deepest shame. Uncle Vernon had even padlocked Harry's owl, Hedwig, inside her cage, to stop her from carrying

messages to anyone in the wizarding world.

Harry looked nothing like the rest of the family. Uncle Vernon was large and neckless, with an enormous black mustache; Aunt Petunia was horse-faced and bony; Dudley was blond, pink, and porky. Harry, on the other hand, was small and skinny, with brilliant green eyes and jet-black hair that was always untidy. He wore round glasses, and on his forehead was a thin, lightning-shaped scar.

It was this scar that made Harry so particularly unusual, even for a wizard. This scar was the only hint of Harry's very mysterious past, of the reason he had been left on the Dursleys' doorstep eleven years before.

At the age of one year old, Harry had somehow survived a curse from the greatest Dark sorcerer of all time, Lord Voldemort, whose name most witches and wizards still feared to speak. Harry's parents had died in Voldemort's attack, but Harry had escaped with his lightning scar, and somehow - nobody understood why Voldemort's powers had been destroyed the instant he had failed to kill Harry.

So Harry had been brought up by his dead mother's sister and her husband. He had spent ten years with the Dursleys, never understanding why he kept making odd things happen without meaning to, believing the Dursleys' story that he had got his scar in the car crash that had killed his parents.

And then, exactly a year ago, Hogwarts had written to Harry, and the whole story had come out. Harry had taken up his place at wizard school, where he and his scar were famous ... but now the school year was over, and he was back with the Dursleys for the summer, back to being treated like a dog that had rolled in something smelly.

The Dursleys hadn't even remembered that today happened to be Harry's twelfth birthday. Of course, his hopes hadn't been high; they'd never given him a real present, let alone a cake - but to ignore it completely ...

At that moment, Uncle Vernon cleared his throat importantly and said, "Now, as we all know, today is a very important day."

Harry looked up, hardly daring to believe it.

"This could well be the day I make the biggest deal of my career, " said Uncle Vernon.

Harry went back to his toast. Of course, he thought bitterly, Uncle Vernon was talking about the stupid dinner party. He'd been talking of nothing else for two weeks. Some rich builder and his wife were coming to dinner and Uncle Vernon was hoping to get a huge order from him (Uncle Vernon's company made drills).

"I think we should run through the schedule one more time," said Uncle Vernon. "We should all be in position at eight o'clock. Petunia, you will be -?"

"In the lounge," said Aunt Petunia promptly, "waiting to welcome them graciously to our home."

"Good, good. And Dudley?"

"I'll be waiting to open the door." Dudley put on a foul, simpering smile. "May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

"They'll love him!" cried Aunt Petunia rapturously.

"Excellent, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon. Then he rounded on Harry. "And you?"

"I'll be in my bedroom, making no noise and pretending I'm not there," said Harry tonelessly.

"Exactly," said Uncle Vernon nastily. "I will lead them into the lounge, introduce you, Petunia, and pour them -drinks. At eight-fifteen -"

"I'll announce dinner," said Aunt Petunia.

"And, Dudley, you'll say -"

"May I take you through to the dining room, Mrs. Mason?" said Dudley, offering his fat arm to an invisible woman.

"My perfect little gentleman!" sniffed Aunt Petunia.

"And you?" said Uncle Vernon viciously to Harry.

"I'll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I'm not there," said Harry dully.

"Precisely. Now, we should aim to get in a few good compliments at dinner. Petunia, any ideas?"

"Vernon tells me you're a wonderful golfer, Mr. Mason.... Do tell me where you bought your dress, Mrs. Mason

"Perfect. . . Dudley?"

"How about - 'We had to write an essay about our hero at school, Mr. Mason, and I wrote about you.'"

This was too much for both Aunt Petunia and Harry. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and hugged her son, while Harry ducked under the table so they wouldn't see him laughing.

"And you, boy?"

Harry fought to keep his face straight as he emerged.

"I'll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I'm not there," he said.

"Too right, you will," said Uncle Vernon forcefully. "The Ma sons don't know anything about you and it's going to stay that way. When dinner's over, you take Mrs. Mason back to the lounge for coffee, Petunia, and I'll bring the subject around to drills. With any luck, I'll have the deal signed and sealed before the news at ten. be shopping for a vacation home in Majorca this time to

morrow.

Harry couldn't feel too excited about this. He didn't think the Dursleys would like him any better in Majorca than they did on Privet Drive.

"Right - I'm off into town to pick up the dinner jackets for Dudley and me. And you," he snarled at Harry. "You stay out of your aunt's way while she's cleaning."

Harry left through the back door. It was a brilliant, sunny day. He crossed the lawn, slumped down on the garden bench, and sang under his breath:

"Happy birthday to me ... happy birthday to me. . .

No cards, no presents, and he would be spending the evening pretending not to exist. He gazed miserably into the hedge. He had never felt so lonely. More than anything else at Hogwarts, more even than playing Quidditch, Harry missed his best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. They, however, didn't seem to be missing him at all. Neither of them had written to him all summer, even though Ron had said he was going to ask Harry to come and stay.

Countless times, Harry had been on the point of unlocking Hedwig's cage by magic and sending her to Ron and Hermione with a letter, but it wasn't worth the risk. Underage wizards weren't allowed to use magic outside of school. Harry hadn't told the

Dursleys this; he knew it was only their terror that he might turn them all into dung beetles that stopped them from locking him in the cupboard under the stairs with his wand and broomstick. For the first couple of weeks back, Harry had enjoyed muttering nonsense words under his breath and watching Dudley tearing out of the room as fast as his fat legs would carry him. But the long silence from Ron and Hermione had made Harry feel so cut off from the magical world that even taunting Dudley had lost its appeal - and now Ron and Hermione had forgotten his birthday.

What wouldn't he give now for a message from Hogwarts? From any witch or wizard? He'd almost be glad of a sight of his archenemy, Draco Malfoy, just to be sure it hadn't all been a dream

Not that his whole year at Hogwarts had been fun. At the very end of last term, Harry had come face-to-face with none other than Lord Voldemort himself. Voldemort might be a ruin of his former self, but he was still terrifying, still cunning, still determined to regain power. Harry had slipped through Voldemort's clutches for a second time, but it had been a narrow escape, and even now, weeks later, Harry kept waking in the night, drenched in cold sweat, wondering where Voldemort was now, remembering his livid face, his wide, mad eyes

Harry suddenly sat bolt upright on the garden bench. He had been staring absent-mindedly into the hedge - and the hedge was staring back. Two enormous green eyes had appeared among the leaves.

Harry jumped to his feet just as a jeering voice floated across the lawn.

"I know what day it is," sang Dudley, waddling toward him.

The huge eyes blinked and vanished.

"What?" said Harry, not taking his eyes off the spot where they had been.

"I know what day it is," Dudley repeated, coming right up to him.

"Well done," said Harry. "So you've finally learned the days of the week."

"Today's your birthday," sneered Dudley. "How come you haven't got any cards? Haven't you even got friends at that freak place?"

"Better not let your mum hear you talking about my school," said Harry coolly.

Dudley hitched up his trousers, which were slipping down his fat bottom.

"Why're you staring at the hedge?" he said suspiciously.

"I'm trying to decide what would be the best spell to set it on fire," said Harry.

Dudley stumbled backward at once, a look of panic on his fat face.

"You c-can't - Dad told you you're not to do m-magic - he said he'll chuck you out of the house - and you haven't got anywhere else to go - you haven't got any friends to take you -"

"Jiggery pokery!" said Harry in a fierce voice. "Hocus pocus squiggly wiggly -"

"MUUUUUUUM!" howled Dudley, tripping over his feet as he dashed back toward the house. "MUUUUM! He's doing you know what!"

Harry paid dearly for his moment of fun. As neither Dudley nor

the hedge was in any way hurt, Aunt Petunia knew he hadn't really done magic, but he still had to duck as she aimed a heavy blow at his head with the soapy frying pan. Then she gave him work to do, with the promise he wouldn't eat again until he'd finished.

While Dudley lolled around watching and eating ice cream, Harry cleaned the windows, washed the car, mowed the lawn, trimmed the flowerbeds, pruned and watered the roses, and repainted the garden bench. The sun blazed overhead, burning the back of his neck. Harry knew he shouldn't have risen to Dudley's bait, but Dudley had said the very thing Harry had been thinking himself... maybe he didn't have any friends at Hogwarts

Wish they could see famous Harry Potter now, he thought savagely as he spread manure on the flower beds, his back aching, sweat running down his face.

It was half past seven, in the evening when at last, exhausted, he heard Aunt Petunia calling him.

"Get in here! And walk on the newspaper!"

Harry moved gladly into the shade of the gleaming kitchen. On top of the fridge stood tonight's pudding: a huge mound of whipped cream and sugared violets. A loin of roast pork was sizzling in the oven.

"Eat quickly! The Masons will be here soon!" snapped Aunt Petunia, pointing to two slices of bread and a lump of cheese on the kitchen table. She was already wearing a salmon-pink cocktail dress.

Harry washed his hands and bolted down his pitiful supper. The moment he had finished, Aunt Petunia whisked away his plate.

"Upstairs! Hurry!"

As he passed the door to the living room, Harry caught a glimpse of Uncle Vernon and Dudley in bow ties and dinner jackets. He had only just reached the upstairs landing when the door bell rang and Uncle Vernon's furious face appeared at the foot of the stairs.

"Remember, boy - one sound -"

Harry crossed to his bedroom on tiptoe slipped inside, closed the door, and turned to collapse on his bed.

The trouble was, there was already someone sitting on it.

C H-H A P T E RR T W O

I

DOBBY'S WARNING

arry managed not to shout out, but it was a close thing. The little creature on the bed had large, bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls. Harry knew instantly that this was what had been watching him out of the garden hedge that morning.

As they stared at each other, Harry heard Dudley's voice from the hall.

"May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

The creature slipped off the bed and bowed so low that the end of its long, thin nose touched the carpet. Harry noticed that it was wearing what looked like an old pillowcase, with rips for arm- and leg-holes.

"Er - hello," said Harry nervously.

"Harry Potter!" said the creature in a high-pitched voice Harry was sure would carry down the stairs. "So long has Dobby wanted to meet you, sir ... Such an honor it is"

"Th-thank you," said Harry, edging along the wall and sinking into his desk chair, next to Hedwig, who was asleep in her large cage. He wanted to ask, "What are you?" but thought it would sound too rude, so instead he said, "Who are you?"

"Dobby, sir. Just Dobby. Dobby the house-elf," said the creature.

"Oh - really?" said Harry. "Er - I don't want to be rude or anything, but - this isn't a great time for me to have a house-elf in my bedroom."

Aunt Petunias high, false laugh sounded from the living room. The elf hung his head.

"Not that I'm not pleased to meet you," said Harry quickly, "but, er,

is there any particular reason you're here?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said Dobby earnestly. "Dobby has come to tell you, sir ... it is difficult, sir ... Dobby wonders where to begin"

"Sit down," said Harry politely, pointing at the bed.

To his horror, the elf burst into tears - very noisy tears.

"S-sit down!" he wailed. "Never ... never ever. . . ."

Harry thought he heard the voices downstairs falter.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "I didn't mean to offend you or anything -"

"Offend Dobby!" choked the elf. "Dobby has never been asked to sit down by a wizard - like an equal -"

Harry, trying to say "Shh!" and look comforting at the same time, ushered Dobby back onto the bed where he sat hiccoughing, looking like a large and very ugly doll. At last he managed to control himself, and sat with his great eyes fixed on Harry in an expression of watery adoration.

"You can't have met many decent wizards," said Harry, trying to cheer him up.

Dobby shook his head. Then, without warning, he leapt up and started banging his head furiously on the window, shouting, "Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!"

"Don't - what are you doing?" Harry hissed, springing up and pulling Dobby back onto the bed - Hedwig had woken up with a particularly loud screech and was beating her wings wildly against the bars of her cage.

"Dobby had to punish himself, sir," said the elf, who had gone slightly cross-eyed. "Dobby almost spoke ill of his family, sir"

"Your family?"

"The wizard family Dobby serves, sir... DOBBY'S is a houseelf - bound to serve one house and one family forever

"Do they know you're here?" asked Harry curiously.

Dobby shuddered.

"Oh, no, sir, no ... Dobby will have to punish himself most grievously for coming to see you, sir. Dobby will have to shut his ears in the oven door for this. If they ever knew, sir _"

"But won't they notice if you shut your ears in the oven door?"

"Dobby doubts it, sir. Dobby is always having to punish himself for something, sir. They lets Dobby get on with it, sir. Sometimes they reminds me to do extra punishments

"But why don't you leave? Escape?"

"A house-elf must be set free, sir. And the family will never set Dobby free ... Dobby will serve the family until he dies, sir"

Harry stared.

"And I thought I had it bad staying here for another four weeks,"

he said. "This makes the Dursleys sound almost human. Can't anyone help you? Can't I?"

Almost at once, Harry wished he hadn't spoken. Dobby dissolved again into wails of gratitude.

"Please," Harry whispered frantically, "please be quiet. If the Dursleys hear anything, if they know you're here -"

"Harry Potter asks if he can help Dobby ... Dobby has heard of your greatness, sir, but of your goodness, Dobby never knew"

Harry, who was feeling distinctly hot in the face, said, "Whatever you've heard about my greatness is a load of rubbish. I'm not even top of my year at Hogwarts; that's Hermione, she -"

But he stopped quickly, because thinking about Hermione was painful.

"I-Tarry Potter is humble and modest," said Dobby reverently, his orb-like eyes aglow. "Harry Potter speaks not of his triumph over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named -"

"Voldemort?" said Harry.

Dobby clapped his hands over his bat ears and moaned, "Ah, speak not the name, sir! Speak not the name!"

"Sorry" said Harry quickly. "I know lots of people don't like it. My friend Ron -"

He stopped again. Thinking about Ron was painful, too.

Dobby leaned toward Harry, his eyes wide as headlights.

'Dobby heard tell,' he said hoarsely, "that Harry Potter met the Dark Lord for a second time just weeks ago ... that Harry Potter escaped Yet again."

Harry nodded and Dobby's eyes suddenly shone with tears.

"Ah, sir," he gasped, dabbing his face with a corner of the grubby pillowcase he was wearing. "Harry Potter is valiant and bold! He has braved so many dangers already! But Dobby has come to protect Harry Potter, to warn him, even if he does have to shut his ears in the oven door later... Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts."

There was a silence broken only by the chink of knives and forks from downstairs and the distant rumble of Uncle Vernon's voice.

"W-what?" Harry stammered. "But I've got to go back - term starts on September first. It's all that's keeping me going. You don't know what it's like here. I don't belong here. I belong in your world - at

Hogwarts."

"No, no, no," squeaked Dobby, shaking his head so hard his ears flapped. "Harry Potter must stay where he is safe. He is too great, too good, to lose. If Harry Potter goes back to Hogwarts, he will be in mortal danger."

"Why?" said Harry in surprise.

"There is a plot, Harry Potter. A plot to make most terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year," whispered Dobby, suddenly trembling all over. "Dobby has known it for months, sir. Harry Potter must not put himself in peril. He is too important, sir!"

"What terrible things?" said Harry at once. "Who's plotting them?"

Dobby made a funny choking noise and then banged his head frantically against the wall.

"All right!" cried Harry, grabbing the elf's arm to stop him. "You can't tell me. I understand. But why are you warning me?" A sudden, unpleasant thought struck him. "Hang on - this hasn't got anything to do with Vol- - sorry - with You-Know-Who, has it?"

You could just shake or nod," he added hastily as Dobby's head tilted worryingly close to the wall again.

Slowly, Dobby shook his head.

"Not -not He- Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, sir ='

But Dobby's eyes were wide and he seemed to be trying to give Harry a hint. Harry, however, was completely lost.

"He hasn't got a brother, has he?"

Dobby shook his head, his eyes wider than ever.

"Well then, I can't think who else would have a chance of making horrible things happen at Hogwarts," said Harry. "I mean, there's Dumbledore, for one thing - you know who Dumbledore is, don't you?"

Dobby bowed his head.

"Albus Dumbledore is the greatest headmaster Hogwarts has ever had. Dobby knows it, sir. Dobby has heard Dumbledore's powers rival those of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the height of his strength. But, sir" - Dobby's voice dropped to an urgent whisper - "there are powers Dumbledore doesn't ... powers no decent wizard.
. . ."

And before Harry could stop him, Dobby bounded off the bed, seized Harry's desk lamp, and started beating himself around the head with earsplitting yelps.

A sudden silence fell downstairs. Two seconds later Harry, heart thudding madly, heard Uncle Vernon coming into the hall, calling, "Dudley must have left his television on again, the little tyke!"

"Quick! In the closet!" hissed Harry, stuffing Dobby in, shutting the door, and flinging himself onto the bed just as the door handle turned.

"What - the - devil - are - you - doing?" said Uncle Vernon through gritted teeth, his face horribly close to Harry's. "You've just ruined the punch line of my Japanese golfer joke One more sound and you'll wish you'd never been born, boy!"

He stomped flat-footed from the room.

Shaking, Harry let Dobby out of the closet.

"See what it's like here?" he said. "See why I've got to go back to Hogwarts? It's the only place I've got -well, I think I've got friends. "

"Friends who don't even write to Harry Potter?" said Dobby slyly.

"I expect they've just been - wait a minute," said Harry, frowning.
"How do you know my friends haven't been writing to me?"

Dobby shuffled his feet.

"Harry Potter mustn't be angry with Dobby. Dobby did it for the best -"

"Have you been stopping my letters?"

"Dobby has them here, sir," said the elf. Stepping nimbly out of Harry's reach, he pulled a thick wad of envelopes from the inside of the pillowcase he was wearing. Harry could make out Hermione's neat writing, Ron's untidy scrawl, and even a scribble that looked as though it was from the Hogwarts gamekeeper, Hagrid.

Dobby blinked anxiously up at Harry.

"Harry Potter mustn't be angry... Dobby hoped ... if Harry Potter thought his friends had forgotten him ... Harry Potter might not want to go back to school, sir

Harry wasn't listening. He made a grab for the letters, but Dobby jumped out of reach.

"Harry Potter will have them, sir, if he gives Dobby his word that he will not return to Hogwarts. Ah, sir, this is a danger you must not face! Say you won't go back, sir!"

"No," said Harry angrily. "Give me my friends' letters!"

"Then Harry Potter leaves Dobby no choice," said the elf sadly.

Before Harry could move, Dobby had darted to the bedroom door, pulled it open, and sprinted down the stairs.

Mouth dry, stomach lurching, Harry sprang after him, trying not to make a sound. He jumped the last six steps, landing catlike on the hall carpet, looking around for Dobby. From the dining room he heard Uncle Vernon saying, ". . . tell Petunia that very funny story

about those American plumbers, Mr. Mason. She's been dying to hear. . . ."

Harry ran up the hall into the kitchen and felt his stomach disappear.

Aunt Petunia's masterpiece of a pudding, the mountain of cream and sugared violets, was floating up near the ceiling. On top of a cupboard in the corner crouched Dobby.

"No," croaked Harry. "Please ... they'll kill me

"Harry Potter must say he's not going back to school -"

"Dobby ... please ...

"Say it, sir -"

"I can't -"

Dobby gave him a tragic look.

"Then Dobby must do it, sir, for Harry Potter's own good."

The pudding fell to the floor with a heart-stopping crash. Cream splattered the windows and walls as the dish shattered. With a crack like a whip, Dobby vanished.

There were screams from the dining room and Uncle Vernon burst into the kitchen to find Harry, rigid with shock, covered from head to foot in Aunt Petunias pudding.

At first, it looked as though Uncle Vernon would manage to gloss the whole thing over. ("Just our nephew - very disturbed

meeting strangers upsets him, so we kept him upstairs) He

shooed the shocked Masons back into the dining room, promised Harry he would flay him to within an inch of his life when the Masons had left, and handed him a mop. Aunt Petunia dug some ice cream out of the freezer and Harry, still shaking, started scrubbing the kitchen clean.

Uncle Vernon might still have been able to make his deal - if it hadn't been for the owl.

Aunt Petunia was just passing around a box of after-dinner mints when a huge barn owl swooped through the dining room window, dropped a letter on Mrs. Mason's head, and swooped out again. Mrs. Mason screamed like a banshee and ran from the house shouting about lunatics. Mr. Mason stayed just long enough to tell the Dursleys that his wife was mortally afraid of birds of all shapes and sizes, and to ask whether this was their idea of a joke.

Harry stood in the kitchen, clutching the mop for support, as Uncle Vernon advanced on him, a demonic glint in his tiny eyes.

"Read it!" he hissed evilly, brandishing the letter the owl had delivered.

"Go on - read it!"

Harry took it. It did not contain birthday greetings.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that a Hover Charm was used at your place of residence this evening at twelve minutes past nine.

As you know, underage wizards are not permitted to perform spells outside school, and further spellwork on your part may lead to expulsion from said school (Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, Paragraph C).

We would also ask you to remember that any magical activity that risks notice by members of the non-magical community (Muggles) is a serious offense under section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy.

Enjoy your holidays! Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

IMPROPER USE OF MAGIC OFFICE

Ministry of Magic

Harry looked up from the letter and gulped.

"You didn't tell us you weren't allowed to use magic outside school," said Uncle Vernon, a mad gleam dancing in his eyes. "For got to mention it Slipped your mind, I daresay

He was bearing down on Harry like a great bulldog, all his teeth bared. "Well, I've got news for you, boy . . . I'm locking you up You're never going back to that school ... never ... and if you try and magic yourself out - they'll expel you!"

And laughing like a maniac, he dragged Harry back upstairs.

Uncle Vernon was as bad as his word. The following morning,

he paid a man to fit bars on Harry's window. He himself fitted a cat-flap in the bedroom door, so that small amounts of food could be pushed inside three times a day. They let Harry out to use the bathroom morning and evening. Otherwise, he was locked in his room around the clock.

Three days later, the Dursleys were showing no sign of relenting, and Harry couldn't see any way out of his situation. He lay on his bed watching the sun sinking behind the bars on the window and wondered miserably what was going to happen to him.

What was the good of magicking himself out of his room if Hogwarts would expel him for doing it? Yet life at Privet Drive had reached an all-time low. Now that the Dursleys knew they weren't going to wake up as fruit bats, he had lost his only weapon. Dobby might have saved Harry from horrible happenings at Hogwarts, but the way things were going, he'd probably starve to death anyway.

The cat-flap rattled and Aunt Petunia's hand appeared, pushing a bowl of canned soup into the room. Harry, whose insides were aching with hunger, jumped off his bed and seized it. The soup was stone-cold, but he drank half of it in one gulp. Then he crossed the room to Hedwig's cage and tipped the soggy vegetables at the bottom of the bowl into her empty food tray. She ruffled her feathers and gave him a look of deep disgust.

"It's no good turning your beak up at it - that's all we've got," said Harry grimly.

He put the empty bowl back on the floor next to the cat-flap and lay back down on the bed, somehow even hungrier than he had been before the soup.

Supposing he was still alive in another four weeks, what would happen if he didn't turn up at Hogwarts? Would someone be sent to see why he hadn't come back? Would they be able to make the Dursleys let him go?

The room was growing dark. Exhausted, stomach rumbling, mind spinning over the same unanswerable questions, Harry fell into an uneasy sleep.

He dreamed that he was on show in a zoo, with a card reading UNDERAGE WIZARD attached to his cage. People goggled through the bars at him as he lay, starving and weak, on a bed of straw. He saw Dobby's face in the crowd and shouted out, asking for help, but Dobby called, "Harry Potter is safe there, sir!" and vanished. Then the Dursleys appeared and Dudley rattled the bars of the cage, laughing at him.

"Stop it," Harry muttered as the rattling pounded in his sore head.
"Leave me alone ... cut it out ... I'm trying to sleep . . ."

He opened his eyes. Moonlight was shining through the bars on the window. And someone was goggling through the bars at him: a freckle-faced, red-haired, long-nosed someone.

Ron Weasley was outside Harry's window.

H-H A P T E RR T 11-H RR E E

THE BURROW

Ron." breathed Harry, creeping to the window and pushing it up so they could talk through the bars. "Ron, how did you - What the -?"

Harry's mouth fell open as the full impact of what he was seeing hit him. Ron was leaning out of the back window of an old turquoise car, which was parked in midair Grinning at Harry from the front seats were Fred and George, Ron's elder twin brothers.

"All right, Harry?" asked George.

"What's been going on?" said Ron. "Why haven't you been answering my letters? I've asked you to stay about twelve times, and then Dad came home and said you'd got an official warning for using magic in front of Muggles -"

"It wasn't me - and how did he know?"

"He works for the Ministry," said Ron. "You know we're not supposed to do spells outside school -"

"You should talk," said Harry, staring at the floating car.

"Oh, this doesn't count," said Ron. "We're only borrowing this. It's Dad's, we didn't enchant it. But doing magic in front of those Muggles you live with -"

"I told you, I didn't - but it'll take too long to explain now look, can you tell them at Hogwarts that the Dursleys have locked me up and won't let me come back, and obviously I can't magic myself out, because the Ministry'll think that's the second spell I've done in three days, so -"

"Stop gibbering," said Ron. "We've come to take you home with us."

"But you can't magic me out either -"

"We don't need to," said Ron, jerking his head toward the front seat and grinning. "You forget who I've got with me."

"Tie that around the bars," said Fred, throwing the end of a rope to Harry.

"If the Dursleys wake up, I'm dead," said Harry as he tied the rope tightly around a bar and Fred revved up the car.

"Don't worry," said Fred, "and stand back."

Harry moved back into the shadows next to Hedwig, who seemed to have realized how important this was and kept still and silent. The car revved louder and louder and suddenly, with a crunching noise, the bars were pulled clean out of the window as Fred drove straight up in the air. Harry ran back to the window to see the bars dangling a few feet above the ground. Panting, Ron hoisted them up into the car. Harry listened anxiously, but there was no sound from the Dursleys' bedroom.

When the bars were safely in the back seat with Ron, Fred reversed as close as possible to Harry's window.

"Get in," Ron said.

"But all my Hogwarts stuff - my wand - my broomstick -"

"Where is it?"

"Locked in the cupboard under the stairs, and I can't get out of this room -"

"No problem," said George from the front passenger seat. "Out of the way, Harry."

Fred and George climbed catlike through the window into Harry's

room. You had to hand it to them, thought Harry, as George took an ordinary hairpin from his pocket and started to pick the lock.

"A lot of wizards think it's a waste of time, knowing this sort of Muggle trick," said Fred, "but we feel they're skills worth learning, even if they are a bit slow."

There was a small click and the door swung open.

"So - we'll get your trunk - you grab anything you need from your room and hand it out to Ron," whispered George.

"Watch out for the bottom stair - it creaks," Harry whispered back as the twins disappeared onto the dark landing.

Harry dashed around his room, collecting his things and passing them out of the window to Ron. Then he went to help Fred and George heave his trunk up the stairs. Harry heard Uncle Vernon cough.

At last, panting, they reached the landing, then carried the trunk through Harry's room to the open window. Fred climbed back into the car to pull with Ron, and Harry and George pushed from the bedroom side. Inch by inch, the trunk slid through the window.

Uncle Vernon coughed again.

"A bit more," panted Fred, who was pulling from inside the car.
"One good push -"

Harry and George threw their shoulders against the trunk and it slid out of the window into the back seat of the car.

"Okay, let's go," George whispered.

But as Harry climbed onto the windowsill there came a sudden loud screech from behind him, followed immediately by the thunder of Uncle Vernon's voice.

"THAT RUDDY OWL!"

"I've forgotten Hedwig!"

Harry tore back across the room as the landing light clicked on - he snatched up Hedwig's cage, dashed to the window, and passed it out to Ron. He was scrambling back onto the chest of drawers when Uncle Vernon hammered on the unlocked door and it crashed open.

For a split second, Uncle Vernon stood framed in the doorway; then he let out a bellow like an angry bull and dived at Harry, grabbing him by the ankle.

Ron, Fred, and George seized Harry's arms and pulled as hard as they could.

"Petunia!" roared Uncle Vernon. "He's getting away! HE'S GETTING AWAY!"

But the Weasleys gave a gigantic tug and Harry's leg slid out of Uncle Vernon's grasp - Harry was in the car - he'd slammed the door shut

"Put your foot down, Fred!" yelled Ron, and the car shot suddenly toward the moon.

Harry couldn't believe it - he was free. He rolled down the window, the night air whipping his hair, and looked back at the shrinking rooftops of Privet Drive. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley were all hanging, dumbstruck, out of Harry's window.

"See you next summer!" Harry yelled.

The Weasleys roared with laughter and Harry settled back in his seat, grinning from ear to ear.

"Let Hedwig out," he told Ron. "She can fly behind us. She hasn't had a chance to stretch her wings for ages."

George handed the hairpin to Ron and, a moment later, Hedwig soared joyfully out of the window to glide alongside them like a ghost.

"So - what's the story, Harry?" said Ron impatiently. "What's been happening?"

Harry told them all about Dobby, the warning he'd given Harry and the fiasco of the violet pudding. There was a long, shocked silence when he had finished.

"Very fishy," said Fred finally.

"Definitely dodgy" agreed George. "So he wouldn't even tell you who's supposed to be plotting all this stuff?"

"I don't think he could," said Harry. "I told you, every time he got close to letting something slip, he started banging his head against the wall."

He saw Fred and George look at each other.

"What, you think he was lying to me?" said Harry.

"Well," said Fred, "put it this way - house-elves have got powerful magic of their own, but they can't usually use it without their master's permission. I reckon old Dobby was sent to stop you coming back to Hogwarts. Someone's idea of a joke. Can you think of anyone at school with a grudge against you?"

"Yes," said Harry and Ron together, instantly.

"Draco Malfoy," Harry explained. "He hates me."

"Draco Malfoy?" said George, turning around. "Not Lucius Malfoy's son?"

"Must be, it's not a very common name, is it?" said Harry.

Y.

"I've heard Dad talking about him," said George. "He was a big

supporter of You-Know-Who."

"And when You-Know-Who disappeared," said Fred, craning around to look at Harry, "Lucius Malfoy came back saying he'd never meant any of it. Load of dung - Dad reckons he was right in You-Know-Who's inner circle."

Harry had heard these rumors about Malfoy's family before, and they didn't surprise him at all. Malfoy made Dudley Dursley look

like a kind, thoughtful, and sensitive boy.

"I don't know whether the Malfoys own a house-elf said Harry.

"Well, whoever owns him will be an old wizarding family, and they'll be rich," said Fred.

"Yeah, Mum's always wishing we had a house-elf to do the ironing," said George. "But all we've got is a lousy old ghoul in the attic and gnomes all over the garden. House-elves come with big old manors and castles and places like that; you wouldn't catch one in our house . . ."

Harry was silent. Judging by the fact that Draco Malfoy usually had the best of everything, his family was rolling in wizard gold; he

could just see Malfoy strutting around a large manor house. Sending the family servant to stop Harry from going back to Hogwarts also sounded exactly like the sort of thing Malfoy would do. Had Harry been stupid to take Dobby seriously?

"I'm glad we came to get you, anyway," said Ron. "I was getting really worried when you didn't answer any of my letters. I thought it was Errol's fault at first

"

"Who's Errol?"

"Our owl. He's ancient. It wouldn't be the first time he'd collapsed on a delivery. So then I tried to borrow Hermes -"

"Who?"

"The owl Mum and Dad bought Percy when he was made prefect," said Fred from the front.

"But Percy wouldn't lend him to me," said Ron. "Said he needed him."

"Percy's been acting very oddly this summer," said George, frowning. "And he has been sending a lot of letters and spending a load of time shut up in his room I mean, there's only so many times you can polish a prefect badge You're driving too far west, Fred," he added, pointing at a compass on the dashboard. Fred twiddled the steering wheel.

"So, does your dad know you've got the car?" said Harry, guessing the answer.

"Er, no," said Ron, "he had to work tonight. Hopefully we'll be able to get it back in the garage without Mum noticing we flew it."

"What does your dad do at the Ministry of Magic, anyway?"

"He works in the most boring department," said Ron. "The Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office."

"The what?"

"It's all to do with bewitching things that are Muggle-made, you know, in case they end up back in a Muggle shop or house. Like, last year, some old witch died and her tea set was sold to an antiques shop. This Muggle woman bought it, took it home, and tried to serve her friends tea in it. It was a nightmare - Dad was working overtime for weeks."

"What happened?"

"The teapot went berserk and squirted boiling tea all over the place and one man ended up in the hospital with the sugar tongs clamped to his nose. Dad was going frantic - it's only him and an old warlock called Perkins in the office -and they had to do Memory Charms and all sorts of stuff to cover it up -"

"But your dad - this car -"

Fred laughed. "Yeah, Dad's crazy about everything to do with Muggles; our shed's full of Muggle stuff. He takes it apart, puts spells on it, and puts it back together again. If he raided our house he'd have to put himself under arrest. It drives Mum mad."

"That's the main road," said George, peering down through the windshield. "We'll be there in ten minutes Just as well, it's getting light"

A faint pinkish glow was visible along the horizon to the east.

Fred brought the car lower, and Harry saw a dark patchwork of fields and clumps of trees.

"We're a little way outside the village," said George. "Ottery St. Catchpole."

Lower and lower went the flying car. The edge of a brilliant red sun was now gleaming through the trees.

"Touchdown!" said Fred as, with a slight bump, they hit the ground. They had landed next to a tumbledown garage in a small yard, and Harry looked out for the first time at Ron's house.

It looked as though it had once been a large stone pigpen, but extra rooms had been added here and there until it was several stories high and so crooked it looked as though it were held up by magic (which, Harry reminded himself, it probably was). Four or five chimneys were perched on top of the red roof. A lopsided sign stuck in the ground near the entrance read, THE BuRRow. Around the front door lay a jumble of rubber boots and a very rusty cauldron. Several fat brown chickens were pecking their way around the yard.

"It's not much," said Ron.

"It's wonderful," said Harry happily, thinking of Privet Drive.

They got out of the car.

"Now, we'll go upstairs really quietly," said Fred, "and wait for Mum to call us for breakfast. Then, Ron, you come bounding downstairs going, 'Mum, look who turned up in the night!' and she'll be all pleased to see Harry and no one need ever know we flew the car."

"Right," said Ron. "Come on, Harry, I sleep at the - at the top

Ron had gone a nasty greenish color, his eyes fixed on the house. The other three wheeled around.

Mrs. Weasley was marching across the yard, scattering chickens, and for a short, plump, kind-faced woman, it was remarkable how much she looked like a saber-toothed tiger.

"Ah," said Fred.

"Oh, dear," said George.

Mrs. Weasley came to a halt in front of them, her hands on her hips, staring from one guilty face to the next. She was wearing a flowered apron with a wand sticking out of the pocket.

"So," she said.

"Morning, Mum," said George, in what he clearly thought was a jaunty, winning voice.

"Have you any idea how worried I've been?" said Mrs. Weasley in a deadly whisper.

"Sorry, Mum, but see, we had to -"

All three of Mrs. Weasley's sons were taller than she was, but they cowered as her rage broke over them.

"Beds empty! No note! Cargone - could have crashed - out of my mind with worry - did you care? - never, as long as I've lived - you wait until your father gets home, we never had trouble like this from Bill or Charlie or Percy -"

"Perfect Percy," muttered Fred.

"YOU COULD DO WITH TAKING A LEAF OUT OF PERCY'S BOOK!" yelled Mrs. Weasley, prodding a finger in Fred's chest. "You could have died, you could have been seen, you could have lost your father his job -"

It seemed to go on for hours. Mrs. Weasley had shouted herself hoarse before she turned on Harry, who backed away.

"I'm very pleased to see you, Harry, dear," she said. "Come in and have some breakfast."

She turned and walked back into the house and Harry, after a nervous glance at Ron, who nodded encouragingly, followed her.

The kitchen was small and rather cramped. There was a scrubbed wooden table and chairs in the middle, and Harry sat down on the edge of his seat, looking around. He had never been in a wizard house before.

The clock on the wall opposite him had only one hand and no numbers at all. Written around the edge were things like Time to make tea, Time to feed the chickens, and You're late. Books were stacked three deep on the mantelpiece, books with titles like Charm Your Own Cheese, Enchantment in Baking, and One Minute Feasts - It's Magic! And unless Harry's ears were deceiving him, the old radio next to the sink had just announced that coming up was "Witching Hour, with the popular singing sorceress, Celestina Warbeck."

Mrs. Weasley was clattering around, cooking breakfast a little haphazardly, throwing dirty looks at her sons as she threw sausages into the frying pan. Every now and then she muttered things like "don't know what you were thinking of," and "never would have believed it."

"I don't blame you, dear," she assured Harry, tipping eight or nine sausages onto his plate. "Arthur and I have been worried about you, too. Just last night we were saying we'd come and get you ourselves if you hadn't written back to Ron by Friday. But really," (she was now adding three fried eggs to his plate) "flying an illegal car halfway across the country - anyone could have seen you -"

She flicked her wand casually at the dishes in the sink, which began to clean themselves, clinking gently in the background.

"It was cloudy, Mum!" said Fred.

"You keep your mouth closed while you're eating!" Mrs. Weasley snapped.

"They were starving him, Mum!" said George.

"And you!" said Mrs. Weasley, but it was with a slightly softened expression that she started cutting Harry bread and buttering it for him.

At that moment there was a diversion in the form of a small, redheaded figure in a long nightdress, who appeared in the kitchen, gave a small squeal, and ran out again.

"Ginny," said Ron in an undertone to Harry. "My sister. She's been talking about you all summer."

"Yeah, she'll be wanting your autograph, Harry," Fred said with a grin, but he caught his mother's eye and bent his face over his plate without another word. Nothing more was said until all four plates were clean, which took a surprisingly short time.

"Blimey, I'm tired," yawned Fred, setting down his knife and fork at last.

"I think I'll go to bed and -"

"You will not," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "It's your own fault you've been up all night. You're going to de-gnome the garden for me; they're getting completely out of hand again -"

"Oh, Mum -"

"And you two," she said, glaring at Ron and Fred. "You can go up to bed, dear," she added to Harry. "You didn't ask them to fly that wretched car -"

But Harry, who felt wide awake, said quickly, "I'll help Ron. I've never seen a de-gnoming -"

"That's very sweet of you, dear, but it's dull work," said Mrs. Weasley. "Now, let's see what Lockhart's got to say on the subject -"

And she pulled a heavy book from the stack on the mantelpiece. George groaned.

"Mum, we know how to de-gnome a garden -"

Harry looked at the cover of Mrs. Weasley's book. Written across it in fancy gold letters were the words Gilderoy Lockhart's Guide to Household Pests. There was a big photograph on the front of a very good-looking wizard with wavy blond hair and bright blue eyes. As always in the wizarding world, the photograph was moving; the wizard, who Harry supposed was Gilderoy Lockhart, kept winking cheekily up at them all. Mrs. Weasley beamed down at him.

"Oh, he is marvelous," she said. "He knows his household pests, all right, it's a wonderful book"

"Mum fancies him," said Fred, in a very audible whisper.

"Don't be so ridiculous, Fred," said Mrs. Weasley, her cheeks rather pink. "All right, if you think you know better than Lockhart, you can go and get on with it, and woe betide you if there's a single gnome in that garden when I come out to inspect it."

Yawning and grumbling, the Weasleys slouched outside with Harry behind them. The garden was large, and in Harry's eyes, exactly what a garden should be. The Dursleys wouldn't have liked it - there were plenty of weeds, and the grass needed cutting but there were gnarled trees all around the walls, plants Harry had never seen spilling from every flower bed, and a big green pond full of frogs.

"Muggles have garden gnomes, too, you know," Harry told Ron

they crossed the lawn.

"Yeah, I've seen those things they think are gnomes," said Ron, bent double with his head in a peony bush, "like fat little Santa Clauses with fishing rods"

There was a violent scuffling noise, the peony bush shuddered, and Ron straightened up. "This is a gnome," he said grimly.

"Gerroff me! Gerroff me!" squealed the gnome.

It was certainly nothing like Santa Claus. It was small and leathery looking, with a large, knobby, bald head exactly like a potato. Ron held it at arm's length as it kicked out at him with its horny little feet; he grasped it around the ankles and turned it upside down.

"This is what you have to do," he said. He raised the gnome above his head ("Gerroff me!") and started to swing it in great circles like a lasso. Seeing the shocked look on Harry's face, Ron added, "It doesn't hurt them - you've just got to make them really dizzy so they can't find their way back to the gnomeholes."

He let go of the gnome's ankles: It flew twenty feet into the air and landed with a thud in the field over the hedge.

"Pitiful," said Fred. "I bet I can get mine beyond that stump."

Harry learned quickly not to feel too sorry for the gnomes. He decided just to drop the first one he caught over the hedge, but the gnome, sensing weakness, sank its razor-sharp teeth into Harry's finger and he had a hard job shaking it off - until

"Wow, Harry - that must've been fifty feet

The air was soon thick with flying gnomes.

"See, they're not too bright," said George, seizing five or six gnomes at once. "The moment they know the de-gnoming's going on they storm up to have a look. You'd think they'd have learned by now just to stay put."

Soon, the crowd of gnomes in the field started walking away in a straggling line, their little shoulders hunched.

"They'll be back," said Ron as they watched the gnomes disappear into the hedge on the other side of the field. "They love it here Dad's too soft with them; he thinks they're funny"

Just then, the front door slammed.

"He's back!" said George. "Dad's home!"

They hurried through the garden and back into the house.

Mr. Weasley was slumped in a kitchen chair with his glasses off and his eyes closed. He was a thin man, going bald, but the little hair he had was as red as any of his children's. He was wearing long green robes, which were dusty and travel-worn.

"What a night," he mumbled, groping for the teapot as they all sat down around him. "Nine raids. Nine! And old Mundungus Fletcher tried to put a hex on me when I had my back turned

Mr. Weasley took a long gulp of tea and sighed.

"Find anything, Dad?" said Fred eagerly.

"All I got were a few shrinking door keys and a biting kettle," yawned Mr. Weasley. "There was some pretty nasty stuff that wasn't my department, though. Mortlake was taken away for questioning about some extremely odd ferrets, but that's the Committee on Experimental

Charms, thank goodness

"Why would anyone bother making door keys shrink?" said George.

"Just Muggle-baiting," sighed Mr. Weasley. "Sell them a key that keeps shrinking to nothing so they can never find it when they need it Of course, it's very hard to convict anyone because no Muggle would admit their key keeps shrinking - they'll insist they just keep losing it. Bless them, they'll go to any lengths to ignore magic, even if it's staring them in the face But the things our lot have taken to enchanting, you wouldn't believe -"

"LIKE CARS, FOR INSTANCE?"

Mrs. Weasley had appeared, holding a long poker like a sword. Mr. Weasley's eyes jerked open. He stared guiltily at his wife.

"C-cars, Molly, dear?"

"Yes, Arthur, cars," said Mrs. Weasley, her eyes flashing. "Imagine a wizard buying a rusty old car and telling his wife all he wanted to do with it was take it apart to see how it worked, while really he was enchanting it to make it fly."

Mr. Weasley blinked.

"Well, dear, I think you'll find that he would be quite within the law to do that, even if - er - he maybe would have done better to, um, tell his wife the truth There's a loophole in the law, you'll find As long as he wasn't intending to fly the car, the fact that the car could fly wouldn't -"

"Arthur Weasley, you made sure there was a loophole when you wrote that law!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "Just so you could carry on tinkering with all that Muggle rubbish in your shed! And for your information, Harry arrived this morning in the car you weren't intending to fly!"

"Harry?" said Mr. Weasley blankly. "Harry who?"

He looked around, saw Harry, and jumped.

"Good lord, is it Harry Potter? Very pleased to meet you, Ron's told us so much about -"

"Your sons flew that car to Harry's house and back last night."

shouted Mrs. Weasley. "What have you got to say about that, eh?"

"Did you really?" said Mr. Weasley eagerly. "Did it go all right? I - I mean," he faltered as sparks flew from Mrs. Weasley's eyes, "that - that was very wrong, boys - very wrong indeed

"Let's leave them to it," Ron muttered to Harry as Mrs. Weasley swelled like a bullfrog. "Come on, I'll show you my bedroom."

They slipped out of the kitchen and down a narrow passageway to an uneven staircase, which wound its way, zigzagging up

through the house. On the third landing, a door stood ajar. Harry just caught sight of a pair of bright brown eyes staring at him before it closed with a snap.

"Ginny," said Ron. "You don't know how weird it is for her to be this shy. She never shuts up normally -"

They climbed two more flights until they reached a door with peeling paint and a small plaque on it, saying RONALD'S ROOM.

Harry stepped in, his head almost touching the sloping ceiling, and blinked. It was like walking into a furnace: Nearly everything in Ron's room seemed to be a violent shade of orange: the bedspread, the walls, even the ceiling. Then Harry realized that Ron had covered nearly every inch of the shabby wallpaper with posters of the same seven witches and wizards, all wearing bright orange robes, carrying broomsticks, and waving energetically.

"Your Quidditch team?" said Harry.

"The Chudley Cannons," said Ron, pointing at the orange bedspread, which was emblazoned with two giant black C's and a speeding cannonball. "Ninth in the league."

Ron's school spellbooks were stacked untidily in a corner, next to a pile of comics that all seemed to feature The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle. Ron's magic wand was lying on top of a fish tank full of frog spawn on the windowsill, next to his fat gray rat, Scabbers, who was snoozing in a patch of sun.

Harry stepped over a pack of Self-Shuffling playing cards on the floor and looked out of the tiny window. In the field far below he could see a gang of gnomes sneaking one by one back through the Weasleys' hedge. Then he turned to look at Ron, who was watching him almost nervously, as though waiting for his opinion.

"It's a bit small," said Ron quickly. "Not like that room you had with the Muggles. And I'm right underneath the ghoul in the attic; he's always banging on the pipes and groaning But Harry, grinning widely, said, "This is the best house I've ever been in."

Ron's ears went pink. .

C H4 A P T E R

V O U R

AT F L 0 V RR 11 \$ H
AND BLOTTS

ife at the Burrow was as different as possible from life on Privet Drive. The Dursleys liked everything neat and ordered; the Weasleys' house burst with the strange and unexpected. Harry got a shock the first time he looked in the mirror over the kitchen mantelpiece and it shouted, "Tuck your shirt in, scruffy!" The ghoul in the attic howled and dropped pipes whenever he felt things were getting too quiet, and small explosions from Fred and George's bedroom were considered perfectly normal. What Harry found most unusual about life at Ron's, however, wasn't the talking mirror or the clanking ghoul: It was the fact that everybody there seemed to like him.

Mrs. Weasley fussed over the state of his socks and tried to force him

to eat fourth helpings at every meal. Mr. Weasley liked Harry to sit next to him at the dinner table so that he could bombard him with questions about life with Muggles, asking him to explain how things like plugs and the postal service worked.

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"Fascinating." he would say as Harry talked him through using a telephone. "Ingenious, really, how many ways Muggles have found of getting along without magic."

Harry heard from Hogwarts one sunny morning about a week after he had arrived at the Burrow. He and Ron went down to breakfast to find Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ginny already sitting at the kitchen table. The moment she saw Harry, Ginny accidentally knocked her porridge bowl to the floor with a loud clatter. Ginny seemed very prone to knocking things over whenever Harry entered a room. She dived under the table to retrieve the bowl and emerged with her face glowing like the setting sun. Pretending he hadn't noticed this, Harry sat down and took the toast Mrs. Weasley offered him.

"Letters from school," said Mr. Weasley, passing Harry and Ron identical envelopes of yellowish parchment, addressed in green ink. "Dumbledore already knows you're here, Harry - doesn't miss a trick, that man. You two've got them, too," he added, as Fred and George ambled in, still in their pajamas.

For a few minutes there was silence as they all read their letters. Harry's told him to catch the Hogwarts Express as usual from King's Cross station on September first. There was also a list of the new books he'd need for the coming year.

SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS WILL REQUIRE:

The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2

by Miranda Goshawk

Break with a Banshee by Gilderoy Lockhart
Gadding with Ghouls by Gilderoy Lockhart
Holidays with Hags by Gilderoy Lockhart

4 ",3

Travels with Trolls by Gilderoy Lockhart
Voyages with Vampires by Gilderoy Lockhart
Wanderings with Werewolves by Gilderoy Lockhart
Year with the Yeti by Gilderoy Lockhart

Fred, who had finished his own list, peered over at Harry's.

"You've been told to get all Lockhart's books, too!" he said. "The new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher must be a fan - bet it's a witch."

At this point, Fred caught his mother's eye and quickly busied himself with the marmalade.

"That lot won't come cheap," said George, with a quick look at his parents. "Lockhart's books are really expensive

"Well, we'll manage," said Mrs. Weasley, but she looked worried. "I expect we'll be able to pick up a lot of Ginny's things secondhand."

"Oh, are you starting at Hogwarts this year?" Harry asked Ginny.

She nodded, blushing to the roots of her flaming hair, and put her elbow in the butter dish. Fortunately no one saw this except Harry, because just then Ron's elder brother Percy walked in. He was already dressed, his Hogwarts prefect badge pinned to his sweater vest.

"Morning, all," said Percy briskly. "Lovely day."

He sat down in the only remaining chair but leapt up again almost immediately, pulling from underneath him a moulting, gray feather duster - at least, that was what Harry thought it was, until he saw that it was breathing.

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"Errol!" said Ron, taking the limp owl from Percy and extracting a letter from under its wing. "Finally - he's got Hermione's answer. I wrote to her saying we were going to try and rescue you from the Dursleys."

He carried Errol to a perch just inside the back door and tried to stand him on it, but Errol flopped straight off again so Ron lay him on the draining board instead, muttering, "Pathetic." Then he ripped open Hermione's letter and read it out loud:

"`Dear Ron, and Harry if you're there,

"`I hope everything went all right and that Harry is okay and that you didn't do anything illegal to get him out, Ron, because that would get Harry into trouble, too. I've been really worried and if Harry is all right, will you please let me know at once, but perhaps it would be better if you used a different owl because I think another delivery might finish your one off.

"`I'm very busy with schoolwork, of course'- How can she be?" said Ron in horror. "We're on vacation! - and we're going to London next Wednesday to buy my new books. Why don't we meet in Diagon Alley?

"`Let me know what's happening as soon as you can. Love from Hermione.
'''

"Well, that fits in nicely, we can go and get all your things then, too," said Mrs. Weasley, starting to clear the table. "What're you all up to today?"

Harry, Ron, Fred, and George were planning to go up the hill to a small paddock the Weasleys owned. It was surrounded by trees that blocked it from view of the village below, meaning that they could practice Quidditch there, as long as they didn't fly too high.

* 4\$

They couldn't use real Quidditch balls, which would have been hard to explain if they had escaped and flown away over the village; instead they threw apples for one another to catch. They took turns riding Harry's Nimbus Two Thousand, which was easily the best broom; Ron's old Shooting Star was often outstripped by passing butterflies.

Five minutes later they were marching up the hill, broomsticks over their shoulders. They had asked Percy if he wanted to join them, but he had said he was busy. Harry had only seen Percy at mealtimes so far; he stayed shut in his room the rest of the time.

"Wish I knew what he was up to," said Fred, frowning. "He's not himself. His exam results came the day before you did; twelve O.W.L.s and he hardly gloated at all."

"Ordinary Wizarding Levels," George explained, seeing Harry's puzzled look. "Bill got twelve, too. If we're not careful, we'll have another Head Boy in the family. I don't think I could stand the shame."

Bill was the oldest Weasley brother. He and the next brother, Charlie, had already left Hogwarts. Harry had never met either of them, but knew that Charlie was in Romania studying dragons and Bill in Egypt working for the wizard's bank, Gringotts.

"Dunno how Mum and Dad are going to afford all our school stuff this year," said George after a while. "Five sets of Lockhart books! And Ginny needs robes and a wand and everything

Harry said nothing. He felt a bit awkward. Stored in an underground vault at Gringotts in London was a small fortune that his parents had left him. Of course, it was only in the wizarding world that he had money; you couldn't use Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts

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in Muggle shops. He had never mentioned his Gringotts bank account to the Dursleys; he didn't think their horror of anything connected with magic would stretch to a large pile of gold.

Mrs. Weasley woke them all early the following Wednesday. After a quick half a dozen bacon sandwiches each, they pulled on their coats and Mrs. Weasley took a flowerpot off the kitchen mantelpiece and peered inside.

"We're running low, Arthur," she sighed. "We'll have to buy some more today... Ah well, guests first! After you, Harry dear!"

And she offered him the flowerpot.

Harry stared at them all watching him.

"W-what am I supposed to do?" he stammered.

"He's never traveled by Floo powder," said Ron suddenly. "Sorry, Harry, I forgot."

"Never?" said Mr. Weasley. "But how did you get to Diagon Alley to buy your school things last year?"

"I went on the Underground -"

"Really?" said Mr. Weasley eagerly. "Were there escapators? How exactly -"

"Not now, Arthur," said Mrs. Weasley. "Floo powder's a lot quicker, dear, but goodness me, if you've never used it before -"

"He'll be all right, Mum," said Fred. "Harry, watch us first."

He took a pinch of glittering powder out of the flowerpot, stepped up to the fire, and threw the powder into the flames.

With a roar, the fire turned emerald green and rose higher than Fred, who stepped right into it, shouted, "Diagon Alley!" and vanished.

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"You must speak clearly, dear," Mrs. Weasley told Harry as George dipped his hand into the flowerpot. "And be sure to get out at the right grate

"The right what?" said Harry nervously as the fire roared and whipped George out of sight, too.

"Well, there are an awful lot of wizard fires to choose from, you know, but as long as you've spoken clearly -"

"He'll be fine, Molly, don't fuss," said Mr. Weasley, helping himself to Floo powder, too.

"But, dear, if he got lost, how would we ever explain to his aunt and uncle?"

"They wouldn't mind," Harry reassured her. "Dudley would think it was a brilliant joke if I got lost up a chimney, don't worry about that -"

"Well ... all right ... you go after Arthur," said Mrs. Weasley. "Now, when you get into the fire, say where you're going

"And keep your elbows tucked in," Ron advised.

"And your eyes shut," said Mrs. Weasley. "The soot -"

"Don't fidget," said Ron. "Or you might well fall out of the wrong fireplace -"

"But don't panic and get out too early; wait until you see Fred and George."

Trying hard to bear all this in mind, Harry took a pinch of Floo powder and walked to the edge of the fire. He took a deep breath, scattered the powder into the flames, and stepped forward; the fire felt like a warm breeze; he opened his mouth and immediately swallowed a lot of hot ash.

"D-Dia-gon Alley," he coughed.

It felt as though he was being sucked down a giant drain. He seemed to be spinning very fast - the roaring in his ears was deafening -he tried to keep his eyes open but the whirl of green flames made him feel sick - something hard knocked his elbow and he tucked it in tightly, still spinning and spinning - now it felt as though cold hands were slapping his face - squinting through his glasses he saw a blurred stream of fireplaces and snatched glimpses of the rooms beyond - his bacon sandwiches were churning inside him - he closed his eyes again wishing it would stop, and then

He fell, face forward, onto cold stone and felt the bridge of his glasses snap.

Dizzy and bruised, covered in soot, he got gingerly to his feet, holding his broken glasses up to his eyes. He was -,cute alone, but where he was, he had no idea. All he could tell was that he was standing in the stone fireplace of what looked like a large, dimly lit wizard's shop - but nothing in here was ever likely to be on a Hogwarts school list.

A glass case nearby held a withered hand on a cushion, a bloodstained pack of cards, and a staring glass eye. Evil-looking masks stared down from the walls, an assortment of human bones lay upon the counter, and rusty, spiked instruments hung from the ceiling. Even worse, the dark, narrow street Harry could see through the dusty shop window was definitely not Diagon Alley.

The sooner he got out of here, the better. Nose still stinging where it had hit the hearth, Harry made his way swiftly and silently toward the door, but before he'd got halfway toward it, two people appeared on the other side of the glass - and one of them was the

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very last person Harry wanted to meet when he was lost, covered in soot, and wearing broken glasses: Draco Malfoy.

Harry looked quickly around and spotted a large black cabinet to his left; he shot inside it and pulled the doors closed, leaving a small crack to peer through. Seconds later, a bell clanged, and Malfoy stepped into the shop.

The man who followed could only be Draco's father. He had the same pale, pointed face and identical cold, gray eyes. Mr. Malfoy crossed the shop, looking lazily at the items on display, and rang a bell on the counter before turning to his son and saying, "Touch nothing, Draco."

Malfoy, who had reached for the glass eye, said, "I thought you were going to buy me a present."

"I said I would buy you a racing broom," said his father, drumming his fingers on the counter.

"What's the good of that if I'm not on the House team?" said Malfoy, looking sulky and bad-tempered. "Harry Potter got a Nimbus Two Thousand last year. Special permission from Dumbledore so he could play for Gryffindor. He's not even that good, it's just because he's famous ... famous for having a stupid scar on his forehead . . ."

Malfoy bent down to examine a shelf full of skulls.

". . . everyone thinks he's so smart, wonderful Potter with his scar and his broomstick --"

"You have told me this at least a dozen times already," said Mr. Malfoy, with a quelling look at his son. "And I would remind you that it is not - prudent - to appear less than fond of Harry Potter, not when most of our kind regard him as the hero who made the Dark Lord disappear - ah, Mr. Borgin."

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A stooping man had appeared behind the counter, smoothing his greasy hair back from his face.

"Mr. Malfoy, what a pleasure to see you again," said Mr. Borgin in a voice as oily as his hair. "Delighted - and young Master Malfoy, too - charmed. How may I be of assistance? I must show you, just in today, and very reasonably priced -"

"I'm not buying today, Mr. Borgin, but selling," said Mr. Malfoy.

"Selling?" The smile faded slightly from Mr. Borgin's face.

"You have heard, of course, that the Ministry is conducting more raids," said Mr. Malfoy, taking a roll of parchment from his inside pocket and unraveling it for Mr. Borgin to read. "I have a few - ah - items at home that might embarrass me, if the Ministry were to call

Mr. Borgin fixed a pair of pince-nez to his nose and looked down the list.

"The Ministry wouldn't presume to trouble you, sir, surely?"

Mr. Malfoy's lip curled.

"I have not been visited yet. The name Malfoy still commands a certain respect, yet the Ministry grows ever more meddlesome. There are rumors about a new Muggle Protection Act - no doubt that flea-bitten, Muggle-loving fool Arthur Weasley is behind it

Harry felt a hot surge of anger.

"- and as you see, certain of these poisons might make it appear -"

"I understand, sir, of course," said Mr. Borgin. "Let me see. . . ."

"Can I have that?" interrupted Draco, pointing at the withered hand on its cushion.

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"Ah, the Hand of Glory!" said Mr. Borgin, abandoning Mr. Malfoy's list and scurrying over to Draco. "Insert a candle and it gives light only to the holder! Best friend of thieves and plunderers! Your son has fine taste, sir."

"I hope my son will amount to more than a thief or a plunderer, Borgin," said Mr. Malfoy coldly, and Mr. Borgin said quickly, "No offense, sir, no offense meant -"

"Though if his grades don't pick up," said Mr. Malfoy, more coldly still, "that may indeed be all he is fit for -"

"It's not my fault," retorted Draco. "The teachers all have favorites, that Hermione Granger -"

"I would have thought you'd be ashamed that a girl of no wizard family beat you in every exam," snapped Mr. Malfoy.

"Ha!" said Harry under his breath, pleased to see Draco looking both abashed and angry.

"It's the same all over," said Mr. Borgin, in his oily voice. "Wizard blood is counting for less everywhere -"

"Not with me," said Mr. Malfoy, his long nostrils flaring.

"No, sir, nor with me, sir," said Mr. Borgin, with a deep bow.

"In that case, perhaps we can return to my list," said Mr. Malfoy shortly. "I am in something of a hurry, Borgin, I have important business elsewhere today -"

They started to haggle. Harry watched nervously as Draco drew nearer and nearer to his hiding place, examining the objects for sale. Draco paused to examine a long coil of hangman's rope and to read, smirking, the card propped on a magnificent necklace of opals, Caution: Do Not Touch. Cursed - Has Claimed the Lives of Nineteen Muggle Owners to Date.

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Draco turned away and saw the cabinet right in front of him. He walked forward - he stretched out his hand for the handle

"Done," said Mr. Malfoy at the counter. "Come, Draco -"

Harry wiped his forehead on his sleeve as Draco turned away.

"Good day to you, Mr. Borgin. I'll expect you at the manor tomorrow to pick up the goods."

The moment the door had closed, Mr. Borgin dropped his oily manner.

"Good day yourself, Mister Malfoy, and if the stories are true, you haven't sold me half of what's hidden in your manor

Muttering darkly, Mr. Borgin disappeared into a back room. Harry waited for a minute in case he came back, then, quietly as he could, slipped out of the cabinet, past the glass cases, and out of the shop door.

Clutching his broken glasses to his face, Harry stared around. He had emerged into a dingy alleyway that seemed to be made up entirely of shops devoted to the Dark Arts. The one he'd just left, Borgin and Burkes, looked like the largest, but opposite was a nasty window

display of shrunken heads and, two doors down, a large cage was alive with gigantic black spiders. Two shabby-looking wizards were watching him from the shadow of a doorway, muttering to each other. Feeling jumpy, Harry set off, trying to hold his glasses on straight and hoping against hope he'd be able to find a way out of here.

An old wooden street sign hanging over a shop selling poisonous candles told him he was in Knockturn Alley. This didn't help, as Harry had never heard of such a place. He supposed he hadn't spoken clearly enough through his mouthful of ashes

back in the Weasleys' fire. Trying to stay calm, he wondered what to do.

"Not lost are you, my dear?" said a voice in his ear, making him jump.

An aged witch stood in front of him, holding a tray of what looked horribly like whole human fingernails. She leered at him, showing mossy teeth. Harry backed away.

"I'm fine, thanks," he said. "I'm just -"

"HARRY! What d'yeh think yer doin' down there?"

Harry's heart leapt. So did the witch; a load of fingernails cascaded down over her feet and she cursed as the massive form of Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, came striding toward them, beetle-black eyes flashing over his great bristling beard.

"Hagrid!" Harry croaked in relief. "I was lost - Floo powder -"

Hagrid seized Harry by the scruff of the neck and pulled him away from the witch, knocking the tray right out of her hands. Her shrieks followed them all the way along the twisting alleyway out into bright sunlight. Harry saw a familiar, snow-white marble building in the distance - Gringotts Bank. Hagrid had steered him right into Diagon Alley.

"Yer a mess!" said Hagrid gruffly, brushing soot off Harry so forcefully he nearly knocked him into a barrel of dragon dung outside an apothecary. "Skulkin' around Knockturn Alley, I dunno dodgy place, Harry - don' want no one ter see yeh down there -"

"I realized that," said Harry, ducking as Hagrid made to brush him off again. "I told you, I was lost - what were you doing down there, anyway?"

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"I was lookin' fer a Flesh-Eatin' Slug Repellent," growled Hagrid. "They're ruinin' the school cabbages. Yer not on yer own?"

"I'm staying with the Weasleys but we got separated," Harry explained. "I've got to go and find them"

They set off together down the street.

"How come yeh never wrote back ter me?" said Hagrid as Harry

jogged alongside him (he had to take three steps to every stride of Hagrid's enormous boots). Harry explained all about Dobby and the Dursleys.

"Lousy Muggles," growled Hagrid. "If I'd've known -"

"Harry! Harry! Over here!"

Harry looked up and saw Hermione Granger standing at the top of the white flight of steps to Gringotts. She ran down to meet them, her bushy brown hair flying behind her.

"What happened to your glasses? Hello, Hagrid - Oh, it's wonderful to see you two again - Are you coming into Gringotts, Harry?"

"As soon as I've found the Weasleys," said Harry.

"Yeh won't have long ter wait," Hagrid said with a grin.

Harry and Hermione looked around: Sprinting up the crowded street were Ron, Fred, George, Percy, and Mr. Weasley.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley panted. "We hoped you'd only gone one grate too far . He mopped his glistening bald patch. "Molly's frantic - she's coming now -"

"Where did you come out?" Ron asked.

"Knockturn Alley," said Hagrid grimly.

"Excellent." said Fred and George together.

"We've never been allowed in," said Ron enviously.

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"I should ruddy well think not," growled Hagrid.

Mrs. Weasley now came galloping into view, her handbag swinging wildly in one hand, Ginny just clinging onto the other.

"Oh, Harry - oh, my dear - you could have been anywhere -"

Gasping for breath she pulled a large clothes brush out of her bag and began sweeping off the soot Hagrid hadn't managed to beat away. Mr. Weasley took Harry's glasses, gave them a tap of his wand, and returned them, good as new.

"Well, gotta be off," said Hagrid, who was having his hand wrung by Mrs. Weasley ("Knockturn Alley! If you hadn't found him, Hagrid!"). "See yer at Hogwarts!" And he strode away, head and shoulders taller than anyone else in the packed street.

"Guess who I saw in Borgin and Burkes?" Harry asked Ron and Hermione as they climbed the Gringotts steps. "Malfoy and his father."

"Did Lucius Malfoy buy anything?" said Mr. Weasley sharply behind them.

"No, he was selling ='

"So he's worried," said Mr. Weasley with grim satisfaction. "Oh, I'd love to get Lucius Malfoy for something

"You be careful, Arthur," said Mrs. Weasley sharply as they were

bowed into the bank by a goblin at the door. "That family's trouble. Don't go biting off more than you can chew --"

"So you don't think I'm a match for Lucius Malfoy?" said Mr. Weasley indignantly, but he was distracted almost at once by the sight of Hermione's parents, who were standing nervously at the counter that ran all along the great marble hall, waiting for Hermione to introduce them.

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"But you're Muggles!" said Mr. Weasley delightedly. "We must have a drink!"

What's that you've got there? Oh, you're changing Muggle money. Molly, look!" He pointed excitedly at the tenpound notes in Mr. Granger's hand.

"Meet you back here," Ron said to Hermione as the Weasleys and Harry were led off to their underground vaults by another Gringotts goblin.

The vaults were reached by means of small, goblin-driven carts that sped along miniature train tracks through the bank's underground tunnels.

Harry enjoyed the breakneck journey down to the Weasleys' vault, but felt dreadful, far worse than he had in Knockturn Alley, when it was opened. There was a very small pile of silver Sickles inside, and just one gold Galleon.

Mrs. Weasley felt right into the corners before sweeping the whole lot into

her bag. Harry felt even worse when they reached his vault. He tried to block the contents from view as he hastily shoved handfuls of coins into a leather bag.

Back outside on the marble steps, they all separated. Percy muttered vaguely about needing a new quill. Fred and George had spotted their friend from Hogwarts, Lee Jordan. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were going to a secondhand robe shop. Mr. Weasley was insisting on taking the Grangers off to the Leaky Cauldron for a drink.

"We'll all meet at Flourish and Blotts in an hour to buy your schoolbooks,"

said Mrs. Weasley, setting off with Ginny. "And not one step down Knockturn Alley!" she shouted at the twins' retreating backs.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione strolled off along the winding, cobbled street. The bag of gold, silver, and bronze jangling cheerfully

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in Harry's pocket was clamoring to be spent, so he bought three large strawberry-and-peanut-butter ice creams, which they slurped happily as they wandered up the alley, examining the fascinating shop windows. Ron gazed longingly at a full set of Chudley Cannobon robes in the windows of Quality Quidditch Supplies until Hermione dragged them off to buy ink and parchment next door. In Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop, they met Fred, George, and Lee Jordan, who were stocking up on Dr. Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks, and in a tiny junk shop full of broken wands, lopsided brass scales, and old cloaks covered in potion stains they found Percy, deeply immersed in a small and deeply boring book called *Prefects Who Gained Power*.

'A study of Hogwarts prefects and their later careers, " Ron read

aloud off the back cover. "That sounds fascinating"

"Go away," Percy snapped.

"Course, he's very ambitious, Percy, he's got it all planned out He wants to be Minister of Magic. . . ." Ron told Harry and Hermione in an undertone as they left Percy to it.

An hour later, they headed for Flourish and Blotts. They were by no means the only ones making their way to the bookshop. As they approached it, they saw to their surprise a large crowd jostling outside the doors, trying to get in. The reason for this was proclaimed

by a large banner stretched across the upper windows:

GILDEROY LOCKHART
will be signing copies of his autobiography
MAGICAL ME
today 12:30 P.m. to 4:30 P.m.

"We can actually meet him!" Hermione squealed. "I mean, he's written almost the whole booklist!"

The crowd seemed to be made up mostly of witches around Mrs. Weasley's age. A harrassed-looking wizard stood at the door, saying, "Calmly, please, ladies Don't push, there ... mind the books, now"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione squeezed inside. A long line wound right to the back of the shop, where Gilderoy Lockhart was signing his books. They each grabbed a copy of The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2 and sneaked up the line to where the rest of the Weasleys were standing with Mr. and Mrs. Granger.

"Oh, there you are, good," said Mrs. Weasley. She sounded breathless and kept patting her hair. "We'll be able to see him in a minute

Gilderoy Lockhart came slowly into view, seated at a table surrounded by large pictures of his own face, all winking and flashing dazzlingly white teeth at the crowd. The real Lockhart was wearing robes of forget-me-not blue that exactly matched his eyes; his pointed wizard's hat was set at a jaunty angle on his wavy hair.

A short, irritable-looking man was dancing around taking photographs with a large black camera that emitted puffs of purple smoke with every blinding flash.

"Out of the way, there," he snarled at Ron, moving back to get a better shot. "This is for the Daily Prophet -"

"Big deal," said Ron, rubbing his foot where the photographer had stepped on it.

Gilderoy Lockhart heard him. He looked up. He saw Ron

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and then he saw Harry. He stared. Then he leapt to his feet and positively shouted, "It can't be Harry Potter?"

The crowd parted, whispering excitedly; Lockhart dived forward, seized Harry's arm, and pulled him to the front. The crowd burst into applause. Harry's face burned as Lockhart shook his hand for the photographer, who was clicking away madly, wafting thick smoke over the Weasleys.

"Nice big smile, Harry," said Lockhart, through his own gleaming teeth. "Together, you and I are worth the front page."

When he finally let go of Harry's hand, Harry could hardly feel his fingers.

He tried to sidle back over to the Weasleys, but Lockhart threw an arm around his shoulders and clamped him tightly to his side.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said loudly, waving for quiet. "What an extraordinary moment this is! The perfect moment for me to make a little announcement I've been sitting on for some time!"

"When young Harry here stepped into Flourish and Blotts today, he only wanted to buy my autobiography -which I shall be happy to present him now, free of charge-" The crowd applauded again. "He had no idea," Lockhart continued, giving Harry a little shake that made his glasses slip to

the end of his nose, "that he would shortly be getting much, much more than my book, *Magical Me*. He and his schoolmates will, in fact, be getting

the real magical me. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure and pride in announcing that this September, I will be taking up the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

The crowd cheered and clapped and Harry found himself being

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presented with the entire works of Gilderoy Lockhart. Staggering slightly under their weight, he managed to make his way out of the limelight to the edge of the room, where Ginny was standing next to her new cauldron.

"You have these," Harry mumbled to her, tipping the books into the cauldron. "I'll buy my own -"

"Bet you loved that, didn't you, Potter?" said a voice Harry had no trouble recognizing. He straightened up and found himself face-to-face with Draco Malfoy, who was wearing his usual sneer.

"Famous Harry Potter," said Malfoy. "Can't even go into a bookshop without making the front page."

"Leave him alone, he didn't want all that!" said Ginny. It was the first time she had spoken in front of Harry. She was glaring at Malfoy.

"Potter, you've got yourself a girlfriend!" drawled Malfoy. Ginny went scarlet as Ron and Hermione fought their way over, both clutching stacks of Lockhart's books.

"Oh, it's you," said Ron, looking at Malfoy as if he were something unpleasant on the sole of his shoe. "Bet you're surprised to see Harry here, eh?"

"Not as surprised as I am to see you in a shop, Weasley," retorted Malfoy. "I suppose your parents will go hungry for a month to pay for all those."

Ron went as red as Ginny. He dropped his books into the cauldron, too, and started toward Malfoy, but Harry and Hermione grabbed the back of his jacket.

"Ron!" said Mr. Weasley, struggling over with Fred and George. "What are you doing? It's too crowded in here, let's go outside."

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"Well, well, well - Arthur Weasley."

It was Mr. Malfoy. He stood with his hand on Draco's shoulder, sneering in just the same way.

"Lucius," said Mr. Weasley, nodding coldly.

"Busy time at the Ministry, I hear," said Mr. Malfoy. "All those raids ... I hope they're paying you overtime?"

He reached into Ginny's cauldron and extracted, from amid the glossy Lockhart books, a very old, very battered copy of *A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration*.

"Obviously not," Mr. Malfoy said. "Dear me, what's the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well for it?"

Mr. Weasley flushed darker than either Ron or Ginny.

"We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard, Malfoy," he said.

"Clearly," said Mr. Malfoy, his pale eyes straying to Mr. and Mrs. Granger, who were watching apprehensively. "The company you keep, Weasley ... and I thought your family could sink no lower ='

There was a thud of metal as Ginny's cauldron went flying; Mr. Weasley had thrown himself at Mr. Malfoy, knocking him backward into a bookshelf. Dozens of heavy spellbooks came thundering down on all their heads; there was a yell of, "Get him, Dad!" from Fred or George; Mrs. Weasley was shrieking, "No, Arthur, no!"; the crowd stamped backward, knocking more shelves over; "Gentlemen, please - please!" cried the assistant, and then, louder than all

"Break it up, there, gents, break it up -"

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Hagrid was wading toward them through the sea of books. In an instant he had pulled Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy apart. Mr. Weasley had a cut lip and Mr. Malfoy had been hit in the eye by an Encyclopedia of Toadstools. He was still holding Ginny's old Transfiguration book. He thrust it at her, his eyes glittering with malice.

"Here, girl - take your book - it's the best your father can give you -"
Pulling
himself out of Hagrid's grip he beckoned to Draco and swept from the
shop.

"Yeh should've ignored him, Arthur," said Hagrid, almost lifting Mr.
Weasley
off his feet as he straightened his robes. "Rotten ter the core, the
whole family,
everyone knows that - no Malfoy's worth listenin' ter - bad blood, that's
what it
is - come on now - let's get outta here."

The assistant looked as though he wanted to stop them leaving, but he
barely
came up to Hagrid's waist and seemed to think better of it. They hurried
up the
street, the Grangers shaking with fright and Mrs. Weasley beside herself
with
fury.

"A fine example to set for your children . . . brawling in public . . .
what
Gilderoy Lockhart must've thought -"

"He was pleased," said Fred. "Didn't you hear him as we were leaving? He
was
asking that bloke from the Daily Prophet if he'd be able to work the
fight into
his report - said it was all publicity -"

But it was a subdued group that headed back to the fireside in the Leaky
Cauldron, where Harry, the Weasleys, and all their shopping would be
traveling back to the Burrow using Floo powder. They said good-bye to the
Grangers, who were leaving the pub for the Muggle street on the other
side;
Mr. Weasley started to ask

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them how bus stops worked, but stopped quickly at the look on Mrs.
Weasley's face.

Harry took off his glasses and put them safely in his pocket before
helping himself to Floo powder. It definitely wasn't his favorite way to
travel.

C H-H A P T E RR F I v E

THE WHOMPING
WILLOW

he end of the summer vacation came too quickly for Harry's liking.
He was looking forward to getting back to Hogwarts, but his month
at the Burrow had been the happiest of his life. It was difficult not to
feel jealous of Ron when he thought of the Dursleys and the sort of
welcome he could expect next time he turned up on Privet Drive.

On their last evening, Mrs. Weasley conjured up a sumptuous dinner

that included all of Harry's favorite things, ending with a mouthwatering treacle pudding. Fred and George rounded off the evening with a display of Filibuster fireworks; they filled the kitchen with red and blue stars that bounced from ceiling to wall for at least half an hour. Then it was time for a last mug of hot chocolate and bed.

It took a long while to get started next morning. They were up at dawn, but somehow they still seemed to have a great deal to do.

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Mrs. Weasley dashed about in a bad mood looking for spare socks and quills; people kept colliding on the stairs, half-dressed with bits of toast

in their hands; and Mr. Weasley nearly broke his neck, tripping over a stray chicken as he crossed the yard carrying Ginny's trunk to the car.

Harry couldn't see how eight people, six large trunks, two owls, and a rat were going to fit into one small Ford Anglia. He had reckoned, of course, without the special features that Mr. Weasley had added.

"Not a word to Molly," he whispered to Harry as he opened the trunk and showed him how it had been magically expanded so that the luggage fitted easily.

When at last they were all in the car, Mrs. Weasley glanced into the back seat, where Harry, Ron, Fred, George, and Percy were all sitting comfortably side by side, and said, "Muggles do know more than we give them credit for, don't they?" She and Ginny got into the front seat, which had been stretched so that it resembled a park bench. "I mean, you'd never know it was this roomy from the outside, would you?"

Mr. Weasley started up the engine and they trundled out of the yard, Harry turning back for a last look at the house. He barely had time to wonder when he'd see it again when they were back George had forgotten his box of Filibuster fireworks. Five minutes after that, they skidded to a halt in the yard so that Fred could run in for his broomstick. They had almost reached the highway when Ginny shrieked that she'd left her diary. By the time she had clambered back into the car, they were running very late, and tempers were running high.

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Mr. Weasley glanced at his watch and then at his wife.

"Molly, dear -"

"No, Arthur -"

"No one would see - this little button here is an Invisibility Booster I installed - that'd get us up in the air - then we fly above the clouds. We'd be there in ten minutes and no one would be any the wiser -"

"I said no, Arthur, not in broad daylight -"

They reached King's Cross at a quarter to eleven. Mr. Weasley

dashed across the road to get trolleys for their trunks and they all hurried into the station.

Harry had caught the Hogwarts Express the previous year. The tricky part was getting onto platform nine and three-quarters, which wasn't visible to the Muggle eye. What you had to do was walk through the solid barrier dividing platforms nine and ten. It didn't hurt, but it had to be done carefully so that none of the Muggles noticed you vanishing.

"Percy first," said Mrs. Weasley, looking nervously at the clock overhead, which showed they had only five minutes to disappear casually through the barrier.

Percy strode briskly forward and vanished. Mr. Weasley went next; Fred and George followed.

"I'll take Ginny and you two come right after us," Mrs. Weasley told Harry and Ron, grabbing Ginny's hand and setting off. In the blink of an eye they were gone.

"Let's go together, we've only got a minute," Ron said to Harry.

Harry made sure that Hedwig's cage was safely wedged on top of his trunk and wheeled his trolley around to face the barrier. He felt

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perfectly confident; this wasn't nearly as uncomfortable as using Floo powder. Both of them bent low over the handles of their trolleys and walked purposefully toward the barrier, gathering speed. A few feet away from it, they broke into a run and

CRASH.

Both trolleys hit the barrier and bounced backward; Ron's trunk fell off with a loud thump, Harry was knocked off his feet, and Hedwig's cage bounced onto the shiny floor, and she rolled away, shrieking indignantly; people all around them stared and a guard nearby yelled, "What in blazes d'you think you're doing?"

"Lost control of the trolley," Harry gasped, clutching his ribs as he got up. Ron ran to pick up Hedwig, who was causing such a scene that there was a lot of muttering about cruelty to animals from the surrounding crowd.

"Why can't we get through?" Harry hissed to Ron.

"I dunno -"

Ron looked wildly around. A dozen curious people were still watching them.

"We're going to miss the train," Ron whispered. "I don't understand why the gateway's sealed itself -"

Harry looked up at the giant clock with a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. Ten seconds ... nine seconds ...

He wheeled his trolley forward cautiously until it was right against the

barrier and pushed with all his might. The metal remained solid.

Three seconds . . . two seconds . . . one second . . .

"It's gone," said Ron, sounding stunned. "The train's left. What if Mum and Dad can't get back through to us? Have you got any Muggle money?"

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And they marched off through the crowd of curious Muggles, out of the station and back onto the side road where the old Ford Anglia was parked.

Ron unlocked the cavernous trunk with a series of taps from his wand. They heaved their luggage back in, put Hedwig on the back seat, and got into the front.

"Check that no one's watching," said Ron, starting the ignition with another tap of his wand. Harry stuck his head out of the window: Traffic was rumbling along the main road ahead, but their street was empty.

"Okay," he said.

Ron pressed a tiny silver button on the dashboard. The car around them vanished - and so did they. Harry could feel the seat vibrating beneath him, hear the engine, feel his hands on his knees and his glasses on his nose, but for all he could see, he had become a pair of eyeballs, floating a few feet above the ground in a dingy street full of parked cars.

"Let's go," said Ron's voice from his right.

And the ground and the dirty buildings on either side fell away, dropping out of sight as the car rose; in seconds, the whole of London lay, smoky and glittering, below them.

Then there was a popping noise and the car, Harry, and Ron reappeared.

"Uh-oh," said Ron, jabbing at the Invisibility Booster. "It's faulty -"

Both of them pummeled it. The car vanished. Then it flickered back again.

"Hold on!" Ron yelled, and he slammed his foot on the acceler

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ator; they shot straight into the low, woolly clouds and everything turned dull and foggy.

"Now what?" said Harry, blinking at the solid mass of cloud pressing in on them from all sides.

"We need to see the train to know what direction to go in," said Ron.

"Dip back down again - quickly -"

They dropped back beneath the clouds and twisted around in their seats, squinting at the ground.

"I can see it!" Harry yelled. "Right ahead - there!"

The Hogwarts Express was streaking along below them like a scarlet snake.

"Due north," said Ron, checking the compass on the dashboard.

"Okay, we'll just have to check on it every half hour or so - hold on

And they shot up through the clouds. A minute later, they burst out into a blaze of sunlight.

It was a different world. The wheels of the car skimmed the sea of fluffy cloud, the sky a bright, endless blue under the blinding white sun.

"All we've got to worry about now are airplanes," said Ron.

They looked at each other and started to laugh; for a long time, they couldn't stop.

It was as though they had been plunged into a fabulous dream. This, thought Harry, was surely the only way to travel - past swirls and turrets of snowy cloud, in a car full of hot, bright sunlight, with a fat pack of toffees in the glove compartment, and the prospect of seeing Fred's and George's jealous faces when they

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landed smoothly and spectacularly on the sweeping lawn in front of Hogwarts castle.

They made regular checks on the train as they flew farther and farther north, each dip beneath the clouds showing them a different view. London was soon far behind them, replaced by neat green fields that gave way in turn to wide, purplish moors, a great city alive with cars like multicolored ants, villages with tiny toy churches.

Several uneventful hours later, however, Harry had to admit that some of the fun was wearing off. The toffees had made them extremely thirsty and they had nothing to drink. He and Ron had pulled off their sweaters, but Harry's T-shirt was sticking to the back of his seat and his glasses kept sliding down to the end of his sweaty nose. He had stopped noticing the fantastic cloud shapes now and was thinking longingly of the train miles below, where you could buy ice-cold pumpkin juice from a trolley pushed by a plump witch. Why hadn't they been able to get onto platform nine and three-quarters?

"Can't be much further, can it?" croaked Ron, hours later still, as the sun started to sink into their floor of cloud, staining it a deep pink.
"Ready for another check on the train?"

It was still right below them, winding its way past a snowcapped mountain. It was much darker beneath the canopy of clouds.

Ron put his foot on the accelerator and drove them upward again, but as he did so, the engine began to whine.

Harry and Ron exchanged nervous glances.

"It's probably just tired," said Ron. "It's never been this far before
.....

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And they both pretended not to notice the whining growing louder and louder as the sky became steadily darker. Stars were blossoming in the blackness. Harry pulled his sweater back on, trying to ignore the way the windshield wipers were now waving feebly, as though in protest.

"Not far," said Ron, more to the car than to Harry, "not far now," and he patted the dashboard nervously.

When they flew back beneath the clouds a little while later, they had to squint through the darkness for a landmark they knew.

"There!" Harry shouted, making Ron and Hedwig jump.

"Straight ahead!"

Silhouetted on the dark horizon, high on the cliff over the lake, stood the many turrets and towers of Hogwarts castle.

But the car had begun to shudder and was losing speed.

"Come on," Ron said cajolingly, giving the steering wheel a little shake, "nearly there, come on -"

The engine groaned. Narrow jets of steam were issuing from under the hood. Harry found himself gripping the edges of his seat very hard as they flew toward the lake.

The car gave a nasty wobble. Glancing out of his window, Harry saw the smooth, black, glassy surface of the water, a mile below. Ron's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. The car wobbled again.

"Come on," Ron muttered.

They were over the lake - the castle was right ahead - Ron put his foot down.

There was a loud clunk, a splutter, and the engine died completely.

"Uh-oh," said Ron, into the silence.

The nose of the car dropped. They were falling, gathering speed, heading straight for the solid castle wall.

"Nooooooooo!" Ron yelled, swinging the steering wheel around; they missed the dark stone wall by inches as the car turned in a great arc, soaring over the dark greenhouses, then the vegetable patch, and then out over the black lawns, losing altitude all the time.

Ron let go of the steering wheel completely and pulled his wand out of his back pocket

"STOP! STOP!" he yelled, whacking the dashboard and the windshield, but they were still plummeting, the ground flying up toward them

"WATCH OUT FOR THAT TREE!" Harry bellowed, lunging for the steering wheel, but too late

CRUNCH.

With an earsplitting bang of metal on wood, they hit the thick tree trunk and dropped to the ground with a heavy jolt. Steam was

billowing from under the crumpled hood; Hedwig was shrieking in terror; a golfball-size lump was throbbing on Harry's head where he had hit the windshield; and to his right, Ron let out a low, despairing groan.

"Are you okay?" Harry said urgently.

"My wand," said Ron, in a shaky voice. "Look at my wand -"

It had snapped, almost in two; the tip was dangling limply, held on by a few splinters.

Harry opened his mouth to say he was sure they'd be able to mend it up at the school, but he never even got started. At that very moment, something hit his side of the car with the force of a

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charging bull, sending him lurching sideways into Ron, just as an equally heavy blow hit the roof.

"What's happen -?"

Ron gasped, staring through the windshield, and Harry looked around just in time to see a branch as thick as a python smash into it. The tree they had hit was attacking them. Its trunk was bent almost double, and its gnarled boughs were pummeling every inch of the car it could reach.

"Aaargh!" said Ron as another twisted limb punched a large dent into his door; the windshield was now trembling under a hail of blows from knuckle-like twigs and a branch as thick as a battering ram was pounding furiously on the roof, which seemed to be caving

"Run for it!" Ron shouted, throwing his full weight against his door, but next second he had been knocked backward into Harry's lap by a vicious uppercut from another branch.

"We're done for!" he moaned as the ceiling sagged, but suddenly the floor of the car was vibrating - the engine had restarted.

"Reverse!" Harry yelled, and the car shot backward; the tree was still trying to hit them; they could hear its roots creaking as it almost ripped itself up, lashing out at them as they sped out of reach.

"That," panted Ron, "was close. Well done, car -"

The car, however, had reached the end of its tether. With two sharp clunks, the doors flew open and Harry felt his seat tip sideways: Next thing he knew he was sprawled on the damp ground. Loud thuds told him that the car was ejecting their luggage from the trunk; Hedwig's cage flew through the air and burst open; she rose out of it with an angry screech and sped off toward the castle

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without a backward look. Then, dented, scratched, and steaming, the car rumbled off into the darkness, its rear lights blazing angrily.

"Come back!" Ron yelled after it, brandishing his broken wand.
"Dad'll kill me!"

But the car disappeared from view with one last snort from its exhaust.

"Can you believe our luck?" said Ron miserably, bending down to pick up Scabbers. "Of all the trees we could've hit, we had to get one that hits back."

He glanced over his shoulder at the ancient tree, which was still flailing its branches threateningly.

"Come on," said Harry wearily, "we'd better get up to the school"

It wasn't at all the triumphant arrival they had pictured. Stiff, cold, and bruised, they seized the ends of their trunks and began dragging them up the grassy slope, toward the great oak front doors.

"I think the feast's already started," said Ron, dropping his trunk at the foot of the front steps and crossing quietly to look through a brightly lit window. "Hey - Harry - come and look - it's the Sorting!"

Harry hurried over and, together, he and Ron peered in at the Great Hall.

Innumerable candles were hovering in midair over four long, crowded tables, making the golden plates and goblets sparkle. Overhead, the bewitched ceiling, which always mirrored the sky outside, sparkled with stars.

Through the forest of pointed black Hogwarts hats, Harry saw a long line of scared-looking first years filing into the Hall. Ginny

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was among them, easily visible because of her vivid Weasley hair. Meanwhile, Professor McGonagall, a bespectacled witch with her hair in a tight bun, was placing the famous Hogwarts Sorting Hat on a stool before the newcomers.

Every year, this aged old hat, patched, frayed, and dirty, sorted new students into the four Hogwarts houses (Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin). Harry well remembered putting it on, exactly one year ago, and waiting, petrified, for its decision as it muttered aloud in his ear. For a few horrible seconds he had feared that the hat was going to put him in Slytherin, the house that had turned out more Dark witches and wizards than any other -but he had ended up in Gryffindor, along with Ron, Hermione, and the rest of the Weasleys. Last term, Harry and Ron had helped Gryffindor win the House Championship, beating Slytherin for the first time in seven years.

A very small, mousy-haired boy had been called forward to place the hat on his head. Harry's eyes wandered past him to where Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster, sat watching the Sorting from the staff table, his long silver beard and half-moon glasses shining brightly in the candlelight. Several seats along, Harry saw Gilderoy Lockhart,

dressed in robes of aquamarine. And there at the end was Hagrid, huge and hairy, drinking deeply from his goblet.

"Hang on. . . ." Harry muttered to Ron. "There's an empty chair at the staff table Where's Snape?"

Professor Severus Snape was Harry's least favorite teacher. Harry also happened to be Snape's least favorite student. Cruel, sarcastic, and disliked by everybody except the students from his own house (Slytherin), Snape taught Potions.

"Maybe he's ill!" said Ron hopefully.

"Maybe he's left," said Harry, "because he missed out on the Defense Against Dark Arts job again!"

"Or he might have been sacked!" said Ron enthusiastically. "I mean, everyone hates him -"

"Or maybe," said a very cold voice right behind them, "he's waiting to hear why you two didn't arrive on the school train."

Harry spun around. There, his black robes rippling in a cold breeze, stood Severus Snape. He was a thin man with sallow skin, a hooked nose, and greasy, shoulder-length black hair, and at this moment, he was smiling in a way that told Harry he and Ron were in very deep trouble.

"Follow me," said Snape.

Not daring even to look at each other, Harry and Ron followed Snape up the steps into the vast, echoing entrance hall, which was lit with flaming torches. A delicious smell of food was wafting from the Great Hall, but Snape led them away from the warmth and light, down a narrow stone staircase that led into the dungeons.

"In!" he said, opening a door halfway down the cold passageway and pointing.

They entered Snape's office, shivering. The shadowy walls were lined with shelves of large glass jars, in which floated all manner of revolting things Harry didn't really want to know the name of at the moment. The fireplace was dark and empty. Snape closed the door and turned to look at them.

"So," he said softly, "the train isn't good enough for the famous Harry Potter and his faithful sidekick Weasley. Wanted to arrive with a bang, did we, boys?"

"No, sir, it was the barrier at King's Cross, it -"

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"Silence!" said Snape coldly. "What have you done with the car?"

Ron gulped. This wasn't the first time Snape had given Harry the impression of being able to read minds. But a moment later, he understood, as Snape unrolled today's issue of the Evening Prophet. "You were seen," he hissed, showing them the headline: FLYING FORD ANGLIA MYSTIFIES MUGGLES. He began to read

aloud: "Two Muggles in London, convinced they saw an old car flying over the Post Office tower ... at noon in Norfolk, Mrs. Hetty Bayliss, while hanging out her washing ... Mr. Angus Fleet, of Peebles, reported to police ... Six or seven Muggles in all. I believe your father works in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office?" he said, looking up at Ron and smiling still more nastily. "Dear, dear ... his own son. . . ."

Harry felt as though he'd just been walloped in the stomach by one of the mad tree's larger branches. If anyone found out Mr. Weasley had bewitched the car ... he hadn't thought of that "I noticed, in my search of the park, that considerable damage seems to have been done to a very valuable Whomping Willow," Snape went on.

"That tree did more damage to us than we -" Ron blurted out. "Silence!" snapped Snape again. "Most unfortunately, you are not in my House and the decision to expel you does not rest with me. I shall go and fetch the people who do have that happy power. You will wait here."

Harry and Ron stared at each other, white-faced. Harry didn't feel hungry any more. He now felt extremely sick. He tried not to look at a large, slimy something suspended in green liquid on a

shelf behind Snape's desk. If Snape had gone to fetch Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor House, they were hardly any better off. She might be fairer than Snape, but she was still extremely strict.

Ten minutes later, Snape returned, and sure enough it was Professor McGonagall who accompanied him. Harry had seen Professor McGonagall angry on several occasions, but either he had forgotten just how thin her mouth could go, or he had never seen her this angry before. She raised her wand the moment she entered; Harry and Ron both flinched, but she merely pointed it at the empty fireplace, where flames suddenly erupted.

"Sit," she said, and they both backed into chairs by the fire.

"Explain," she said, her glasses glinting ominously.

Ron launched into the story, starting with the barrier at the station refusing to let them through.

"

-so we had no choice, Professor, we couldn't get on the train."

"Why didn't you send us a letter by owl? I believe you have an owl?" Professor McGonagall said coldly to Harry.

Harry gaped at her. Now she said it, that seemed the obvious thing to have done.

"I - I didn't think -"

"That," said Professor McGonagall, "is obvious."

There was a knock on the office door and Snape, now looking happier than ever, opened it. There stood the headmaster, Professor Dumbledore.

Harry's whole body went numb. Dumbledore was looking unusually

grave. He stared down his very crooked nose at them, and

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Harry suddenly found himself wishing he and Ron were still being beaten up by the Whomping Willow.

There was a long silence. Then Dumbledore said, "Please explain why you did this."

It would have been better if he had shouted. Harry hated the disappointment in his voice. For some reason, he was unable to look Dumbledore in the eyes, and spoke instead to his knees. He told Dumbledore everything except that Mr. Weasley owned the bewitched car, making it sound as though he and Ron had happened to find a flying car parked outside the station. He knew Dumbledore would see through this at once, but Dumbledore asked no questions about the car. When Harry had finished, he merely continued to peer at them through his spectacles.

"We'll go and get our stuff," said Ron in a hopeless sort of voice.

"What are you talking about, Weasley?" barked Professor McGonagall.

"Well, you're expelling us, aren't you?" said Ron.

Harry looked quickly at Dumbledore.

"Not today, Mr. Weasley," said Dumbledore. "But I must impress upon both of you the seriousness of what you have done. I will be writing to both your families tonight. I must also warn you that if you do anything like this again, I will have no choice but to expel you."

Snape looked as though Christmas had been canceled. He cleared his throat and said, "Professor Dumbledore, these boys have flouted the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry, caused serious damage to an old and valuable tree - surely acts of this nature -"

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"It will be for Professor McGonagall to decide on these boys' punishments, Severus," said Dumbledore calmly. "They are in her House and are therefore her responsibility." He turned to Professor McGonagall. "I must go back to the feast, Minerva, I've got to give out a few notices. Come, Severus, there's a delicious-looking custard tart I want to sample -"

Snape shot a look of pure venom at Harry and Ron as he allowed himself to be swept out of his office, leaving them alone with Professor McGonagall, who was still eyeing them like a wrathful eagle. "You'd better get along to the hospital wing, Weasley, you're bleeding."

"Not much," said Ron, hastily wiping the cut over his eye with his sleeve. "Professor, I wanted to watch my sister being Sorted -" "The Sorting Ceremony is over," said Professor McGonagall.

"Your sister is also in Gryffindor."

"Oh, good," said Ron.

"And speaking of Gryffindor --" Professor McGonagall said sharply, but Harry cut in: "Professor, when we took the car, term hadn't started, so - so Gryffindor shouldn't really have points

taken from it - should it?" he finished, watching her anxiously. Professor McGonagall gave him a piercing look, but he was sure she had almost smiled. Her mouth looked less thin, anyway. "I will not take any points from Gryffindor," she said, and Harry's heart lightened considerably. "But you will both get a detention."

It was better than Harry had expected. As for Dumbledore's writing to the Dursleys, that was nothing. Harry knew perfectly well they'd just be disappointed that the Whomping Willow hadn't squashed him flat.

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Professor McGonagall raised her wand again and pointed it at Snape's desk. A large plate of sandwiches, two silver goblets, and a jug of-iced pumpkin juice appeared with a pop.

"You will eat in here and then go straight up to your dormitory," she said. "I must also return to the feast."

When the door had closed behind her, Ron let out a long, low whistle.

"I thought we'd had it," he said, grabbing a sandwich.

"So did I," said Harry, taking one, too.

"Can you believe our luck, though?" said Ron thickly through a mouthful of chicken and ham. "Fred and George must've flown that car five or six times and no Muggle ever saw them." He swallowed and took another huge bite. "Why couldn't we get through the barrier?"

Harry shrugged. "We'll have to watch our step from now on, though," he said, taking a grateful swig of pumpkin juice. "Wish we could've gone up to the feast

"She didn't want us showing off," said Ron sagely. "Doesn't want people to think it's clever, arriving by flying car."

When they had eaten as many sandwiches as they could (the plate kept refilling itself) they rose and left the office, treading the familiar path to Gryffindor Tower. The castle was quiet; it seemed that the feast was over. They walked past muttering portraits and creaking suits of armor, and climbed narrow flights of stone stairs, until at last they reached the passage where the secret entrance to Gryffindor Tower was hidden, behind an oil painting of a very fat woman in a pink silk dress.

"Password?" she said as they approached.

"Er -" said Harry.

They didn't know the new year's password, not having met a Gryffindor prefect yet, but help came almost immediately; they heard hurrying feet behind them and turned to see Hermione dashing toward them.

"There you are! Where have you been? The most ridiculous rumors - someone said you'd been expelled for crashing a flying car

"Well, we haven't been expelled," Harry assured her.

"You're not telling me you did fly here?" said Hermione, sounding almost as severe as Professor McGonagall.

"Skip the lecture," said Ron impatiently, "and tell us the new password."

"It's 'wattlebird,'" said Hermione impatiently, "but that's not the point
—
"

Her words were cut short, however, as the portrait of the fat lady swung open and there was a sudden storm of clapping. It looked as though the whole of Gryffindor House was still awake, packed into the circular common room, standing on the lopsided tables and squashy armchairs, waiting for them to arrive. Arms reached through the portrait hole to pull Harry and Ron inside, leaving Hermione to scramble in after them-t.

"Brilliant!" yelled Lee Jordan. "Inspired! What an entrance! Flying a car right into the Whomping Willow, people'll be talking about that one for years —"

"Good for you," said a fifth year Harry had never spoken to; someone was patting him on the back as though he'd just won a marathon; Fred and George pushed their way to the front of the crowd and said together, "Why couldn't we've come in the car, eh?"

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Ron was scarlet in the face, grinning embarrassedly, but Harry could see one person who didn't look happy at all. Percy was visible over the heads of some excited first years, and he seemed to be trying to get near enough to start telling them off. Harry nudged Ron in the ribs and nodded in Percy's direction. Ron got the point at once.

"Got to get upstairs - bit tired," he said, and the two of them started pushing their way toward the door on the other side of the room, which led to a spiral staircase and the dormitories.

"'Night," Harry called back to Hermione, who was wearing a scowl just like Percy's.

They managed to get to the other side of the common room, still having their backs slapped, and gained the peace of the staircase. They hurried up it, right to the top, and at last reached the door of their old dormitory, which now had a sign on it saying SECOND YEARS. They entered the familiar, circular room, with its five four-posters hung with red velvet and its high, narrow windows. Their trunks had been brought up for them and stood at the ends of their beds.

Ron grinned guiltily at Harry.

"I know I shouldn't've enjoyed that or anything, but ='

The dormitory door flew open and in came the other second year Gryffindor boys, Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom.

"Unbelievable!" beamed Seamus.

"Cool," said Dean.

"Amazing," said Neville, awestruck.

Harry couldn't help it. He grinned, too.

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H-H A P T E RR s 1 x

GILDEROY LOCKHART

he next day, however, Harry barely grinned once. Things started to go downhill from breakfast in the Great Hall. The four long house tables were laden with tureens of porridge, plates of kippers, mountains of toast, and dishes of eggs and bacon, beneath the enchanted ceiling (today, a dull, cloudy gray). Harry and Ron sat down at the Gryffindor table next to Hermione, who had her copy of *Voyages with Vampires* propped open against a milk jug. There was a slight stiffness in the way she said "Morning," which told Harry that she was still disapproving of the way they had arrived. Neville Longbottom, on the other hand, greeted them cheerfully. Neville was a round-faced and accident-prone boy with the worst memory of anyone Harry had ever met.

"Mail's due any minute - I think Gran's sending a few things I forgot."

Harry had only just started his porridge when, sure enough, there was a rushing sound overhead and a hundred or so owls

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streamed in, circling the hall and dropping letters and packages into the chattering crowd. A big, lumpy package bounced off Neville's head and, a second later, something large and gray fell into Hermione's jug, spraying them all with milk and feathers.

"Enrol!" said Ron, pulling the bedraggled owl out by the feet. Errol slumped, unconscious, onto the table, his legs in the air and a damp red envelope in his beak.

"Oh, no -" Ron gasped.

"It's all right, he's still alive," said Hermione, prodding Errol gently with the tip of her finger.

"It's not that - it's that."

Ron was pointing at the red envelope. It looked quite ordinary to Harry, but Ron and Neville were both looking at it as though they expected it to explode.

"What's the matter?" said Harry.

"She's - she's sent me a Howler," said Ron faintly.

"You'd better open it, Ron," said Neville in a timid whisper. "It'll be worse if you don't My gran sent me one once, and I ignored it and" - he gulped - "it was horrible."

Harry looked from their petrified faces to the red envelope.

"What's a Howler?" he said.

But Ron's whole attention was fixed on the letter, which had begun to smoke at the corners.

"Open it," Neville urged. "It'll all be over in a few minutes -"

Ron stretched out a shaking hand, eased the envelope from Errol's beak, and slit it open. Neville stuffed his fingers in his ears. A split second later, Harry knew why. He thought for a moment it had exploded; a roar of sound filled the huge hall, shaking dust from the ceiling.

8 —

"— E CAR, I WO ULDN'T HAVE BEEN S UR-

STEALING THE

PRISED IF THEY'D EXPELLED YOU, YOU WAIT TILL I GET
HOLD OF YOU, I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU STOPPED TO
THINK WHAT YOUR FATHERAND I WENT THROUGH WHEN
WE SAW IT WAS GONE —"

Mrs. Weasleys yells, a hundred times louder than usual, made the plates and spoons rattle on the table, and echoed deafeningly off the stone walls. People throughout the hall were swiveling around to see who had received the Howler, and Ron sank so low in his chair that only his crimson forehead could be seen.

"— LETTER FROM DUMBLEDORE LAST NIGHT, I THOUGHT
YOUR FATHER WOULD DIE OF SHAME, WE DIDN'T BRING
YOU UP TO BEHAVE LIKE THIS, YOU AND HARRY COULD
BOTH HAVE DIED —"

Harry had been wondering when his name was going to crop up. He tried very hard to look as though he couldn't hear the voice that was making his eardrums throb.

"—ABSOLUTELYDISGUSTED — YOUR FATHER'S FACING AN
INQUIRY AT WORK, IT'S ENTIRELY YOUR FAULT AND IF
YOU PUT ANOTHER TOE OUT OF LINE WE'LL BRING YOU
STRAIGHT BACK HOME."

A ringing silence fell. The red envelope, which had dropped from Ron's hand, burst into flames and curled into ashes. Harry and Ron sat stunned, as though a tidal wave had just passed over them. A few people laughed and, gradually, a babble of talk broke out again.

Hermione closed Voyages with Vampires and looked down at the top of Ron's head.

"Well, I don't know what you expected, Ron, but you -"

"Don't tell me I deserved it," snapped Ron.

Harry pushed his porridge away. His insides were burning with guilt. Mr. Weasley was facing an inquiry at work. After all Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had done for him over the summer ...

But he had no time to dwell on this; Professor McGonagall was moving along the Gryffindor table, handing out course schedules. Harry took his and saw that they had double Herbology with the Hufepuffs first.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the castle together, crossed the vegetable patch, and made for the greenhouses, where the magical plants were kept. At least the Howler had done one good thing: Hermione seemed to think they had now been punished enough and was being perfectly friendly again.

As they neared the greenhouses they saw the rest of the class standing outside, waiting for Professor Sprout. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had only just joined them when she came striding into view across the lawn, accompanied by Gilderoy Lockhart. Professor Sprout's arms were full of bandages, and with another twinge of guilt, Harry spotted the Whomping Willow in the distance, several of its branches now in slings.

Professor Sprout was a squat little witch who wore a patched hat over her flyaway hair; there was usually a large amount of earth on her clothes and her fingernails would have made Aunt Petunia faint. Gilderoy Lockhart, however, was immaculate in sweeping robes of turquoise, his golden hair shining under a perfectly positioned turquoise hat with gold trimming.

"Oh, hello there!" he called, beaming around at the assembled

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students. "Just been showing Professor Sprout the right way to doctor a Whomping Willow! But I don't want you running away with the idea that I'm better at Herbology than she is! I just happen to have met several of these exotic plants on my travels . . ."

"Greenhouse three today, chaps!" said Professor Sprout, who was looking distinctly disgruntled, not at all her usual cheerful self.

There was a murmur of interest. They had only ever worked in greenhouse one before - greenhouse three housed far more interesting and dangerous plants. Professor Sprout took a large key from her belt and unlocked the door. Harry caught a whiff of damp earth and fertilizer mingling with the heavy perfume of some giant, umbrella-sized flowers dangling from the ceiling. He was about to follow Ron and Hermione inside when Lockhart's hand shot out.

"Harry! I've been wanting a word - you don't mind if he's a couple of minutes late, do you, Professor Sprout?"

Judging by Professor Sprout's scowl, she did mind, but Lockhart said, "That's the ticket," and closed the greenhouse door in her face.

"Harry," said Lockhart, his large white teeth gleaming in the sunlight as he shook his head. "Harry, Harry, Harry."

Completely nonplussed, Harry said nothing.

"When I heard -well, of course, it was all my fault. Could have kicked myself."

Harry had no idea what he was talking about. He was about to say so when Lockhart went on, "Don't know when I've been more shocked. Flying a car to Hogwarts! Well, of course, I knew at once why you'd done it. Stood out a mile. Harry, Harry, Harry."

It was remarkable how he could show every one of those brilliant teeth even when he wasn't talking.

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"Gave you a taste for publicity, didn't I?" said Lockhart. "Gave you the bug. You got onto the front page of the paper with me and you couldn't wait to do it again."

"Oh, no, Professor, see -"

"Harry, Harry, Harry," said Lockhart, reaching out and grasping his shoulder. "I understand. Natural to want a bit more once you've had that first taste - and I blame myself for giving you that, because it was bound to go to your head - but see here, young man, you can't start flying cars to try and get yourself noticed. Just calm down, all right? Plenty of time for all that when you're older. Yes, yes, I know what you're thinking! 'It's all right for him, he's an internationally famous wizard already!' But when I was twelve, I was just as much of a nobody as you are now. In fact, I'd say I was even more of a nobody! I mean, a few people have heard of you, haven't they? All that business with He-\o-Must-Not-Be-Named!" He glanced at the lightning scar on Harry's forehead. "I know, I know - it's not quite as good as winning Witch Weekly's Most Charming-Smile Award five times in a row, as I have - but it's a start, Harry, it's a start."

He gave Harry a hearty wink and strode off. Harry stood stunned for a few seconds, then, remembering he was supposed to be in the greenhouse, he opened the door and slid inside.

Professor Sprout was standing behind a trestle bench in the center of the greenhouse. About twenty pairs of different-colored ear muffs were lying on the bench. When Harry had taken his place between Ron and Hermione, she said, "We'll be repotting Mandrakes today. Now, who can tell me the properties of the Mandrake?"

To nobody's surprise, Hermione's hand was first into the air.

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"Mandrake, or Mandragora, is a powerful restorative," said Hermione, sounding as usual as though she had swallowed the textbook. "It is used to return people who have been transfigured or cursed to their original state."

"Excellent. Ten points to Gryffindor," said Professor Sprout. "The Mandrake forms an essential part of most antidotes. It is also, however, dangerous. Who can tell me why?"

Hermione's hand narrowly missed Harry's glasses as it shot up again.

"The cry of the Mandrake is fatal to anyone who hears it," she said promptly.

"Precisely. Take another ten points," said Professor Sprout. "Now, the Mandrakes we have here are still very young."

She pointed to a row of deep trays as she spoke, and everyone shuffled forward for a better look. A hundred or so tufty little plants, purplish green in color, were growing there in rows. They looked quite unremarkable to Harry, who didn't have the slightest idea what Hermione meant by the "cry" of the Mandrake.

"Everyone take a pair of earmuffs," said Professor Sprout.

There was a scramble as everyone tried to seize a pair that wasn't pink and fluffy.

"When I tell you to put them on, make sure your ears are completely covered," said Professor Sprout. "When it is safe to remove them, I will give you the thumbs-up. Right - earmuffs on."

Harry snapped the earmuffs over his ears. They shut out sound completely. Professor Sprout put the pink, fluffy pair over her own ears, rolled up the sleeves of her robes, grasped one of the tufty plants firmly, and pulled hard.

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Harry let out a gasp of surprise that no one could hear.

Instead of roots, a small, muddy, and extremely ugly baby popped out of the earth. The leaves were growing right out of his head. He had pale green, mottled skin, and was clearly bawling at the top of his lungs.

Professor Sprout took a large plant pot from under the table and plunged the Mandrake into it, burying him in dark, damp compost until only the tufted leaves were visible. Professor Sprout dusted off her hands, gave them all the thumbs-up, and removed her own earmuffs.

"As our Mandrakes are only seedlings, their cries won't kill yet," she said calmly as though she'd just done nothing more exciting than water a begonia. "However, they will knock you out for several hours, and as I'm sure none of you want to miss your first day back, make sure your earmuffs are securely in place while you work. I will attract your attention when it is time to pack up."

"Four to a tray - there is a large supply of pots here - compost in the sacks over there - and be careful of the Venemous Tentacula, it's teething."

She gave a sharp slap to a spiky, dark red plant as she spoke, making it draw in the long feelers that had been inching sneakily over her shoulder.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were joined at their tray by a curly-haired Hufflepuff boy Harry knew by sight but had never spoken to.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley," he said brightly, shaking Harry by the hand.
"Know who you are, of course, the famous Harry Potter... And you're
Hermione Granger - always top in everything"

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(Hermione beamed as she had her hand shaken too) "- and Ron Weasley. Wasn't that your flying car?"

Ron didn't smile. The Howler was obviously still on his mind.

"That Lockhart's something, isn't he?" said Justin happily as they began filling their plant pots with dragon dung compost. "Awfully brave chap. Have you read his books? Id have died of fear if Id been cornered in a telephone booth by a werewolf, but he stayed cool and - zap - just fantastic.

"My name was down for Eton, you know. I can't tell you how glad I am I came here instead. Of course, Mother was slightly disappointed, but since I made her read Lockhart's books I think she's begun to see how useful it'll be to have a fully trained wizard in the family"

After that they didn't have much chance to talk. Their earmuffs were back on and they needed to concentrate on the Mandrakes. Professor Sprout had made it look extremely easy, but it wasn't. The Mandrakes didn't like coming out of the earth, but didn't seem to want to go back into it either. They squirmed, kicked, flailed their sharp little fists, and

gnashed their teeth; Harry spent ten whole minutes trying to squash a particularly fat one into a pot.

By the end of the class, Harry, like everyone else, was sweaty, aching, and covered in earth. Everyone traipsed back to the castle for a quick wash and then the Gryffindors hurried off to Transfiguration.

Professor McGonagall's classes were always hard work, but today was especially difficult. Everything Harry had learned last year seemed to have leaked out of his head during the summer. He was supposed to be turning a beetle into a button, but all he managed

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to do was give his beetle a lot of exercise as it scuttled over the desktop avoiding his wand.

Ron was having far worse problems. He had patched up his wand with some borrowed Spellotape, but it seemed to be damaged beyond repair. It kept crackling and sparking at odd moments, and every time Ron tried to transfigure his beetle it engulfed him in thick gray smoke that smelled of rotten eggs. Unable to see what he was doing, Ron accidentally squashed his beetle with his elbow and had to ask for a new one. Professor McGonagall wasn't pleased.

Harry was relieved to hear the lunch bell. His brain felt like a wrung sponge. Everyone filed out of the classroom except him and Ron, who was whacking his wand furiously on the desk.

"Stupid - useless - thing -"

"Write home for another one," Harry suggested as the wand let off a

volley of bangs like a firecracker.

"Oh, yeah, and get another Howler back," said Ron, stuffing the now hissing wand into his bag. " `It's your own fault your wand got snapped -'"

They went down to lunch, where Ron's mood was not improved by Hermione's showing them the handful of perfect coat buttons she had produced in Transfiguration.

"What've we got this afternoon?" said Harry, hastily changing the subject.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts," said Hermione at once.

"Why, "demanded Ron, seizing her schedule, "have you outlined all Lockhart's lessons in little hearts?"

Hermione snatched the schedule back, blushing furiously.

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They finished lunch and went outside into the overcast courtyard. Hermione sat down on a stone step and buried her nose in Voyages with Vampires again. Harry and Ron stood talking about Quidditch for several minutes before Harry became aware that he was being closely watched. Looking up, he saw the very small, mousy-haired boy he'd seen trying on the Sorting Hat last night staring at Harry as though transfixed. He was clutching what looked like an ordinary Muggle camera, and the moment Harry looked at him, he went bright red.

"All right, Harry? I'm -I'm Colin Creevey," he said breathlessly, taking a tentative step forward. "I'm in Gryffindor, too. D'you think - would it be all right if - can I have a picture?" he said, raising the camera hopefully.

"A picture?" Harry repeated blankly.

"So I can prove I've met you," said Colin Creevey eagerly, edging further forward. "I know all about you. Everyone's told me. About how you survived when You-Know-Who tried to kill you and how he disappeared and everything and how you've still got a lightning scar on your forehead" (his eyes raked Harry's hairline) "and a boy in my dormitory said if I develop the film in the right potion, the pictures'll move." Colin drew a great shuddering breath of excitement and said, "It's amazing here, isn't it? I never knew all the odd stuff I could do was magic till I got the letter from Hogwarts. My dad's a milkman, he couldn't believe it either. So I'm taking loads of pictures to send home to him. And it'd be really good if I had one of you" - he looked imploringly at Harry - "maybe your friend could take it and I could stand next to you? And then, could you sign it?"

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"Signed photos? You're giving out signed photos, Potter?"

Loud and scathing, Draco Malfoy's voice echoed around the courtyard. He had stopped right behind Colin, flanked, as he always was at Hogwarts, by his large and thuggish cronies, Crabbe and Goyle.

"Everyone line up!" Malfoy roared to the crowd. "Harry Potter's giving out signed photos!"

"No, I'm not," said Harry angrily, his fists clenching. "Shut up, Malfoy."

"You're just jealous," piped up Colin, whose entire body was about as thick as Crabbe's neck.

'jealous?" said Malfoy, who didn't need to shout anymore: half the courtyard was listening in. "Of what? I don't want a foul scar right across my head, thanks. I don't think getting your head cut open makes you that special, myself."

Crabbe and Goyle were sniggering stupidly.

"Eat slugs, Malfoy," said Ron angrily. Crabbe stopped laughing and started rubbing his knuckles in a menacing way.

"Be careful, Weasley," sneered Malfoy. "You don't want to start any trouble or your Mommy'll have to come and take you away from school." He put on a shrill, piercing voice. "If you put another toe out of line' - "

A knot of Slytherin fifth-years nearby laughed loudly at this.

"Weasley would like a signed photo, Potter," smirked Malfoy. "It'd be worth more than his family's whole house -"

Ron whipped out his Spellotaped wand, but Hermione shut Voyages with Vampires with a snap and whispered, "Look out!"

"What's all this, what's all this?" Gilderoy Lockhart was striding

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toward them, his turquoise robes swirling behind him. "Who's giving out signed photos?"

Harry started to speak but he was cut short as Lockhart flung an arm around his shoulders and thundered jovially, "Shouldn't have asked! We meet again, Harry!"

Pinned to Lockhart's side and burning with humiliation, Harry saw Malfoy slide smirking back into the crowd.

"Come on then, Mr. Creevey," said Lockhart, beaming at Colin.

"A double portrait, can't do better than that, and we'll both sign it for you."

Colin fumbled for his camera and took the picture as the bell rang behind them, signaling the start of afternoon classes.

"Off you go, move along there," Lockhart called to the crowd, and he set off back to the castle with Harry, who was wishing he knew a good Vanishing Spell, still clasped to his side.

"A word to the wise, Harry," said Lockhart paternally as they entered the building through a side door. "I covered up for you back there with young Creevey - if he was photographing me, too, your schoolmates won't think you're setting yourself up so much"

Deaf to Harry's stammers, Lockhart swept him down a corridor lined with staring students and up a staircase.

"Let me just say that handing out signed pictures at this stage of

your career isn't sensible - looks a tad bigheaded, Harry, to be frank. There may well come a time when, like me, you'll need to keep a stack handy wherever you go, but" - he gave a little chortle - "I don't think you're quite there yet."

They had reached Lockhart's classroom and he let Harry go at

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last. Harry yanked his robes straight and headed for a seat at the very back of the class, where he busied himself with piling all seven of Lockhart's books in front of him, so that he could avoid looking at the real thing.

The rest of the class came clattering in, and Ron and Hermione sat down on either side of Harry.

"You could've fried an egg on your face" said Ron. "You'd better hope Creevey doesn't meet Ginny, or they'll be starting a Harry Potter fan club."

"Shut up," snapped Harry. The last thing he needed was for Lockhart to hear the phrase "Harry Potter fan club."

When the whole class was seated, Lockhart cleared his throat loudly and silence fell. He reached forward, picked up Neville Longbottom's copy of *Travels with Trolls*, and held it up to show his own, winking portrait on the front.

"Me," he said, pointing at it and winking as well. "Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award - but I don't talk about that. I didn't get rid of the Bandon Banshee by smiling at her!"

He waited for them to laugh; a few people smiled weakly.

"I see you've all bought a complete set of my books -well done. I thought we'd start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about just to check how well you've read them, how much you've taken in -"

When he had handed out the test papers he returned to the front of the class and said, "You have thirty minutes - start - now!"

Harry looked down at his paper and read:

1. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color?
2. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition?
3. What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart's greatest achievement to date?

On and on it went, over three sides of paper, right down to:

54. When is Gilderoy Lockhart's birthday, and what would his ideal gift be?

Half an hour later, Lockhart collected the papers and rifled through

them in front of the class.

"Tut, tut - hardly any of you remembered that my favorite color is lilac. I say so in Year with the Yeti. And a few of you need to read Wanderings with Werewolves more carefully - I clearly state in chapter twelve that my ideal birthday gift would be harmony between all magic and non-magic peoples - though I wouldn't say no to a large bottle of Ogdeds Old Firewhisky!"

He gave them another roguish wink. Ron was now staring at Lockhart with an expression of disbelief on his face; Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, who were sitting in front, were shaking with silent laughter. Hermione, on the other hand, was listening to Lockhart with rapt attention and gave a start when he mentioned her name.

". . . but Miss Hermione Granger knew my secret ambition is to rid the world of evil and market my own range of hair-care potions - good girl! In fact" - he flipped her paper over - "full marks! Where is Miss Hermione Granger?"

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Hermione raised a trembling hand.

"Excellent!" beamed Lockhart. "Quite excellent! Take ten points for Gryffindor! And so - to business -"

He bent down behind his desk and lifted a large, covered cage onto it.

"Now - be warned! It is my job to arm you against the foulest creatures known to wizardkind! You may find yourselves facing your worst fears in this room. Know only that no harm can befall you whilst I am here. All I ask is that you remain calm."

In spite of himself, Harry leaned around his pile of books for a better look at the cage. Lockhart placed a hand on the cover. Dean and Seamus had stopped laughing now. Neville was cowering in his front row seat.

"I must ask you not to scream," said Lockhart in a low voice. "It might provoke them."

As the whole class held its breath, Lockhart whipped off the cover.

"Yes," he said dramatically. "Freshly caught Cornish pixies. "

Seamus Finnigan couldn't control himself. He let out a snort of laughter that even Lockhart couldn't mistake for a scream of terror.

"Yes?" He smiled at Seamus.

"Well, they're not - they're not very - dangerous, are they?" Seamus choked.

"Don't be so sure!" said Lockhart, waggling a finger annoyingly at Seamus. "Devilish tricky little blighters they can be!"

The pixies were electric blue and about eight inches high, with pointed faces and voices so shrill it was like listening to a lot of budgies

arguing. The moment the cover had been removed, they

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had started jabbering and rocketing around, rattling the bars and making bizarre faces at the people nearest them.

"Right, then," Lockhart said loudly. "Let's see what you make of them!" And he opened the cage.

It was pandemonium. The pixies shot in every direction like rockets. Two of them seized Neville by the ears and lifted him into the air. Several shot straight through the window, showering the back row with broken glass. The rest proceeded to wreck the classroom more effectively than a rampaging rhino. They grabbed ink bottles and sprayed the class with them, shredded books and papers, tore pictures from the walls, up-ended the waste basket, grabbed bags and books and threw them out of the smashed window; within minutes, half the class was sheltering under desks and Neville was swinging from the iron chandelier in the ceiling.

"Come on now - round them up, round them up, they're only pixies," Lockhart shouted.

He rolled up his sleeves, brandished his wand, and bellowed,

"Peskipiksi Pesternomi!"

It had absolutely no effect; one of the pixies seized his wand and threw it out of the window, too. Lockhart gulped and dived under his own desk, narrowly avoiding being squashed by Neville, who fell a second later as the chandelier gave way.

The bell rang and there was a mad rush toward the exit. In the relative calm that followed, Lockhart straightened up, caught sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who were almost at the door, and said, "Well, I'll ask you three to just nip the rest of them back into their cage." He swept past them and shut the door quickly behind him.

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"Can you believe him?" roared Ron as one of the remaining pixies bit him painfully on the ear.

"He just wants to give us some hands-on experience," said Hermione, immobilizing two pixies at once with a clever Freezing Charm and stuffing them back into their cage.

"Hands on? "said Harry, who was trying to grab a pixie dancing out of reach with its tongue out. "Hermione, he didn't have a clue what he was doing -"

"Rubbish," said Hermione. "You've read his books - look at all those amazing things he's done -"

"He says he's done," Ron muttered.

arry spent a lot of time over the next few days dodging out of sight whenever he saw Gilderoy Lockhart coming down a corridor. Harder

to avoid was Colin Creevey, who seemed to have memorized Harry's schedule. Nothing seemed to give Colin a bigger thrill than to say, "All right, Harry?" six or seven times a day and hear, "Hello, Colin," back, however exasperated Harry sounded when he said it.

Hedwig was still angry with Harry about the disasterous car journey and Ron's wand was still malfunctioning, surpassing itself on Friday morning by shooting out of Ron's hand in Charms and hitting tiny old Professor Flitwick squarely between the eyes, creating a large, throbbing green boil where it had struck. So with one thing and another, Harry was quite glad to reach the weekend. He, Ron, and Hermione were planning to visit Hagrid on Saturday morning. Harry, however, was shaken awake several hours earlier

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than he would have liked by Oliver Wood, Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

"Whassamatter?" said Harry groggily.

"Quidditch practice!" said Wood. "Come on!"

Harry squinted at the window. There was a thin mist hanging across the pink-and-gold sky. Now that he was awake, he couldn't understand how he could have slept through the racket the birds were making.

"Oliver," Harry croaked. "It's the crack of dawn."

"Exactly," said Wood. He was a tall and burly sixth year and, at the moment, his eyes were gleaming with a crazed enthusiasm. "It's part of our new training program. Come on, grab your broom, and let's go," said Wood heartily. "None of the other teams have started training yet; we're going to be first off the mark this year -"

Yawning and shivering slightly, Harry climbed out of bed and tried to find his Quidditch robes.

"Good man," said Wood. "Meet you on the field in fifteen minutes.

When he'd found his scarlet team robes and pulled on his cloak for warmth, Harry scribbled a note to Ron explaining where he'd gone and went down the spiral staircase to the common room, his Nimbus Two Thousand on his shoulder. He had just reached the portrait hole when there was a clatter behind him and Colin Creevey came dashing down the spiral staircase, his camera swinging madly around his neck and something clutched in his hand.

"I heard someone saying your name on the stairs, Harry! Look what I've got here! I've had it developed, I wanted to show you -"

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Harry looked bemusedly at the photograph Colin was brandishing under his nose.

A moving, black-and-white Lockhart was tugging hard on an arm

Harry recognized as his own. He was pleased to see that his photographic self was putting up a good fight and refusing to be dragged into view. As Harry watched, Lockhart gave up and slumped, panting, against the white edge of the picture.

"Will you sign it?" said Colin eagerly.

"No," said Harry flatly, glancing around to check that the room was really deserted. "Sorry, Colin, I'm in a hurry - Quidditch practice -"

He climbed through the portrait hole.

"Oh, wow! Wait for me! I've never watched a Quidditch game before!"

Colin scrambled through the hole after him.

"It'll be really boring," Harry said quickly, but Colin ignored him, his face shining with excitement.

"You were the youngest House player in a hundred years, weren't you, Harry? Weren't you?" said Colin, trotting alongside him. "You must be brilliant. I've never flown. Is it easy? Is that your own broom? Is that the best one there is?"

Harry didn't know how to get rid of him. It was like having an extremely talkative shadow.

"I don't really understand Quidditch," said Colin breathlessly. "Is it true there are four balls? And two of them fly around trying to knock people off their brooms?"

"Yes," said Harry heavily, resigned to explaining the complicated rules of Quidditch. "They're called Bludgers. There are two Beaters

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on each team who carry clubs to beat the Bludgers away from their side. Fred and George Weasley are the Gryffindor Beaters."

"And what are the other balls for?" Colin asked, tripping down a couple of steps because he was gazing open-mouthed at Harry.

"Well, the Quafe - that's the biggish red one - is the one that scores goals. Three Chasers on each team throw the Quaffle to each other and try and get it through the goal posts at the end of the pitch - they're three long poles with hoops on the end."

"And the fourth ball -"

"- is the Golden Snitch," said Harry, "and it's very small, very fast, and difficult to catch. But that's what the Seeker's got to do, because a game of Quidditch doesn't end until the Snitch has been caught. And whichever team's Seeker gets the Snitch earns his team an extra hundred and fifty points."

"And you're the Gryffindor Seeker, aren't you?" said Colin in awe.

"Yes," said Harry as they left the castle and started across the dew-

drenched grass. "And there's the Keeper, too. He guards the goal posts. That's it, really."

But Colin didn't stop questioning Harry all the way down the sloping lawns to the Quidditch field, and Harry only shook him off when he reached the changing rooms; Colin called after him in a piping voice, "I'll go and get a good seat, Harry!" and hurried off to the stands.

The rest of the Gryffindor team were already in the changing room. Wood was the only person who looked truly awake. Fred and George Weasley were sitting, puffy-eyed and touslehaired, next to fourth year Alicia Spinnet, who seemed to be nodding off against the wall behind her. Her fellow Chasers, Katie

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Bell and Angelina Johnson, were yawning side by side opposite them.

"There you are, Harry, what kept you?" said Wood briskly. "Now, I wanted a quick talk with you all before we actually get onto the field, because I spent the summer devising a whole new training program, which I really think will make all the difference

Wood was holding up a large diagram of a Quidditch field, on which were drawn many lines, arrows, and crosses in different colored inks. He took out his wand, tapped the board, and the arrows began to wiggle over the diagram like caterpillars. As Wood launched into a speech about his new tactics, Fred Weasley's head drooped right onto Alicia Spinnet's shoulder and he began to snore.

The first board took nearly twenty minutes to explain, but there was another board under that, and a third under that one. Harry sank into a stupor as Wood droned on and on.

"So," said Wood, at long last, jerking Harry from a wistful fantasy about what he could be eating for breakfast at this very moment up at the castle. "Is that clear? Any questions?"

"I've got a question, Oliver," said George, who had woken with a start. "Why couldn't you have told us all this yesterday when we were awake?"

Wood wasn't pleased.

"Now, listen here, you lot," he said, glowering at them all. "We should have won the Quidditch cup last year. We're easily the best team. But unfortunately - owing to circumstances beyond our control -"

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Harry shifted guiltily in his seat. He had been unconscious in the hospital wing for the final match of the previous year, meaning that Gryffindor had been a player short and had suffered their worst defeat in three hundred years.

Wood took a moment to regain control of himself. Their last defeat was clearly still torturing him.

"So this year, we train harder than ever before Okay, let's go and put our new theories into practice!" Wood shouted, seizing his broomstick and leading the way out of the locker rooms. Stifflegged and still yawning, his team followed.

They had been in the locker room so long that the sun was up completely now, although remnants of mist hung over the grass in the stadium. As Harry walked onto the field, he saw Ron and Hermione sitting in the stands.

"Aren't you finished yet?" called Ron incredulously.

"Haven't even started," said Harry, looking jealously at the toast and marmalade Ron and Hermione had brought out of the Great Hall.

"Wood's been teaching us new moves."

He mounted his broomstick and kicked at the ground, soaring up into the air. The cool morning air whipped his face, waking him far more effectively than Wood's long talk. It felt wonderful to be back on the Quidditch field. He soared right around the stadium at full speed, racing Fred and George.

"What's that funny clicking noise?" called Fred as they hurtled around the corner.

Harry looked into the stands. Colin was sitting in one of the highest seats, his camera raised, taking picture after picture, the sound strangely magnified in the deserted stadium.

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"Look this way, Harry! This way!" he cried shrilly.

"Who's that?" said Fred.

"No idea," Harry lied, putting on a spurt of speed that took him as far away as possible from Colin.

"What's going on?" said Wood, frowning, as he skimmed through the air toward them. "Why's that first year taking pictures? I don't like it. He could be a Slytherin spy, trying to find out about our new training program."

"He's in Gryffindor," said Harry quickly.

"And the Slytherins don't need a spy, Oliver," said George.

"What makes you say that?" said Wood testily.

"Because they're here in person," said George, pointing.

Several people in green robes were walking onto the field, broomsticks in their hands.

"I don't believe it!" Wood hissed in outrage. "I booked the field for today! We'll see about this!"

Wood shot toward the ground, landing rather harder than he meant to in his anger, staggering slightly as he dismounted. Harry, Fred, and George followed.

"Flint!" Wood bellowed at the Slytherin Captain. "This is our practice time! We got up specially! You can clear off now!"

Marcus Flint was even larger than Wood. He had a look of trollish cunning on his face as he replied, "Plenty of room for all of us, Wood."

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie had come over, too. There were no girls on the Slytherin team, who stood shoulder to shoulder, facing the Gryffindors, leering to a man.

"But I booked the field!" said Wood, positively spitting with rage. "I booked it!"

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"Ah," said Flint. "But I've got a specially signed note here from Professor Snape. `I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team permission to practice today on the Quidditch field owing to the need to train their new Seeker.'"

"You've got a new Seeker?" said Wood, distracted. "Where?"

And from behind the six large figures before them came a seventh, smaller boy, smirking all over his pale, pointed face. It was Draco Malfoy.

"Aren't you Lucius Malfoy's son?" said Fred, looking at Malfoy with dislike.

"Funny you should mention Draco's father," said Flint as the whole Slytherin team smiled still more broadly. "Let me show you the generous gift he's made to the Slytherin team."

All seven of them held out their broomsticks. Seven highly polished, brand-new handles and seven sets of fine gold lettering spelling the words Nimbus Two Thousand and One gleamed under the Gryffindors' noses in the early morning sun.

"Very latest model. Only came out last month," said Flint carelessly, flicking a speck of dust from the end of his own. "I believe it outstrips the old Two Thousand series by a considerable amount. As for the old Cleansweeps" - he smiled nastily at Fred and George, who were both clutching Cleansweep Fives - "sweeps the board with them."

None of the Gryffindor team could think of anything to say for a moment. Malfoy was smirking so broadly his cold eyes were reduced to slits.

"Oh, look," said Flint. "A field invasion."

Ron and Hermione were crossing the grass to see what was going on.

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"What's happening?" Ron asked Harry. "Why aren't you playing? And what's he doing here?"

He was looking at Malfoy, taking in his Slytherin Quidditch robes.

"I'm the new Slytherin Seeker, Weasley," said Malfoy, smugly. "Everyone's just been admiring the brooms my father's bought our team."

Ron gaped, open-mouthed, at the seven superb broomsticks in front of him.

"Good, aren't they?" said Malfoy smoothly. "But perhaps the Gryffindor team will be able to raise some gold and get new brooms, too. You could raffle off those Cleansweep Fives; I expect a museum would bid for them."

The Slytherin team howled with laughter.

"At least no one on the Gryffindor team had to buy their way in," said Hermione sharply. "They got in on pure talent."

The smug look on Malfoy's face flickered.

"No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood," he spat.

Harry knew at once that Malfoy had said something really bad because there was an instant uproar at his words. Flint had to dive in front of Malfoy to stop Fred and George jumping on him, Alicia shrieked, "How dare you!" ; and Ron plunged his hand into his robes, pulled out his wand, yelling, "You'll pay for that one, Malfoy!" and pointed it furiously under Flint's arm at Malfoys face.

A loud bang echoed around the stadium and a jet of green light shot out of the wrong end of Ron's wand, hitting him in the stomach and sending him reeling backward onto the grass.

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"Ron! Ron! Are you all right?" squealed Hermione.

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Instead he gave an almighty belch and several slugs dribbled out of his mouth onto his lap.

The Slytherin team were paralyzed with laughter. Flint was doubled up, hanging onto his new broomstick for support. Malfoy was on all fours, banging the ground with his fist. The Gryffindors were gathered around Ron, who kept belching large, glistening slugs. Nobody seemed to want to touch him.

"We'd better get him to Hagrid's, it's nearest," said Harry to Hermione, who nodded bravely, and the pair of them pulled Ron up by the arms.

"What happened, Harry? What happened? Is he ill? But you can cure him, can't you?" Colin had run down from his seat and was now dancing alongside them as they left the field. Ron gave a huge heave and more slugs dribbled down his front.

"Oooh," said Colin, fascinated and raising his camera. "Can you hold him still, Harry?"

"Get out of the way, Colin!" said Harry angrily. He and Hermione supported Ron out of the stadium and across the grounds toward

the edge of the forest.

"Nearly there, Ron," said Hermione as the gamekeeper's cabin came into view. "You'll be all right in a minute - almost there -"

They were within twenty feet of Hagrid's house when the front door opened, but it wasn't Hagrid who emerged. Gilderoy Lockhart, wearing robes of palest mauve today, came striding out.

"Quick, behind here," Harry hissed, dragging Ron behind a nearby bush. Hermione followed, somewhat reluctantly.

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"It's a simple matter if you know what you're doing!" Lockhart was saying loudly to Hagrid. "If you need help, you know where I am! I'll let you have a copy of my book. I'm surprised you haven't already got one - I'll sign one tonight and send it over. Well, good-bye!" And he strode away toward the castle.

Harry waited until Lockhart was out of sight, then pulled Ron out of the bush and up to Hagrid's front door. They knocked urgently.

Hagrid appeared at once, looking very grumpy, but his expression brightened when he saw who it was.

"Bin wonderin' when you'd come ter see me - come in, come in - thought you mighta bin Professor Lockhart back again -"

Harry and Hermione supported Ron over the threshold into the one-roomed cabin, which had an enormous bed in one corner, a fire crackling merrily in the other. Hagrid didn't seem perturbed by Ron's slug problem, which Harry hastily explained as he lowered Ron into a chair.

"Better out than in," he said cheerfully, plunking a large copper basin in front of him. "Get 'em all up, Ron."

"I don't think there's anything to do except wait for it to stop," said Hermione anxiously, watching Ron bend over the basin. "That's a difficult curse to work at the best of times, but with a broken wand -"

Hagrid was bustling around making them tea. His boarhound, Fang, was slobbering over Harry.

"What did Lockhart want with you, Hagrid?" Harry asked, scratching Fang's ears.

"Givin' me advice on gettin' kelpies out of a well," growled

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Hagrid, moving a half-plucked rooster off his scrubbed table and setting down the teapot. "Like I don't know. An' bangin' on about some banshee he banished. If one word of it was true, I'll eat my kettle."

It was most unlike Hagrid to criticize a Hogwarts' teacher, and Harry looked at him in surprise. Hermione, however, said in a voice

somewhat higher than usual, "I think you're being a bit unfair. Professor Dumbledore obviously thought he was the best man for the job -"

"He was the on' man for the job," said Hagrid, offering them a Y plate of treacle fudge, while Ron coughed squelchily into his basin. "An' I mean the on' one. Gettin' very difficult ter find anyone fer Y the Dark Arts job. People aren't too keen ter take it on, see. They're startin' ter think it's jinxed. No one's lasted long fer a while now. So tell me," said Hagrid, jerking his head at Ron. "Who was he tryin' ter curse?"

"Malfoy called Hermione something - it must've been really bad, because everyone went wild."

"It was bad," said Ron hoarsely, emerging over the tabletop looking pale and sweaty. "Malfoy called her 'Mudblood,' Hagrid -"

Ron dived out of sight again as a fresh wave of slugs made their appearance. Hagrid looked outraged.

"He didn'!" he growled at Hermione.

"He did," she said. "But I don't know what it means. I could tell it was really rude, of course -"

"It's about the most insulting thing he could think of," gasped Ron, coming back up. "Mudblood's a really foul name for someone who is Muggle-born - you know, non-magic parents. There are

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some wizards - like Malfoy's family - who think they're better than everyone else because they're what people call pure-blood." He gave a small burp, and a single slug fell into his outstretched hand. He threw it into the basin and continued, "I mean, the rest of us know it doesn't make any difference at all. Look at Neville Longbottom - he's pure-blood and he can hardly stand a cauldron the right way up."

"An' they haven't invented a spell our Hermione can' do," said Hagrid proudly, making Hermione go a brilliant shade of magenta.

"It's a disgusting thing to call someone," said Ron, wiping his sweaty brow with a shaking hand. "Dirty blood, see. Common blood. It's ridiculous. Most wizards these days are half-blood anyway. If we hadn't married Muggles we'd've died out."

He retched and ducked out of sight again.

"Well, I don' blame yeh fer tryin' ter curse him, Ron," said Hagrid loudly over the thuds of more slugs hitting the basin. "Bu' maybe it was a good thing yer wand backfired. 'Spect Lucius Malfoy would've come marchin' up ter school if yeh'd cursed his son. Least yer not in trouble."

Harry would have pointed out that trouble didn't come much worse than having slugs pouring out of your mouth, but he couldn't; Hagrid's

treacle fudge had cemented his jaws together.

"Harry," said Hagrid abruptly as though struck by a sudden thought.
"Gotta bone ter pick with yeh. I've heard you've bin givin' out signed
photos. How come I haven't got one?"

Furious, Harry wrenched his teeth apart.

"I have not been giving out signed photos," he said hotly. "If
Lockhart's still spreading that around -"

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But then he saw that Hagrid was laughing.

"I'm on'y jokin'," he said, patting Harry genially on the back and
sending him face first into the table. "I knew yeh hadn't really. I told
Lockhart yeh didn' need teh. Yer more famous than him without
tryin'."

"Bet he didn't like that," said Harry, sitting up and rubbing his chin.

"Don' think he did," said Hagrid, his eyes twinkling. "An' then I told
him Id never read one o' his books an' he decided ter go. Treacle
fudge, Ron?" he added as Ron reappeared.

"No thanks," said Ron weakly. "Better not risk it."

"Come an' see what I've bin growin'," said Hagrid as Harry and
Hermione finished the last of their tea.

In the small vegetable patch behind Hagrid's house were a dozen of
the largest pumpkins Harry had ever seen. Each was the size of a
large boulder.

"Gettin' on well, aren't they?" said Hagrid happily. "Fer the Halloween
feast ... should be big enough by then."

"What've you been feeding them?" said Harry.

Hagrid looked over his shoulder to check that they were alone.

"Well, I've bin givin' them - you know - a bit o' help -"

Harry noticed Hagrid's flowery pink umbrella leaning against the back
wall of the cabin. Harry had had reason to believe before now that
this umbrella was not all it looked; in fact, he had the strong
impression that Hagrid's old school wand was concealed inside it.
Hagrid wasn't supposed to use magic. He had been expelled from
Hogwarts in his third year, but Harry had never found out why -any
mention of the matter and Hagrid would clear his

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throat loudly and become mysteriously deaf until the subject was
changed.

"An Engorgement Charm, I suppose?" said Hermione, halfway
between disapproval and amusement. "Well, you've done a good job on
them."

"That's what yer little sister said," said Hagrid, nodding at Ron. "Met her jus' yesterday." Hagrid looked sideways at Harry, his beard twitching. "Said she was jus' lookin' round the grounds, but I reckon she was hopin' she might run inter someone else at my house." He winked at Harry. "If yeh ask me, she wouldn't say no ter a signed -"

"Oh, shut up," said Harry. Ron snorted with laughter and the ground was sprayed with slugs.

"Watch it!" Hagrid roared, pulling Ron away from his precious pumpkins.

It was nearly lunchtime and as Harry had only had one bit of treacle fudge since dawn, he was keen to go back to school to eat. They said good-bye to Hagrid and walked back up to the castle, Ron hiccupping occasionally, but only bringing up two very small slugs.

They had barely set foot in the cool entrance hall when a voice rang out, "There you are, Potter - Weasley." Professor McGonagall was walking toward them, looking stern. "You will both do your detentions this evening."

"What're we doing, Professor?" said Ron, nervously suppressing a burp.

"You will be polishing the silver in the trophy room with Mr. Filch," said Professor McGonagall. "And no magic, Weasley - elbow grease."

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Ron gulped. Argus Filch, the caretaker, was loathed by every student in the school.

"And you, Potter, will be helping Professor Lockhart answer his fan mail," said Professor McGonagall.

"Oh n - Professor, can't I go and do the trophy room, too?" said Harry desperately.

"Certainly not," said Professor McGonagall, raising her eyebrows. "Professor Lockhart requested you particularly. Eight o'clock sharp, both of you."

Harry and Ron slouched into the Great Hall in states of deepest gloom, Hermione behind them, wearing a well-you-did-break-school-rules sort of expression. Harry didn't enjoy his shepherd's pie as much as he'd thought. Both he and Ron felt they'd got the worse deal.

"Filch'll have me there all night," said Ron heavily. "No magic! There must be about a hundred cups in that room. I'm no good at Muggle cleaning."

"I'd swap anytime," said Harry hollowly. "I've had loads of practice with the Dursleys. Answering Lockhart's fan mail ... he'll be a nightmare

Saturday afternoon seemed to melt away, and in what seemed like no time, it was five minutes to eight, and Harry was dragging his feet along the second-floor corridor to Lockhart's office. He gritted his

teeth and knocked.

The door flew open at once. Lockhart beamed down at him.

"Ah, here's the scalawag!" he said. "Come in, Harry, come in -"

Shining brightly on the walls by the light of many candles were countless framed photographs of Lockhart. He had even signed a few of them. Another large pile lay on his desk.

"You can address the envelopes!" Lockhart told Harry, as though this was a huge treat. "This first one's to Gladys Gudgeon, bless her - huge fan of mine -"

The minutes snailed by. Harry let Lockhart's voice wash over him, occasionally saying, "Mmm" and "Right" and "Yeah." Now and then he caught a phrase like, "Fame's a fickle friend, Harry," or "Celebrity is as celebrity does, remember that."

The candles burned lower and lower, making the light dance over the many moving faces of Lockhart watching him. Harry moved his aching hand over what felt like the thousandth envelope, writing out Veronica Smethley's address. It must be nearly time to leave, Harry thought miserably, please let it be nearly time...

And then he heard something - something quite apart from the spitting of the dying candles and Lockhart's prattle about his fans.

It was a voice, a voice to chill the bone marrow, a voice of breathtaking, ice-cold venom.

"Come ... come to me.... Let me rip you.... Let me tear you Let me kill you . . .
. . ."

Harry gave a huge jump and a large lilac blot appeared on Veronica Smethley's street.

"What?" he said loudly.

"I know!" said Lockhart. "Six solid months at the top of the best-seller list! Broke all records!"

"No," said Harry frantically. "That voice!"

"Sorry?" said Lockhart, looking puzzled. "What voice?"

"That - that voice that said - didn't you hear it?"

Lockhart was looking at Harry in high astonishment.

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"What are you talking about, Harry? Perhaps you're getting a little drowsy? Great Scott - look at the time! We've been here nearly four hours! I'd never have believed it - the time's flown, hasn't it?"

Harry didn't answer. He was straining his ears to hear the voice again,

but there was no sound now except for Lockhart telling him he mustn't expect a treat like this every time he got detention. Feeling dazed, Harry left.

It was so late that the Gryffindor common room was almost empty. Harry went straight up to the dormitory. Ron wasn't back yet. Harry pulled on his pajamas, got into bed, and waited. Half an hour later, Ron arrived, nursing his right arm and bringing a strong smell of polish into the darkened room.

"My muscles have all seized up," he groaned, sinking on his bed. "Fourteen times he made me buff up that Quidditch cup before he was satisfied. And then I had another slug attack all over a Special Award for Services to the School. Took ages to get the slime off... How was it with Lockhart?"

Keeping his voice low so as not to wake Neville, Dean, and Seamus, Harry told Ron exactly what he had heard.

"And Lockhart said he couldn't hear it?" said Ron. Harry could see him frowning in the moonlight. "D'you think he was lying? But I don't get it - even someone invisible would've had to open the door."

"I know," said Harry, lying back in his four-poster and staring at the canopy above him. "I don't get it either."

* 12-1 *

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October arrived, spreading a damp chill over the grounds and into the castle.

Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, was kept busy by a sudden spate of colds among the staff and students. Her Pepperup potion worked instantly, though it left

the drinker smoking at the ears for several hours afterward. Ginny Weasley,

who had been looking pale, was bullied into taking some by Percy. The steam pouring from under her vivid hair gave the impression that her whole

head was on fire.

Raindrops the size of bullets thundered on the castle windows for days on end; the lake rose, the flower beds turned into muddy streams, and

Hagrid's

pumpkins swelled to the size of garden sheds. Oliver Wood's enthusiasm for

regular training sessions, however, was not dampened, which was why Harry was to be found, late one stormy Saturday afternoon a few days before Halloween, returning to Gryffindor Tower, drenched to the skin and splattered with mud..

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Even aside from the rain and wind it hadn't been a happy practice session.

Fred and George, who had been spying on the Slytherin team, had seen for themselves the speed of those new Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones. They reported that the Slytherin team was no more than seven greenish blurs, shooting through the air like missiles.

As Harry squelched along the deserted corridor he came across somebody who looked just as preoccupied as he was. Nearly Headless Nick, the ghost

of Gryffindor Tower, was staring morosely out of a window, muttering under his breath, ". . . don't fulfill their requirements . . . half an inch, if that .

. . ."

"Hello, Nick," said Harry.

"Hello, hello," said Nearly Headless Nick, starting and looking round. He wore a dashing, plumed hat on his long curly hair, and a tunic with a ruff,

which concealed the fact that his neck was almost completely severed. He was pale as smoke, and Harry could see right through him to the dark sky and torrential rain outside.

"You look troubled, young Potter," said Nick, folding a transparent letter as

he spoke and tucking it inside his doublet.

"So do you," said Harry.

"Ah," Nearly Headless Nick waved an elegant hand, "a matter of no importance. . . . It's not as though I really wanted to join. . . . Thought I'd

apply, but apparently I 'don't fulfill requirements' -"

In spite of his airy tone, there was a look of great bitterness on his face.

"But you would think, wouldn't you," he erupted suddenly, pulling the letter

back out of his pocket, "that getting hit forty-five times in the neck with a

blunt axe would qualify you to join the Headless Hunt?"

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"Oh - yes," said Harry, who was obviously supposed to agree.

"I mean, nobody wishes more than I do that it had all been quick and clean,

and my head had come off properly, I mean, it would have saved me a great deal of pain and ridicule. However -" Nearly Headless Nick shook his letter

open and read furiously: "'We can only accept huntsmen whose heads have parted company with their bodies. You will appreciate that it would be impossible otherwise for members to participate in hunt activities such as

Horseback Head-Juggling and Head Polo. It is with the greatest regret, therefore, that I must inform you that you do not fulfill our requirements.

With very best wishes, Sir Patrick Delaney-Podmore.'"

Fuming, Nearly Headless Nick stuffed the letter away.

"Half an inch of skin and sinew holding my neck on, Harry! Most people would think that's good and beheaded, but oh, no, it's not enough for Sir Properly Decapitated-Podmore."

Nearly Headless Nick took several deep breaths and then said, in a far calmer tone, "So - what's bothering you? Anything I can do?"

"No," said Harry. "Not unless you know where we can get seven free Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones for our match against Sly -"

The rest of Harry's sentence was drowned out by a high-pitched mewling from somewhere near his ankles. He looked down and found himself gazing into a pair of lamp-like yellow eyes. It was Mrs. Norris, the skeletal gray cat

who was used by the caretaker, Argus Filch, as a sort of deputy in his endless battle against students.

"You'd better get out of here, Harry," said Nick quickly. "Filch isn't in a

good mood - he's got the flu and some third years accidentally plastered frog brains all over the ceiling in dungeon five. He's been cleaning all morning, and if he sees you dripping mud all over the place -"

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"Right," said Harry, backing away from the accusing stare of Mrs. Norris, but not quickly enough. Drawn to the spot by the mysterious power that seemed to connect him with his foul cat, Argus Filch burst suddenly through a tapestry to Harry's right, wheezing and looking wildly about for the rule-breaker.

There was a thick tartan scarf bound around his head, and his nose was unusually purple.

"Filth!" he shouted, his jowls aquiver, his eyes popping alarmingly as he pointed at the muddy puddle that had dripped from Harry's Quidditch robes.

"Mess and muck everywhere! I've had enough of it, I tell you! Follow me, Potter!"

So Harry waved a gloomy good-bye to Nearly Headless Nick and followed Filch back downstairs, doubling the number of muddy footprints on the floor.

Harry had never been inside Filch's office before; it was a place most students avoided. The room was dingy and windowless, lit by a single oil lamp dangling from the low ceiling. A faint smell of fried fish lingered about

the place. Wooden filing cabinets stood around the walls; from their labels,

Harry could see that they contained details of every pupil Filch had ever punished. Fred and George Weasley had an entire drawer to themselves. A highly polished collection of chains and manacles hung on the wall behind Filch's desk. It was common knowledge that he was always begging Dumbledore to let him suspend students by their ankles from the ceiling. Filch grabbed a quill from a pot on his desk and began shuffling around looking for parchment.

"Dung," he muttered furiously, "great sizzling dragon bogies . . . frog brains

. . . rat intestines . . . I've had enough of it . . . make an example .

. . where's

the form . . . yes . . ."

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He retrieved a large roll of parchment from his desk drawer and stretched it

out in front of him, dipping his long black quill into the ink pot.

"Name . . . Harry Potter. Crime . . ."

"It was only a bit of mud!" said Harry.

"It's only a bit of mud to you, boy, but to me it's an extra hour scrubbing!"

shouted Filch, a drip shivering unpleasantly at the end of his bulbous nose.

"Crime . . . befouling the castle . . . suggested sentence . . ."

Dabbing at his streaming nose, Filch squinted unpleasantly at Harry who waited with bated breath for his sentence to fall.

But as Filch lowered his quill, there was a great BANG! on the ceiling of the office, which made the oil lamp rattle.

"PEEVES!" Filch roared, flinging down his quill in a transport of rage.

"I'll

have you this time, I'll have you!"

And without a backward glance at Harry, Filch ran flat-footed from the office, Mrs. Norris streaking alongside him.

Peeves was the school poltergeist, a grinning, airborne menace who lived to cause havoc and distress. Harry didn't much like Peeves, but couldn't help feeling grateful for his timing. Hopefully, whatever Peeves had done (and it sounded as though he'd wrecked something very big this time) would distract Filch from Harry.

Thinking that he should probably wait for Filch to come back, Harry sank into a moth-eaten chair next to the desk. There was only one thing on it apart from his half-completed form: a large, glossy, purple envelope with silver lettering on the front. With a quick glance at the door to check that Filch wasn't on his way back, Harry picked up the envelope and read: kwikspell A Correspondence Course in Beginners' Magic.

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Intrigued, Harry flicked the envelope open and pulled out the sheaf of parchment inside. More curly silver writing on the front page said: Feel out of step in the world of modern magic? Find yourself making excuses not to perform simple spells? Ever been taunted for your woeful wandwork? There is an answer! Kwikspell is an all-new, fail-safe, quick-result, easy-learn course. Hundreds of witches and wizards have benefited from the Kwikspell method! Madam Z. Nettles of Topsham writes: "I had no memory for incantations and my potions were a family joke! Now, after a Kwikspell course, I am the center of attention at parties and friends beg for the recipe of my Scintillation Solution!" Warlock D. J. Prod of Didsbury says: "My wife used to sneer at my feeble charms, but one month into your fabulous Kwikspell course and I succeeded in turning her into a yak! Thank you, Kwikspell!"

Fascinated, Harry thumbed through the rest of the envelope's contents. Why on earth did Filch want a Kwikspell course? Did this mean he wasn't a proper wizard? Harry was just reading "Lesson One: Holding Your Wand (Some Useful Tips)" when shuffling footsteps outside told him Filch was coming back. Stuffing the parchment back into the envelope, Harry threw it back onto the desk just as the door opened.

Filch was looking triumphant.

"That vanishing cabinet was extremely valuable!" he was saying gleefully to Mrs. Norris. "We'll have Peeves out this time, my sweet -"

His eyes fell on Harry and then darted to the Kwikspell envelope, which, Harry realized too late, was lying two feet away from where it had started.

Filch's pasty face went brick red. Harry braced himself for a tidal wave of fury. Filch hobbled across to his desk, snatched up the envelope, and threw it into a drawer.

"Have you - did you read -?" he sputtered.

"No," Harry lied quickly.

Filch's knobbly hands were twisting together.

"If I thought you'd read my private - not that it's mine - for a friend - be that

as it may - however -"

Harry was staring at him, alarmed; Filch had never looked madder. His eyes

were popping, a tic was going in one of his pouchy cheeks, and the tartan scarf didn't help.

"Very well - go - and don't breathe a word - not that - however, if you didn't

read - go now, I have to write up Peeves' report - go -"

Amazed at his luck, Harry sped out of the office, up the corridor, and back

upstairs. To escape from Filch's office without punishment was probably some kind of school record.

"Harry! Harry! Did it work?"

Nearly Headless Nick came gliding out of a classroom. Behind him, Harry could see the wreckage of a large black-and-gold cabinet that appeared to have been dropped from a great height.

"I persuaded Peeves to crash it right over Filch's office," said Nick eagerly.

"Thought it might distract him -"

"Was that you?" said Harry gratefully. "Yeah, it worked, I didn't even get

detention. Thanks, Nick!"

They set off up the corridor together. Nearly Headless Nick, Harry noticed,

was still holding Sir Patrick's rejection letter..

"I wish there was something I could do for you about the Headless Hunt," Harry said.

Nearly Headless Nick stopped in his tracks and Harry walked right through him. He wished he hadn't; it was like stepping through an icy shower.

"But there is something you could do for me," said Nick excitedly. "Harry -

would I be asking too much - but no, you wouldn't want -"

"What is it?" said Harry.

"Well, this Halloween will be my five hundredth deathday," said Nearly Headless Nick, drawing himself up and looking dignified.

"Oh," said Harry, not sure whether he should look sorry or happy about this.

"Right."

"I'm holding a party down in one of the roomier dungeons. Friends will be coming from all over the country. It would be such an honor if you would attend. Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger would be most welcome, too, of course - but I daresay you'd rather go to the school feast?" He watched Harry

on tenterhooks.

"No," said Harry quickly, "I'll come -"

"My dear boy! Harry Potter, at my deathday party! And" - he hesitated, looking excited - "do you think you could possibly mention to Sir Patrick how very frightening and impressive you find me?"

"Of - of course," said Harry.

Nearly Headless Nick beamed at him. "A deathday party?" said Hermione keenly when Harry had changed at last and joined her and Ron in the common room. "I bet there aren't many living people who can say they've been to one of those - it'll be fascinating!".

"Why would anyone want to celebrate the day they died?" said Ron, who was halfway through his Potions homework and grumpy. "Sounds dead depressing to me. . . ."

Rain was still lashing the windows, which were now inky black, but inside all looked bright and cheerful. The firelight glowed over the countless squashy armchairs where people sat reading, talking, doing homework or,

in the case of Fred and George Weasley, trying to find out what would happen if you fed a Filibuster firework to a salamander. Fred had "rescued" the brilliant orange, fire-dwelling lizard from a Care of Magical Creatures class

and it was now smouldering gently on a table surrounded by a knot of curious people.

Harry was at the point of telling Ron and Hermione about Filch and the Kwikspell course when the salamander suddenly whizzed into the air, emitting loud sparks and bangs as it whirled wildly round the room. The sight of Percy bellowing himself hoarse at Fred and George, the spectacular

display of tangerine stars showering from the salamander's mouth, and its escape into the fire, with accompanying explosions, drove both Filch and the

Kwikspell envelope from Harry's mind. By the time Halloween arrived, Harry was regretting his rash promise to go to the deathday party. The rest of

the school was happily anticipating their Halloween feast; the Great Hall had

been decorated with the usual live bats, Hagrid's vast pumpkins had been carved into lanterns large enough for three men to sit in, and there were rumors that Dumbledore had booked a troupe of dancing skeletons for the entertainment.

"A promise is a promise," Hermione reminded Harry bossily. "You said you'd go to the deathday party."

So at seven o'clock, Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked straight past the doorway to the packed Great Hall, which was glittering invitingly with gold

plates and candles, and directed their steps instead toward the dungeons.

The passageway leading to Nearly Headless Nick's party had been lined with candles, too, though the effect was far from cheerful: These were long,

thin, jet-black tapers, all burning bright blue, casting a dim, ghostly light

even over their own living faces. The temperature dropped with every step they took. As Harry shivered and drew his robes tightly around him, he heard what sounded like a thousand fingernails scraping an enormous blackboard.

"Is that supposed to be music?" Ron whispered. They turned a corner and saw Nearly Headless Nick standing at a doorway hung with black velvet drapes.

"My dear friends," he said mournfully. "Welcome, welcome . . . so pleased you could come. . . ."

He swept off his plumed hat and bowed them inside.

It was an incredible sight. The dungeon was full of hundreds of pearly-white,

translucent people, mostly drifting around a crowded dance floor, waltzing to the dreadful, quavering sound of thirty musical saws, played by

an orchestra on a raised, black-draped platform. A chandelier overhead blazed midnight-blue with a thousand more black candles. Their breath rose in a mist before them; it was like stepping into a freezer.

"Shall we have a look around?" Harry suggested, wanting to warm up his feet.

"Careful not to walk through anyone," said Ron nervously, and they set off around the edge of the dance floor. They passed a group of gloomy nuns, a ragged man wearing chains, and the Fat Friar, a cheerful Hufflepuff ghost,

who was talking to a knight with an arrow sticking out of his forehead.

Harry wasn't surprised to see that the Bloody Baron, a gaunt, staring Slytherin ghost covered in silver bloodstains, was being given a wide berth by the other ghosts.

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"Oh, no," said Hermione, stopping abruptly. "Turn back, turn back, I don't want to talk to Moaning Myrtle -"

"Who?" said Harry as they backtracked quickly.

"She haunts one of the toilets in the girls' bathroom on the first floor," said Hermione.

"She haunts a toilet?"

"Yes. It's been out-of-order all year because she keeps having tantrums and flooding the place. I never went in there anyway if I could avoid it; it's awful trying to have a pee with her wailing at you -"

"Look, food!" said Ron.

On the other side of the dungeon was a long table, also covered in black velvet. They approached it eagerly but next moment had stopped in their tracks, horrified. The smell was quite disgusting. Large, rotten fish were laid on handsome silver platters; cakes, burned charcoal-black, were heaped on salvers; there was a great maggoty haggis, a slab of cheese covered in furry green mold and, in pride of place, an enormous gray cake in the shape of a tombstone, with tar-like icing forming the words, Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington died 31st October, 1492

Harry watched, amazed, as a portly ghost approached the table, crouched low, and walked through it, his mouth held wide so that it passed through one of the stinking salmon.

"Can you taste it if you walk though it?" Harry asked him.

"Almost," said the ghost sadly, and he drifted away.

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"I expect they've let it rot to give it a stronger flavor," said Hermione knowledgeably, pinching her nose and leaning closer to look at the putrid haggis.

"Can we move? I feel sick," said Ron.

They had barely turned around, however, when a little man swooped suddenly from under the table and came to a halt in midair before them.

"Hello, Peeves," said Harry cautiously.

Unlike the ghosts around them, Peeves the Poltergeist was the very reverse

of pale and transparent. He was wearing a bright orange party hat, a revolving bow tie, and a broad grin on his wide, wicked face.
"Nibbles?" he said sweetly, offering them a bowl of peanuts covered in fungus.

"No thanks," said Hermione.

"Heard you talking about poor Myrtle," said Peeves, his eyes dancing.

"Rude you was about poor Myrtle." He took a deep breath and bellowed, "OY! MYRTLE!"

"Oh, no, Peeves, don't tell her what I said, she'll be really upset," Hermione

whispered frantically. "I didn't mean it, I don't mind her - er, hello, Myrtle."

The squat ghost of a girl had glided over. She had the glummest face Harry had ever seen, half-hidden behind lank hair and thick, pearly spectacles.

"What?" she said sulkily.

"How are you, Myrtle?" said Hermione in a falsely bright voice. "It's nice to see you out of the toilet."

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Myrtle sniffed.

"Miss Granger was just talking about you -" said Peeves slyly in Myrtle's ear.

"Just saying - saying - how nice you look tonight," said Hermione, glaring at Peeves.

Myrtle eyed Hermione suspiciously.

"You're making fun of me," she said, silver tears welling rapidly in her small, see-through eyes.

"No - honestly - didn't I just say how nice Myrtle's looking?" said Hermione, nudging Harry and Ron painfully in the ribs.

"Oh, yeah -"

"She did -"

"Don't lie to me," Myrtle gasped, tears now flooding down her face, while Peeves chuckled happily over her shoulder. "D'you think I don't know what people call me behind my back? Fat Myrtle! Ugly Myrtle! Miserable, moaning, moping Myrtle!"

"You've forgotten pimply," Peeves hissed in her ear.

Moaning Myrtle burst into anguished sobs and fled from the dungeon.

Peeves shot after her, pelting her with moldy peanuts, yelling, "Pimply! Pimply!"

"Oh, dear," said Hermione sadly.

Nearly Headless Nick now drifted toward them through the crowd.

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"Enjoying yourselves?"

"Oh, yes," they lied.

"Not a bad turnout," said Nearly Headless Nick proudly. "The Wailing Widow came all the way up from Kent. . . . It's nearly time for my speech,

I'd better go and warn the orchestra. . . ."

The orchestra, however, stopped playing at that very moment. They, and everyone else in the dungeon, fell silent, looking around in excitement, as a

hunting horn sounded.

"Oh, here we go," said Nearly Headless Nick bitterly.

Through the dungeon wall burst a dozen ghost horses, each ridden by a headless horseman. The assembly clapped wildly; Harry started to clap, too,

but stopped quickly at the sight of Nick's face.
The horses galloped into the middle of the dance floor and halted,
rearing
and plunging. At the front of the pack was a large ghost who held his
bearded head under his arm, from which position he was blowing the horn.
The ghost leapt down, lifted his head high in the air so he could see
over the
crowd (everyone laughed), and strode over to Nearly Headless Nick,
squashing his head back onto his neck.
"Nick!" he roared. "How are you? Head still hanging in there?"
He gave a hearty guffaw and clapped Nearly Headless Nick on the shoulder.
"Welcome, Patrick," said Nick stiffly.
"Live 'uns!" said Sir Patrick, spotting Harry, Ron, and Hermione and
giving
a huge, fake jump of astonishment, so that his head fell off again (the
crowd
howled with laughter).

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"Very amusing," said Nearly Headless Nick darkly.
"Don't mind Nick!" shouted Sir Patrick's head from the floor. "Still
upset we
won't let him join the Hunt! But I mean to say - look at the fellow -"
"I think," said Harry hurriedly, at a meaningful look from Nick, "Nick's
very
- frightening and - er -"
"Ha!" yelled Sir Patrick's head. "Bet he asked you to say that!"
"If I could have everyone's attention, it's time for my speech!" said
Nearly
Headless Nick loudly, striding toward the podium and climbing into an icy
blue spotlight.
"My late lamented lords, ladies, and gentlemen, it is my great sorrow . .
. ."
But nobody heard much more. Sir Patrick and the rest of the Headless Hunt
had just started a game of Head Hockey and the crowd were turning to
watch. Nearly Headless Nick tried vainly to recapture his audience, but
gave
up as Sir Patrick's head went sailing past him to loud cheers.
Harry was very cold by now, not to mention hungry.
"I can't stand much more of this," Ron muttered, his teeth chattering, as
the
orchestra ground back into action and the ghosts swept back onto the
dance
floor.
"Let's go," Harry agreed.
They backed toward the door, nodding and beaming at anyone who looked
at them, and a minute later were hurrying back up the passageway full of
black candles.
"Pudding might not be finished yet," said Ron hopefully, leading the way
toward the steps to the entrance hall.

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And then Harry heard it.
". . . rip . . . tear . . . kill . . ."
It was the same voice, the same cold, murderous voice he had heard in
Lockhart's office.
He stumbled to a halt, clutching at the stone wall, listening with all
his
might, looking around, squinting up and down the dimly lit passageway.
"Harry, what're you -?"

"It's that voice again - shut up a minute -"
". . . so hungry . . . for so long . . ."
"Listen!" said Harry urgently, and Ron and Hermione froze, watching him.
. . . kill . . . time to kill . . ."
The voice was growing fainter. Harry was sure it was moving away - moving upward. A mixture of fear and excitement gripped him as he stared at the dark ceiling; how could it be moving upward? Was it a phantom, to whom stone ceilings didn't matter?
"This way," he shouted, and he began to run, up the stairs, into the entrance hall. It was no good hoping to hear anything here, the babble of talk from the
Halloween feast was echoing out of the Great Hall. Harry sprinted up the marble staircase to the first floor, Ron and Hermione clattering behind him.
"Harry, what're we -"
"SHH!"

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Harry strained his ears. Distantly, from the floor above, and growing fainter still, he heard the voice: ". . . I smell blood. . . . I SMELL BLOOD!" His stomach lurched -
"It's going to kill someone!" he shouted, and ignoring Ron's and Hermione's bewildered faces, he ran up the next flight of steps three at a time, trying to listen over his own pounding footsteps -
Harry hurtled around the whole of the second floor, Ron and Hermione panting behind him, not stopping until they turned a corner into the last, deserted passage.

"Harry, what was that all about?" said Ron, wiping sweat off his face. "I couldn't hear anything. . . ."

But Hermione gave a sudden gasp, pointing down the corridor.

"Look!"

Something was shining on the wall ahead. They approached slowly, squinting through the darkness. Foot-high words had been daubed on the wall between two windows, shimmering in the light cast by the flaming torches. the chamber of secrets has been opened. enemies of the heir, beware.

"What's that thing - hanging underneath?" said Ron, a slight quiver in his voice.

As they edged nearer, Harry almost slipped - there was a large puddle of water on the floor; Ron and Hermione grabbed him, and they inched toward the message, eyes fixed on a dark shadow beneath it. All three of them realized what it was at once, and leapt backward with a splash..Mrs. Norris,

the caretaker's cat, was hanging by her tail from the torch bracket. She was stiff as a board, her eyes wide and staring. For a few seconds, they didn't move. Then Ron said, "Let's get out of here."

"Shouldn't we try and help -" Harry began awkwardly.

"Trust me," said Ron. "We don't want to be found here."

But it was too late. A rumble, as though of distant thunder, told them that

the feast had just ended. From either end of the corridor where they stood came the sound of hundreds of feet climbing the stairs, and the loud, happy talk of well-fed people; next moment, students were crashing into the passage from both ends. The chatter, the bustle, the noise died suddenly as the people in front spotted the hanging cat. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood alone, in the middle of the corridor, as silence fell among the mass of students pressing forward to see the grisly sight.

Then someone shouted through the quiet.
"Enemies of the Heir, beware! You'll be next, Mudbloods!"
It was Draco Malfoy. He had pushed to the front of the crowd, his cold eyes alive, his usually bloodless face flushed, as he grinned at the sight of the hanging, immobile cat.

C H A P T X I R

N I N E

THE WRTITING ON THE WALL

What's going on here? What's going on?" Attracted no doubt by Malfoy's shout, Argus Filch came shouldering his way through the crowd. Then he saw Mrs. Norris and fell back, clutching his face in horror.

"My cat! My cat! What's happened to Mrs. Norris?" he shrieked.

And his popping eyes fell on Harry.

"You!" he screeched. "You! You've murdered my cat! You've killed her! I'll kill you! I'll -"

"Argus!"

Dumbledore had arrived on the scene, followed by a number of other teachers. In seconds, he had swept past Harry, Ron, and Hermione and detached Mrs. Norris from the torch bracket.

"Come with me, Argus," he said to Filch. "You, too, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger."

Lockhart stepped forward eagerly.

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"My office is nearest, Headmaster - just upstairs - please feel free -"

"Thank you, Gilderoy," said Dumbledore.

The silent crowd parted to let them pass. Lockhart, looking excited and important, hurried after Dumbledore; so did Professors McGonagall and Snape.

As they entered Lockhart's darkened office there was a flurry of movement across the walls; Harry saw several of the Lockharts in the pictures dodging out of sight, their hair in rollers. The real Lockhart lit

the candles on his desk and stood back. Dumbledore lay Mrs. Norris on the polished surface and began to examine her. Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged tense looks and sank into chairs outside the pool of candlelight, watching.

The tip of Dumbledore's long, crooked nose was barely an inch from Mrs. Norris's fur. He was looking at her closely through his half-moon spectacles, his long fingers gently prodding and poking. Professor McGonagall was bent almost as close, her eyes narrowed. Snape loomed behind them, half in shadow, wearing a most peculiar expression: It was as though he was trying hard not to smile. And Lockhart was hovering around all of them, making suggestions.

"It was definitely a curse that killed her - probably the Transmogrifian Torture - I've seen it used many times, so unlucky I wasn't there, I know the very countercurse that would have saved her

Lockhart's comments were punctuated by Filch's dry, racking sobs. He was slumped in a chair by the desk, unable to look at Mrs. Norris, his face in his hands. Much as he detested Filch, Harry

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couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for him, though not nearly as sorry as he felt for himself If Dumbledore believed Filch, he would be expelled for sure.

Dumbledore was now muttering strange words under his breath and tapping Mrs. Norris with his wand but nothing happened: She continued to look as though she had been recently stuffed.

". . . I remember something very similar happening in Ouagadogou," said Lockhart, "a series of attacks, the full story's in my autobiography, I was able to provide the townsfolk with various amulets, which cleared the matter up at once

The photographs of Lockhart on the walls were all nodding in agreement as he talked. One of them had forgotten to remove his hair net.

At last Dumbledore straightened up.

"She's not dead, Argus," he said softly.

Lockhart stopped abruptly in the middle of counting the number of murders he had prevented.

"Not dead?" choked Filch, looking through his fingers at Mrs. Norris. "But why's she all - all stiff and frozen?"

"She has been Petrified," said Dumbledore ("Ah! I thought so!" said Lockhart). "But how, I cannot say"

"Ask him!" shrieked Filch, turning his blotched and tearstained face to Harry.

"No second year could have done this," said Dumbledore firmly. "it would take Dark Magic of the most advanced -"

"He did it, he did it!" Filch spat, his pouchy face purpling. "You saw what he wrote on the wall! He found - in my office - he knows I'm a - I'm a -" Filch's face worked horribly. "He knows I'm a Squib!" he finished.

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"I never touched Mrs. Norris!" Harry said loudly, uncomfortably aware of everyone looking at him, including all the Lockharts on the walls. "And I don't even know what a Squib is."

"Rubbish!" snarled Filch. "He saw my Kwikspell letter!"

"If I might speak, Headmaster," said Snape from the shadows, and Harry's sense of forboding increased; he was sure nothing Snape had to say was going to do him any good.

"Potter and his friends may have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time," he said, a slight sneer curling his mouth as though he doubted it. "But we do have a set of suspicious circumstances here. Why was he in the upstairs corridor at all? Why wasn't he at the Halloween feast?"

Harry, Ron and Hermione all launched into an explanation about the deathday party. ". . . there were hundreds of ghosts, theyll tell you we were there -"

"But why not join the feast afterward?" said Snape, his black eyes glittering in the candlelight. "Why go up to that corridor?"

Ron and Hermione looked at Harry.

"Because - because -" Harry said, his heart thumping very fast; something told him it would sound very far-fetched if he told them he had been led there by a bodiless voice no one but he could hear, "because we were tired and wanted to go to bed," he said.

"Without any supper?" said Snape, a triumphant smile flickering across his gaunt face. "I didn't think ghosts provided food fit for living people at their parties."

"We weren't hungry," said Ron loudly as his stomach gave a huge rumble.

Snape's nasty smile widened.

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"I suggest, Headmaster, that Potter is not being entirely truthful," he said. "It might be a good idea if he were deprived of certain privileges until he is ready to tell us the whole story. I personally feel he should be taken off the Gryffindor Quidditch team until he is ready to be honest."

"Really, Severus," said Professor McGonagall sharply, "I see no reason to stop the boy playing Quidditch. This cat wasn't hit over the head with a broomstick. There is no evidence at all that Potter has done anything wrong."

Dumbledore was giving Harry a searching look. His twinkling light-blue gaze made Harry feel as though he were being X-rayed.

"Innocent until proven guilty, Severus," he said firmly.

Snape looked furious. So did Filch.

"My cat has been Petrified!" he shrieked, his eyes popping. "I want to see some punishment!"

"We will be able to cure her, Argus," said Dumbledore patiently. "Professor Sprout recently managed to procure some Mandrakes. As soon as they have reached their full size, I will have a potion made that will revive Mrs. Norris."

"I'll make it," Lockhart butted in. "I must have done it a hundred times. I could whip up a Mandrake Restorative Draught in my sleep -"

"Excuse me," said Snape icily. "But I believe I am the Potions master at this school."

There was a very awkward pause.

"You may go," Dumbledore said to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

They went, as quickly as they could without actually running. When they were a floor up from Lockhart's office, they turned into

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an empty classroom and closed the door quietly behind them. Harry squinted at his friends' darkened faces.

"D'you think I should have told them about that voice I heard?"

"No," said Ron, without hesitation. "Hearing voices no one else can hear isn't a good sign, even in the wizarding world."

Something in Ron's voice made Harry ask, "You do believe me, don't you?"

"'Course I do," said Ron quickly. "But -you must admit it's weird

"I know it's weird," said Harry. "The whole thing's weird. What was that writing on the wall about? The Chamber Has Been Opened... What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know, it rings a sort of bell," said Ron slowly. "I think someone told me a story about a secret chamber at Hogwarts once ... might've been Bill"

"And what on earth's a Squib?" said Harry.

To his surprise, Ron stifled a snigger.

"Well - it's not funny really - but as it's Filch, he said. "A Squib is someone who was born into a wizarding family but hasn't got any magic powers. Kind of the opposite of Muggle-born wizards, but Squibs are quite unusual. If Filch's trying to learn magic from a Kwikspell course, I reckon he must be a Squib. It would explain a lot. Like why he hates students so much." Ron gave a satisfied smile. "He's bitter."

A clock chimed somewhere.

"Midnight," said Harry. "We'd better get to bed before Snape comes along and tries to frame us for something else."

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For a few days, the school could talk of little else but the attack on Mrs. Norris. Filch kept it fresh in everyone's minds by pacing the spot where she had been attacked, as though he thought the attacker might come back. Harry had seen him scrubbing the message on the wall with Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover, but to no effect; the words still gleamed as brightly as ever on the stone. When Filch wasn't guarding the scene of the crime, he was skulking red-eyed through the corridors, lunging out at unsuspecting students and trying to put them in detention for things like "breathing loudly" and "looking happy."

Ginny Weasley seemed very disturbed by Mrs. Norris's fate. According to Ron, she was a great cat lover.

"But you haven't really got to know Mrs. Norris," Ron told her bracingly. "Honestly, we're much better off without her." Ginny's lip trembled. "Stuff like this doesn't often happen at Hogwarts," Ron assured her. "They'll catch the maniac who did it and have him out of here in no time. I just hope he's got time to Petrify Filch before he's expelled. I'm only joking -" Ron added hastily as Ginny blanched.

The attack had also had an effect on Hermione. It was quite usual for Hermione to spend a lot of time reading, but she was now doing almost nothing else. Nor could Harry and Ron get much response from her when they asked what she was up to, and not until the following Wednesday did they find out.

Harry had been held back in Potions, where Snape had made him stay behind to scrape tubeworms off the desks. After a hurried lunch, he went upstairs to meet Ron in the library, and saw Justin Finch-Fletchley, the Hufflepuff boy from Herbology, coming

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toward him. Harry had just opened his mouth to say hello when Justin caught sight of him, turned abruptly, and sped off in the opposite direction.

Harry found Ron at the back of the library, measuring his History of Magic homework. Professor Binns had asked for a threefoot-long composition on "The Medieval Assembly of European

Wizards."

"I don't believe it, I'm still eight inches short said Ron furiously, letting go of his parchment, which sprang back into a roll. "And Hermione's done four feet seven inches and her writing's tiny."

"Where is she?" asked Harry, grabbing the tape measure and unrolling his own homework.

"Somewhere over there," said Ron, pointing along the shelves. "Looking for another book. I think she's trying to read the whole library before Christmas."

Harry told Ron about Justin Finch-Fletchley running away from him.

"Dunno why you care. I thought he was a bit of an idiot," said Ron, scribbling away, making his writing as large as possible. "All that junk about Lockhart being so great -"

Hermione emerged from between the bookshelves. She looked irritable and at last seemed ready to talk to them.

"All the copies of Hogwarts, A History have been taken out," she said, sitting down next to Harry and Ron. "And there's a two-week waiting list. I wish I hadn't left my copy at home, but I couldn't fit it in my trunk with all the Lockhart books."

"Why do you want it?" said Harry.

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"The same reason everyone else wants it," said Hermione, "to read up on the legend of the Chamber of Secrets."

"What's that?" said Harry quickly.

"That's just it. I can't remember," said Hermione, biting her lip. "And I can't find the story anywhere else -"

"Hermione, let me read your composition," said Ron desperately, checking his watch.

"No, I won't," said Hermione, suddenly severe. "You've had ten days to finish it -"

"I only need another two inches, come on -"

The bell rang. Ron and Hermione led the way to History of Magic, bickering.

History of Magic was the dullest subject on their schedule. Professor Binns, who taught it, was their only ghost teacher, and the most exciting thing that ever happened in his classes was his entering the room through the blackboard. Ancient and shriveled, many people said he hadn't noticed he was dead. He had simply got up to teach one day and left his body behind him in an armchair in front of the staff room fire; his routine had not varied in the slightest since.

Today was as boring as ever. Professor Binns opened his notes and

began to read in a flat drone like an old vacuum cleaner until nearly everyone in the class was in a deep stupor, occasionally coming to long enough to copy down a name or date, then falling asleep again. He had been speaking for half an hour when something happened that had never happened before. Hermione put up her hand.

Professor Binns, glancing up in the middle of a deadly dull lec

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ture on the International Warlock Convention of 1289, looked amazed.

"Miss - er -?"

"Granger, Professor. I was wondering if you could tell us anything about the Chamber of Secrets," said Hermione in a clear voice.

Dean Thomas, who had been sitting with his mouth hanging open, gazing out of the window, jerked out of his trance; Lavender Brown's head came up off her arms and Neville Longbottom's elbow slipped off his desk.

Professor Binns blinked.

"My subject is History of Magic," he said in his dry, wheezy voice. "I deal with facts, Miss Granger, not myths and legends." He cleared his throat with a small noise like chalk s!-ping and continued, "In September of that year, a subcommittee of Sardinian sorcerers

"

He stuttered to a halt. Hermione's hand was waving in the air again.

"Miss Grant?"

"Please, sir, don't legends always have a basis in fact?"

Professor Binns was looking at her in such amazement, Harry was sure no student had ever interrupted him before, alive or dead.

"Well," said Professor Binns slowly, "yes, one could argue that, I suppose." He peered at Hermione as though he had never seen a student properly before. "However, the legend of which you speak is such a very sensational, even ludicrous tale -"

But the whole class was now hanging on Professor Binns's every word. He looked dimly at them all, every face turned to his. Harry

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could tell he was completely thrown by such an unusual show of interest.

"Oh, very well," he said slowly. "Let me see ... the Chamber of Secrets ...

"You all know, of course, that Hogwarts was founded over a thousand years ago - the precise date is uncertain - by the four greatest witches and wizards of the age. The four school Houses are named after them: Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and

Salazar Slytherin. They built this castle together, far from prying Muggle eyes, for it was an age when magic was feared by common people, and witches and wizards suffered much persecution."

He paused, gazed blearily around the room, and continued.

"For a few years, the founders worked in harmony together, seeking out youngsters who showed signs of magic and bringing them to the castle to be educated. But then disagreements sprang up between them. A rift began to grow between Slytherin and the others. Slytherin wished to be more selective about the students admitted to Hogwarts. He believed that magical learning should be kept within all-magic families. He disliked taking students of Muggle parentage, believing them to be untrustworthy. After a while, there was a serious argument on the subject between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Slytherin left the school."

Professor Binns paused again, pursing his lips, looking like a wrinkled old tortoise.

"Reliable historical sources tell us this much," he said. "But these honest facts have been obscured by the fanciful legend of the Chamber of Secrets. The story goes that Slytherin had built a

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hidden chamber in the castle, of which the other founders knew nothing.

"Slytherin, according to the legend, sealed the Chamber of Secrets so that none would be able to open it until his own true heir arrived at the school. The heir alone would be able to unseal the Chamber of Secrets, unleash the horror within, and use it to purge the school of all who were unworthy to study magic."

There was silence as he finished telling the story, but it wasn't the usual, sleepy silence that filled Professor Binns's classes. There was unease in the air as everyone continued to watch him, hoping for more. Professor Binns looked faintly annoyed.

"The whole thing is arrant nonsense, of course," he said. "Naturally, the school has been searched for evidence of such a chamber, many times, by the most learned witches and wizards. It does not exist. A tale told to frighten the gullible."

Hermione's hand was back in the air.

"Sir - what exactly do you mean by the 'horror within' the Chamber?"

"That is believed to be some sort of monster, which the Heir of Slytherin alone can control," said Professor Binns in his dry, reedy voice.

The class exchanged nervous looks.

"I tell you, the thing does not exist," said Professor Binns, shuffling his notes. "There is no Chamber and no monster."

"But, sir," said Seamus Finnigan, "if the Chamber can only be opened by Slytherin's true heir, no one else would be able to find it, would they?"

"Nonsense, O'Flaherty," said Professor Binns in an aggravated

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tone. "If a long succession of Hogwarts headmasters and headmistresses haven't found the thing -"

"But, Professor," piped up Parvati Patil, "you'd probably have to use Dark Magic to open it -"

"Just because a wizard doesn't use Dark Magic doesn't mean he can't, Miss Pennyfeather," snapped Professor Binns. "I repeat, if the likes of Dumbledore -"

"But maybe you've got to be related to Slytherin, so Dumbledore couldn't -" began Dean Thomas, but Professor Binns had had enough.

"That will do," he said sharply. "It is a myth! It does not exist! There is not a shred of evidence that Slytherin ever built so much as a secret broom cupboard! I regret telling you such a foolish story! We will return, if you please, to history, to solid, believable, verifiable fact!"

And within five minutes, the class had sunk back into its usual torpor.

"I always knew Salazar Slytherin was a twisted old loony," Ron told Harry and Hermione as they fought their way through the teeming corridors at the end of the lesson to drop off their bags before dinner. "But I never knew he started all this pure-blood stuff. I wouldn't be in his house if you paid me. Honestly, if the Sorting Hat had tried to put me in Slytherin, I'd've got the train straight back home

Hermione nodded fervently, but Harry didn't say anything. His stomach had just dropped unpleasantly.

Harry had never told Ron and Hermione that the Sorting Hat

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had seriously considered putting him in Slytherin. He could remember, as though it were yesterday, the small voice that had spoken in his ear when he'd placed the hat on his head a year before: You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin would help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that...

But Harry, who had already heard of Slytherin House's reputation for turning out Dark wizards, had thought desperately, Not Slytherin! and the hat had said, Oh, well, if you're sure ... better be Gryffindor...

As they were shunted along in the throng, Colin Creevy went past.

"Hiya, Harry!"

"Hullo, Colin," said Harry automatically.

"Harry - Harry - a boy in my class has been saying you're But Colin was so small he couldn't fight against the tide of people bearing him toward the Great Hall; they heard him squeak, "See you, Harry!" and he was gone.

"What's a boy in his class saying about you?" Hermione wondered.

"That I'm Slytherin's heir, I expect," said Harry, his stomach dropping another inch or so as he suddenly remembered the way Justin Finch-Fletchley had run away from him at lunchtime.

"People here'll believe anything," said Ron in disgust.

The crowd thinned and they were able to climb the next staircase without difficulty.

"D'you really think there's a Chamber of Secrets?" Ron asked Hermione.

"I don't know," she said, frowning. "Dumbledore couldn't cure

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Mrs. Norris, and that makes me think that whatever attacked her might not be - well - human."

As she spoke, they turned a corner and found themselves at the end of the very corridor where the attack had happened. They stopped and looked. The scene was just as it had been that night, except that there was no stiff cat hanging from the torch bracket, and an empty chair stood against the wall bearing the message "The Chamber of Secrets has been Opened."

"That's where Filch has been keeping guard," Ron muttered.

They looked at each other. The corridor was deserted.

"Can't hurt to have a poke around," said Harry, dropping his bag and getting to his hands and knees so that he could crawl along, searching for clues.

"Scorch marks!" he said. "Here - and here -"

"Come and look at this!" said Hermione. "This is funny"

Harry got up and crossed to the window next to the message on the wall. Hermione was pointing at the topmost pane, where around twenty spiders were scuttling, apparently fighting to get through a small crack. A long, silvery thread was dangling like a rope, as though they had all climbed it in their hurry to get outside.

"Have you ever seen spiders act like that?" said Hermione wonderingly.

"No," said Harry, "have you, Ron? Ron?"

He looked over his shoulder. Ron was standing well back and seemed to be fighting the impulse to run.

"What's up?" said Harry.

"I - don't - like - spiders," said Ron tensely.

"I never knew that," said Hermione, looking at Ron in surprise.
"You've used spiders in Potions loads of times

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"I don't mind them dead," said Ron, who was carefully looking anywhere but at the window. "I just don't like the way they move

Hermione giggled.

"It's not funny," said Ron, fiercely. "If you must know, when I was three, Fred turned my - my teddy bear into a great big filthy spider because I broke his toy broomstick You wouldn't like them either if you'd been holding your bear and suddenly it had too many legs and. . ."

He broke off, shuddering. Hermione was obviously still trying not to laugh. Feeling they had better get off the subject, Harry said, "Remember all that water on the floor? Where did that come from? Someone's mopped it up."

"It was about here," said Ron, recovering himself to walk a few paces past Filch's chair and pointing. "Level with this door."

He reached for the brass doorknob but suddenly withdrew his hand as though he'd been burned.

"What's the matter?" said Harry.

"Can't go in there," said Ron gruffly. "That's a girls' toilet."

"Oh, Ron, there won't be anyone in there," said Hermione, standing up and coming over. "That's Moaning Myrtle's place. Come on, let's have a look."

And ignoring the large OUT OF ORDER sign, she opened the door.

It was the gloomiest, most depressing bathroom Harry had ever set foot in. Under a large, cracked, and spotted mirror were a row of chipped sinks. The floor was damp and reflected the dull light given off by the stubs of a few candles, burning low in their holders; the wooden doors to the stalls were flaking and scratched and one of them was dangling off its hinges.

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Hermione put her fingers to her lips and set off toward the end stall. When she reached it she said, "Hello, Myrtle, how are you?"

Harry and Ron went to look. Moaning Myrtle was floating above the tank of the toilet, picking a spot on her chin.

"This is a girls' bathroom," she said, eyeing Ron and Harry suspiciously.

"They're not girls."

"No," Hermione agreed. "I just wanted to show them how er - nice it is in here."

She waved vaguely at the dirty old mirror and the damp floor.

"Ask her if she saw anything," Harry mouthed at Hermione.

"What are you whispering?" said Myrtle, staring at him.

"Nothing," said Harry quickly. "We wanted to ask -"

"I wish people would stop talking behind my back!" said Myrtle, in a voice choked with tears. "I do have feelings, you know, even if I am dead -"

"Myrtle, no one wants to upset you," said Hermione. "Harry only -"

"No one wants to upset me! That's a good one!" howled Myrtle. "My life was nothing but misery at this place and now people come along ruining my death!"

"We wanted to ask you if you've seen anything funny lately," said Hermione quickly. "Because a cat was attacked right outside your front door on Halloween."

"Did you see anyone near here that night?" said Harry.

"I wasn't paying attention," said Myrtle dramatically. "Peeves upset me so much I came in here and tried to kill myself Then, of course, I remembered that I'm - that I'm "

"Already dead," said Ron helpfully.

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Myrtle gave a tragic sob, rose up in the air, turned over, and dived headfirst into the toilet, splashing water all over them and vanishing from sight, although from the direction of her muffled sobs, she had come to rest somewhere in the U-bend.

Harry and Ron stood with their mouths open, but Hermione shrugged wearily and said, "Honestly, that was almost cheerful for Myrtle Come on, let's go."

Harry had barely closed the door on Myrtle's gurgling sobs when a loud voice made all three of them jump.

"RON!"

Percy Weasley had stopped dead at the head of the stairs, prefect badge agleam, an expression of complete shock on his face.

"That's a girls' bathroom!" he gasped. "What were you -?"

"Just having a look around," Ron shrugged. "Clues, you know -"

Percy swelled in a manner that reminded Harry forcefully of Mrs. Weasley.

"Get - away - from - there -" Perry said, striding toward them and starting to bustle them along, flapping his arms. "Don't you care what this looks like? Coming back here while everyone's at dinner -"

"Why shouldn't we be here?" said Ron hotly, stopping short and glaring at Percy. "Listen, we never laid a finger on that cat!"

"That's what I told Ginny," said Percy fiercely, "but she still seems to think you're going to be expelled, I've never seen her so upset, crying her eyes out, you might think of her, all the first years are thoroughly overexcited by this business -"

"You don't care about Ginny," said Ron, whose ears were now

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reddening. "You're just worried I'm going to mess up your chances of being Head Boy -"

"Five points from Gryffindor!" Percy said tersely, fingering his prefect badge. "And I hope it teaches you a lesson! No more detective work, or I'll write to Mum!"

And he strode off, the back of his neck as red as Ron's ears.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione chose seats as far as possible from Percy in the common room that night. Ron was still in a very bad temper and kept blotting his Charms homework. When he reached absently for his wand to remove the smudges, it ignited the parchment. Fuming almost as much as his homework, Ron slammed The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2 shut. To Harry's surprise, Hermione followed suit.

"Who can it be, though?" she said in a quiet voice, as though continuing a conversation they had just been having. "Who'd want to frighten all the Squibs and Muggle-borns out of Hogwarts?"

"Let's think," said Ron in mock puzzlement. "Who do we know who thinks Muggle-borns are scum?"

He looked at Hermione. Hermione looked back, unconvinced.

"If you're talking about Malfoy -"

"Of course I am!" said Ron. "You heard him - 'You'll be next, Mudbloods!' - come on, you've only got to look at his foul rat face to know it's him -"

"Malfoy, the Heir of Slytherin?" said Hermione skeptically.

"Look at his family," said Harry, closing his books, too. "The whole lot of them have been in Slytherin; he's always boasting about it. They could easily be Slytherin's descendants. His father's definitely evil enough."

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"They could've had the key to the Chamber of Secrets for centuries!" said Ron. "Handing it down, father to son"

"Well," said Hermione cautiously, "I suppose it's possible

"But how do we prove it?" said Harry darkly.

"There might be a way," said Hermione slowly, dropping her voice still further with a quick glance across the room at Percy. "Of course, it would be difficult. And dangerous, very dangerous. We'd be breaking about fifty school rules, I expect -"

"If, in a month or so, you feel like explaining, you will let us know, won't you?" said Ron irritably.

"All right," said Hermione coldly. "What we'd need to do is to get inside the Slytherin common room and ask Malfoy a few questions without him realizing it's us."

"But that's impossible," Harry said as Ron laughed.

"No, it's not," said Hermione. "All we'd need would be some Polyjuice Potion."

"What's that?" said Ron and Harry together.

"Snape mentioned it in class a few weeks ago -"

"D'you think we've got nothing better to do in Potions than listen to Snape?" muttered Ron.

"It transforms you into somebody else. Think about it! We could change into three of the Slytherins. No one would know it was us. Malfoy would probably tell us anything. He's probably boasting about it in the Slytherin common room right now, if only we could hear him."

"This Polyjuice stuff sounds a bit dodgy to me," said Ron, frowning. "What if we were stuck looking like three of the Slytherins forever?"

"It wears off after a while," said Hermione, waving her hand

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impatiently. "But getting hold of the recipe will be very difficult. Snape said it was in a book called *Moste Potente Potions* and it's bound to be in the Restricted Section of the library."

There was only one way to get out a book from the Restricted Section: You needed a signed note of permission from a teacher.

"Hard to see why we'd want the book, really," said Ron, "if we weren't going to try and make one of the potions."

"I think," said Hermione, "that if we made it sound as though we were just interested in the theory, we might stand a chance

"Oh, come on, no teacher's going to fall for that," said Ron.

"They'd have to be really thick . . ."

C H-H A P T V It T 1' N

THE ROGUE BLUDGER

ince the disastrous episode of the pixies, Professor Lockhart had not brought live creatures to class. Instead, he read passages from his books to them, and sometimes reenacted some of the more dramatic bits. He usually picked Harry to help him with these reconstructions;

so far, Harry had been forced to play a simple Transylvanian villager whom Lockhart had cured of a Babbling Curse, a yeti with a head cold, and a vampire who had been unable to eat anything except lettuce since Lockhart had dealt with him.

Harry was hauled to the front of the class during their very next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson, this time acting a werewolf If he hadn't had a very good reason for keeping Lockhart in a good mood, he would have refused to do it.

"Nice loud howl, Harry - exactly - and then, if you'll believe it, I pounced - like this - slammed him to the floor - thus with one hand, I managed to hold him down - with my other, I

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put my wand to his throat -I then screwed up my remaining strength and performed the immensely complex Homorphus Charm - he let out a piteous moan - go on, Harry - higher than that - good - the fur vanished - the fangs shrank - and he turned back into a man. Simple, yet effective - and another village will remember me forever as the hero who delivered them from the monthly terror of werewolf attacks."

The bell rang and Lockhart got to his feet.

"Homework - compose a poem about my defeat of the Wagga Wagga Werewolf! Signed copies of Magical Me to the author of the best one!"

The class began to leave. Harry returned to the back of the room, where Ron and Hermione were waiting.

"Ready?" Harry muttered.

"Wait till everyone's gone," said Hermione nervously. "All right . . . "

She approached Lockhart's desk, a piece of paper clutched tightly in her hand, Harry and Ron right behind her.

"Er - Professor Lockhart?" Hermione stammered. "I wanted to - to get this book out of the library. Just for background reading." She held out the piece of paper, her hand shaking slightly. "But the thing is, it's in the Restricted Section of the library, so I need a teacher to sign for it - I'm sure it would help me understand what you say in Gadding with Ghouls about slow-acting venoms

"Ah, Gadding with Ghouls!" said Lockhart, taking the note from Hermione and smiling widely at her. "Possibly my very favorite book. You enjoyed it?"

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"Oh, yes," said Hermione eagerly. "So clever, the way you trapped that last one with the tea-strainer -"

"Well, I'm sure no one will mind me giving the best student of the year a little extra help," said Lockhart warmly, and he pulled out an

enormous peacock quill. "Yes, nice, isn't it?" he said, misreading the revolted look on Ron's face. "I usually save it for book-signings."

He scrawled an enormous loopy signature on the note and handed it back to Hermione.

"So, Harry," said Lockhart, while Hermione folded the note with fumbling fingers and slipped it into her bag. "Tomorrow's the first Quidditch match of the season, I believe? Gryffindor against Slytherin, is it not? I hear you're a useful player. I was a Seeker, too. I was asked to try for the National Squad, but preferred to dedicate my life to the eradication of the Dark Forces. Still, if ever you feel the need for a little private training, don't hesitate to ask. Always happy to pass

on my expertise to less able players

Harry made an indistinct noise in his throat and then hurried off after Ron and Hermione.

"I don't believe it," he said as the three of them examined the signature on the note. "He didn't even look at the book we wanted."

"That's because he's a brainless git," said Ron. "But who cares, we've got what we needed -"

"He is not a brainless git," said Hermione shrilly as they half ran toward the library.

"Just because he said you were the best student of the year -"

They dropped their voices as they entered the muffled stillness of the library. Madam Pince, the librarian, was a thin, irritable woman who looked like an underfed vulture.

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"Moste Potente Potions?" she repeated suspiciously, trying to take the note from Hermione; but Hermione wouldn't let go.

"I was wondering if I could keep it," she said breathlessly.

"Oh, come on," said Ron, wrenching it from her grasp and thrusting it at Madam Pince. "We'll get you another autograph. Lockhart'll sign anything if it stands still long enough."

Madam Pince held the note up to the light, as though determined to detect a forgery, but it passed the test. She stalked away between the lofty shelves and returned several minutes later carrying a large and moldy-looking book. Hermione put it carefully into her bag and they left, trying not to walk too quickly or look too guilty.

Five minutes later, they were barricaded in Moaning Myrtle's out-of-order bathroom once again. Hermione had overridden Ron's objections by pointing out that it was the last place anyone in their right minds would go, so they were guaranteed some privacy. Moaning Myrtle was crying noisily in her stall, but they were ignoring her, and she them.

Hermione opened Moste Potente Potions carefully, and the three of them bent over the damp-spotted pages. It was clear from a glance

why it belonged in the Restricted Section. Some of the potions had effects almost too gruesome to think about, and there were some very unpleasant illustrations, which included a man who seemed to have been turned inside out and a witch sprouting several extra pairs of arms out of her head.

"Here it is," said Hermione excitedly as she found the page headed The Polyjuice Potion. It was decorated with drawings of people halfway through transforming into other people. Harry sin

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cerely hoped the artist had imagined the looks of intense pain on their faces.

"This is the most complicated potion I've ever seen," said Hermione as they scanned the recipe. "Lacewing flies, leeches, fluxweed, and knotgrass," she murmured, running her finger down the list of ingredients. "Well, they're easy enough, they're in the student store-cupboard, we can help ourselves Oooh, look, powdered horn of a bicorn - don't know where we're going to get that - shredded skin of a boomslang -. that'll be tricky, too and of course a bit of whoever we want to change into."

"Excuse me?" said Ron sharply. "What d'you mean, a bit of whoever we're changing into? I'm drinking nothing with Crabbe's toenails in it -"

Hermione continued as though she hadn't heard him.

"We don't have to worry about that yet, though, because we add those bits last

Ron turned, speechless, to Harry, who had another worry.

"D'you realize how much we're going to have to steal, Hermione? Shredded skin of a boomslang, that's definitely not in the students' cupboard. What're we going to do, break into Snape's private stores? I don't know if this is a good idea

Hermione shut the book with a snap.

"Well, if you two are going to chicken out, fine," she said. There were bright pink patches on her cheeks and her eyes were brighter than usual. "I don't want to break rules, you know. I think threatening Muggle-borns is far worse than brewing up a difficult potion. But if you don't want to find out if it's Malfoy, I'll go straight to Madam Pince
now and hand the book back in ='

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"I never thought Id see the day when you'd be persuading us to break rules," said Ron. "All right, we'll do it. But not toenails, okay?"

"How long will it take to make, anyway?" said Harry as Hermione, looking happier, opened the book again.

"Well, since the fluxweed has got to be picked at the full moon and the lacewings have got to be stewed for twenty-one days ... I'd say it'd be ready in about a month, if we can get all the ingredients."

"A month?" said Ron. "Malfoy could have attacked half the Muggle-borns in the school by then!" But Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously again, and he added swiftly, "But it's the best plan we've got, so full steam ahead, I say."

However, while Hermione was checking that the coast was clear for them to leave the bathroom, Ron muttered to Harry, "It'll be a lot less hassle if you can just knock Malfoy off his broom tomorrow.

Harry woke early on Saturday morning and lay for a while thinking about the coming Quidditch match. He was nervous, mainly at the thought of what Wood would say if Gryffindor lost, but also at the idea of facing a team mounted on the fastest racing brooms gold could buy. He had never wanted to beat Slytherin so badly. After half an hour of lying there with his insides churning, he got up, dressed, and went down to breakfast early, where he found the rest of the Gryffindor team huddled at the long, empty table, all looking uptight and not speaking much.

As eleven o'clock approached, the whole school started to make its way down to the Quidditch stadium. It was a muggy sort of day

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with a hint of thunder in the air. Ron and Hermione came hurrying over to wish Harry good luck as he entered the locker rooms. The team pulled on their scarlet Gryffindor robes, then sat down to listen to Wood's usual pre-match pep talk.

"Slytherin has better brooms than us," he began. "No point denying it. But we've got better people on our brooms. We've trained harder than they have, we've been flying in all weathers -" ("Too true," muttered George Weasley. "I haven't been properly dry since August") "- and we're going to make them rue the day they let that little bit of slime, Malfoy, buy his way onto their team."

Chest heaving with emotion, Wood turned to Harry.

"It'll be down to you, Harry, to show them that a Seeker has to have something more than a rich father. Get to that Snitch before Malfoy or die trying, Harry, because we've got to win today, we've got to."

"So no pressure, Harry" said Fred, winking at him.

As they walked out onto the pitch, a roar of noise greeted them; mainly cheers, because Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were anxious to see Slytherin beaten, but the Slytherins in the crowd made their boos and hisses heard, too. Madam Hooch, the Quidditch teacher, asked Flint and Wood to shake hands, which they did, giving each other threatening stares and gripping rather harder than was necessary.

"On my whistle," said Madam Hooch. "Three ... two ... one. . .

With a roar from the crowd to speed them upward, the fourteen players rose toward the leaden sky. Harry flew higher than any of them, squinting around for the Snitch.

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"All right there, Scarhead?" yelled Malfoy, shooting underneath him as though to show off the speed of his broom.

Harry had no time to reply. At that very moment, a heavy black Bludger came pelting toward him; he avoided it so narrowly that he felt it ruffle his hair as it passed.

"Close one, Harry!" said George, streaking past him with his club in his hand, ready to knock the Bludger back toward a Slytherin. Harry saw George give the Bludger a powerful whack in the direction of Adrian Pucey, but the Bludger changed direction in midair and shot straight for Harry again.

Harry dropped quickly to avoid it, and George managed to hit it hard toward Malfoy. Once again, the Bludger swerved like a boomerang and shot at Harry's head.

Harry put on a burst of speed and zoomed toward the other end of the pitch. He could hear the Bludger whistling along behind him. What was going on? Bludgers never concentrated on one player like this; it was their job to try and unseat as many people as possible

Fred Weasley was waiting for the Bludger at the other end. Harry ducked as Fred swung at the Bludger with all his might; the Bludger was knocked off course.

"Gotcha!" Fred yelled happily, but he was wrong; as though it was magnetically attracted to Harry, the Bludger pelted after him once more and Harry was forced to fly off at full speed.

It had started to rain; Harry felt heavy drops fall onto his face, splattering onto his glasses. He didn't have a clue what was going on in the rest of the game until he heard Lee Jordan, who was commentating, say, "Slytherin lead, sixty points to zero ='

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The Slytherins' superior brooms were clearly doing their jobs, and meanwhile the mad Bludger was doing all it could to knock Harry out of the air. Fred and George were now flying so close to him on either side that Harry could see nothing at all except their flailing arms

and had no chance to look for the Snitch, let alone catch it.

"Someone's - tampered - with - this - Bludger -" Fred grunted, swinging his bat with all his might at it as it launched a new attack on Harry.

"We need time out," said George, trying to signal to Wood and stop the Bludger breaking Harry's nose at the same time.

Wood had obviously got the message. Madam Hooch's whistle rang out and Harry, Fred, and George dived for the ground, still trying to avoid the mad Bludger.

"What's going on?" said Wood as the Gryffindor team huddled together, while Slytherins in the crowd jeered. "We're being flattened. Fred, George, where were you when that Bludger stopped Angelina scoring?"

"We were twenty feet above her, stopping the other Bludger from murdering Harry, Oliver," said George angrily. "Someone's fixed it - it won't leave Harry alone. It hasn't gone for anyone else all game. The Slytherins must have done something to it."

"But the Bludgers have been locked in Madam Hooch's office since our last practice, and there was nothing wrong with them then" said Wood, anxiously.

Madam Hooch was walking toward them. Over her shoulder, Harry could see the Slytherin team jeering and pointing in his direction.

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"Listen," said Harry as she came nearer and nearer, "with you two flying around me all the time the only way I'm going to catch the Snitch is if it flies up my sleeve. Go back to the rest of the team and let me deal with the rogue one."

"Don't be thick," said Fred. "It'll take your head off."

Wood was looking from Harry to the Weasleys.

(I Oliver, this is insane," said Alicia Spinner angrily. "You can't let Harry deal with that thing on his own. Let's ask for an inquiry -))

"If we stop now, we'll have to forfeit the match!" said Harry. "And we're not losing to Slytherin just because of a crazy Bludger! Come on, Oliver, tell them to leave me alone!"

"This is all your fault," George said angrily to Wood. "'Get the Snitch or die trying,' what a stupid thing to tell him --"

Madam Hooch had joined them.

"Ready to resume play?" she asked Wood.

Wood looked at the determined look on Harry's face.

"All right," he said. "Fred, George, you heard Harry -leave him alone and let him deal with the Bludger on his own."

The rain was falling more heavily now. On Madam Hooch's whistle, Harry kicked hard into the air and heard the telltale whoosh of the Bludger behind him. Higher and higher Harry climbed; he looped and swooped, spiraled, zigzagged, and rolled. Slightly dizzy, he nevertheless kept his eyes wide open, rain was speckling his glasses and ran up his nostrils as he hung upside down, avoiding another fierce dive from the Bludger. He could hear laughter from the crowd; he knew he must look very stupid, but the rogue Bludger was heavy and couldn't change direction as quickly as Harry could; he began a kind of roller-coaster ride around the

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edges of the stadium, squinting through the silver sheets of rain to the Gryffindor goal posts, where Adrian Pucey was trying to get past Wood

A whistling in Harry's ear told him the Bludger had just missed him again; he turned right over and sped in the opposite direction.

"Training for the ballet, Potter?" yelled Malfoy as Harry was forced to do a stupid kind of twirl in midair to dodge the Bludger, and he fled, the

Bludger trailing a few feet behind him; and then, glaring back at Malfoy in hatred, he saw it - the Golden Snitch. It was hovering inches above Malfoy's left ear - and Malfoy, busy laughing at Harry, hadn't seen it.

For an agonizing moment, Harry hung in midair, not daring to speed toward Malfoy in case he looked up and saw the Snitch.

WHAM.

He had stayed still a second too long. The Bludger had hit him at last, smashed into his elbow, and Harry felt his arm break. Dimly, dazed by the searing pain in his arm, he slid sideways on his rain-drenched broom, one knee still crooked over it, his right arm dangling useless at his side - the Bludger came pelting back for a second attack, this time W-ming at his face - Harry swerved out of the way, one idea firmly lodged in his numb brain: get to Malfoy.

Through a haze of rain and pain he dived for the shimmering, sneering face below him and saw its eyes widen with fear: Malfoy thought Harry was attacking him.

"What the -" he gasped, careening out of Harry's way.

Harry took his remaining hand off his broom and made a wild snatch; he felt his fingers close on the cold Snitch but was now only

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gripping the broom with his legs, and there was a yell from the crowd below as he headed straight for the ground, trying hard not to pass out.

With a splattering thud he hit the mud and rolled off his broom. His arm was hanging at a very strange angle; riddled with pain, he heard, as though from a distance, a good deal of whistling and shouting. He focused on the Snitch clutched in his good hand.

"Aha," he said vaguely. "We've won."

And he fainted.

He came around, rain falling on his face, still lying on the field, with someone leaning over him. He saw a glitter of teeth.

"Oh, no, not you," he moaned.

"Doesn't know what he's saying," said Lockhart loudly to the anxious crowd of Gryffindors pressing around them. "Not to worry, Harry. I'm about to fix your arm."

"No!" said Harry. "I'll keep it like this, thanks

He tried to sit up, but the pain was terrible. He heard a familiar

clicking noise nearby.

"I don't want a photo of this, Colin," he said loudly.

"Lie back, Harry," said Lockhart soothingly. "It's a simple charm I've used countless times -"

"Why can't I just go to the hospital wing?" said Harry through clenched teeth.

"He should really, Professor," said a muddy Wood, who couldn't help grinning even though his Seeker was injured. "Great capture, Harry, really spectacular, your best yet, I'd say -"

Through the thicket of legs around him, Harry spotted Fred and

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George Weasley, wrestling the rogue Bludger into a box. It was still putting up a terrific fight.

"Stand back," said Lockhart, who was rolling up his jade-green sleeves.

"No - don't -" said Harry weakly, but Lockhart was twirling his wand and a second later had directed it straight at Harry's arm.

A strange and unpleasant sensation started at Harry's shoulder and spread all the way down to his fingertips. It felt as though his arm was being deflated. He didn't dare look at what was happening. He had shut his eyes, his face turned away from his arm, but his worst fears were realized as the people above him gasped and Colin Creevey began clicking away madly. His arm didn't hurt anymore - nor did it feel remotely like an arm.

"Ah," said Lockhart. "Yes. Well, that can sometimes happen. But the point is, the bones are no longer broken. That's the thing to bear in mind. So, Harry, just toddle up to the hospital wing - ah, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, would you escort him? - and Madam Pomfrey will be able to - er - tidy you up a bit."

As Harry got to his feet, he felt strangely lopsided. Taking a deep breath he looked down at his right side. What he saw nearly made him pass out again.

Poking out of the end of his robes was what looked like a thick, flesh-colored rubber glove. He tried to move his fingers. Nothing happened.

Lockhart hadn't mended Harry's bones. He had removed them.

Madam Pomfrey wasn't at all pleased.

"You should have come straight to me!" she raged, holding up

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the sad, limp remainder of what, half an hour before, had been a working arm. "I can mend bones in a second - but growing them back -"

"You will be able to, won't you?" said Harry desperately.

"I'll be able to, certainly, but it will be painful," said Madam Pomfrey grimly, throwing Harry a pair of pajamas. "You'll have to stay the night

Hermione waited outside the curtain drawn around Harry's bed while Ron helped him into his pajamas. It took a while to stuff the rubbery, boneless arm into a sleeve.

"How can you stick up for Lockhart now, Hermione, eh?" Ron called through the curtain as he pulled Harry's limp fingers through the cuff. "If Harry had wanted deboning he would have asked."

"Anyone can make a mistake," said Hermione. "And it doesn't hurt anymore, does it, Harry?"

"No," said Harry, getting into bed. "But it doesn't do anything else either."

As he swung himself onto the bed, his arm flapped pointlessly.

Hermione and Madam Pomfrey came around the curtain. Madam Pomfrey was holding a large bottle of something labeled Skele-Gro.

"You're in for a rough night," she said, pouring out a steaming beakerful and handing it to him. "Regrowing bones is a nasty business."

So was taking the Skele-Gro. It burned Harry's mouth and throat as it went down, making him cough and splutter. Still tut-tutting about dangerous sports and inept teachers, Madam Pomfrey re

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treated, leaving Ron and Hermione to help Harry gulp down some water.

"We won, though," said Ron, a grin breaking across his face.

"That was some catch you made. Malfoy's face ... he looked ready to kill

"I want to know how he fixed that Bludger," said Hermione darkly.

"We can add that to the list of questions we'll ask him when we've taken the Polyjuice Potion," said Harry, sinking back onto his pillows. "I hope it tastes better than this stuff

"If it's got bits of Slytherins in it? You've got to be joking," said Ron.

The door of the hospital wing burst open at that moment. Filthy and soaking wet, the rest of the Gryffindor team had arrived to see Harry.

"Unbelievable flying, Harry," said George. "I've just seen Marcus Flint yelling at Malfoy. Something about having the Snitch on top of his head and not noticing. Malfoy didn't seem too happy." They had brought cakes, sweets, and bottles of pumpkin juice; they gathered around Harry's bed and were just getting started on what promised to be a good party when Madam Pomfrey came storming over, shouting, "This boy needs rest, he's got thirty-three bones to regrow! Out! OUT!"

And Harry was left alone, with nothing to distract him from the stabbing pains in his limp arm.

Hours and hours later, Harry woke quite suddenly in the pitch blackness and gave a small yelp of pain: His arm now felt full of large splinters. For a second, he thought that was what had woken him. Then, with a thrill of horror, he realized that someone was sponging his forehead in the dark.

"Get off!" he said loudly, and then, "Dobby!"

The house-elf's goggling tennis ball eyes were peering at Harry through the darkness. A single tear was running down his long, pointed nose.

"Harry Potter came back to school," he whispered miserably. "Dobby warned and warned Harry Potter. Ah sir, why didn't you heed Dobby? Why didn't Harry Potter go back home when he missed the train?"

Harry heaved himself up on his pillows and pushed Dobby's sponge away.

"What're you doing here?" he said. "And how did you know I missed the train?"

Dobby's lip trembled and Harry was seized by a sudden suspicion.

"It was you!" he said slowly. "You stopped the barrier from letting us through!"

"Indeed yes, sir," said Dobby, nodding his head vigorously, ears flapping. "Dobby hid and watched for Harry Potter and sealed the gateway and Dobby had to iron his hands afterward" - he showed Harry ten long, bandaged fingers - "but Dobby didn't care, sir, for he thought Harry Potter was safe, and never did Dobby dream that Harry Potter would get to school another way!"

He was rocking backward and forward, shaking his ugly head.

"Dobby was 'so shocked when he heard Harry Potter was back at Hogwarts, he let his master's dinner burn! Such a flogging Dobby never had, sir

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Harry slumped back onto his pillows.

"You nearly got Ron and me expelled," he said fiercely. "You'd better get lost before my bones come back, Dobby, or I might strangle you."

Dobby smiled weakly.

"Dobby is used to death threats, sir. Dobby gets them five times a day at home."

He blew his nose on a corner of the filthy pillowcase he wore, looking so pathetic that Harry felt his anger ebb away in spite of himself.

"Why d'you wear that thing, Dobby?" he asked curiously.

"This, sir?" said Dobby, plucking at the pillowcase. "'Tis a mark of the house-elf's enslavement, sir. Dobby can only be freed if his masters present him with clothes, sir. The family is careful not to pass Dobby even a sock, sir, for then he would be free to leave their house forever."

Dobby mopped his bulging eyes and said suddenly, "Harry Potter must go home! Dobby thought his Bludger would be enough to make -"

"Your Bludger?" said Harry, anger rising once more. "What d'you mean, your Bludger? You made that Bludger try and kill me?"

"Not kill you, sir, never kill you!" said Dobby, shocked. "Dobby wants to save Harry Potter's life! Better sent home, grievously injured, than remain here sir! Dobby only wanted Harry Potter hurt enough to be sent home!"

"Oh, is that all?" said Harry angrily. "I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you wanted me sent home in pieces?"

"Ah, if Harry Potter only knew!" Dobby groaned, more tears dripping onto his ragged pillowcase. "If he knew what he means

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to us, to the lowly, the enslaved, we dregs of the magical world! Dobby remembers how it was when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was at the height of his powers, sir! We house-elfs were treated like vermin, sir! Of course, Dobby is still treated like that, sir," he admitted, drying his face on the pillowcase. "But mostly, sir, life has improved for my kind since you triumphed over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry Potter survived, and the Dark Lord's power was broken, and it was a new dawn, sir, and Harry Potter shone like a beacon of hope for those of us who thought the Dark days would never end, sit... And now, at Hogwarts, terrible things are to happen, are perhaps happening already, and Dobby cannot let Harry Potter stay here now that history is to repeat itself, now that the Chamber of Secrets is open once more

Dobby froze, horrorstruck, then grabbed Harry's water jug from his bedside table and cracked it over his own head, toppling out of sight. A second later, he crawled back onto the bed, cross-eyed, muttering, "Bad Dobby, very bad Dobby. . ."

"So there is a Chamber of Secrets?" Harry whispered. "And did you say it's been opened before? Tell me, Dobby!"

He seized the elf's bony wrist as Dobby's hand inched toward the water jug. "But I'm not Muggle-born - how can I be in danger from the Chamber?"

"Ah, sir, ask no more, ask no more of poor Dobby," stammered the elf, his eyes huge in the dark. "Dark deeds are planned in this place, but Harry Potter must not be here when they happen - go home, Harry Potter, go home. Harry Potter must not meddle in this, sir, 'tis too dangerous -"

"Who is it, Dobby?" Harry said, keeping a firm hold on Dobby's

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wrist to stop him from hitting himself with the water jug again. "Who's opened it? Who opened it last time?"

"Dobby can't, sir, Dobby can't, Dobby mustn't tell!" squealed the elf.
"Go home, Harry Potter, go home!"

"I'm not going anywhere!" said Harry fiercely. "One of my best friends is Muggle-born; she'll be first in line if the Chamber really has been opened -"

"Harry Potter risks his own life for his friends!" moaned Dobby in a kind of miserable ecstasy. "So noble! So valiant! But he must save himself, he must, Harry Potter must not -"

Dobby suddenly froze, his bat ears quivering. Harry heard it, too. There were footsteps coming down the passageway outside.

"Dobby must go!" breathed the elf, terrified. There was a loud crack, and Harry's fist was suddenly clenched on thin air. He slumped back into bed, his eyes on the dark doorway to the hospital wing as the footsteps drew nearer.

Next moment, Dumbledore was backing into the dormitory, wearing a long woolly dressing gown and a nightcap. He was carrying one end of what looked like a statue. Professor McGonagall appeared a second later, carrying its feet. Together, they heaved it onto a bed.

"Get Madam Pomfrey," whispered Dumbledore, and Professor McGonagall hurried past the end of Harry's bed out of sight. Harry lay quite still, pretending to be asleep. He heard urgent voices, and then Professor McGonagall swept back into view, closely followed by Madam Pomfrey, who was pulling a cardigan on over her nightdress. He heard a sharp intake of breath.

"What happened?" Madam Pomfrey whispered to Dumbledore, bending over the statue on the bed.

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"Another attack," said Dumbledore. "Minerva found him on the stairs.

"There was a bunch of grapes next to him," said Professor McGonagall. "We think he was trying to sneak up here to visit Potter."

Harry's stomach gave a horrible lurch. Slowly and carefully, he raised himself a few inches so he could look at the statue on the bed. A ray of moonlight lay across its staring face.

It was Colin Creevey. His eyes were wide and his hands were stuck up in front of him, holding his camera.

"Petrified?" whispered Madam Pomfrey.

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall. "But I shudder to think ... If Albus hadn't been on the way downstairs for hot chocolate - who knows what might have -"

The three of them stared down at Colin. Then Dumbledore leaned forward and wrenched the camera out of Colin's rigid grip.

"You don't think he managed to get a picture of his attacker?" said Professor McGonagall eagerly.

Dumbledore didn't answer. He opened the back of the camera.

"Good gracious!" said Madam Pomfrey.

A jet of steam had hissed out of the camera. Harry, three beds away, caught the acrid smell of burnt plastic.

"Melted," said Madam Pomfrey wonderingly. "All melted..."

"What does this mean, Albus?" Professor McGonagall asked urgently.

"It means," said Dumbledore, "that the Chamber of Secrets is indeed open again."

Madam Pomfrey clapped a hand to her mouth. Professor McGonagall stared at Dumbledore.

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"But, Albus ... surely ... who?"

"The question is not who," said Dumbledore, his eyes on Colin.

"The question is, how"

And from what Harry could see of Professor McGonagall's shadowy face, she didn't understand this any better than he did.

C H-H A P T t R ELEVEN

THE D-KJEL]ING C-L-IJIB

Harry woke up on Sunday morning to find the dormitory blazing with winter sunlight and his arm reboned but very stiff. He sat up quickly and looked over at Colin's bed, but it had been blocked from view by the high curtains Harry had changed behind yesterday. Seeing that he was awake, Madam Pomfrey came bustling over with a breakfast tray and then began bending and stretching his arm and fingers.

"All in order," she said as he clumsily fed himself porridge lefthanded. "When you've finished eating, you may leave."

Harry dressed as quickly as he could and hurried off to Gryffindor Tower, desperate to tell Ron and Hermione about Colin and Dobby, but they weren't there. Harry left to look for them, wondering where they could have got to and feeling slightly hurt that they weren't interested in whether he had his bones back or not.

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As Harry passed the library, Percy Weasley strolled out of it, looking in far better spirits than last time they'd met.

"Oh, hello, Harry," he said. "Excellent flying yesterday, really excellent. Gryffindor has just taken the lead for the House Cup you earned fifty points!"

"You haven't seen Ron or Hermione, have you?" said Harry.

"No, I haven't," said Percy, his smile fading. "I hope Ron's not in another girls' toilet

Harry forced a laugh, watched Percy walk out of sight, and then headed straight for Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. He couldn't see why Ron and Hermione would be in there again, but after making sure that neither Filch nor any prefects were around, he opened the door and heard their voices coming from a locked stall.

"It's me," he said, closing the door behind him. There was a clunk, a splash, and a gasp from within the stall and he saw Hermione's eye peering through the keyhole.

"Harry!" she said. "You gave us such a fright - come in how's your arm?"

"Fine," said Harry, squeezing into the stall. An old cauldron was perched on the toilet, and a crackling from under the rim told Harry they had lit a fire beneath it. Conjuring up portable, waterproof fires was a speciality of Hermione's.

"We'd've come to meet you, but we decided to get started on the Polyjuice Potion," Ron explained as Harry, with difficulty, locked the stall again. "We've decided this is the safest place to hide it."

Harry started to tell them about Colin, but Hermione interrupted.

"We already know - we heard Professor McGonagall telling Professor Flitwick this morning. That's why we decided we'd better get going -"

"The sooner we get a confession out of Malfoy, the better," snarled Ron. "D'you know what I think? He was in such a foul temper after the Quidditch match, he took it out on Colin."

"There's something else," said Harry, watching Hermione tearing bundles of knotgrass and throwing them into the potion. "Dobby came to visit me in the middle of the night."

Ron and Hermione looked up, amazed. Harry told them everything Dobby had told him - or hadn't told him. Hermione and Ron listened with their mouths open.

"The Chamber of Secrets has been opened before?" Hermione said.

"This settles it," said Ron in a triumphant voice. "Lucius Malfoy must've opened the Chamber when he was at school here and now he's told dear old Draco how to do it. It's obvious. Wish Dobby'd told you what kind of monster's in there, though. I want to know how come nobody's noticed it sneaking around the school."

"Maybe it can make itself invisible," said Hermione, prodding leeches to the bottom of the cauldron. "Or maybe it can disguise itself - pretend to be a suit of armor or something - I've read about Chameleon Ghouls -"

"You read too much, Hermione," said Ron, pouring dead lacewings on

top of the leeches. He crumpled up the empty lacewing bag and looked at Harry.

"So Dobby stopped us from getting on the train and broke your arm. He shook his head. "You know what, Harry? If he doesn't stop trying to save your life he's going to kill you."

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The news that Colin Creevey had been attacked and was now lying as though dead in the hospital wing had spread through the entire school by Monday morning. The air was suddenly thick with rumor and suspicion. The first years were now moving around the castle in tight-knit groups, as though scared they would be attacked if they ventured forth alone.

Ginny Weasley, who sat next to Colin Creevey in Charms, was distraught, but Harry felt that Fred and George were going the wrong way about cheering her up. They were taking turns covering themselves with fur or boils and jumping out at her from behind statues. They only stopped when Percy, apoplectic with rage, told them he was going to write to Mrs. Weasley and tell her Ginny was having nightmares.

Meanwhile, hidden from the teachers, a roaring trade in talismans, amulets, and other protective devices was sweeping the school. Neville Longbottom bought a large, evil-smelling green onion, a pointed purple crystal, and a rotting newt tail before the other Gryffindor boys pointed out that he was in no danger; he was a pure-blood, and therefore unlikely to be attacked.

"They went for Filch first," Neville said, his round face fearful. "And everyone knows I'm almost a Squib."

In the second week of December Professor McGonagall came around as usual, collecting names of those who would be staying at school for Christmas. Harry, Ron, and Hermione signed her list; they had heard that Malfoy was staying, which struck them as very suspicious. The holidays would be the perfect time to use the Polyjuice Potion and try to worm a confession out of him.

Unfortunately, the potion was only half finished. They still

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needed the bicorn horn and the boomslang skin, and the only place they were going to get them was from Snape's private stores. Harry privately felt he'd rather face Slytherin's legendary monster than let Snape catch him robbing his office.

"What we need," said Hermione briskly as Thursday afternoon's double Potions lesson loomed nearer, "is a diversion. Then one of us can sneak into Snape's office and take what we need."

Harry and Ron looked at her nervously.

"I think Id better do the actual stealing," Hermione continued in a matter-of-fact tone. "You two will be expelled if you get into any more

trouble, and I've got a clean record. So all you need to do is cause enough mayhem to keep Snape busy for five minutes or so.

Harry smiled feebly. Deliberately causing mayhem in Snape's Potions class was about as safe as poking a sleeping dragon in the eye.

Potions lessons took place in one of the large dungeons. Thursday afternoon's lesson proceeded in the usual way. Twenty cauldrons stood steaming between the wooden desks, on which stood brass scales and jars of ingredients. Snape prowled through the fumes, making waspish remarks about the Gryffindors' work while the Slytherins sniggered appreciatively. Draco Malfoy, who was Snape's favorite student, kept flicking puffer-fish eyes at Ron and Harry, who knew that if they retaliated they would get detention faster than you could say "Unfair."

Harry's Swelling Solution was far too runny, but he had his mind on more important things. He was waiting for Hermione's signal, and he hardly listened as Snape paused to sneer at his watery

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potion. When Snape turned and walked off to bully Neville, Hermione caught Harry's eye and nodded.

Harry ducked swiftly down behind his cauldron, pulled one of Fred's Filibuster fireworks out of his pocket, and gave it a quick prod with his wand. The firework began to fizz and sputter. Knowing he had only seconds, Harry straightened up, took aim, and lobbed it into the air; it landed right on target in Goyle's cauldron.

Goyle's potion exploded, showering the whole class. People shrieked as splashes of the Swelling Solution hit them. Malfoy got a faceful and his nose began to swell like a balloon; Goyle blundered around, his hands over his eyes, which had expanded to the size of a dinner plate - Snape was trying to restore calm and find out what had happened. Through the confusion, Harry saw Hermione slip quietly into Snape's office.

"Silence! SILENCE!" Snape roared. "Anyone who has been splashed, come here for a Deflating Draft - when I find out who did this -"

Harry tried not to laugh as he watched Malfoy hurry forward, his head drooping with the weight of a nose like a small melon. As half the class lumbered up to Snape's desk, some weighted down with arms like clubs, others unable to talk through gigantic puffedup lips, Harry saw Hermione slide back into the dungeon, the front of her robes bulging.

When everyone had taken a swig of antidote and the various swellings had subsided, Snape swept over to Goyle's cauldron and scooped out the twisted black remains of the firework. There was a sudden hush.

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"If I ever find out who threw this," Snape whispered, "I shall make sure that person is expelled."

Harry arranged his face into what he hoped was a puzzled expression. Snape was looking right at him, and the bell that rang ten

minutes later could not have been more welcome.

"He knew it was me," Harry told Ron and Hermione as they hurried back to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. "I could tell."

Hermione threw the new ingredients into the cauldron and began to stir feverishly.

"It'll be ready in two weeks," she said happily.

"Snape can't prove it was you," said Ron reassuringly to Harry. "What can he do?"

"Knowing Snape, something foul," said Harry as the potion frothed and bubbled.

A week later, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were walking across the entrance hall when they saw a small knot of people gathered around the notice board, reading a piece of parchment that had just been pinned up. Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas beckoned them over, looking excited.

"They're starting a Dueling Club!" said Seamus. "First meeting tonight! I wouldn't mind dueling lessons; they might come in handy one of these days"

"What, you reckon Slytherin's monster can duel?" said Ron, but he, too, read the sign with interest.

"Could be useful," he said to Harry and Hermione as they went into dinner. "Shall we go?"

Harry and Hermione were all for it, so at eight o'clock that

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evening they hurried back to the Great Hall. The long dining tables had vanished and a golden stage had appeared along one wall, lit by thousands of candles floating overhead. The ceiling was velvety black once more and most of the school seemed to be packed beneath it, all carrying their wands and looking excited.

"I wonder who'll be teaching us?" said Hermione as they edged into the chattering crowd. "Someone told me Flitwick was a dueling champion when he was young - maybe it'll be him."

"As long as it's not -" Harry began, but he ended on a groan: Gilderoy Lockhart was walking onto the stage, resplendent in robes of deep plum and accompanied by none other than Snape, wearing his usual black.

Lockhart waved an arm for silence and called ' "Gather round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excellent!

"Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little dueling club, to train you all in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions - for full details, see my published works.

"Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape," said Lockhart, flashing a wide smile. "He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about dueling himself and has sportingly agreed to help me with a short demonstration before we begin. Now, I don't want any of you youngsters to worry - you'll still have your Potions master when I'm through with him, never fear!"

"Wouldn't it be good if they finished each other off?" Ron muttered in Harry's ear.

Snape's upper lip was curling. Harry wondered why Lockhart

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was still smiling; if Snape had been looking at him like that he'd have been running as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

Lockhart and Snape turned to face each other and bowed; at least, Lockhart did, with much twirling of his hands, whereas Snape jerked his head irritably. Then they raised their wands like swords in front of them.

"As you see, we are holding our wands in the accepted combative position," Lockhart told the silent crowd. "On the count of three, we will cast our first spells. Neither of us will be aiming to kill, of course."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Harry murmured, watching Snape baring his teeth.

"One - two - three -"

Both of them swung their wands above their heads and pointed them at their opponent; Snape cried: "Expelliarmus!" There was a dazzling flash of scarlet light and Lockhart was blasted off his feet: He flew backward off the stage, smashed into the wall, and slid down it to sprawl on the floor.

Malfoy and some of the other Slytherins cheered. Hermione was dancing on tiptoes. "Do you think he's all right?" she squealed through her fingers.

"Who cares?" said Harry and Ron together.

Lockhart was getting unsteadily to his feet. His hat had fallen off and his wavy hair was standing on end.

"Well, there you have it!" he said, tottering back onto the platform. "That was a Disarming Charm - as you see, I've lost my wand - ah, thank you, Miss Brown - yes, an excellent idea to show them that, Professor Snape, but if you don't mind my saying

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so, it was very obvious what you were about to do. If I had wanted to stop you it would have been only too easy - however, I felt it would be instructive to let them see . . ."

Snape was looking murderous. Possibly Lockhart had noticed, because

he said, "Enough demonstrating! I'm going to come amongst you now and put you all into pairs. Professor Snape, if you'd like to help me -"

They moved through the crowd, matching up partners. Lockhart teamed Neville with Justin Finch-Fletchley, but Snape reached Harry and Ron first.

"Time to split up the dream team, I think," he sneered. "Weasley, you can partner Finnigan. Potter -"

Harry moved automatically toward Hermione.

"I don't think so," said Snape, smiling coldly. "Mr. Malfoy, come over here. Let's see what you make of the famous Potter. And you, Miss Granger - you can partner Miss Bulstrode."

Malfoy strutted over, smirking. Behind him walked a Slytherin girl who reminded Harry of a picture he'd seen in Holidays with Hags. She was large and square and her heavy jaw jutted aggressively. Hermione gave her a weak smile that she did not return.

"Face your partners!" called Lockhart, back on the platform. "And bow!"

Harry and Malfoy barely inclined their heads, not taking their eyes off each other.

"Wands at the ready!" shouted Lockhart. "When I count to three, cast your charms to disarm your opponents - only to disarm them - we don't want any accidents - one ... two ... three -"

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Harry swung his wand high, but Malfoy had already started on "two": His spell hit Harry so hard he felt as though he'd been hit over the head with a saucepan. He stumbled, but everything still seemed to be working, and wasting no more time, Harry pointed his wand straight at Malfoy and shouted, "Rictusempra!"

A jet of silver light hit Malfoy in the stomach and he doubled up, wheezing.

"I said disarm only!" Lockhart shouted in alarm over the heads of the battling crowd, as Malfoy sank to his knees; Harry had hit him with a Tickling Charm, and he could barely move for laughing. Harry hung back, with a vague feeling it would be unsporting to bewitch Malfoy while he was on the floor, but this was a mistake; gasping for breath, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry's knees, choked, "Tarantallegra!" and the next second Harry's legs began to jerk around out of his control in a kind of quickstep.

"Stop! Stop!" screamed Lockhart, but Snape took charge.

"Finite Incantatem!" he shouted; Harry's feet stopped dancing, Malfoy stopped laughing, and they were able to look up.

A haze of greenish smoke was hovering over the scene. Both Neville and Justin were lying on the floor, panting; Ron was holding up an ashen-faced Seamus, apologizing for whatever his broken wand had done; but Hermione and Millicent Bulstrode were still moving;

Millicent had Hermione in a headlock and Hermione was whimpering in pain; both their wands lay forgotten on the floor. Harry leapt forward and pulled Millicent off. It was difficult: She was a lot bigger than he was.

"Dear, dear," said Lockhart, skittering through the crowd, looking at the aftermath of the duels. "Up you go, Macmillan

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Careful there, Miss Fawcett Pinch it hard, it'll stop bleeding in a second, Boot

"I think I'd better teach you how to block unfriendly spells," said Lockhart, standing flustered in the midst of the hall. He glanced at Snape, whose black eyes glinted, and looked quickly away. "Let's have a volunteer pair - Longbottom and Finch-Fletchley, how about you -"

"A bad idea, Professor Lockhart," said Snape, gliding over like a large and malevolent bat. "Longbottom causes devastation with the simplest spells. We'll be sending what's left of Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox." Neville's round, pink face went pinker. "How about Malfoy and Potter?" said Snape with a twisted smile.

"Excellent idea!" said Lockhart, gesturing Harry and Malfoy into the middle of the hall as the crowd backed away to give them room.

"Now, Harry," said Lockhart. "When Draco points his wand at you, you do this."

He raised his own wand, attempted a complicated sort of wiggling action, and dropped it. Snape smirked as Lockhart quickly picked it up, saying, "Whoops -my wand is a little overexcited -"

Snape moved closer to Malfoy, bent down, and whispered something in his ear. Malfoy smirked, too. Harry looked up nervously at Lockhart and said, "Professor, could you show me that blocking thing again?"

"Scared?" muttered Malfoy, so that Lockhart couldn't hear him.

"You wish," said Harry out of the corner of his mouth.

Lockhart cuffed Harry merrily on the shoulder. "Just do what I did, Harry!"

"What, drop my wand?"

But Lockhart wasn't listening.

"Three - two - one - go!" he shouted.

Malfoy raised his wand quickly and bellowed, "Serpensortia!"

The end of his wand exploded. Harry watched, aghast, as a long black snake shot out of it, fell heavily onto the floor between them, and raised itself, ready to strike. There were screams as the crowd backed swiftly away, clearing the floor.

"Don't move, Potter," said Snape lazily, clearly enjoying the sight of

Harry standing motionless, eye to eye with the angry snake. "I'll get rid of it

"Allow me!" shouted Lockhart. He brandished his wand at the snake and there was a loud bang; the snake, instead of vanishing, flew ten feet into the air and fell back to the floor with a loud smack. Enraged, hissing furiously, it slithered straight toward Justin Finch-Fletchley and raised itself again, fangs exposed, poised to strike.

Harry wasn't sure what made him do it. He wasn't even aware of deciding to do it. All he knew was that his legs were carrying him forward as though he was on casters and that he had shouted stupidly at the snake, "Leave him alone!" And miraculously - inexplicably - the snake slumped to the floor, docile as a thick, black garden hose, its eyes now on Harry. Harry felt the fear drain out of him. He knew the snake wouldn't attack anyone now, though how he knew it, he couldn't have explained.

He looked up at Justin, grinning, expecting to see Justin looking

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relieved, or puzzled, or even grateful - but certainly not angry and scared.

"What do you think you're playing at?" he shouted, and before Harry could say anything, Justin had turned and stormed out of the hall.

Snape stepped forward, waved his wand, and the snake vanished in a small puff of black smoke. Snape, too, was looking at Harry in an unexpected way: It was a shrewd and calculating look, and Harry didn't like it. He was also dimly aware of an ominous muttering all around the walls. Then he felt a tugging on the back of his robes.

"Come on," said Rods voice in his ear. "Move - come on -"

Ron steered him out of the hall, Hermione hurrying alongside them. As they went through the doors, the people on either side drew away as though they were frightened of catching something. Harry didn't have a clue what was going on, and neither Ron nor Hermione explained anything until they had dragged him all the way up to the empty Gryffindor common room. Then Ron pushed Harry into an armchair and said, "You're a Parselmouth. Why didn't you tell us?"

"I'm a what?" said Harry.

"A Parselmouth!" said Ron. "You can talk to snakes!"

"I know," said Harry. "I mean, that's only the second time I've ever done it. I accidentally set a boa constrictor on my cousin Dudley at the zoo once - long story - but it was telling me it had never seen Brazil and I sort of set it free without meaning to that was before I knew I was a wizard -"

"A boa constrictor told you it had never seen Brazil?" Ron repeated faintly.

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"So?" said Harry. "I bet loads of people here can do it."

"Oh, no they can't," said Ron. "It's not a very common gift. Harry, this is bad."

"What's bad?" said Harry, starting to feel quite angry. "What's wrong with everyone? Listen, if I hadn't told that snake not to attack Justin -"

"Oh, that's what you said to it?"

"What d'you mean? You were there - you heard me -"

"I heard you speaking Parseltongue," said Ron. "Snake language. You could have been saying anything - no wonder Justin panicked, you sounded like you were egging the snake on or something - it was creepy, you know -"

Harry gaped at him.

"I spoke a different language? But - I didn't realize - how can I speak a language without knowing I can speak it?"

Ron shook his head. Both he and Hermione were looking as though someone had died. Harry couldn't see what was so terrible.

"D'you want to tell me what's wrong with stopping a massive snake biting off Justin's head?" he said. "What does it matter how I did it as long as Justin doesn't have to join the Headless Hunt?"

"It matters," said Hermione, speaking at last in a hushed voice, "because being able to talk to snakes was what Salazar Slytherin was famous for. That's why the symbol of Slytherin House is a serpent."

Harry's mouth fell open.

"Exactly," said Ron. "And now the whole school's going to think you're his great-great-great-grandson or something -"

"But I'm not," said Harry, with a panic he couldn't quite explain.

"You'll find that hard to prove," said Hermione. "He lived about a thousand years ago; for all we know, you could be."

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Harry lay awake for hours that night. Through a gap in the curtains around his four-poster he watched snow starting to drift past the tower window and wondered . . .

Could he be a descendant of Salazar Slithering? He didn't know anything about his father's family, after all. The Dursleys had always forbidden questions about his wizarding relatives.

Quietly, Harry tried to say something in Parseltongue. The words wouldn't come. It seemed he had to be face-to-face with a snake to do it.

But I'm in Gryffindor, Harry thought. The Sorting Hat wouldn't have put me in here if I had Slytherin blood...

Ah, said a nasty little voice in his brain, but the Sorting Hat wanted to put you in Slytherin, don't you remember?

Harry turned over. He'd see Justin the next day in Herbology and he'd explain that he'd been calling the snake off, not egging it on, which (he thought angrily, pummeling his pillow) any fool should have realized.

By next morning, however, the snow that had begun in the night had turned into a blizzard so thick that the last Herbology lesson of the term was canceled: Professor Sprout wanted to fit socks and scarves on the Mandrakes, a tricky operation she would entrust to no one else, now that it was so important for the Mandrakes to grow quickly and revive Mrs. Norris and Colin Creevey.

Harry fretted about this next to the fire in the Gryffindor common room, while Ron and Hermione used their time off to play a game of wizard chess.

"For heaven's sake, Harry," said Hermione, exasperated, as one

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of Ron's bishops wrestled her knight off his horse and dragged him off the board. "Go and find Justin if it's so important to you."

So Harry got up and left through the portrait hole, wondering where Justin might be.

The castle was darker than it usually was in daytime because of the thick, swirling gray snow at every window. Shivering, Harry walked past classrooms where lessons were taking place, catching snatches of what was happening within. Professor McGonagall was shouting at someone who, by the sound of it, had turned his friend into a badger. Resisting the urge to take a look, Harry walked on by, thinking that Justin might be using his free time to catch up on some work, and deciding to check the library first.

A group of the Hufflepuffs who should have been in Herbology were indeed sitting at the back of the library, but they didn't seem to be working. Between the long lines of high bookshelves, Harry could see that their heads were close together and they were having what looked like an absorbing conversation. He couldn't see whether Justin was among them. He was walking toward them when something of what they were saying met his ears, and he paused to listen, hidden in the Invisibility section.

"So anyway," a stout boy was saying, "I told Justin to hide up in our dormitory. I mean to say, if Potter's marked him down as his next victim, it's best if he keeps a low profile for a while. Of course, Justin's been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggle-born. Justin actually told him he'd been down for Eton. That's not the kind of thing you bandy about with Slytherin's heir on the loose, is it?"

"You definitely think it is Potter, then, Ernie?" said a girl with blonde pigtails anxiously.

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"Hannah," said the stout boy solemnly, "he's a Parselmouth. Everyone knows that's the mark of a Dark wizard. Have you ever heard of a decent one who could talk to snakes? They called Slytherin himself Serpent-tongue."

There was some heavy murmuring at this, and Ernie went on, "Remember what was written on the wall? Enemies of the Heir, Beware. Potter had some sort of run-in with Filch. Next thing we know, Flich's cat's attacked. That first year, Creevey, was annoying Potter at the Quidditch match, taking pictures of him while he was lying in the mud. Next thing we know - Creevey's been attacked."

"He always seems so nice, though," said Hannah uncertainly, "and, well, he's the one who made You-Know-Who disappear. He can't be all bad, can he?"

Ernie lowered his voice mysteriously, the Hufflepuffs bent closer, and Harry edged nearer so that he could catch Ernie's words.

"No one knows how he survived that attack by You-Know-Who. I mean to say, he was only a baby when it happened. He should have been blasted into smithereens. Only a really powerful Dark wizard could have survived a curse like that." He dropped his voice until it was barely more than a whisper, and said, "That's probably why You-Know-Who wanted to kill him in the first place. Didn't want another Dark Lord competing with him. I wonder what other powers Potter's been hiding?"

Harry couldn't take anymore. Clearing his throat loudly, he stepped out from behind the bookshelves. If he hadn't been feeling so angry, he would have found the sight that greeted him funny: Every one of the Hufflepuffs looked as though they had been Petrified by the sight of him, and the color was draining out of Ernie's face.

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"Hello," said Harry. "I'm looking for Justin Finch-Fletchley."

The Hufflepuffs' worst fears had clearly been confirmed. They all looked fearfully at Ernie.

"What do you want with him?" said Ernie in a quavering voice.

"I wanted to tell him what really happened with that snake at the Dueling Club," said Harry.

Ernie bit his white lips and then, taking a deep breath, said, "We were all there. We saw what happened."

"Then you noticed that after I spoke to it, the snake backed off?" said Harry.

"All I saw," said Ernie stubbornly, though he was trembling as he spoke, "was you speaking Parseltongue and chasing the snake toward Justin."

"I didn't chase it at him!" Harry said, his voice shaking with anger. "It didn't even touch him!"

"It was a very near miss," said Ernie. "And in case you're getting ideas," he added hastily, "I might tell you that you can trace my family back through nine generations of witches and warlocks and my blood's as pure as anyone's, so -"

- cc I don't care what sort of blood you've got!" said Harry fiercely.
"Why would I want to attack Muggle-borns?"

"I've heard you hate those Muggles you live with," said Ernie swiftly.

"It's not possible to live with the Dursleys and not hate them," said Harry. "Id like to see you try it."

He turned on his heel and stormed out of the library, earning himself a reproving glare from Madam Pince, who was polishing the gilded cover of a large spellbook.

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Harry blundered up the corridor, barely noticing where he was going, he was in such a fury. The result was that he walked into something very large and solid, which knocked him backward onto the floor.

"Oh, hello, Hagrid," Harry said, looking up.

Hagrid's face was entirely hidden by a woolly, snow-covered balaclava, but it couldn't possibly be anyone else, as he filled most of the corridor in his moleskin overcoat. A dead rooster was hanging from one of his massive, gloved hands.

"All righ', Harry?" he said, pulling up the balaclava so he could speak. "Why aren't yeh in class?"

"Canceled," said Harry, getting up. "What're you doing in here?"

Hagrid held up the limp rooster.

"Second one killed this term," he explained. "It's either foxes or a Blood-Suckin Bugbear, an' I need the Headmaster's permission ter put a charm around the hen coop."

He peered more closely at Harry from under his thick, snowflecked eyebrows.

"Yeh sure yeh're all righ'? Yeh look all hot an' bothered -"

Harry couldn't bring himself to repeat what Ernie and the rest of the Hufflepuffs had been saying about him.

"It's nothing," he said. "Id better get going, Hagrid, it's Transfiguration next and I've got to pick up my books."

He walked off, his mind still full of what Ernie had said about him.

"Justin's been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggle-born

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Harry stamped up the stairs and turned along another corridor, which was particularly dark; the torches had been extinguished by a strong, icy draft that was blowing through a loose windowpane. He was halfway down the passage when he tripped headlong over something lying on the floor.

He turned to squint at what he'd fallen over and felt as though his stomach had dissolved.

Justin Finch-Fletchley was lying on the floor, rigid and cold, a look of shock frozen on his face, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. And that wasn't all. Next to him was another figure, the strangest sight Harry had ever seen.

It was Nearly Headless Nick, no longer pearly-white and transparent, but black and smoky, floating immobile and horizontal, six inches off the floor. His head was half off and his face wore an expression of shock identical to Justin's.

Harry got to his feet, his breathing fast and shallow, his heart doing a kind of drumroll against his ribs. He looked wildly up and down the deserted corridor and saw a line of spiders scuttling as fast as they could away from the bodies. The only sounds were the muffled voices of teachers from the classes on either side.

He could run, and no one would ever know he had been there. But he couldn't just leave them lying here He had to get help Would anyone believe he hadn't had anything to do with this?

As he stood there, panicking, a door right next to him opened with a bang. Peeves the Poltergeist came shooting out.

"Why, it's potty wee Potter!" cackled Peeves, knocking Harry's glasses askew as he bounced past him. "What's Potter up to? Why's Potter lurking --"

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Peeves stopped, halfway through a midair somersault. Upside down, he spotted Justin and Nearly Headless Nick. He flipped the right way up, filled his lungs and, before Harry could stop him, screamed, "ATTACK! ATTACK! ANOTHER ATTACK! NO MORTAL OR GHOST IS SAFE! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! ATTAAAACK!"

Crash - crash - crash - door after door flew open along the corridor and people flooded out. For several long minutes, there was a scene of such confusion that Justin was in danger of being squashed and people kept standing in Nearly Headless Nick. Harry found himself pinned against the wall as the teachers shouted for quiet. Professor McGonagall came running, followed by her own class, one of whom still had black-and-white-striped hair. She used her wand to set off aloud bang, which restored silence, and ordered everyone back into their classes. No sooner had the scene cleared somewhat than Ernie the Hufflepuff arrived, panting, on the scene.

"Caught in the act!" Ernie yelled, his face stark white, pointing his finger dramatically at Harry.

"That will do, Macmillan!" said Professor McGonagall sharply.

Peeves was bobbing overhead, now grinning wickedly, surveying the scene; Peeves always loved chaos. As the teachers bent over Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, examining them, Peeves broke into song:

"Oh, Potter, you rotter, oh, what have you done,
You're killing off' students, you think it's good fun -"

"That's enough Peeves!" barked Professor McGonagall, and Peeves zoomed away backward, with his tongue out at Harry.

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Justin was carried up to the hospital wing by Professor Flitwick and Professor Sinistra of the Astronomy department, but nobody seemed to know what to do for Nearly Headless Nick. In the end, Professor McGonagall conjured a large fan out of thin air, which she gave to Ernie with instructions to waft Nearly Headless Nick up the stairs. This Ernie did, fanning Nick along like a silent black hovercraft. This left Harry and Professor McGonagall alone together.

"This way, Potter," she said.

"Professor," said Harry at once, "I swear I didn't -"

"This is out of my hands, Potter," said Professor McGonagall curtly.

They marched in silence around a corner and she stopped before a large and extremely ugly stone gargoyle.

"Lemon drop!" she said. This was evidently a password, because the gargoyle sprang suddenly to life and hopped aside as the wall behind him split in two. Even full of dread for what was coming, Harry couldn't fail to be amazed. Behind the wall was a spiral staircase that was moving smoothly upward, like an escalator. As he and Professor McGonagall stepped onto it, Harry heard the wall thud closed behind them. They rose upward in circles, higher and higher, until at last, slightly dizzy, Harry saw a gleaming oak door ahead, with a brass knocker in the shape of a griffin.

He knew now where he was being taken. This must be where Dumbledore lived.

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C I3 A P T V RR T W E I V

THE POLYJUICE POTION

hey stepped off the stone staircase at the top, and Professor McGonagall rapped on the door. It opened silently and they entered. Professor McGonagall told Harry to wait and left him there, alone.

Harry looked around. One thing was certain: of all the teachers' offices Harry had visited so far this year, Dumbledore's was by far the most interesting. If he hadn't been scared out of his wits that he was about to be thrown out of school, he would have been very pleased to have a chance to look around it.

It was a large and beautiful circular room, full of funny little noises.
A

number of curious silver instruments stood on spindlelegged tables, whirring and emitting little puffs of smoke. The walls were covered with portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses, all of whom were snoozing gently in their frames. There was also an enormous, claw-footed desk, and, sitting on a shelf behind it, a shabby, tattered wizard's hat - the Sorting Hat.

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Harry hesitated. He cast a wary eye around the sleeping witches and wizards on the walls. Surely it couldn't hurt if he took the hat down and tried it on again? Just to see ... just to make sure it had put him in the right House

He walked quietly around the desk, lifted the hat from its shelf, and lowered it slowly onto his head. It was much too large and slipped down over his eyes, just as it had done the last time he'd put it on. Harry stared at the black inside of the hat, waiting. Then a small voice said in his ear, "Bee in your bonnet, Harry Potter?"

"Er, yes," Harry muttered. "Er - sorry to bother you - I wanted to ask -"

"You've been wondering whether I put you in the right House," said the hat smartly. "Yes ... you were particularly difficult to place. But I stand by what I said before" - Harry's heart leapt - "you would have done well in Slytherin -"

Harry's stomach plummeted. He grabbed the point of the hat and pulled it off. It hung limply in his hand, grubby and faded. Harry pushed it back onto its shelf, feeling sick.

"You're wrong," he said aloud to the still and silent hat. It didn't move.

Harry backed away, watching it. Then a strange, gagging noise behind him made him wheel around.

He wasn't alone after all. Standing on a golden perch behind the door was a decrepit-looking bird that resembled a half-plucked turkey. Harry stared at it and the bird looked balefully back, making its gagging noise again. Harry thought it looked very ill. Its eyes were dull and, even as Harry watched, a couple more feathers fell out of its tail.

Harry was just thinking that all he needed was for Dumbledore's pet bird to die while he was alone in the office with it, when the bird burst into flames.

Harry yelled in shock and backed away into the desk. He looked feverishly around in case there was a glass of water somewhere but couldn't see one; the bird, meanwhile, had become a fireball; it gave one loud shriek and next second there was nothing but a smouldering pile of ash on the floor.

The office door opened. Dumbledore came in, looking very somber.

"Professor," Harry gasped. "Your bird - I couldn't do anything - he just caught fire -"

To Harry's astonishment, Dumbledore smiled.

"About time, too," he said. "He's been looking dreadful for days; I've been telling him to get a move on."

He chuckled at the stunned look on Harry's face.

"Fawkes is a phoenix, Harry. Phoenixes burst into flame when it is time for them to die and are reborn from the ashes. Watch him . . ."

Harry looked down in time to see a tiny, wrinkled, newborn bird poke its head out of the ashes. It was quite as ugly as the old one.

"It's a shame you had to see him on a Burning Day," said Dumbledore, seating himself behind his desk. "He's really very handsome most of the time, wonderful red and gold plumage. Fascinating creatures, phoenixes. They can carry immensely heavy loads, their tears have healing powers, and they make highly faithful pets."

In the shock of Fawkes catching fire, Harry had forgotten what he was there for, but it all came back to him as Dumbledore settled

himself in the high chair behind the desk and fixed Harry with his penetrating, light-blue stare.

Before Dumbledore could speak another word, however, the door of the office flew open with an almighty bang and Hagrid burst in, a wild look in his eyes, his balaclava perched on top of his shaggy black head and the dead rooster still swinging from his hand.

"It wasn' Harry, Professor Dumbledore!" said Hagrid urgently. "I was talkin' ter him seconds before that kid was found, he never had time, sir
-
"

Dumbledore tried to say something, but Hagrid went ranting on, waving the rooster around in his agitation, sending feathers everywhere.

"- it can't've bin him, I'll swear it in front o' the Ministry o' Magic if I have to -"

"Hagrid, I -"

"- yeh've got the wrong boy, sir, I know Harry never ='

"Hagrid!" said Dumbledore loudly. "I do not think that Harry attacked those people."

"Oh," said Hagrid, the rooster falling limply at his side. "Right. I'll wait outside then, Headmaster."

And he stomped out looking embarrassed.

"You don't think it was me, Professor?" Harry repeated hopefully as Dumbledore brushed rooster feathers off his desk.

"No, Harry, I don't," said Dumbledore, though his face was somber again. "But I still want to talk to you."

Harry waited nervously while Dumbledore considered him, the tips of his long fingers together.

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"I must ask you, Harry, whether there is anything you'd like to tell me," he said gently. "Anything at all."

Harry didn't know what to say. He thought of Malfoy shouting, "You'll be next, Mudbloods!" and of the Polyjuice Potion simmering away in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Then he thought of the disembodied voice he had heard twice and remembered what Ron had said:

"Hearing voices no one else can hear isn't a good sign, even in the wizarding world." He thought, too, about what everyone was saying about him, and his growing dread that he was somehow connected with Salazar Slytherin

"No," said Harry. "There isn't anything, Professor"

The double attack on Justin and Nearly Headless Nick turned what had hitherto been nervousness into real panic. Curiously, it was Nearly Headless Nick's fate that seemed to worry people most. What could possibly do that to a ghost? people asked each other; what terrible power could harm someone who was already dead? There was almost a stampede to book seats on the Hogwarts Express so that students could go home for Christmas.

"At this rate, we'll be the only ones left," Ron told Harry and Hermione. "Us, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. What a jolly holiday it's going to be."

Crabbe and Goyle, who always did whatever Malfoy did, had signed up to stay over the holidays, too. But Harry was glad that most people were leaving. He was tired of people skirting around him in the corridors, as though he was about to sprout fangs or spit poison; tired of all the muttering, pointing, and hissing as he passed.

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Fred and George, however, found all this very funny. They went out of their way to march ahead of Harry down the corridors, shouting, "Make way for the Heir of Slytherin, seriously evil wizard coming through

Percy was deeply disapproving of this behavior.

"It is not a laughing matter," he said coldly.

"Oh, get out of the way, Percy," said Fred. "Harry's in a hurry."

"Yeah, he's off to the Chamber of Secrets for a cup of tea with his fanged servant," said George, chortling.

Ginny didn't find it amusing either.

"Oh, don't," she wailed every time Fred asked Harry loudly who he was planning to attack next, or when George pretended to ward Harry off with a large clove of garlic when they met.

Harry didn't mind; it made him feel better that Fred and George, at least, thought the idea of his being Slytherin's heir was quite ludicrous.

But their antics seemed to be aggravating Draco Malfoy, who looked increasingly sour each time he saw them at it.

"It's because he's bursting to say it's really him," said Ron knowingly. "You know how he hates anyone beating him at anything, and you're getting all the credit for his dirty work."

"Not for long," said Hermione in a satisfied tone. "The Polyjuice Potion's nearly ready. We'll be getting the truth out of him any day now."

At last the term ended, and a silence deep as the snow on the grounds descended on the castle. Harry found it peaceful, rather than gloomy, and enjoyed the fact that he, Hermione, and the Weasleys had the run of Gryffindor Tower, which meant they could

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play Exploding Snap loudly without bothering anyone, and practice dueling in private. Fred, George, and Ginny had chosen to stay at school rather than visit Bill in Egypt with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Percy, who disapproved of what he termed their childish behavior, didn't spend much time in the Gryffindor common room. He had already told them pompously that he was only staying over Christmas because it was his duty as a prefect to support the teachers during this troubled time.

Christmas morning dawned, cold and white. Harry and Ron, the only ones left in their dormitory, were woken very early by Hermione, who burst in, fully dressed and carrying presents for them both.

"Wake up," she said loudly, pulling back the curtains at the window.

"Hermione - you're not supposed to be in here -" said Ron, shielding his eyes against the light.

"Merry Christmas to you, too," said Hermione, throwing him his present. "I've been up for nearly an hour, adding more lacewings to the potion. It's ready."

Harry sat up, suddenly wide awake.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," said Hermione, shifting Scabbers the rat so that she could sit down on the end of Ron's four-poster. "If we're going to do it, I say it should be tonight."

At that moment, Hedwig swooped into the room, carrying a very small package in her beak.

"Hello," said Harry happily as she landed on his bed. "Are you

speaking to me again?"

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She nibbled his ear in an affectionate sort of way, which was a far better present than the one that she had brought him, which turned out to be from the Dursleys. They had sent Harry a toothpick and a note telling him to find out whether he'd be able to stay at Hogwarts for the summer vacation, too.

The rest of Harry's Christmas presents were far more satisfactory. Hagrid had sent him a large tin of treacle fudge, which Harry decided to soften by the fire before eating; Ron had given him a book called *Flying with the Cannons*, a book of interesting facts about his favorite Quidditch team, and Hermione had bought him a luxury eagle-feather quill. Harry opened the last present to find a new, hand-knitted sweater from Mrs. Weasley and a large plum cake. He read her card with a fresh surge of guilt, thinking about Mr. Weasley's car (which hadn't been seen since its crash with the Whomping Willow), and the bout of rule-breaking he and Ron were planning next.

No one, not even someone dreading taking Polyjuice Potion later, could fail to enjoy Christmas dinner at Hogwarts.

The Great Hall looked magnificent. Not only were there a dozen frost-covered Christmas trees and thick streamers of holly and mistletoe crisscrossing the ceiling, but enchanted snow was falling, warm and dry, from the ceiling. Dumbledore led them in a few of his favorite carols, Hagrid booming more and more loudly with every goblet of eggnog he consumed. Percy, who hadn't noticed that Fred had bewitched his prefect badge so that it now read "Pinhead," kept asking them all what they were sniggering at. Harry didn't even care that Draco Malfoy was making loud, snide remarks

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about his new sweater from the Slytherin table. With a bit of luck, Malfoy would be getting his comeuppance in a few hours' time.

Harry and Ron had barely finished their third helpings of Christmas pudding when Hermione ushered them out of the hall to finalize their plans for the evening.

"We still need a bit of the people you're changing into," said Hermione matter-of-factly, as though she were sending them to the supermarket for laundry detergent. "And obviously, it'll be best if you can get something of Crabbe's and Goyle's; they're Malfoys best friends, he'll tell them anything. And we also need to make sure the real Crabbe and Goyle can't burst in on us while we're interrogating him."

"I've got it all worked out," she went on smoothly, ignoring Harry's and Ron's stupefied faces. She held up two plump chocolate cakes. "I've filled these with a simple Sleeping Draught. All you have to do is make sure Crabbe and Goyle find them. You know how greedy they are, they're bound to eat them. Once they're asleep, pull out a few of their hairs and hide them in a broom closet."

Harry and Ron looked incredulously at each other.

"Hermione, I don't think -"

"That could go seriously wrong -"

But Hermione had a steely glint in her eye not unlike the one Professor McGonagall sometimes had.

"The potion will be useless without Crabbe's and Goyle's hair," she said sternly. "You do want to investigate Malfoy, don't you?"

"Oh, all right, all right," said Harry. "But what about you? Whose hair are you ripping out?"

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"I've already got mine!" said Hermione brightly, pulling a tiny bottle out of her pocket and showing them the single hair inside it.

"Remember Millicent Bulstrode wrestling with me at the Dueling Club? She left this on my robes when she was trying to strangle me! And she's gone home for Christmas - so I'll just have to tell the Slytherins I've decided to come back."

When Hermione had bustled off to check on the Polyjuice Potion again, Ron turned to Harry with a doom-laden expression.

"Have you ever heard of a plan where so many things could go wrong?"

But to Harry's and Ron's utter amazement, stage one of the operation went just as smoothly as Hermione had said. They lurked in the deserted entrance hall after Christmas tea, waiting for Crabbe and Goyle who had remained alone at the Slytherin table, shoveling down fourth helpings of trifle. Harry had perched the chocolate cakes on the end of the banisters. When they spotted Crabbe and Goyle coming out of the Great Hall, Harry and Ron hid quickly behind a suit of armor next to the front door.

"How thick can you get?" Ron whispered ecstatically as Crabbe gleefully pointed out the cakes to Goyle and grabbed them. Grinning stupidly, they stuffed the cakes whole into their large mouths. For a moment, both of them chewed greedily, looks of triumph on their faces. Then, without the smallest change of expression, they both keeled over backward onto the floor.

By far the hardest part was hiding them in the closet across the hall. Once they were safely stowed among the buckets and mops, Harry yanked out a couple of the bristles that covered Goyle's fore

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head and Ron pulled out several of Crabbe's hairs. They also stole their shoes, because their own were far too small for Crabbe- and Goyle-size feet. Then, still stunned at what they had just done, they sprinted up to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

They could hardly see for the thick black smoke issuing from the stall in which Hermione was stirring the cauldron. Pulling their robes up over their faces, Harry and Ron knocked softly on the door.

"Hermione?"

They heard the scrape of the lock and Hermione emerged, shiny-faced and looking anxious. Behind her they heard the gloop gloop of the bubbling, glutinous potion. Three glass tumblers stood ready on the toilet seat.

"Did you get them?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

Harry showed her Goyle's hair.

"Good. And I sneaked these spare robes out of the laundry," Hermione said, holding up a small sack. "You'll need bigger sizes once you're Crabbe and Goyle."

The three of them stared into the cauldron. Close up, the potion looked like thick, dark mud, bubbling sluggishly.

"I'm sure I've done everything right," said Hermione, nervously rereading the splotched page of *Moste Potente Potions*. "It looks like the book says it should ... once we've drunk it, we'll have exactly an hour before we change back into ourselves."

"Now what?" Ron whispered.

"We separate it into three glasses and add the hairs."

Hermione ladled large dollops of the potion into each of the glasses. Then, her hand trembling, she shook Millicent Bulstrode's hair out of its bottle into the first glass.

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The potion hissed loudly like a boiling kettle and frothed madly. A second later, it had turned a sick sort of yellow.

"Urgh - essence of Millicent Bulstrode," said Ron, eyeing it with loathing. "Bet it tastes disgusting."

"Add yours, then," said Hermione.

Harry dropped Goyle's hair into the middle glass and Ron put Crabbe's into the last one. Both glasses hissed and frothed: Goyle's turned the khaki color of a booger, Crabbe's a dark, murky brown.

"Hang on," said Harry as Ron and Hermione reached for their glasses. "We'd better not all drink them in here Once we turn into Crabbe and Goyle we won't fit. And Millicent Bulstrode's no pixie."

"Good thinking," said Ron, unlocking the door. "We'll take separate stalls."

Careful not to spill a drop of his Polyjuice Potion, Harry slipped into the middle stall.

"Ready?" he called.

"Ready," came Ron's and Hermione's voices.

"One - two - three -"

Pinching his nose, Harry drank the potion down in two large gulps. It tasted like overcooked cabbage.

Immediately, his insides started writhing as though he'd just swallowed live snakes - doubled up, he wondered whether he was going to be sick - then a burning sensation spread rapidly from his stomach to the very ends of his fingers and toes - next, bringing him gasping to all fours, came a horrible melting feeling, as the skin all over his body bubbled like hot wax - and before his eyes, his hands began to grow, the fingers thickened, the nails broadened,

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the knuckles were bulging like bolts -his shoulders stretched painfully and a prickling on his forehead told him that hair was creeping down toward his eyebrows - his robes ripped as his chest expanded like a barrel bursting its hoops - his feet were agony in shoes four sizes too small

As suddenly as it had started, everything stopped. Harry lay facedown on the stone-cold floor, listening to Myrtle gurgling morosely in the end toilet. With difficulty, he kicked off his shoes and stood up. So this was

what it felt like, being Goyle. His large hand trembling, he pulled off his old robes, which were hanging a foot above his ankles, pulled on the spare ones, and laced up Goyle's boatlike shoes. He reached up to brush his hair out of his eyes and met only the short growth of wiry bristles, low on his forehead. Then he realized that his glasses were clouding his eyes because Goyle obviously didn't need them - he took them off and called, "Are you two okay?" Goyle's low rasp of a voice issued from his mouth.

"Yeah," came the deep grunt of Crabbe from his right.

Harry unlocked his door and stepped in front of the cracked mirror. Goyle stared back at him out of dull, deepset eyes. Harry scratched his ear. So did Goyle.

Ron's door opened. They stared at each other. Except that he looked pale and shocked, Ron was indistinguishable from Crabbe, from the pudding-bowl haircut to the long, gorilla arms.

"This is unbelievable," said Ron, approaching the mirror and prodding Crabbe's flat nose. "Unbelievable."

"We'd better get going," said Harry, loosening the watch that was cutting into Goyle's thick wrist. "We've still got to find out

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where the Slytherin common room is. I only hope we can find someone to follow. . ."

Ron, who had been gazing at Harry, said, "You don't know how bizarre it is to see Goyle thinking." He banged on Hermione's door. "C'mon, we need to go -"

A high-pitched voice answered him.

"I - I don't think I'm going to come after all. You go on without me.

"Hermione, we know Millicent Bulstrode's ugly, no one's going to know it's you -"

"No - really - I don't think I'll come. You two hurry up, you're wasting time

Harry looked at Ron, bewildered.

"That looks more like Goyle," said Ron. "That's how he looks every time a teacher asks him a question."

"Hermione, are you okay?" said Harry through the door.

"Fine - I'm fine - go on -"

Harry looked at his watch. Five of their precious sixty minutes had already passed.

"We'll meet you back here, all right?" he said.

Harry and Ron opened the door of the bathroom carefully, checked that the coast was clear, and set off.

"Don't swing your arms like that," Harry muttered to Ron.

"Eh?"

"Crabbe holds them sort of stiff"

"How's this?"

"Yeah, that's better"

They went down the marble staircase. All they needed now was

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a Slytherin that they could follow to the Slytherin common room, but there was nobody around.

"Any ideas?" muttered Harry.

"The Slytherins always come up to breakfast from over there," said Ron, nodding at the entrance to the dungeons. The words had barely left his mouth when a girl with long, curly hair emerged from the entrance.

"Excuse me," said Ron, hurrying up to her. "We've forgotten the way to our common room."

"I beg your pardon?" said the girl stiffly. "Our common room? I'm a Ravenclaw."

She walked away, looking suspiciously back at them.

Harry and Ron hurried down the stone steps into the darkness, their footsteps echoing particularly loudly as Crabbe's and Goyle's huge feet hit the floor, feeling that this wasn't going to be as easy as they had hoped.

The labyrinthine passages were deserted. They walked deeper and deeper under the school, constantly checking their watches to see how much time they had left. After a quarter of an hour, just when they were getting desperate, they heard a sudden movement ahead.

"Ha!" said Ron excitedly. "There's one of them now!"

The figure was emerging from a side room. As they hurried nearer, however, their hearts sank. It wasn't a Slytherin, it was Percy.

"What're you doing down here?" said Ron in surprise.

Percy looked affronted.

"That," he said stiffly, "is none of your business. It's Crabbe, isn't it?"

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"Wh - oh, yeah," said Ron.

"Well, get off to your dormitories," said Percy sternly. "It's not safe to go wandering around dark corridors these days."

"You are," Ron pointed out.

"I," said Percy, drawing himself up, "am a prefect. Nothing's about to attack me."

A voice suddenly echoed behind Harry and Ron. Draco Malfoy was strolling toward them, and for the first time in his life, Harry was pleased to see him.

"There you are," he drawled, looking at them. "Have you two been pigging out in the Great Hall all this time? I've been looking for you; I want to show you something really funny."

Malfoy glanced witheringly at Percy.

"And what're you doing down here, Weasley?" he sneered.

Percy looked outraged.

"You want to show a bit more respect to a school prefect!" he said. "I don't like your attitude!"

Malfoy sneered and motioned for Harry and Ron to follow him. Harry almost said something apologetic to Percy but caught himself just in time. He and Ron hurried after Malfoy, who said as they turned into the next passage, "That Peter Weasley -"

"Percy," Ron corrected him automatically.

"Whatever," said Malfoy. "I've noticed him sneaking around a lot lately. And I bet I know what he's up to. He thinks he's going to catch Slytherin's heir single-handed."

He gave a short, derisive laugh. Harry and Ron exchanged excited

looks.

Malfoy paused by a stretch of bare, damp stone wall.

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"What's the new password again?" he said to Harry.

"Er -" said Harry.

"Oh, yeah -pure-blood!" said Malfoy, not listening, and a stone door concealed in the wall slid open. Malfoy marched through it, and Harry and Ron followed him.

The Slytherin common room was a long, low underground room with rough stone walls and ceiling from which round, greenish lamps were hanging on chains. A fire was crackling under an elaborately carved mantelpiece ahead of them, and several Slytherins were silhouetted around it in high-backed chairs.

"Wait here," said Malfoy to Harry and Ron, motioning them to a pair of empty chairs set back from the fire. "I'll go and get it my father's just sent it to me -"

Wondering what Malfoy was going to show them, Harry and Ron sat down, doing their best to look at home.

Malfoy came back a minute later, holding what looked like a newspaper clipping. He thrust it under Ron's nose.

"That'll give you a laugh," he said.

Harry saw Ron's eyes widen in shock. He read the clipping quickly, gave a very forced laugh, and handed it to Harry.

It had been clipped out of the Daily Prophet, and it said:

INQUIRY AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, was today fined fifty Galleons for bewitching a Muggle car.

Mr. Lucius Malfoy, a governor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where the

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enchanted car crashed earlier this year, called today for Mr. Weasley's resignation.

"Weasley has brought the Ministry into disrepute," Mr. Malfoy told our reporter. "He is clearly unfit to draw up our laws and his ridiculous Muggle Protection Act should be scrapped immediately."

Mr. Weasley was unavailable for comment, although his wife told reporters to clear off or she'd set the family ghoul on them.

"Well?" said Malfoy impatiently as Harry handed the clipping back to him. "Don't you think it's funny?"

"Ha, ha," said Harry bleakly.

"Arthur Weasley loves Muggles so much he should snap his wand in half and go and join them," said Malfoy scornfully. "You'd never know the Weasleys were pure-bloods, the way they behave."

Ron's - or rather, Crabbe's - face was contorted with fury.

"What's up with you, Crabbe?" snapped Malfoy.

"Stomachache," Ron grunted.

"Well, go up to the hospital wing and give all those Mudbloods a kick from me," said Malfoy, snickering. "You know, I'm surprised the Daily Prophet hasn't reported all these attacks yet," he went on thoughtfully. "I suppose Dumbledore's trying to hush it all up. He'll be sacked if it doesn't stop soon. Father's always said old Dumbledore's the worst thing that's ever happened to this place. He loves Muggle-borns. A decent headmaster would never've let slime like that Creevey in."

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Malfoy started taking pictures with an imaginary camera and did a cruel but accurate impression of Colin: "`Potter, can I have your picture, Potter? Can I have your autograph? Can I lick your shoes, please, Potter?'"

He dropped his hands and looked at Harry and Ron.

"What's the matter with you two?"

Far too late, Harry and Ron forced themselves to laugh, but Malfoy seemed satisfied; perhaps Crabbe and Goyle were always slow on the uptake.

"Saint Potter, the Mudbloods' friend," said Malfoy slowly. "He's another one with no proper wizard feeling, or he wouldn't go around with that jumped up Granger Mudblood. And people think he's Slytherin's heir!"

Harry and Ron waited with bated breath: Malfoy was surely seconds away from telling them it was him - but then

"I wish I knew who it is," said Malfoy petulantly. "I could help them."

Ron's jaw dropped so that Crabbe looked even more clueless than usual. Fortunately, Malfoy didn't notice, and Harry, thinking fast, said, "You must have some idea who's behind it all

"You know I haven't, Goyle, how many times do I have to tell you?" snapped Malfoy. "And Father won't tell me anything about the last time the Chamber was opened either. Of course, it was fifty years ago, so it was before his time, but he knows all about it, and he says that it was all kept quiet and it'll look suspicious if I know too much about it. But I know one thing - last time the Chamber of Secrets was opened, a Mudblood died. So I bet it's a matter of time before one of them's killed this time I hope it's Granger," he said with relish.

Ron was clenching Crabbe's gigantic fists. Feeling that it would be a

bit of a giveaway if Ron punched Malfoy, Harry shot him a warning look and said, "D'you know if the person who opened the Chamber last time was caught?"

"Oh, yeah ... whoever it was was expelled," said Malfoy. "They're probably still in Azkaban."

"Azkaban?" said Harry, puzzled.

"Azkaban - the wizard prison, Goyle," said Malfoy, looking at him in disbelief "Honestly, if you were any slower, you'd be going backward."

He shifted restlessly in his chair and said, "Father says to keep my head down and let the Heir of Slytherin get on with it. He says the school needs ridding of all the Mudblood filth, but not to get mixed up in it. Of course, he's got a lot on his plate at the moment. You know the Ministry of Magic raided our manor last week?"

Harry tried to force Goyle's dull face into a look of concern.

"Yeah. . ." said Malfoy. "Luckily, they didn't find much. Father's got some very valuable Dark Arts stuff. But luckily, we've got our own secret chamber under the drawing-room floor

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"Ho!" said Ron.

Malfoy looked at him. So did Harry. Ron blushed. Even his hair was turning red. His nose was also slowly lengthening - their hour was up, Ron was turning back into himself, and from the look of horror he was suddenly giving Harry, he must be, too.

They both jumped to their feet.

"Medicine for my stomach," Ron grunted, and without further ado they sprinted the length of the Slytherin common room, hurled themselves at the stone wall, and dashed up the passage, hoping against hope that Malfoy hadn't noticed anything. Harry

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could feel his feet slipping around in Goyle's huge shoes and had to hoist up his robes as he shrank; they crashed up the steps into the dark entrance hall, which was full of a muffled pounding coming from the closet where they'd locked Crabbe and Goyle. Leaving their shoes outside the closet door, they sprinted in their socks up the marble staircase toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"Well, it wasn't a complete waste of time," Ron panted, closing the bathroom door behind them. "I know we still haven't found out who's doing the attacks, but I'm going to write to Dad tomorrow and tell him to check under the Malfoys' drawing room."

Harry checked his face in the cracked mirror. He was back to normal. He put his glasses on as Ron hammered on the door of Hermione's stall.

"Hermione, come out, we've got loads to tell you -"

"Go away!" Hermione squeaked.

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

"What's the matter?" said Ron. "You must be back to normal by now, we are

But Moaning Myrtle glided suddenly through the stall door. Harry had never seen her looking so happy.

"Ooooooh, wait till you see," she said. "It's awful—"

They heard the lock slide back and Hermione emerged, sobbing, her robes pulled up over her head.

"What's up?" said Ron uncertainly. "Have you still got Millicent's nose or something?"

Hermione let her robes fall and Ron backed into the sink.

Her face was covered in black fur. Her eyes had turned yellow and there were long, pointed ears poking through her hair.

"It was a c-cat hair!" she howled. "M-Millicent Bulstrode

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m-must have a cat! And the p-potion isn't supposed to be used for animal transformations!"

"Uh-oh," said Ron.

"You'll be teased something dreadful," said Myrtle happily.

"It's okay, Hermione," said Harry quickly. "We'll take you up to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey never asks too many questions

It took a long time to persuade Hermione to leave the bathroom. Moaning Myrtle sped them on their way with a hearty guffaw. "Wait till everyone finds out you've got a tail!"

Hermione remained in the hospital wing for several weeks. There was a flurry of rumor about her disappearance when the rest of the school arrived back from their Christmas holidays, because of course everyone thought that she had been attacked. So many students filed past the hospital wing trying to catch a glimpse of her that Madam Pomfrey took out her curtains again and placed them around Hermione's bed, to spare her the shame of being seen with a furry face.

Harry and Ron went to visit her every evening. When the new term started, they brought her each day's homework.

"If I'd sprouted whiskers, I'd take a break from work," said Ron, tipping a stack of books onto Hermione's bedside table one evening.

"Don't be silly, Ron, I've got to keep up," said Hermione briskly. Her spirits were greatly improved by the fact that all the hair had

gone from her face and her eyes were turning slowly back to brown. "I don't suppose you've got any new leads?" she added in a whisper, so that Madam Pomfrey couldn't hear her.

"Nothing," said Harry gloomily.

"I was so sure it was Malfoy," said Ron, for about the hundredth time.

"What's that?" asked Harry, pointing to something gold sticking out from under Hermione's pillow.

"Just a get well card," said Hermione hastily, trying to poke it out of sight, but Ron was too quick for her. He pulled it out, flicked it open, and read aloud:

"To Miss Granger, wishing you a speedy recovery, from your concerned teacher, Professor Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award. "

Ron looked up at Hermione, disgusted.

"You sleep with this under your pillow?"

But Hermione was spared answering by Madam Pomfrey sweeping over with her evening dose of medicine.

"Is Lockhart the smarmiest bloke you've ever met, or what?" Ron said to Harry as they left the infirmary and started up the stairs toward Gryffindor Tower. Snape had given them so much homework, Harry thought he was likely to be in the sixth year before he finished it. Ron was just saying he wished he had asked Hermione how many rat tails you were supposed to add to a HairRaising Potion when an angry outburst from the floor above reached their ears.

"That's Filch," Harry muttered as they hurried up the stairs and paused, out of sight, listening hard.

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"You don't think someone else's been attacked?" said Ron tensely.

They stood still, their heads inclined toward Flich's voice, which sounded quite hysterical.

'= even more work for me! Mopping all night, like I haven't got enough to do! No, this is the final straw, I'm going to Dumbledore -"

His footsteps receded along the out-of-sight corridor and they heard a distant door slam.

They poked their heads around the corner. Filch had clearly been manning his usual lookout post: They were once again on the spot where Mrs. Norris had been attacked. They saw at a glance what Filch had been shouting about. A great flood of water stretched over

half the corridor, and it looked as though it was still seeping from under the door of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Now that Filch had stopped shouting, they could hear Myrtle's wails echoing off the bathroom walls.

"Now what's up with her?" said Ron.

"Let's go and see," said Harry, and holding their robes over their ankles they stepped through the great wash of water to the door bearing its OUT OF ORDER sign, ignored it as always, and entered.

Moaning Myrtle was crying, if possible, louder and harder than ever before. She seemed to be hiding down her usual toilet. It was dark in the bathroom because the candles had been extinguished in the great rush of water that had left both walls and floor soaking wet.

"What's up, Myrtle?" said Harry.

"Who's that?" glugged Myrtle miserably. "Come to throw something else at me?"

Harry waded across to her stall and said, "Why would I throw something at you?"

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"Don't ask me," Myrtle shouted, emerging with a wave of yet more water, which splashed onto the already sopping floor. "Here I am, minding my own business, and someone thinks it's funny to throw a book at me

"But it can't hurt you if someone throws something at you," said Harry, reasonably. "I mean, it'd just go right through you, wouldn't it?"

He had said the wrong thing. Myrtle puffed herself up and shrieked, "Let's all throw books at Myrtle, because she can't feel it! Ten points if you can get it through her stomach! Fifty points if it goes through her head! Well, ha, ha, ha! What a lovely game, I don't think!"

"Who threw it at you, anyway?" asked Harry.

"I don't know... I was just sitting in the U-bend, thinking about death, and it fell right through the top of my head," said Myrtle, glaring at them. "It's over there, it got washed out

Harry and Ron looked under the sink where Myrtle was pointing. A small, thin book lay there. It had a shabby black cover and was as wet as everything else in the bathroom. Harry stepped forward to pick it up, but Ron suddenly flung out an arm to hold him back.

"What?" said Harry.

"Are you crazy?" said Ron. "It could be dangerous."

"Dangerous?" said Harry, laughing. "Come off it, how could it be dangerous?"

"You'd be surprised," said Ron, who was looking apprehensively at the book. "Some of the books the Ministry's confiscated Dad's told

me - there was one that burned your eyes out. And

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everyone who read Sonnets of a Sorcerer spoke in limericks for the rest of their lives. And some old witch in Bath had a book that you could never stop reading! You just had to wander around with your nose in it, trying to do everything one-handed. And -"

"All right, I've got the point," said Harry.

The little book lay on the floor, nondescript and soggy.

"Well, we won't find out unless we look at it," he said, and he ducked around Ron and picked it up off the floor.

Harry saw at once that it was a diary, and the faded year on the cover told him it was fifty years old. He opened it eagerly. On the first page he could just make out the name "T M. Riddle" in smudged ink.

"Hang on," said Ron, who had approached cautiously and was looking over Harry's shoulder. "I know that name T. M. Riddle got an award for special services to the school fifty years ago."

"How on earth d'you know that?" said Harry in amazement.

"Because Filch made me polish his shield about fifty times in detention," said Ron resentfully. "That was the one I burped slugs all over. If you'd wiped slime off a name for an hour, you'd remember it, too."

Harry peeled the wet pages apart. They were completely blank. There wasn't the faintest trace of writing on any of them, not even Auntie Mabel's birthday, or dentist, half-past three.

"He never wrote in it," said Harry, disappointed.

"I wonder why someone wanted to flush it away?" said Ron curiously.

Harry turned to the back cover of the book and saw the printed name of a variety store on Vauxhall Road, London.

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"He must've been Muggle-born," said Harry thoughtfully. "To have bought a diary from Vauxhall Road

"Well, it's not much use to you," said Ron. He dropped his voice. "Fifty points if you can get it through Myrtle's nose."

Harry, however, pocketed it.

Hermione left the hospital wing, de-whiskered, tail-less, and furfree, at the beginning of February. On her first evening back in Gryffindor Tower, Harry showed her T. M. Riddle's diary and told her the story of how they had found it.

"Oooh, it might have hidden powers," said Hermione enthusiastically, taking the diary and looking at it closely.

"If it has, it's hiding them very well," said Ron. "Maybe it's shy. I don't know why you don't chuck it, Harry."

"I wish I knew why someone did try to chuck it," said Harry. "I wouldn't mind knowing how Riddle got an award for special services to Hogwarts either."

"Could've been anything," said Ron. "Maybe he got thirty O.W.L.s or saved a teacher from the giant squid. Maybe he murdered Myrtle; that would've done everyone a favor

But Harry could tell from the arrested look on Hermione's face that she was thinking what he was thinking.

"What?" said Ron, looking from one to the other.

"Well, the Chamber of Secrets was opened fifty years ago, wasn't it?" he said. "That's what Malfoy said."

"Yeah. . ." said Ron slowly.

"And this diary is fifty years old," said Hermione, tapping it excitedly.

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a so?

"Oh, Ron, wake up," snapped Hermione. "We know the person who opened the Chamber last time was expelled fifty years ago. We know T. M. Riddle got an award for special services to the school fifty years ago. Well, what if Riddle got his special award for catching the Heir of Slytherin? His diary would probably tell us everything - where the Chamber is, and how to open it, and what sort of creature lives in it - the person who's behind the attacks this time wouldn't want that lying around, would they?"

"That's a brilliant theory, Hermione," said Ron, "with just one tiny little flaw. There's nothing written in his diary."

But Hermione was pulling her wand out of her bag.

"It might be invisible ink!" she whispered.

She tapped the diary three times and said, "Aparecium!"

Nothing happened. Undaunted, Hermione shoved her hand back into her bag and pulled out what appeared to be a bright red eraser.

"It's a Revealer, I got it in Diagon Alley," she said.

She rubbed hard on January first. Nothing happened.

"I'm telling you, there's nothing to find in there," said Ron. "Riddle just got a diary for Christmas and couldn't be bothered filling it in."

Harry couldn't explain, even to himself, why he didn't just throw Riddle's diary away. The fact was that even though he knew the diary was blank, he kept absentmindedly picking it up and turning the pages, as though it were a story he wanted to finish. And while Harry was sure he had never heard the name T. M. Riddle before, it still seemed to mean something to him, almost as though

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Riddle was a friend he'd had when he was very small, and had halfforgotten. But this was absurd. He'd never had friends before Hogwarts, Dudley had made sure of that.

Nevertheless, Harry was determined to find out more about Riddle, so next day at break, he headed for the trophy room to examine Riddle's special award, accompanied by an interested Hermione and a thoroughly unconvinced Ron, who told them he'd seen enough of the trophy room to last him a lifetime.

Riddle's burnished gold shield was tucked away in a corner cabinet. It didn't carry details of why it had been given to him ("Good thing, too, or it'd be even bigger and I'd still be polishing it," said Ron). However, they did find Riddle's name on an old Medal for Magical Merit, and on a list of old Head Boys.

"He sounds like Percy," said Ron, wrinkling his nose in disgust.
"Prefect, Head Boy ... probably top of every class -"

"You say that like it's a bad thing," said Hermione in a slightly hurt voice.

The sun had now begun to shine weakly on Hogwarts again. Inside the castle, the mood had grown more hopeful. There had been no more attacks since those on Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, and Madam Pomfrey was pleased to report that the Mandrakes were becoming moody and secretive, meaning that they were fast leaving childhood.

"The moment their acne clears up, they'll be ready for repotting again," Harry heard her telling Filch kindly one afternoon. "And after that, it won't be long until we're cutting them up and stewing them. You'll have Mrs. Norris back in no time."

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Perhaps the Heir of Slytherin had lost his or her nerve, thought Harry. It must be getting riskier and riskier to open the Chamber of Secrets, with the school so alert and suspicious. Perhaps the monster, whatever it was, was even now settling itself down to hibernate for another fifty years

Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff didn't take this cheerful view. He was still convinced that Harry was the guilty one, that he had "given himself away" at the Dueling Club. Peeves wasn't helping matters; he kept popping up in the crowded corridors singing "Oh, Potter, you rotter . . ." now with a dance routine to match.

Gilderoy Lockhart seemed to think he himself had made the attacks stop. Harry overheard him telling Professor McGonagall so while the Gryffindors were lining up for Transfiguration.

"I don't think there'll be any more trouble, Minerva," he said, tapping his nose knowingly and winking. "I think the Chamber has been locked for good this time. The culprit must have known it was only a matter of time before I caught him. Rather sensible to stop now, before I came down hard on him.

"You know, what the school needs now is a morale-booster. Wash away the memories of last term! I won't say any more just now, but I think I know just the thing"

He tapped his nose again and strode off.

Lockhart's idea of a morale-booster became clear at breakfast time on February fourteenth. Harry hadn't had much sleep because of a late-running Quidditch practice the night before, and he hurried down to the Great Hall, slightly late. He thought, for a moment, that he'd walked through the wrong doors.

The walls were all covered with large, lurid pink flowers. Worse

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still, heart-shaped confetti was falling from the pale blue ceiling.
Harry

went over to the Gryffindor table, where Ron was sitting looking sickened, and Hermione seemed to have been overcome with giggles.

"What's going on?" Harry asked them, sitting down and wiping confetti off his bacon.

Ron pointed to the teachers' table, apparently too disgusted to speak. Lockhart, wearing lurid pink robes to match the decorations, was waving for silence. The teachers on either side of him were looking stony-faced. From where he sat, Harry could see a muscle going in Professor McGonagall's cheek. Snape looked as though someone had just fed him a large beaker of Skele-Gro.

"Happy Valentine's Day!" Lockhart shouted. "And may I thank the forty-six people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging this little surprise for you all - and it doesn't end here!"

Lockhart clapped his hands and through the doors to the entrance hall marched a dozen surly-looking dwarfs. Not just any dwarfs, however. Lockhart had them all wearing golden wings and carrying harps.

"My friendly, card-carrying cupids!" beamed Lockhart. "They will be roving around the school today delivering your valentines! And the fun doesn't stop here! I'm sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a Love Potion! And while you're at it, Professor Flitwick knows more about Entrancing Enchantments than any wizard I've ever met, the sly old dog!"

Professor Flitwick buried his face in his hands. Snape was look

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ing as though the first person to ask him for a Love Potion would be force-fed poison.

"Please, Hermione, tell me you weren't one of the forty-six," said Ron as they left the Great Hall for their first lesson. Hermione suddenly became very interested in searching her bag for her schedule and didn't answer.

All day long, the dwarfs kept barging into their classes to deliver valentines, to the annoyance of the teachers, and late that afternoon as the Gryffindors were walking upstairs for Charms, one of the dwarfs caught up with Harry.

"Oy, you! 'Arty Potter!" shouted a particularly grim-looking dwarf, elbowing people out of the way to get to Harry.

Hot all over at the thought of being given a valentine in front of a line of first years, which happened to include Ginny Weasley, Harry tried to escape. The dwarf, however, cut his way through the crowd by kicking people's shins, and reached him before he'd gone two paces.

"I've got a musical message to deliver to 'Arry Potter in person," he said, twanging his harp in a threatening sort of way.

"Not here," Harry hissed, trying to escape.

"Stay still!" grunted the dwarf, grabbing hold of Harry's bag and pulling him back.

"Let me go!" Harry snarled, tugging.

With a loud ripping noise, his bag split in two. His books, wand, parchment, and quill spilled onto the floor and his ink bottle smashed over everything.

Harry scrambled around, trying to pick it all up before the dwarf started singing, causing something of a holdup in the corridor.

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"What's going on here?" came the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy. Harry started stuffing everything feverishly into his ripped bag, desperate to get away before Malfoy could hear his musical valentine.

"What's all this commotion?" said another familiar voice as Percy Weasley arrived.

Losing his head, Harry tried to make a run for it, but the dwarf seized him around the knees and brought him crashing to the floor.

"Right," he said, sitting on Harry's ankles. "Here is your singing valentine:

His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,

His hair is as dark as a blackboard.
I wish he was mine, he's really divine,
The hero who conquered the Dark Lord

Harry would have given all the gold in Gringotts to evaporate on the spot. Trying valiantly to laugh along with everyone else, he got up, his feet numb from the weight of the dwarf, as Percy Weasley did his best to disperse the crowd, some of whom were crying with mirth.

"Off you go, off you go, the bell rang five minutes ago, off to class, now," he said, shooing some of the younger students away. "And you, Malfoy—"

Harry, glancing over, saw Malfoy stoop and snatch up something. Leering, he showed it to Crabbe and Goyle, and Harry realized that he'd got Riddle's diary.

"Give that back," said Harry quietly.

"Wonder what Potter's written in this?" said Malfoy, who obvi

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ously hadn't noticed the year on the cover and thought he had Harry's own diary. A hush fell over the onlookers. Ginny was staring from the diary to Harry, looking terrified.

"Hand it over, Malfoy," said Percy sternly.

"When I've had a look," said Malfoy, waving the diary tauntingly at Harry.

Percy said, "As a school prefect —" but Harry had lost his temper. He pulled out his wand and shouted, "Expelliarmus!" and just as Snape had disarmed Lockhart, so Malfoy found the diary shooting out of his hand into the air. Ron, grinning broadly, caught it.

"Harry!" said Percy loudly. "No magic in the corridors. I'll have to report this, you know!"

But Harry didn't care, he was one-up on Malfoy, and that was worth five points from Gryffindor any day. Malfoy was looking furious, and as Ginny passed him to enter her classroom, he yelled spitefully after her, "I don't think Potter liked your valentine much!"

Ginny covered her face with her hands and ran into class. Snarling, Ron pulled out his wand, too, but Harry pulled him away. Ron didn't need to spend the whole of Charms belching slugs.

It wasn't until they had reached Professor Flitwick's class that Harry noticed something rather odd about Riddle's diary. All his other books were drenched in scarlet ink. The diary, however, was as clean as it had been before the ink bottle had smashed all over it. He tried to point this out to Ron, but Ron was having trouble with his wand again; large purple bubbles were blossoming out of the end, and he wasn't much interested in anything else.

Harry went to bed before anyone else in his dormitory that night. This was partly because he didn't think he could stand Fred and George singing, "His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad" one more time, and partly because he wanted to examine Riddle's diary again, and knew that Ron thought he was wasting his time.

Harry sat on his four-poster and flicked through the blank pages, not

one of which had a trace of scarlet ink on it. Then he pulled a new bottle out of his bedside cabinet, dipped his quill into it, and dropped a blot onto the first page of the diary.

The ink shone brightly on the paper for a second and then, as though it was being sucked into the page, vanished. Excited, Harry loaded up his quill a second time and wrote, "My name is Harry Potter."

The words shone momentarily on the page and they, too, sank without trace. Then, at last, something happened.

Oozing back out of the page, in his very own ink, came words Harry had never written.

"Hello, Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?"

These words, too, faded away, but not before Harry had started to scribble back.

"Someone tried to flush it down a toilet."

He waited eagerly for Riddle's reply.

"Lucky that I recorded my memories in some more lasting way than ink. But I always knew that there would be those who would not want this diary read. "

"What do you mean?" Harry scrawled, blotting the page in his excitement.

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'I mean that this diary holds memories of terrible things. Things that were covered up. Things that happened at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. "

"That's where I am now," Harry wrote quickly. "I'm at Hogwarts, and horrible stuff's been happening. Do you know anything about the Chamber of Secrets?"

His heart was hammering. Riddle's reply came quickly, his writing becoming untidier, as though he was hurrying to tell all he knew.

"Of course I know about the Chamber of Secrets. In my day, they told us it was a legend, that it did not exist. But this was a lie. In my fifth year, the Chamber was opened and the monster attacked several students, finally killing one. I caught the person whod opened the Chamber and he was expelled. But the Headmaster, Professor Dippet, ashamed that such a thing had happened at Hogwarts, forbade me to tell the truth. A story was given out that the girl had died in a freak accident. They gave me a nice, shiny, engraved trophy for my trouble and warned me to keep my mouth shut. But I knew it could happen again. The monster lived on, and the one who had the power to release it was not imprisoned. "

Harry nearly upset his ink bottle in his hurry to write back.

"It's happening again now. There have been three attacks and no one seems to know who's behind them. Who was it last time?"

"I can show you, if you like," came Riddle's reply. "You don't have to take my word for it. I can take you inside my memory of the night when I caught him."

Harry hesitated, his quill suspended over the diary. What did Riddle mean? How could he be taken inside somebody else's memory? He glanced nervously at the door to the dormitory, which was

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growing dark. When he looked back at the diary, he saw fresh words forming.

"Let me show you."

Harry paused for a fraction of a second and then wrote two letters.

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The pages of the diary began to blow as though caught in a high wind, stopping halfway through the month of June. Mouth hanging open, Harry saw that the little square for June thirteenth seemed to have turned into a minuscule television screen. His hands trembling slightly, he raised the book to press his eye against the little window, and before he knew what was happening, he was tilting forward; the window was widening, he felt his body leave his bed, and he was pitched headfirst through the opening in the page, into a whirl of color and shadow.

He felt his feet hit solid ground, and stood, shaking, as the blurred shapes around him came suddenly into focus.

He knew immediately where he was. This circular room with the sleeping portraits was Dumbledore's office - but it wasn't Dumbledore who was sitting behind the desk. A wizened, frail-looking wizard, bald except for a few wisps of white hair, was reading a letter by candlelight. Harry had never seen this man before.

"I'm sorry," he said shakily. "I didn't mean to butt in -"

But the wizard didn't look up. He continued to read, frowning slightly. Harry drew nearer to his desk and stammered, "Er - I'll just go, shall I?"

Still the wizard ignored him. He didn't seem even to have heard him. Thinking that the wizard might be deaf, Harry raised his voice.

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"Sorry I disturbed you. I'll go now," he half-shouted.

The wizard folded up the letter with a sigh, stood up, walked past Harry without glancing at him, and went to draw the curtains at his window.

The sky outside the window was ruby-red; it seemed to be sunset. The wizard went back to the desk, sat down, and twiddled his thumbs, watching the door.

Harry looked around the office. No Fawkes the phoenix - no whirring silver contraptions. This was Hogwarts as Riddle had known it, meaning that this unknown wizard was Headmaster, not Dumbledore, and he, Harry, was little more than a phantom, completely invisible to the people of fifty years ago.

There was a knock on the office door.

"Enter," said the old wizard in a feeble voice.

A boy of about sixteen entered, taking off his pointed hat. A silver prefect's badge was glinting on his chest. He was much taller than Harry, but he, too, had jet-black hair.

"Ah, Riddle," said the Headmaster.

"You wanted to see me, Professor Dippet?" said Riddle. He looked nervous.

"Sit down," said Dippet. "I've just been reading the letter you sent me.

"Oh," said Riddle. He sat down, gripping his hands together very tightly.

"My dear boy," said Dipper kindly, "I cannot possibly let you stay at school over the summer. Surely you want to go home for the holidays?"

"No," said Riddle at once. "Id much rather stay at Hogwarts than go back to that - to that -"

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"You live in a Muggle orphanage during the holidays, I believe?" said Dippet curiously.

"Yes, sir," said Riddle, reddening slightly.

"You are Muggle-born?"

"Half-blood, sir," said Riddle. "Muggle father, witch mother."

"And are both your parents -?"

"My mother died just after I was born, sir. They told me at the orphanage she lived just long enough to name me - Tom after my father, Marvolo after my grandfather."

Dipper clucked his tongue sympathetically.

"The thing is, Tom," he sighed, "Special arrangements might have been made for you, but in the current circumstances . . ."

"You mean all these attacks, sir?" said Riddle, and Harry's heart leapt, and he moved closer, scared of missing anything.

"Precisely," said the headmaster. "My dear boy, you must see how foolish it would be of me to allow you to remain at the castle when term ends. Particularly in light of the recent tragedy ... the death of that poor little girl You will be safer by far at your orphanage. As a matter of fact, the Ministry of Magic is even now talking about closing the school. We are no nearer locating the er - source of all this unpleasantness"

Riddle's eyes had widened.

"Sir - if the person was caught - if it all stopped -"

"What do you mean?" said Dippet with a squeak in his voice, sitting up in his chair. "Riddle, do you mean you know something about these attacks?"

"No, sir," said Riddle quickly.

But Harry was sure it was the same sort of "no" that he himself had given Dumbledore.

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Dippet sank back, looking faintly disappointed.

"You may go, Tom

Riddle slid off his chair and slouched out of the room. Harry followed him.

Down the moving spiral staircase they went, emerging next to the gargoyle in the darkening corridor. Riddle stopped, and so did Harry, watching him. Harry could tell that Riddle was doing some serious thinking. He was biting his lip, his forehead furrowed.

Then, as though he had suddenly reached a decision, he hurried off, Harry gliding noiselessly behind him. They didn't see another person until they reached the entrance hall, when a tall wizard with long, sweeping auburn hair and a beard called to Riddle from the marble staircase.

"What are you doing, wandering around this late, Tom?"

Harry gaped at the wizard. He was none other than a fifty-year-younger Dumbledore.

"I had to see the headmaster, sir," said Riddle.

"Well, hurry off to bed," said Dumbledore, giving Riddle exactly the kind of penetrating stare Harry knew so well. "Best not to roam the corridors these days. Not since"

He sighed heavily, bade Riddle good night, and strode off. Riddle watched him walk out of sight and then, moving quickly, headed straight down the stone steps to the dungeons, with Harry in hot pursuit.

But to Harry's disappointment, Riddle led him not into a hidden passageway or a secret tunnel but to the very dungeon in which

Harry had Potions with Snape. The torches hadn't been lit, and when Riddle pushed the door almost closed, Harry could only just

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see him, standing stock-still by the door, watching the passage outside.

It felt to Harry that they were there for at least an hour. All he could see was the figure of Riddle at the door, staring through the crack, waiting like a statue. And just when Harry had stopped feeling expectant and tense and started wishing he could return to the present, he heard something move beyond the door.

Someone was creeping along the passage. He heard whoever it was pass the dungeon where he and Riddle were hidden. Riddle, quiet as a shadow, edged through the door and followed, Harry tiptoeing behind him, forgetting that he couldn't be heard.

For perhaps five minutes they followed the footsteps, until Riddle stopped suddenly, his head inclined in the direction of new noises. Harry heard a door creak open, and then someone speaking in a hoarse whisper.

"C'mon ... gotta get yeh outta here C'mon now ... in the box. . ."

There was something familiar about that voice

Riddle suddenly jumped around the corner. Harry stepped out behind him. He could see the dark outline of a huge boy who was crouching in front of an open door, a very large box next to it.

"Evening, Rubeus," said Riddle sharply.

The boy slammed the door shut and stood up.

"What yer doin' down here, Tom?"

Riddle stepped closer.

"It's all over," he said. "I'm going to have to turn you in, Rubeus. They're talking about closing Hogwarts if the attacks don't stop."

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"N" at d'yeh -"

"I don't think you meant to kill anyone. But monsters don't make good pets. I suppose you just let it out for exercise and -"

"It never killed no one!" said the large boy, backing against the closed door. From behind him, Harry could hear a funny rustling and clicking.

"Come on, Rubeus," said Riddle, moving yet closer. "The dead girl's parents will be here tomorrow. The least Hogwarts can do is make sure that the thing that killed their daughter is slaughtered

"It wasn't him!" roared the boy, his voice echoing in the dark passage. "He wouldn't! He never!"

"Stand aside," said Riddle, drawing out his wand.

His spell lit the corridor with a sudden flaming light. The door behind the large boy flew open with such force it knocked him into the wall opposite. And out of it came something that made Harry let out a long, piercing scream unheard by anyone

A vast, low-slung, hairy body and a tangle of black legs; a gleam of many eyes and a pair of razor-sharp pincers - Riddle raised his wand again, but he was too late. The thing bowled him over as it scuttled away, tearing up the corridor and out of sight. Riddle scrambled to his feet, looking after it; he raised his wand, but the huge boy leapt on him, seized his wand, and threw him back down, yelling, "NOOOOOOO!"

The scene whirled, the darkness became complete; Harry felt himself falling and, with a crash, he landed spread-eagled on his four-poster in the Gryffindor dormitory, Riddle's diary lying open on his stomach.

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Before he had had time to regain his breath, the dormitory door opened and Ron came in.

"There you are," he said.

Harry sat up. He was sweating and shaking.

"What's up?" said Ron, looking at him with concern.

"It was Hagrid, Ron. Hagrid opened the Chamber of Secrets fifty years ago."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had always known that Hagrid had an unfortunate liking for large and monstrous creatures. During their first year at Hogwarts he had tried to raise a dragon in his little wooden house, and it would be a long time before they forgot the giant, three-headed dog he'd christened "Fluffy." And if, as a boy, Hagrid had heard that a monster was hidden somewhere in the castle, Harry was sure he'd have gone to any lengths for a glimpse of it. He'd probably thought it was a shame that the monster had been cooped up so long, and thought it deserved the chance to stretch its many legs; Harry could just imagine the thirteen-year-old Hagrid trying to fit a leash and collar on it. But he was equally certain that Hagrid would never have meant to kill anybody.

Harry half wished he hadn't found out how to work Riddle's diary. Again and again Ron and Hermione made him recount what

he'd seen, until he was heartily sick of telling them and sick of the long, circular conversations that followed.

"Riddle might have got the wrong person," said Hermione. "Maybe it was some other monster that was attacking people"

"How many monsters d'you think this place can hold?" Ron asked dully.

"We always knew Hagrid had been expelled," said Harry miserably. "And the attacks must've stopped after Hagrid was kicked out."

Otherwise, Riddle wouldn't have got his award."

Ron tried a different tack.

"Riddle does sound like Percy - who asked him to squeal on Hagrid, anyway?"

"But the monster had killed someone, Ron," said Hermione.

"And Riddle was going to go back to some Muggle orphanage if they closed Hogwarts," said Harry. "I don't blame him for wanting to stay here

"You met Hagrid down Knockturn Alley, didn't you, Harry?"

"He was buying a Flesh-Eating Slug Repellent," said Harry quickly.

The three of them fell silent. After a long pause, Hermione voiced the knottiest question of all in a hesitant voice.

"Do you think we should go and ask Hagrid about it all?"

"That'd be a cheerful visit," said Ron. "'Hello, Hagrid. Tell us, have you been setting anything mad and hairy loose in the castle lately?'

In the end, they decided that they would not say anything to Hagrid unless there was another attack, and as more and more days went by with no whisper from the disembodied voice, they became

hopeful that they would never need to talk to him about why he had been expelled. It was now nearly four months since Justin and Nearly Headless Nick had been Petrified, and nearly everybody seemed to think that the attacker, whoever it was, had retired for good. Peeves had finally got bored of his "Oh, Potter, you rotter" song, Ernie Macmillan asked Harry quite politely to pass a bucket of leaping toadstools in Herbology one day, and in March several of the Mandrakes threw a loud and raucous party in greenhouse three. This made Professor Sprout very happy.

"The moment they start trying to move into each other's pots, we'll know they're fully mature," she told Harry. "Then we'll be able to revive those poor people in the hospital wing."

The second years were given something new to think about during their Easter holidays. The time had come to choose their subjects for the third year, a matter that Hermione, at least, took very seriously.

"it could affect our whole future," she told Harry and Ron as they pored over lists of new subjects, marking them with checks.

"I just want to give up Potions," said Harry.

"We can't," said Ron gloomily. "We keep all our old subjects, or I'd've ditched Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"But that's very important!" said Hermione, shocked.

"Not the way Lockhart teaches it," said Ron. "I haven't learned anything from him except not to set pixies loose."

Neville Longbottom had been sent letters from all the witches and wizards in his family, all giving him different advice on what to choose. Confused and worried, he sat reading the subject lists with his tongue poking out, asking people whether they thought Arithmancy sounded more difficult than the study of Ancient Runes. Dean Thomas, who, like Harry, had grown up with Muggles, ended up closing his eyes and jabbing his wand at the list, then picking the subjects it landed on. Hermione took nobody's advice but signed up for everything.

Harry smiled grimly to himself at the thought of what Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would say if he tried to discuss his career in wizardry with them. Not that he didn't get any guidance: Percy Weasley was eager to share his experience.

"Depends where you want to go, Harry," he said. "It's never too early to think about the future, so I'd recommend Divination. People say Muggle Studies is a soft option, but I personally think wizards should have a thorough understanding of the non-magical community, particularly if they're thinking of working in close contact with them - look at my father, he has to deal with Muggle business all the time. My brother Charlie was always more of an outdoor type, so he went for Care of Magical Creatures. Play to your strengths, Harry."

But the only thing Harry felt he was really good at was Quidditch. In the end, he chose the same new subjects as Ron, feeling that if he was lousy at them, at least he'd have someone friendly to help him.

Gryffindor's next Quidditch match would be against Hufflepuff. Wood was insisting on team practices every night after dinner, so that Harry barely had time for anything but Quidditch and homework. However, the training sessions were getting better, or at least

drier, and the evening before Saturday's match he went up to his dormitory to drop off his broomstick feeling Gryffindor's chances for the Quidditch cup had never been better.

But his cheerful mood didn't last long. At the top of the stairs to the dormitory, he met Neville Longbottom, who was looking frantic.

"Harry - I don't know who did it - I just found -"

Watching Harry fearfully, Neville pushed open the door.

The contents of Harry's trunk had been thrown everywhere. His cloak lay ripped on the floor. The bedclothes had been pulled off his four-poster and the drawer had been pulled out of his bedside cabinet, the contents strewn over the mattress.

Harry walked over to the bed, open-mouthed, treading on a few loose pages of *Travels with Trolls*. As he and Neville pulled the blankets back onto his bed, Ron, Dean, and Seamus came in. Dean swore loudly.

"What happened, Harry?"

"No idea," said Harry. But Ron was examining Harry's robes. All the pockets were hanging out.

"Someone's been looking for something," said Ron. "Is there anything missing?"

Harry started to pick up all his things and throw them into his trunk. It was only as he threw the last of the Lockhart books back into it that he realized what wasn't there.

"Riddle's diary's gone," he said in an undertone to Ron.

"What?"

Harry jerked his head toward the dormitory door and Ron followed him out. They hurried down to the Gryffindor common

room, which was half-empty, and joined Hermione, who was sitting alone, reading a book called *Ancient Runes Made Easy*.

Hermione looked aghast at the news.

"But - only a Gryffindor could have stolen - nobody else knows our password -"

"Exactly," said Harry.

They woke the next day to brilliant sunshine and a light, refreshing breeze.

"Perfect Quidditch conditions!" said Wood enthusiastically at the Gryffindor table, loading the team's plates with scrambled eggs.
"Harry, buck up there, you need a decent breakfast."

Harry had been staring down the packed Gryffindor table, wondering if the new owner of Riddle's diary was right in front of his eyes. Hermione had been urging him to report the robbery, but Harry didn't like the idea. He'd have to tell a teacher all about the diary, and how many people knew why Hagrid had been expelled fifty years ago? He didn't want to be the one who brought it all up again.

As he left the Great Hall with Ron and Hermione to go and collect his Quidditch things, another very serious worry was added to Harry's growing list. He had just set foot on the marble staircase when he heard it yet again

"Kill this time ... let me rip ... tear. . ."

He shouted aloud and Ron and Hermione both jumped away from him in alarm.

"The voice!" said Harry, -looking over his shoulder. "I just heard it again - didn't you?"

Ron shook his head, wide-eyed. Hermione, however, clapped a hand to her forehead.

"Harry - I think I've just understood something! I've got to go to the library!"

And she sprinted away, up the stairs.

"What does she understand?" said Harry distractedly, still looking

around, trying to tell where the voice had come from.

"Loads more than I do," said Ron, shaking his head.

"But why's she got to go to the library?"

"Because that's what Hermione does," said Ron, shrugging. "When in doubt, go to the library."

Harry stood, irresolute, trying to catch the voice again, but people were now emerging from the Great Hall behind him, talking loudly, exiting through the front doors on their way to the Quidditch pitch.

"You'd better get moving," said Ron. "It's nearly eleven - the match -"

Harry raced up to Gryffindor Tower, collected his Nimbus Two Thousand, and joined the large crowd swarming across the grounds, but his mind was still in the castle along with the bodiless voice, and as he pulled on his scarlet robes in the locker room, his only comfort was that everyone was now outside to watch the game.

The teams walked onto the field to tumultuous applause. Oliver Wood took off for a warm-up flight around the goal posts; Madam Hooch released the balls. The Hufflepuffs, who played in canary yellow, were standing in a huddle, having a last-minute discussion of tactics.

Harry was just mounting his broom when Professor McGonagall came half marching, half running across the pitch, carrying an enormous purple megaphone.

Harry's heart dropped like a stone.

"This match has been cancelled," Professor McGonagall called through the megaphone, addressing the packed stadium. There were boos and shouts. Oliver Wood, looking devastated, landed and ran toward Professor McGonagall without getting off his broomstick.

"But, Professor!" he shouted. "We've got to play - the cup Gryffindor -"

Professor McGonagall ignored him and continued to shout through her megaphone:

"All students are to make their way back to the House common rooms, where their Heads of Houses will give them further information. As quickly as you can, please!"

Then she lowered the megaphone and beckoned Harry over to her.

"Potter, I think you'd better come with me

Wondering how she could possibly suspect him this time, Harry saw Ron detach himself from the complaining crowd; he came running up to them as they set off toward the castle. To Harry's surprise, Professor McGonagall didn't object.

"Yes, perhaps you'd better come, too, Weasley

Some of the students swarming around them were grumbling about the match being canceled; others looked worried. Harry and Ron followed Professor McGonagall back into the school and up the marble staircase. But they weren't taken to anybody's office this time.

"This will be a bit of a shock," said Professor McGonagall in a surprisingly gentle voice as they approached the infirmary. "There has been another attack ... another double attack."

Harry's insides did a horrible somersault. Professor McGonagall pushed the door open and he and Ron entered. .

Madam Pomfrey was bending over a fifth-year girl with long, curly hair. Harry recognized her as the Ravenclaw they'd accidentally asked for directions to the Slytherin common room. And on the bed next to her was

"Hermione!" Ron groaned.

Hermione lay utterly still, her eyes open and glassy.

"They were found near the library," said Professor McGonagall. "I don't suppose either of you can explain this? It was on the floor next to them

She was holding up a small, circular mirror.

Harry and Ron shook their heads, both staring at Hermione.

"I will escort you back to Gryffindor Tower," said Professor McGonagall heavily. "I need to address the students in any case.

"All students will return to their House common rooms by six o'clock in the evening. No student is to leave the dormitories after that time. You will be escorted to each lesson by a teacher. No student is to use the bathroom unaccompanied by a teacher. All further Quidditch training and matches are to be postponed. There will be no more evening activities."

The Gryffindors packed inside the common room listened to Professor McGonagall in silence. She rolled up the parchment

from which she had been reading and said in a somewhat choked voice, "I need hardly add that I have rarely been so distressed. It is likely that the school will be closed unless the culprit behind these attacks is caught. I would urge anyone who thinks they might know anything about them to come forward."

She climbed somewhat awkwardly out of the portrait hole, and the Gryffindors began talking immediately.

"That's two Gryffindors down, not counting a Gryffindor ghost, one Ravenclaw, and one Hufflepuff, " said the Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan, counting on his fingers. "Haven't any of the teachers noticed that the Slytherins are all safe? Isn't it obvious all this stuff's coming from Slytherin? The Heir of Slytherin, the monster of Slytherin - why don't they just chuck all the Slytherins out?" he roared, to nods and scattered applause.

Percy Weasley was sitting in a chair behind Lee, but for once he didn't seem keen to make his views heard. He was looking pale and stunned.

"Percy's in shock," George told Harry quietly. "That Ravenclaw girl - Penelope Clearwater - she's a prefect. I don't think he thought the monster would dare attack a prefect."

But Harry was only half-listening. He didn't seem to be able to get rid of the picture of Hermione, lying on the hospital bed as though carved out of stone. And if the culprit wasn't caught soon, he was looking at a lifetime back with the Dursleys. Tom Riddle had turned Hagrid in because he was faced with the prospect of a Muggle orphanage if the school closed. Harry now knew exactly how he had felt.

"What're we going to do?" said Ron quietly in Harry's ear. "D'you think they suspect Hagrid?"

"We've got to go and talk to him," said Harry, making up his mind. "I can't believe it's him this time, but if he set the monster loose last time he'll know how to get inside the Chamber of Secrets, and that's a start."

"But McGonagall said we've got to stay in our tower unless we're in class -"

"I think," said Harry, more quietly still, "it's time to get my dad's old cloak out again."

Harry had inherited) ust one thing from his father: a long and sil very Invisibility Cloak. It was their only chance of sneaking out of the school to visit Hagrid without anyone knowing about it. They went to bed at the usual time, waited until Neville, Dean, and Sea mus had stopped discussing the Chamber of Secrets and finally fallen asleep, then got up, dressed again, and threw the cloak over themselves.

The journey through the dark and deserted castle corridors wasn't enjoyable. Harry, who had wandered the castle at night sev eral times before, had never seen it so crowded after sunset. Teach ers, prefects, and ghosts were marching the corridors in pairs, staring around for any unusual activity. Their Invisibility Cloak didn't stop them making any noise, and there was a particularly tense moment when Ron stubbed his toe only yards from the spot where Snape stood standing guard. Thankfully, Snape sneezed at almost exactly the moment Ron swore. It was with relief that they reached the oak front doors and eased them open.
It was a clear, starry night. They hurried toward the lit windows of Hagrid's house and pulled off the cloak only when they were right outside his front door.

Seconds after they had knocked, Hagrid flung it open. They found themselves face-to-face with him aiming a crossbow at them. Fang the boarhound barked loudly behind him.

"Oh," he said, lowering the weapon and staring at them. "What're you two doin' here?"

"What's that for?" said Harry, pointing at the crossbow as they stepped inside.

"Nothin' - nothin' - " Hagrid muttered. "I've bin expectin' doesn' matter - Sit down - I'll make tea -"

He hardly seemed to know what he was doing. He nearly extinguished the fire, spilling water from the kettle on it, and then smashed the teapot with a nervous jerk of his massive hand.

"Are you okay, Hagrid?" said Harry. "Did you hear about Hermione?"

"Oh, I heard, all righ''," said Hagrid, a slight break in his voice.

He kept glancing nervously at the windows. He poured them both large mugs of boiling water (he had forgotten to add tea bags) and was just putting a slab of fruitcake on a plate when there was a loud knock on the door.

Hagrid dropped the fruitcake. Harry and Ron exchanged panicstricken looks, then threw the Invisibility Cloak back over themselves and retreated into a corner. Hagrid checked that they were hidden, seized his crossbow, and flung open his door once more.

"Good evening, Hagrid."

It was Dumbledore. He entered, looking deadly serious, and was followed by a second, very odd-looking man.

The stranger had rumpled gray hair and an anxious expression, and was wearing a strange mixture of clothes: a pinstriped suit, a scarlet tie, a long black cloak, and pointed purple boots. Under his arm he carried a lime-green bowler.

"That's Dad's boss!" Ron breathed. "Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic!"

Harry elbowed Ron hard to make him shut up.

Hagrid had gone pale and sweaty. He dropped into one of his chairs and looked from Dumbledore to Cornelius Fudge.

"Bad business, Hagrid," said Fudge in rather clipped tones. "Very bad business. Had to come. Four attacks on Muggle-borns. Things've gone far enough. Ministry's got to act."

"I never," said Hagrid, looking imploringly at Dumbledore. "You know I never, Professor Dumbledore, sir -"

"I want it understood, Cornelius, that Hagrid has my full confidence," said Dumbledore, frowning at Fudge.

"Look, Albus," said Fudge, uncomfortably. "Hagrid's record's against him. Ministry's got to do something - the school governors have been in touch -"

"Yet again, Cornelius, I tell you that taking Hagrid away will not help in the slightest," said Dumbledore. His blue eyes were full of a fire Harry had never seen before.

"Look at it from my point of view," said Fudge, fidgeting with his bowler. "I'm under a lot of pressure. Got to be seen to be doing

something. If it turns out it wasn't Hagrid, he'll be back and no more said. But I've got to take him. Got to. Wouldn't be doing my duty -"

"Take me?" said Hagrid, who was trembling. "Take me where?"

"For a short stretch only," said Fudge, not meeting Hagrid's eyes. "Not a punishment, Hagrid, more a precaution. If someone else is caught, you'll be let out with a full apology -"

"Not Azkaban?" croaked Hagrid.

Before Fudge could answer, there was another loud rap on the door.

Dumbledore answered it. It was Harry's turn for an elbow in the ribs; he'd let out an audible gasp.

Mr. Lucius Malfoy strode into Hagrid's hut, swathed in a long black traveling cloak, smiling a cold and satisfied smile. Fang started to growl.

"Already here, Fudge," he said approvingly. "Good, good. . ."

"What're you doin' here?" said Hagrid furiously. "Get outta my house!"

"My dear man, please believe me, I have no pleasure at all in being inside your - er - d'you call this a house?" said Lucius Malfoy, sneering as he looked around the small cabin. "I simply called at the school and was told that the headmaster was here."

"And what exactly did you want with me, Lucius?" said Dumbledore. He spoke politely, but the fire was still blazing in his blue eyes.

"Dreadful thing, Dumbledore," said Malfoy lazily, taking out a long roll of parchment, "but the governors feel it's time for you to step aside. This is an Order of Suspension - you'll find all twelve signatures on it. I'm afraid we feel you're losing your touch. How many attacks have there been now? Two more this afternoon, wasn't it? At this rate, there'll be no Muggle-borns left at Hogwarts, and we all know what an awful loss that would be to the school."

"Oh, now, see here, Lucius," said Fudge, looking alarmed, "Dumbledore suspended - no, no - last thing we want just now

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"The appointment - or suspension - of the headmaster is a matter for the governors, Fudge," said Mr. Malfoy smoothly. "And as Dumbledore has failed to stop these attacks -"

"See here, Malfoy, if Dumbledore can't stop them," said Fudge, whose upper lip was sweating now, "I mean to say, who can?"

"That remains to be seen," said Mr. Malfoy with a nasty smile. "But as all twelve of us have voted -"

Hagrid leapt to his feet, his shaggy black head grazing the ceiling.

'An' how many did yeh have ter threaten an' blackmail before they

agreed, Malfoy, eh?" he roared.

"Dear, dear, you know, that temper of yours will lead you into trouble one of these days, Hagrid," said Mr. Malfoy. "I would advise you not to shout at the Azkaban guards like that. They won't like it at all."

"Yeh can't take Dumbledore!" yelled Hagrid, making Fang the boarhound cower and whimper in his basket. "Take him away, an' the Muggle-borns won't stand a chance! There'll be killin' next!"

"Calm yourself, Hagrid," said Dumbledore sharply. He looked at Lucius Malfoy.

"If the governors want my removal, Lucius, I shall of course step aside -"

"But -" stuttered Fudge.

"No!" growled Hagrid.

Dumbledore had not taken his bright blue eyes off Lucius Malfoy's cold gray ones.

"However," said Dumbledore, speaking very slowly and clearly so that none of them could miss a word, "you will find that I will

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ummer was creeping over the grounds around the castle; sky and lake alike turned periwinkle blue and flowers large as cabbages burst into bloom in the greenhouses. But with no Hagrid visible from the castle windows, striding the grounds with Fang at his heels, the scene didn't look right to Harry; no better, in fact, than the inside of the castle, where things were so horribly wrong.

Harry and Ron had tried to visit Hermione, but visitors were now barred from the hospital wing.

"We're taking no more chances," Madam Pomfrey told them severely through a crack in the infirmary door. "No, I'm sorry, there's every chance the attacker might come back to finish these people off . . ."

With Dumbledore gone, fear had spread as never before, so that the sun warming the castle walls outside seemed to stop at the mullioned windows. There was barely a face to be seen in the school

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that didn't look worried and tense, and any laughter that rang through the corridors sounded shrill and unnatural and was quickly stifled.

Harry constantly repeated Dumbledore's final words to himself "I will only truly have left this school when none here are loyal to me... Help will

always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it." But what good were these words? Who exactly were they supposed to ask for help, when everyone was just as confused and scared as they were?

Hagrid's hint about the spiders was far easier to understand the trouble was, there didn't seem to be a single spider left in the castle to follow. Harry looked everywhere he went, helped (rather reluctantly) by Ron. They were hampered, of course, by the fact that they weren't allowed to wander off on their own but had to move around the castle in a pack with the other Gryffindors. Most of their fellow students seemed glad that they were being shepherded from class to class by teachers, but Harry found it very irksome.

One person, however, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the atmosphere of terror and suspicion. Draco Malfoy was strutting around the school as though he had just been appointed Head Boy. Harry didn't realize what he was so pleased about until the Potions lesson about two weeks after Dumbledore and Hagrid had left, when, sitting right behind Malfoy, Harry overheard him gloating to Crabbe and Goyle.

"I always thought Father might be the one who got rid of Dumbledore," he said, not troubling to keep his voice down. "I told you he thinks Dumbledore's the worst headmaster the school's ever

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had. Maybe we'll get a decent headmaster now. Someone who won't want the Chamber of Secrets closed. McGonagall won't last long, she's only filling in

Snape swept past Harry, making no comment about Hermione's empty seat and cauldron.

"Sir," said Malfoy loudly. "Sir, why don't you apply for the headmaster's job?"

"Now, now, Malfoy," said Snape, though he couldn't suppress a thin-lipped smile. "Professor Dumbledore has only been suspended by the governors. I daresay he'll be back with us soon enough."

"Yeah, right," said Malfoy, smirking. "I expect you'd have Father's vote, sir, if you wanted to apply for the job - I'll tell Father you're the best teacher here, sir -"

Snape smirked as he swept off around the dungeon, fortunately not spotting Seamus Finnigan, who was pretending to vomit into his cauldron.

"I'm quite surprised the Mudbloods haven't all packed their bags by now," Malfoy went on. "Bet you five Galleons the next one dies. Pity it wasn't Granger -"

The bell rang at that moment, which was lucky; at Malfoy's last words, Ron had leapt off his stool, and in the scramble to collect bags and books, his attempts to reach Malfoy went unnoticed.

"Let me at him," Ron growled as Harry and Dean hung onto his arms. "I don't care, I don't need my wand, I'm going to kill him with my bare hands -"

"Hurry up, I've got to take you all to Herbology," barked Snape over

the class's heads, and off they marched, with Harry, Ron, and Dean bringing up the rear, Ron still trying to get loose. It was only

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safe to let go of him when Snape had seen them out of the castle and they were making their way across the vegetable patch toward the greenhouses.

The Herbology class was very subdued; there were now two missing from their number, Justin and Hermione.

Professor Sprout set them all to work pruning the Abyssinian Shrивelfigs. Harry went to tip an armful of withered stalks onto the compost heap and found himself face-to-face with Ernie Macmillan. Ernie took a deep breath and said, very formally, "I just want to say, Harry, that I'm sorry I ever suspected you. I know you'd never attack Hermione Granger, and I apologize for all the stuff I said. We're all in the same boat now, and, well -"

He held out a pudgy hand, and Harry shook it.

Ernie and his friend Hannah came to work at the same Shrивelfig as Harry and Ron.

"That Draco Malfoy character," said Ernie, breaking off dead twigs, "he seems very pleased about all this, doesn't he? D'you know, I think he might be Slytherin's heir."

"That's clever of you," said Ron, who didn't seem to have forgiven Ernie as readily as Harry.

"Do you think it's Malfoy, Harry?" Ernie asked.

"No," said Harry, so firmly that Ernie and Hannah stared.

A second later, Harry spotted something.

Several large spiders were scuttling over the ground on the other side of the glass, moving in an unnaturally straight line as though taking the shortest route to a prearranged meeting. Harry hit Ron over the hand with his pruning shears.

"Ouch! What're you -"

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Harry pointed out the spiders, following their progress with his eyes screwed up against the sun.

"Oh, yeah," said Ron, trying, and failing, to look pleased. "But we can't follow them now -"

Ernie and Hannah were listening curiously.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he focused on the spiders. If they pursued their fixed course, there could be no doubt about where they would end up.

"Looks like they're heading for the Forbidden Forest"

And Ron looked even unhappier about that.

At the end of the lesson Professor Sprout escorted the class to their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. Harry and Ron lagged behind the others so they could talk out of earshot.

"We'll have to use the Invisibility Cloak again," Harry told Ron. "We can take Fang with us. He's used to going into the forest with Hagrid, he might be some help."

"Right," said Ron, who was twirling his wand nervously in his fingers. "Er - aren't there - aren't there supposed to be werewolves in the forest?" he added as they took their usual places at the back of Lockhart's classroom.

Preferring not to answer that question, Harry said, "There are good things in there, too. The centaurs are all right, and the unicorns ...

Ron had never been into the Forbidden Forest before. Harry had entered it only once and had hoped never to do so again.

Lockhart bounded into the room and the class stared at him. Every other teacher in the place was looking grimmer than usual, but Lockhart appeared nothing short of buoyant.

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"Come now," he cried, beaming around him. "Why all these long faces?"

People swapped exasperated looks, but nobody answered.

"Don't you people realize," said Lockhart, speaking slowly, as though they were all a bit dim, "the danger has passed! The culprit has been taken away -"

"Says who?" said Dean Thomas loudly.

"My dear young man, the Minister of Magic wouldn't have taken Hagrid if he hadn't been one hundred percent sure that he was guilty," said Lockhart, in the tone of someone explaining that one and one made two.

"Oh, yes he would," said Ron, even more loudly than Dean.

"I flatter myself I know a touch more about Hagrid's arrest than you do, Mr. Weasley," said Lockhart in a self-satisfied tone.

Ron started to say that he didn't think so, somehow, but stopped in midsentence when Harry kicked him hard under the desk.

"We weren't there, remember?" Harry muttered.

But Lockhart's disgusting cheeriness, his hints that he had always thought Hagrid was no good, his confidence that the whole business was now at an end, irritated Harry so much that he yearned to throw Gadding with Ghouls right in Lockhart's stupid face. Instead he contented himself with scrawling a note to Ron: Let's do it tonight.

Ron read the message, swallowed hard, and looked sideways at the empty seat usually filled by Hermione. The sight seemed to stiffen his resolve, and he nodded.

The Gryffindor common room was always very crowded these days, because from six o'clock onward the Gryffindors had no -

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where else to go. They also had plenty to talk about, with the result that the common room often didn't empty until past midnight.

Harry went to get the Invisibility Cloak out of his trunk right after dinner, and spent the evening sitting on it, waiting for the room to clear. Fred and George challenged Harry and Ron to a few games of Exploding Snap, and Ginny sat watching them, very subdued in Hermione's usual chair. Harry and Ron kept losing on purpose, trying to finish the games quickly, but even so, it was well past midnight when Fred, George, and Ginny finally went to bed.

Harry and Ron waited for the distant sounds of two dormitory doors closing before seizing the cloak, throwing it over themselves, and climbing through the portrait hole.

It was another difficult journey through the castle, dodging all the teachers. At last they reached the entrance hall, slid back the lock on the oak front doors, squeezed between them, trying to stop any creaking, and stepped out into the moonlit grounds.

"'Course," said Ron abruptly as they strode across the black grass, "we might get to the forest and find there's nothing to follow. Those spiders might not've been going there at all. I know it looked like they were moving in that sort of general direction, but. . ."

His voice trailed away hopefully.

They reached Hagrid's house, sad and sorry-looking with its blank windows. When Harry pushed the door open, Fang went mad with joy at the sight of them. Worried he might wake everyone at the castle with his deep, booming barks, they hastily fed him treacle fudge from a tin on the mantelpiece, which glued his teeth together.

Harry left the Invisibility Cloak on Hagrid's table. There would be no need for it in the pitch-dark forest.

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"C'mon, Fang, we're going for a walk," said Harry, patting his leg, and Fang bounded happily out of the house behind them, dashed to the edge of the forest, and lifted his leg against a large sycamore tree.

Harry took out his wand, murmured, "Lumos!" and a tiny light appeared at the end of it, just enough to let them watch the path for signs of spiders.

"Good thinking," said Ron. "I'd light mine, too, but you know - it'd probably blow up or something

Harry tapped Ron on the shoulder, pointing at the grass. Two solitary spiders were hurrying away from the wandlight into the shade of the

trees.

"Okay," Ron sighed as though resigned to the worst, "I'm ready. Let's go."

So, with Fang scampering around them, sniffing tree roots and leaves, they entered the forest. By the glow of Harry's wand, they followed the steady trickle of spiders moving along the path. They walked behind them for about twenty minutes, not speaking, listening hard for noises other than breaking twigs and rustling leaves. Then, when the trees had become thicker than ever, so that the stars overhead were no longer visible, and Harry's wand shone alone in the sea of dark, they saw their spider guides leaving the path.

Harry paused, trying to see where the spiders were going, but everything outside his little sphere of *light was pitch-black. He had never been this deep into the forest before. He could vividly remember Hagrid advising him not to leave the forest path last time he'd been in here. But Hagrid was miles away now, probably sitting in a cell in Azkaban, and he had also said to follow the spiders.

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Something wet touched Harry's hand and he jumped backward, crushing Rods foot, but it was only Fang's nose.

"What d'you reckon?" Harry said to Ron, whose eyes he could just make out, reflecting the light from his wand.

"We've come this far," said Ron.

So they followed the darting shadows of the spiders into the trees. They couldn't move very quickly now; there were tree roots and stumps in their way, barely visible in the near blackness. Harry could feel Fang's hot breath on his hand. More than once, they had to stop, so that Harry could crouch down and find the spiders in the wandlight.

They walked for what seemed like at least half an hour, their robes snagging on low-slung branches and brambles. After a while, they noticed that the ground seemed to be sloping downward, though the trees were as thick as ever.

Then Fang suddenly let loose a great, echoing bark, making both Harry and Ron jump out of their skins.

"What?" said Ron loudly, looking around into the pitch-dark, and gripping Harry's elbow very hard.

"There's something moving over there," Harry breathed. "Listen ... sounds like something big

They listened. Some distance to their right, the something big was snapping branches as it carved a path through the trees.

"Oh, no," said Ron. "Oh, no, oh, no, oh -"

"Shut up," said Harry frantically. "It'll hear you."

"Hear me?" said Ron in an unnaturally high voice. "It's already heard Fang!"

The darkness seemed to be pressing on their eyeballs as they

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stood, terrified, waiting. There was a strange rumbling noise and then silence.

"What d'you think it's doing?" said Harry.

"Probably getting ready to pounce," said Ron.

They waited, shivering, hardly daring to move.

"D'you think it's gone?" Harry whispered.

"Dunno -"

Then, to their right, came a sudden blaze of light, so bright in the darkness that both of them flung up their hands to shield their eyes. Fang yelped and tried to run, but got lodged in a tangle of thorns and yelped even louder.

"Harry!" Ron shouted, his voice breaking with relief "Harry, it's our car!"

"What?"

"Come on!"

Harry blundered after Ron toward the light, stumbling and tripping, and a moment later they had emerged into a clearing.

Mr. Weasley's car was standing, empty, in the middle of a circle of thick trees under a roof of dense branches, its headlights ablaze. As Ron walked, open-mouthed, toward it, it moved slowly toward him, exactly like a large, turquoise dog greeting its owner.

"It's been here all the time!" said Ron delightedly, walking around the car. "Look at it. The forest's turned it wild"

The sides of the car were scratched and smeared with mud.

Apparently it had taken to trundling around the forest on its own. Fang didn't seem at all keen on it; he kept close to Harry, who could feel him quivering. His breathing slowing down again, Harry stuffed his wand back into his robes.

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"And we thought it was going to attack us!" said Ron, leaning against the car and patting it. "I wondered where it had gone!"

Harry squinted around on the floodlit ground for signs of more spiders, but they had all scuttled away from the glare of the headlights.

"We've lost the trail," he said. "C'mon, let's go and find them."

Ron didn't speak. He didn't move. His eyes were fixed on a point some ten feet above the forest floor, right behind Harry. His face was livid with terror.

Harry didn't even have time to turn around. There was a loud clicking noise and suddenly he felt something long and hairy seize him around the middle and lift him off the ground, so that he was hanging facedown. Struggling, terrified, he heard more clicking, and saw Ron's legs leave the ground, too, heard Fang whimpering and howling - next moment, he was being swept away into the dark trees.

Head hanging, Harry saw that what had hold of him was marching on six immensely long, hairy legs, the front two clutching him tightly below a pair of shining black pincers. Behind him, he could hear another of the creatures, no doubt carrying Ron. They were moving into the very heart of the forest. Harry could hear Fang fighting to free himself from a third monster, whining loudly, but Harry couldn't have yelled even if he had wanted to; he seemed to have left his voice back with the car in the clearing.

He never knew how long he was in the creature's clutches; he only knew that the darkness suddenly lifted enough for him to see that the leaf-strewn ground was now swarming with spiders. Craning his neck sideways, he realized that they had reached the ridge of

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a vast hollow, a hollow that had been cleared of trees, so that the stars shone brightly onto the worst scene he had ever laid eyes on.

Spiders. Not tiny spiders like those surging over the leaves below. Spiders the size of carthorses, eight-eyed, eight-legged, black, hairy, gigantic. The massive specimen that was carrying Harry made its way down the steep slope toward a misty, domed web in the very center of the hollow, while its fellows closed in all around it, clicking their pincers excitedly at the sight of its load.

Harry fell to the ground on all fours as the spider released him. Ron and Fang thudded down next to him. Fang wasn't howling anymore, but cowering silently on the spot. Ron looked exactly like Harry felt. His mouth was stretched wide in a kind of silent scream and his eyes were popping.

Harry suddenly realized that the spider that had dropped him was saying something. It had been hard to tell, because he clicked his pincers with every word he spoke.

"Aragog!" it called. "Aragog!"

And from the middle of the misty, domed web, a spider the size of a small elephant emerged, very slowly. There was gray in the black of his body and legs, and each of the eyes on his ugly, pincer-headed head was milky white. He was blind.

"What is it?" he said, clicking his pincers rapidly.

"Men," clicked the spider who had caught Harry.

"Is it Hagrid?" said Aragog, moving closer, his eight milky eyes wandering vaguely.

"Strangers," clicked the spider who had brought Ron.

"Kill them," clicked Aragog fretfully. "I was sleeping

"We're friends of Hagrid's," Harry shouted. His heart seemed to have left his chest to pound in his throat.

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Click, click, click went the pincers of the spiders all around the hollow.

Aragog paused.

"Hagrid has never sent men into our hollow before," he said slowly.

"Hagrid's in trouble," said Harry, breathing very fast. "That's why we've come."

"In trouble?" said the aged spider, and Harry thought he heard concern beneath the clicking pincers. "But why has he sent you?"

Harry thought of getting to his feet but decided against it; he didn't think his legs would support him. So he spoke from the ground, as calmly as he could.

"They think,, up at the school, that Hagrid's been setting a a - something on students. They've taken him to Azkaban."

Aragog clicked his pincers furiously, and all around the hollow the sound was echoed by the crowd of spiders; it was like applause, except applause didn't usually make Harry feel sick with fear.

"But that was years ago," said Aragog fretfully. "Years and years ago. I remember it well. That's why they made him leave the school. They believed that I was the monster that dwells in what they call the Chamber of Secrets. They thought that Hagrid had opened the Chamber and set me free."

"And you ... you didn't come from the Chamber of Secrets?" said Harry, who could feel cold sweat on his forehead.

"I!" said Aragog, clicking angrily. "I was not born in the castle. I come from a distant land. A traveler gave me to Hagrid when I was an egg. Hagrid was only a boy, but he cared for me, hidden in a cupboard in the castle, feeding me on scraps from the table. Hagrid

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is my good friend, and a good man. When I was discovered, and blamed for the death of a girl, he protected me. I have lived here in the forest ever since, where Hagrid still visits me. He even found me a wife, Mosag, and you see how our family has grown, all through Hagrid's goodness

Harry summoned what remained of his courage.

"So you never - never attacked anyone?"

"Never," croaked the old spider. "It would have been my instinct, but out of respect for Hagrid, I never harmed a human. The body of the girl who was killed was discovered in a bathroom. I never saw any

part of the castle but the cupboard in which I grew up. Our kind like the dark and the quiet

"But then ... Do you know what did kill that girl?" said Harry.
"Because whatever it is, it's back and attacking people again -"

His words were drowned by a loud outbreak of clicking and the rustling of many long legs shifting angrily; large black shapes shifted all around him.

"The thing that lives in the castle," said Aragog, "is an ancient creature we spiders fear above all others. Well do I remember how I pleaded with Hagrid to let me go, when I sensed the beast moving about the school."

"What is it?" said Harry urgently.

More loud clicking, more rustling; the spiders seemed to be closing in.

"We do not speak of it!" said Aragog fiercely. "We do not name it! I never even told Hagrid the name of that dread creature, though he asked me, many times."

Harry didn't want to press the subject, not with the spiders

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pressing closer on all sides. Aragog seemed to be tired of tamng. He was backing slowly into his domed web, but his fellow spiders continued to inch slowly toward Harry and Ron.

"We'll just go, then," Harry called desperately to Aragog, hearing leaves rustling behind him.

"Go?" said Aragog slowly. "I think not

"But - but -"

"My sons and daughters do not harm Hagrid, on my command. But I cannot deny them fresh meat, when it wanders so willingly into our midst. Good-bye, friend of Hagrid."

Harry spun around. Feet away, towering above him, was a solid wall of spiders, clicking, their many eyes gleaming in their ugly black heads.

Even as he reached for his wand, Harry knew it was no good, there were too many of them, but as he tried to stand, ready to die fighting, a loud, long note sounded, and a blaze of light flamed through the hollow.

Mr. Weasley's car was thundering down the slope, headlights glaring, its horn screeching, knocking spiders aside; several were thrown onto their backs, their endless legs waving in the air. The car screeched to a halt in front of Harry and Ron and the doors flew open.

"Get Fang!" Harry yelled, diving into the front seat; Ron seized the boarhound around the middle and threw him, yelping, into the back of the car - the doors slammed shut - Ron didn't touch the accelerator but the car didn't need him; the engine roared and they were off,

hitting more spiders. They sped up the slope, out of the hollow, and they were soon crashing through the forest, branches

whipping the windows as the car wound its way cleverly through the widest gaps, following a path it obviously knew.

Harry looked sideways at Ron. His mouth was still open in the silent scream, but his eyes weren't popping anymore.

"Are you okay?"

Ron stared straight ahead, unable to speak.

They smashed their way through the undergrowth, Fang howling loudly in the back seat, and Harry saw the side mirror snap off as they squeezed past a large oak. After ten noisy, rocky minutes, the trees thinned, and Harry could again see patches of sky.

The car stopped so suddenly that they were nearly thrown into the windshield. They had reached the edge of the forest. Fang flung himself at the window in his anxiety to get out, and when Harry opened the door, he shot off through the trees to Hagrid's house, tail between his legs. Harry got out too, and after a minute or so, Ron seemed to regain the feeling in his limbs and followed, still stiff-necked

and staring. Harry gave the car a grateful pat as it reversed back into the forest and disappeared from view.

Harry went back into Hagrid's cabin to get the Invisibility Cloak. Fang was trembling under a blanket in his basket. When Harry got outside again, he found Ron being violently sick in the pumpkin patch.

"Follow the spiders," said Ron weakly, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "I'll never forgive Hagrid. We're lucky to be alive."

"I bet he thought Aragog wouldn't hurt friends of his," said Harry.

"That's exactly Hagrid's problem!" said Ron, thumping the wall of the cabin. "He always thinks monsters aren't as bad as they're

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made out, and look where it's got him! A cell in Azkaban!" He was shivering uncontrollably now. "What was the point of sending us in there? What have we found out, I'd like to know?"

"That Hagrid never opened the Chamber of Secrets," said Harry, throwing the cloak over Ron and prodding him in the arm to make him walk. "He was innocent."

Ron gave a loud snort. Evidently, hatching Aragog in a cupboard wasn't his idea of being innocent.

As the castle loomed nearer Harry twitched the cloak to make sure their feet were hidden, then pushed the creaking front doors ajar. They walked carefully back across the entrance hall and up the marble staircase, holding their breath as they passed corridors where watchful sentries were walking. At last they reached the safety of the Gryffindor common room, where the fire had burned itself into glowing ash. They took off the cloak and climbed the winding stair to

their dormitory.

Ron fell onto his bed without bothering to get undressed. Harry, however, didn't feel very sleepy. He sat on the edge of his fourposter, thinking hard about everything Aragog had said.

The creature that was lurking somewhere in the castle, he thought, sounded like a sort of monster Voldemort - even other monsters didn't want to name it. But he and Ron were no closer to finding out what it was, or how it Petrified its victims. Even Hagrid had never known what was in the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry swung his legs up onto his bed and leaned back against his pillows, watching the moon glinting at him through the tower window.

He couldn't see what else they could do. They had hit dead ends

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everywhere. Riddle had caught the wrong person, the Heir of Slytherin had got off, and no one could tell whether it was the same person, or a different one, who had opened the Chamber this time. There was nobody else to ask. Harry lay down, still thinking about what Aragog had said.

He was becoming drowsy when what seemed like their very last hope occurred to him, and he suddenly sat bolt upright.

"Ron," he hissed through the dark, "Ron -"

Ron woke with a yelp like Fang's, stared wildly around, and saw Harry.

"Ron -that girl who died. Aragog said she was found in a bathroom," said Harry, ignoring Neville's snufing snores from the corner. "What if she never left the bathroom? What if she's still there?"

Ron rubbed his eyes, frowning through the moonlight. And then he understood, too.

"You don't think - not Moaning Myrtle?"

A ll those times we were in that bathroom, and she was just three toilets away," said Ron bitterly at breakfast next day,

"and we could've asked her, and now. . ."

It had been hard enough trying to look for spiders. Escaping their teachers long enough to sneak into a girls' bathroom, the girls' bathroom, moreover, right next to the scene of the first attack, was going to be almost impossible.

But something happened in their first lesson, Transfiguration, that drove the Chamber of Secrets out of their minds for the first time in weeks. Ten minutes into the class, Professor McGonagall told them that their exams would start on the first of June, one week from today.

`Exams?' howled Seamus Finnigan. "We're still getting exams?"

There was a loud bang behind Harry as Neville Longbottom's wand slipped, vanishing one of the legs on his desk. Professorr

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McGonagall restored it with a wave of her own wand, and turned, frowning, to Seamus.

"The whole point of keeping the school open at this time is for you to receive your education," she said sternly. "The exams will therefore take place as usual, and I trust you are all studying hard."

Studying hard! It had never occurred to Harry that there would be exams with the castle in this state. There was a great deal of mutinous muttering around the room, which made Professor McGonagall scowl even more darkly.

"Professor Dumbledore's instructions were to keep the school running as normally as possible, she said. "And that, I need hardly point out, means finding out how much you have learned this year."

Harry looked down at the pair of white rabbits he was supposed to be turning into slippers. What had he learned so far this year? He couldn't seem to think of anything that would be useful in an exam.

Ron looked as though he'd just been told he had to go and live in the Forbidden Forest.

"Can you imagine me taking exams with this?" he asked Harry, holding up his wand, which had just started whistling loudly.

Three days before their first exam, Professor McGonagall made another announcement at breakfast.

"I have good news," she said, and the Great Hall, instead of falling silent, erupted.

"Dumbledore's coming back!" several people yelled joyfully.

"You've caught the Heir of Slytherin!" squealed a girl at the Ravenclaw table.

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"Quidditch matches are back on!" roared Wood excitedly.

When the hubbub had subsided, Professor McGonagall said, "Professor Sprout has informed me that the Mandrakes are ready for cutting at last. Tonight, we will be able to revive those people who have been Petrified. I need hardly remind you all that one of them may well be able to tell us who, or what, attacked them. I am hopeful that this dreadful year will end with our catching the culprit."

There was an explosion of cheering. Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and wasn't at all surprised to see that Draco Malfoy hadn't joined in. Ron, however, was looking happier than he'd looked in days.

"It won't matter that we never asked Myrtle, then!" he said to Harry. "Hermione'll probably have all the answers when they wake her up! Mind you, she'll go crazy when she finds out we've got exams in three days' time. She hasn't studied. It might be kinder to leave her where she is till they're over."

Just then, Ginny Weasley came over and sat down next to Ron. She looked tense and nervous, and Harry noticed that her hands were twisting in her lap.

"What's up?" said Ron, helping himself to more porridge.

Ginny didn't say anything, but glanced up and down the Gryffindor table with a scared look on her face that reminded Harry of someone, though he couldn't think who.

"Spit it out," said Ron, watching her.

Harry suddenly realized who Ginny looked like. She was rocking backward and forward slightly in her chair, exactly like Dobby did when he was teetering on the edge of revealing forbidden information.

"I've got to tell you something," Ginny mumbled, carefully not looking at Harry.

"What is it?" said Harry.

Ginny looked as though she couldn't find the right words.

"What?" said Ron.

Ginny opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Harry leaned forward and spoke quietly, so that only Ginny and Ron could hear him.

"Is it something about the Chamber of Secrets? Have you seen something? Someone acting oddly?"

Ginny drew a deep breath and, at that precise moment, Percy Weasley appeared, looking tired and wan.

"If you've finished eating, I'll take that seat, Ginny. I'm starving, I've only just come off patrol duty."

Ginny jumped up as though her chair had just been electrified, gave Percy a fleeting, frightened look, and scampered away. Percy sat down and grabbed a mug from the center of the table.

"Percy!" said Ron angrily. "She was just about to tell us some-' thing important!"

Halfway through a gulp of tea, Percy choked.

"What sort of thing?" he said, coughing.

"I just asked her if she'd seen anything odd, and she started to say

"Oh - that - that's nothing to do with the Chamber of Secrets," said Percy at once.

"How do you know?" said Ron, his eyebrows raised.

"Well, er, if you must know, Ginny, er, walked in on me the other day when I was - well, never mind - the point is, she spot

ted me doing something and I, um, I asked her not to mention it to anybody. I must say, I did think she'd keep her word. It's nothing, really, I'd just rather -"

Harry had never seen Percy look so uncomfortable.

"What were you doing, Percy?" said Ron, grinning. "Go on, tell us, we won't laugh."

Percy didn't smile back.

"Pass me those rolls, Harry, I'm starving."

Harry knew the whole mystery might be solved tomorrow without their help, but he wasn't about to pass up a chance to speak to Myrtle if it turned up - and to his delight it did, midmorning, when they were being led to History of Magic by Gilderoy Lockhart.

Lockhart, who had so often assured them that all danger had passed, only to be proved wrong right away, was now wholeheartedly convinced that it was hardly worth the trouble to see them safely down the corridors. His hair wasn't as sleek as usual; it seemed he had been up most of the night, patrolling the fourth floor.

"Mark my words," he said, ushering them around a corner. "The first words out of those poor Petrified people's mouths will be 'It was Hagrid.' Frankly, I'm astounded Professor McGonagall thinks all these security measures are necessary."

"I agree, sir," said Harry, making Ron drop his books in surprise.

"Thank you, Harry, said Lockhart graciously while they waited for a long line of Hufflepuffs to pass. "I mean, we teachers have quite enough to be getting on with, without walking students to classes and standing guard all night

"That's right," said Ron, catching on. "Why don't you leave us here, sir, we've only got one more corridor to go -"

"You know, Weasley, I think I will," said Lockhart. "I really should go and prepare my next class -"

And he hurried off.

"Prepare his class," Ron sneered after him. "Gone to curl his hair, more like."

They let the rest of the Gryffindors draw ahead of them, then darted down a side passage and hurried off toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. But just as they were congratulating each other on their brilliant scheme

"Potter! Weasley! What are you doing?"

It was Professor McGonagall, and her mouth was the thinnest of thin

lines.

"We were -we were-" Ron stammered. "We were going to - to go and see -"

"Hermione," said Harry. Ron and Professor McGonagall both looked at him.

"We haven't seen her for ages, Professor," Harry went on hurriedly, treading on Ron's foot, "and we thought we'd sneak into the hospital wing, you know, and tell her the Mandrakes are nearly ready and, er, not to worry -"

Professor McGonagall was still staring at him, and for a moment, Harry thought she was going to explode, but when she spoke, it was in a strangely croaky voice.

"Of course," she said, and Harry, amazed, saw a tear glistening in her beady eye. "Of course, I realize this has all been hardest on the friends of those who have been ... I quite understand. Yes,

Potter, of course you may visit Miss Granger. I will inform Professor Binns where you've gone. Tell Madam Pomfrey I have given my permission."

Harry and Ron walked away, hardly daring to believe that they'd avoided detention. As they turned the corner, they distinctly heard Professor McGonagall blow her nose.

"That," said Ron fervently, "was the best story you've ever come up with."

They had no choice now but to go to the hospital wing and tell Madam Pomfrey that they had Professor McGonagall's permission to visit Hermione.

Madam Pomfrey let them in, but reluctantly.

"There's just no point talking to a Petrified person," she said, and they had to admit she had a point when they'd taken their seats next to Hermione. It was plain that Hermione didn't have the faintest inkling that she had visitors, and that they might just as well tell her bedside cabinet not to worry for all the good it would do.

"Wonder if she did see the attacker, though?" said Ron, looking sadly at Hermione's rigid face. "Because if he sneaked up on them all, no one'll ever know

But Harry wasn't looking at Hermione's face. He was more interested in her right hand. It lay clenched on top of her blankets, and bending closer, he saw that a piece of paper was scrunched inside her fist.

Making sure that Madam Pomfrey was nowhere near, he pointed this out to Ron.

"TG and get it out," Ron whispered, shifting his chair so that he blocked Harry from Madam Pomfrey's view.

It was no easy task. Hermione's hand was clamped so tightly around

the paper that Harry was sure he was going to tear it. While Ron kept watch he tugged and twisted, and at last, after several tense minutes, the paper came free.

It was a page torn from a very old library book. Harry smoothed it out eagerly and Ron leaned close to read it, too.

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size and live many hundreds of years, is born

from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.

And beneath this, a single word had been written, in a hand Harry recognized as Hermione's. Pipes.

It was as though somebody had just flicked a light on in his brain.

"Ron," he breathed. "This is it. This is the answer. The monster in the Chamber's a basilisk - a giant serpent! That why I've been hearing that voice all over the place, and nobody else has heard it. It's because I understand Parseltongue"

Harry looked up at the beds around him.

"The basilisk kills people by looking at them. But no one's died - because no one looked it straight in the eye. Colin saw it through his camera. The basilisk burned up all the film inside it, but Colin just got Petrified. Justin . . . Justin must've seen the basilisk through Nearly Headless Nick! Nick got the full blast of it, but he couldn't die again . . . and Hermione and that Ravenclaw prefect were found with a mirror next to them. Hermione had just realized the monster was a basilisk. I bet you anything she warned the first person she met to look around corners with a mirror first! And that girl pulled out her mirror - and -"

Rods jaw had dropped.

"And Mrs. Norris?" he whispered eagerly.

Harry thought hard, picturing the scene on the night of Halloween.

"The water. . ." he said slowly. "The flood from Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. I bet you Mrs. Norris only saw the reflection"

He scanned the page in his hand eagerly. The more he looked at it, the more it made sense.

`: . . The crowing of the rooster . . . is fatal to it"! he read aloud.

"Hagrid's

roosters were killed! The Heir of Slytherin didn't want one anywhere

near the castle once the Chamber was opened! Spidersflee before it.! It all fits!"

"But how's the basilisk been getting around the place?" said Ron. "A giant snake . . . Someone would've seen. . ."

Harry, however, pointed at the word Hermione had scribbled at the foot of the page.

"Pipes," he said. "Pipes . . . Ron, it's been using the plumbing. I've been hearing that voice inside the walls . . ."

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Ron suddenly grabbed Harry's arm.

"The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets!" he said hoarsely.

"What if it's a bathroom? What if it's in -"

`= Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, "said Harry.

They sat there, excitement coursing through them, hardly able to believe it.

"This means," said Harry, "I can't be the only Parselmouth in the school. The Heir of Slytherin's one, too. That's how he's been controlling the basilisk."

"What're we going to do?" said Ron, whose eyes were flashing.

"Should we go straight to McGonagall?"

"Let's go to the staff room," said Harry, jumping up. "She'll be there in ten minutes. It's nearly break."

They ran downstairs. Not wanting to be discovered hanging around in another corridor, they went straight into the deserted staff room. It was a large, paneled room full of dark, wooden chairs. Harry and Ron paced around it, too excited to sit down.

But the bell to signal break never came.

Instead, echoing through the corridors came Professor McGonagall's voice, magically magnified.

`All students to return to their House dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staff room. Immediately, please. "

Harry wheeled around to stare at Ron.

"Not another attack? Not now?"

"What'll we do?" said Ron, aghast. "Go back to the dormitory?"

"No," said Harry, glancing around. There was an ugly sort of wardrobe to his left, full of the teachers' cloaks. "In here. Let's hear what it's all about. Then we can tell them what we've found out."

They hid themselves inside it, listening to the rumbling of hundreds of people moving overhead, and the staff room door banging open. From between the musty folds of the cloaks, they watched the teachers filtering into the room. Some of them were looking puzzled, others downright scared. Then Professor McGonagall arrived.

"It has happened," she told the silent staff room. "A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself."

Professor Flitwick let out a squeal. Professor Sprout clapped her hands over her mouth. Snape gripped the back of a chair very hard and said, "How can you be sure?"

"The Heir of Slytherin," said Professor McGonagall, who was very white, "left another message. Right underneath the first one. `Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever. ''

Professor Flitwick burst into tears.

"Who is it?" said Madam Hooch, who had sunk, weak-kneed, into a chair. "Which student?"

"Ginny Weasley," said Professor McGonagall.

Harry felt Ron slide silently down onto the wardrobe floor beside him.

"We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow," said Professor McGonagall. "This is the end of Hogwarts. Dumbledore always said. . ."

The staffroom door banged open again. For one wild moment, Harry was sure it would be Dumbledore. But it was Lockhart, and he was beaming.

"So sorry - dozed off - what have I missed?"

He didn't seem to notice that the other teachers were looking at him with something remarkably like hatred. Snape stepped forward.

"Just the man," he said. "The very man. A girl has been snatched by the monster, Lockhart. Taken into the Chamber of Secrets itself. Your moment has come at last."

Lockhart blanched.

"That's right, Gilderoy," chipped in Professor Sprout. "Weren't you saying just last night that you've known all along where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is?"

"I - well, I -"sputtered Lockhart.

"Yes, didn't you tell me you were sure you knew what was inside it?" piped up Professor Flitwick.

"D-did I? I don't recall -"

"I certainly remember you saying you were sorry you hadn't had a crack at the monster before Hagrid was arrested," said Snape. "Didn't you say that the whole affair had been bungled, and that you should have been given a free rein from the first?"

Lockhart stared around at his stony-faced colleagues.

"I - I really never - you may have misunderstood -"

"We'll leave it to you, then, Gilderoy," said Professor McGonagall. "Tonight will be an excellent time to do it. We'll make sure everyone's out of your way. You'll be able to tackle the monster all by youself. A free rein at last."

Lockhart gazed desperately around him, but nobody came to the rescue. He didn't look remotely handsome anymore. His lip was trembling, and in the absence of his usually toothy grin, he looked weak-chinned and feeble.

"Very well," he said. "I'll - I'll be in my office, getting getting ready."

And he left the room.

"Right," said Professor McGonagall, whose nostrils were flared, "that's got him out from under our feet. The Heads of Houses should go and inform their students what has happened. Tell them the Hogwarts Express will take them home first thing tomorrow. Will the rest of you please make sure no students have been left outside their dormitories."

The teachers rose and left, one by one.

It was probably the worst day of Harry's entire life. He, Ron, Fred, and George sat together in a corner of the Gryffindor common room, unable to say anything to each other. Percy wasn't there. He had gone to send an owl to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, then shut himself up in his dormitory.

No afternoon ever lasted as long as that one, nor had Gryffindor Tower ever been so crowded, yet so quiet. Near sunset, Fred and George went up to bed, unable to sit there any longer.

"She knew something, Harry," said Ron, speaking for the first time since they had entered the wardrobe in the staff room. "That's why she was taken. It wasn't some stupid thing about Percy at all., She'd found out something about the Chamber of Secrets. That must be why she was -" Ron rubbed his eyes frantically. "I mean, she was a pure-blood. There can't be any other reason."

Harry could see the sun sinking, blood-red, below the skyline. This was the worst he had ever felt. If only there was something they could do. Anything.

"Harry" said Ron. "D'you think there's any chance at all she's not - you know ="

Harry didn't know what to say. He couldn't see how Ginny could still be alive.

"D'you know what?" said Ron. "I think we should go and see

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Lockhart. Tell him what we know. He's going to try and get into the Chamber. We can tell him where we think it is, and tell him it's a basilisk in there."

Because Harry couldn't think of anything else to do, and because he wanted to be doing something, he agreed. The Gryffindors around them were so miserable, and felt so sorry for the Weasleys, that nobody tried to stop them as they got up, crossed the room, and left through the portrait hole.

Darkness was falling as they walked down to Lockhart's office. There seemed to be a lot of activity going on inside it. They could hear scraping, thumps, and hurried footsteps.

Harry knocked and there was a sudden silence from inside. Then the door opened the tiniest crack and they saw one of Lockhart's eyes peering through it.

"Oh - Mr. Potter - Mr. Weasley -" he said, opening the door a bit wider. "I'm rather busy at the moment - if you would be quick -"

"Professor, we've got some information for you," said Harry. "We think it'll help you."

"Er - well - it's not terribly -" The side of Lockhart's face that they could see looked very uncomfortable. "I mean - well all right -"

He opened the door and they entered.

His office had been almost completely stripped. Two large trunks stood open on the floor. Robes, jade-green, lilac, midnightblue, had been hastily folded into one of them; books were jumbled untidily into the other. The photographs that had covered the walls were now crammed into boxes on the desk.

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"Are you going somewhere?" said Harry.

"Er, well, yes," said Lockhart, ripping a life-size poster of himself from the back of the door as he spoke and starting to roll it up. "Urgent call - unavoidable - got to go -"

"What about my sister?" said Ron jerkily.

"Well, as to that - most unfortunate -" said Lockhart, avoiding their eyes as he wrenched open a drawer and started emptying the contents into a bag. "No one regrets more than I -"

"You're the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher!" said Harry.
"You can't go now! Not with all the Dark stuff going on here!"

"Well - I must say - when I took the job -" Lockhart muttered, now piling socks on top of his robes. "nothing in the job description - didn't expect -"

"You mean you're running away?" said Harry disbelievingly. "After all that stuff you did in your books -"

"Books can be misleading," said Lockhart delicately.

"You wrote them!" Harry shouted.

"My dear boy," said Lockhart, straightening up and frowning at Harry. "Do use your common sense. My books wouldn't have sold half as well if people didn't think I'd done all those things. No one wants to read about some ugly old Armenian warlock, even if he did save a village from werewolves. He'd look dreadful on the front cover. No dress sense at all. And the witch who banished the Bandon Banshee had a harelip. I mean, come on -"

"So you've just been taking credit for what a load of other people have done?" said Harry incredulously.

"Harry, Harry," said Lockhart, shaking his head impatiently, "it's not nearly as simple as that. There was work involved. I had

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to track these people down. Ask them exactly how they managed to do what they did. Then I had to put a Memory Charm on them so they wouldn't remember doing it. If there's one thing I pride myself on, it's my Memory Charms. No, it's been a lot of work, Harry. It's not all book signings and publicity photos, you know. You want fame, you have to be prepared for a long hard slog."

He banged the lids of his trunks shut and locked them.

"Let's see," he said. "I think that's everything. Yes. Only one thing left."

He pulled out his wand and turned to them.

"Awfully sorry, boys, but I'll have to put a Memory Charm on you now. Can't have you blabbing my secrets all over the place. Id never sell another book -"

Harry reached his wand just in time. Lockhart had barely raised his, when Harry bellowed, "Expelliarmus!"

Lockhart was blasted backward, falling over his trunk; his wand flew high into the air; Ron caught it, and flung it out of the open window.

"Shouldn't have let Professor Snape teach us that one," said Harry furiously, kicking Lockhart's trunk aside. Lockhart was looking up at him, feeble once more. Harry was still pointing his wand at him.

"What d'you want me to do?" said Lockhart weakly. "I don't know where the Chamber of Secrets is. There's nothing I can do."

"You're in luck," said Harry, forcing Lockhart to his feet at wandpoint. "We think we know where it is. And what's inside it. Let's go."

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They marched Lockhart out of his office and down the nearest stairs, along the dark corridor where the messages shone on the wall, to the door of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

They sent Lockhart in first. Harry was pleased to see that he was shaking.

Moaning Myrtle was sitting on the tank of the end toilet.

"Oh, it's you," she said when she saw Harry. "What do you want this time?"

"To ask you how you died," said Harry.

Myrtle's whole aspect changed at once. She looked as though she had never been asked such a flattering question.

"Ooooh, it was dreadful," she said with relish. "It happened right in here. I died in this very stall. I remember it so well. Id hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then -" Myrtle swelled importantly, her face shining. "I died."

"How?" said Harry.

"No idea," said Myrtle in hushed tones. "I just remember seeing a pair of great, big, yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away . . ." She looked dreamily at Harry. "And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she'd ever laughed at my glasses."

"Where exactly did you see the eyes?" said Harry.

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"Somewhere there," said Myrtle, pointing vaguely toward the sink in front of her toilet.

Harry and Ron hurried over to it. Lockhart was standing well back, a look of utter terror on his face.

It looked like an ordinary sink. They examined every inch of it, inside and out, including the pipes below. And then Harry saw it: Scratched on the side of one of the copper taps was a tiny snake.

"That tap's never worked," said Myrtle brightly as he tried to turn it.

"Harry," said Ron. "Say something. Something in Parseltongue."

"But -" Harry thought hard. The only times he'd ever managed to speak Parseltongue were when he'd been faced with a real snake. He stared hard at the tiny- engraving, trying to imagine it was real.

"Open up," he said.

He looked at Ron, who shook his head.

"English," he said.

Harry looked back at the snake, willing himself to believe it was alive. If he moved his head, the candlelight made it look as though it were moving.

"Open up," he said.

Except that the words weren't what he heard; a strange hissing had escaped him, and at once the tap glowed with a brilliant white light and began to spin. Next second, the sink began to move; the sink, in fact, sank, right out of sight, leaving a large pipe exposed, a pipe wide enough for a man to slide into.

Harry heard Ron gasp and looked up again. He had made up his mind what he was going to do.

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"I'm going down there," he said. .

He couldn't not go, not now they had found the entrance to the Chamber, not if there was even the faintest, slimmest, wildest chance that Ginny might be alive.

"Me too," said Ron.

There was a pause.

"Well, you hardly seem to need me," said Lockhart, with a shadow of his old smile. "I'll just -"

He put his hand on the door knob, but Ron and Harry both pointed their wands at him.

"You can go first," Ron snarled.

White-faced and wandless, Lockhart approached the opening.

"Boys," he said, his voice feeble. "Boys, what good will it do?"

Harry jabbed him in the back with his wand. Lockhart slid his legs into the pipe.

"I really don't think -" he started to say, but Ron gave him a push, and he slid out of sight. Harry followed quickly. He lowered himself slowly into the pipe, then let go.

It was like rushing down an endless, slimy, dark slide. He could see more pipes branching off in all directions, but none as large as theirs, which twisted and turned, sloping steeply downward, and he knew that he was falling deeper below the school than even the dungeons. Behind him he could hear Ron, thudding slightly at the curves.

And then, just as he had begun to worry about what would happen when he hit the ground, the pipe leveled out, and he shot out of the end with a wet thud, landing on the damp floor of a dark stone tunnel large enough to stand in. Lockhart was getting to his

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feet a little ways away, covered in slime and white as a ghost. Harry stood aside as Ron came whizzing out of the pipe, too.

"We must be miles under the school," said Harry, his voice echoing in the black tunnel.

"Under the lake, probably," said Ron, squinting around at the dark, slimy walls.

All three of them turned to stare into the darkness ahead.

"Lumos!" Harry muttered to his wand and it lit again. "C'mon," he said to Ron and Lockhart, and off they went, their footsteps slapping loudly on the wet floor.

The tunnel was so dark that they could only see a little distance ahead. Their shadows on the wet walls looked monstrous in the wandlight.

"Remember," Harry said quietly as they walked cautiously forward, "any sign of movement, close your eyes right away

But the tunnel was quiet as the grave, and the first unexpected sound they heard was a loud crunch as Ron stepped on what turned out to be a rat's skull. Harry lowered his wand to look at the floor and saw that it was littered with small animal bones. Trying very hard not to imagine what Ginny might look like if they found her, Harry led the way forward, around a dark bend in the tunnel.

"Harry - there's something up there -" said Ron hoarsely, grabbing Harry's shoulder.

They froze, watching. Harry could just see the outline of something huge and curved, lying right across the tunnel. It wasn't moving.

"Maybe it's asleep," he breathed, glancing back at the other two. Lockhart's hands were pressed over his eyes. Harry turned back to look at the thing, his heart beating so fast it hurt.

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Very slowly, his eyes as narrow as he could make them and still see, Harry edged forward, his wand held high.

The light slid over a gigantic snake skin, of a vivid, poisonous green, lying curled and empty across the tunnel floor. The creature that had shed it must have been twenty feet long at least.

"Blimey," said Ron weakly.

There was a sudden movement behind them. Gilderoy Lockhart's knees had given way.

"Get up," said Ron sharply, pointing his wand at Lockhart.

Lockhart got to his feet - then he dived at Ron, knocking him to the ground.

Harry jumped forward, but too late - Lockhart was straightening up, panting, Ron's wand in his hand and a gleaming smile back on his face.

"The adventure ends here, boys!" he said. "I shall take a bit of this skin back up to the school, tell them I was too late to save the girl, and that you two tragically lost your minds at the sight of her mangled body - say good-bye to your memories!"

He raised Ron's Spellotaped wand high over his head and yelled, "Oblivate!"

The wand exploded with the force of a small bomb. Harry flung his arms over his head and ran, slipping over the coils of snake skin, out of the way of great chunks of tunnel ceiling that were thundering to the floor. Next moment, he was standing alone, gazing at a solid wall of broken rock.

"Ron!" he shouted. "Are you okay? Ron!"

"I'm here!" came Ron's muffled voice from behind the rockfall. "I'm okay - this git's not, though - he got blasted by the wand ='

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There was a dull thud and a loud "ow!" It sounded as though Ron had just kicked Lockhart in the shins.

"What now?" Ron's voice said, sounding desperate. "We can't get through - it'll take ages

Harry looked up at the tunnel ceiling. Huge cracks had appeared in it. He had never tried to break apart anything as large as these rocks by magic, and now didn't seem a good moment to try - what if the whole tunnel caved in?

There was another thud and another "ow!" from behind the rocks. They were wasting time. Ginny had already been in the Chamber of Secrets for hours Harry knew there was only one thing to do.

"Wait there," he called to Ron. "Wait with Lockhart. I'll go on.... If I'm not back in an hour. . .

There was a very pregnant pause,

"I'll try and shift some of this rock," said Ron, who seemed to be trying to keep his voice steady. "So you can - can get back through. And, Harry -"

"See you in a bit," said Harry, trying to inject some confidence into his shaking voice.

And he set off alone past the giant snake skin.

Soon the distant noise of Ron straining to shift the rocks was gone. The tunnel turned and turned again. Every nerve in Harry's body was tingling unpleasantly. He wanted the tunnel to end, yet dreaded what he'd find when it did. And then, at last, as he crept around yet another bend, he saw a solid wall ahead on which two entwined serpents were carved, their eyes set with great, glinting emeralds.

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Harry approached, his throat very dry. There was no need to pretend these stone snakes were real; their eyes looked strangely alive.

He could guess what he had to do. He cleared his throat, and the emerald eyes seemed to flicker.

"Open, "said Harry, in a low, faint hiss.

The serpents parted as the wall cracked open, the halves slid smoothly out of sight, and Harry, shaking from head to foot, walked inside.

He was standing at the end of a very long, dimly lit chamber. Towering stone pillars entwined with more carved serpents rose to support a ceiling lost in darkness, casting long, black shadows through the odd,

greenish gloom that filled the place.

His heart beating very fast, Harry stood listening to the chill silence. Could the basilisk be lurking in a shadowy corner, behind a pillar? And where was Ginny?

He pulled out his wand and moved forward between the serpentine columns. Every careful footstep echoed loudly off the shadowy walls. He kept his eyes narrowed, ready to clamp them shut at the smallest sign of movement. The hollow eye sockets of the stone snakes seemed to be following him. More than once, with a jolt of the stomach, he thought he saw one stir.

Then, as he drew level with the last pair of pillars, a statue high as the Chamber itself loomed into view, standing against the back wall.

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Harry had to crane his neck to look up into the giant face above: It was ancient and monkeyish, with a long, thin beard that fell almost to the bottom of the wizard's sweeping stone robes, where two enormous gray feet stood on the smooth Chamber floor. And between the feet, facedown, lay a small, black-robed figure with flaming-red hair.

"tinny!" Harry muttered, sprinting to her and dropping to his knees. "tinny - don't be dead - please don't be dead -" He flung his wand aside, grabbed Ginny's shoulders, and turned her over. Her face was white as marble, and as cold, yet her eyes were closed, so she wasn't Petrified. But then she must be

"Ginny, please wake up," Harry muttered desperately, shaking her. Ginny's head lolled hopelessly from side to side.

"She won't wake," said a soft voice.

Harry jumped and spun around on his knees.

A tall, black-haired boy was leaning against the nearest pillar, watching. He was strangely blurred around the edges, as though Harry were looking at him through a misted window. But there was no mistaking him

"Tom - Tom Riddle?"

Riddle nodded, not taking his eyes off Harry's face.

"What d'you mean, she won't wake?" Harry said desperately. "She's not - she's not -?"

"She's still alive," said Riddle. "But only just."

Harry stared at him. Tom Riddle had been at Hogwarts fifty years ago, yet here he stood, a weird, misty light shining about him, not a day older than sixteen.

"Are you a ghost?" Harry said uncertainly.

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"A memory," said Riddle quietly. "Preserved in a diary for fifty years.

He pointed toward the floor near the statue's giant toes. Lying open there was the little black diary Harry had found in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. For a second, Harry wondered how it had got there - but there were more pressing matters to deal with.

"You've got to help me, Tom," Harry said, raising Ginny's head again. "We've got to get her out of here. There's a basilisk ... I don't know where it is, but it could be along any moment Please, help me -")

Riddle didn't move. Harry, sweating, managed to hoist Ginny half off the floor, and bent to pick up his wand again.

But his wand had gone.

"Did you see -?"

He looked up. Riddle was still watching him - twirling Harry's wand between his long fingers.

"Thanks," said Harry, stretching out his hand for it.

A smile curled the corners of Riddle's mouth. He continued to stare at Harry, twirling the wand idly.

"Listen," said Harry urgently, his knees sagging with Ginny's dead weight. "We've got to go! If the basilisk comes -"

"It won't come until it is called," said Riddle calmly.

Harry lowered Ginny back onto the floor, unable to hold her up any longer.

"What d'you mean?" he said. "Look, give me my wand, I might need it -"

Riddle's smile broadened.

"You won't be needing it," he said.

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Harry stared at him.

"What d'you mean, I won't be -?"

"I've waited a long time for this, Harry Potter," said Riddle. "For the chance to see you. To speak to you."

"Look," said Harry, losing patience, "I don't think you get it. We're in the Chamber of Secrets. We can talk later -"

"We're going to talk now," said Riddle, still smiling broadly, and he pocketed Harry's wand.

Harry stared at him. There was something very funny going on here

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"How did Ginny get like this?" he asked slowly.

"Well, that's an interesting question," said Riddle pleasantly. "And quite a long story. I suppose the real reason Ginny Weasley's like this is because she opened her heart and spilled all her secrets to an invisible stranger."

"What are you talking about?" said Harry.

"The diary," said Riddle. 'My diary. Little Ginny's been writing in it for months and months, telling me all her pitiful worries and woes - how her brothers tease her, how she had to come to school with secondhand robes and books, how" -Riddle's eyes glinted "how she didn't think famous, good, great Harry Potter would ever like her"

All the time he spoke, Riddle's eyes never left Harry's face. There was an almost hungry look in them.

"It's very boring, having to listen to the silly little troubles of an eleven-year-old girl," he went on. "But I was patient. I wrote back. I was sympathetic, I was kind. Ginny simply loved me. No one's ever understood me like you, Tom I'm so glad I've got this diary to

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confide in It's like having a friend I can carry around in my pocket

Riddle laughed, a high, cold laugh that didn't suit him. It made the hairs stand up on the back of Harry's neck.

"If I say it myself, Harry, I've always been able to charm the people I needed. So Ginny poured out her soul to me, and her soul happened to be exactly what I wanted I grew stronger and stronger on a diet of her deepest fears, her darkest secrets. I grew powerful, far more powerful than little Miss Weasley. Powerful enough to start feeding Miss Weasley a few of my secrets, to start pouring a little of my soul back into her. . . ."

"What d'you mean?" said Harry, whose mouth had gone very dry.

"Haven't you guessed yet, Harry Potter?" said Riddle softly. "Ginny Weasley opened the Chamber of Secrets. She strangled the school roosters and daubed threatening messages on the walls. She set the Serpent of Slytherin on four Mudbloods, and the Squib's cat.

"No," Harry whispered.

"Yes," said Riddle, calmly. "Of course, she didn't know what she was doing at first. It was very amusing. I wish you could have seen her new diary entries ... far more interesting, they became Dear Tom," he recited, watching Harry's horrified face, 'I think I'm losing my memory. There are rooster feathers all over my robes and I don't know how

they got there. Dear Tom, I can't remember what I did on the night of Halloween, but a cat was attacked and I've got paint all down my front. Dear Tom, Percy keeps telling me I'm pale and I'm not myself. I think he suspects me... There was another attack today

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and I don't know where I was. Tom, what am I going to do? I think I'm going mad... I think I'm the one attacking everyone, Tom!"

Harry's fists were clenched, the nails digging deep into his Palms.

"it took a very long time for stupid little Ginny to stop trusting her diary," said Riddle. "But she finally became suspicious and tried to dispose of it. And that's where you came in, Harry. You found it, and I couldn't have been more delighted. Of all the people who could have picked it up, it was you, the very person I was most anxious to meet"

"And why did you want to meet me?" said Harry. Anger was coursing through him, and it was an effort to keep his voice steady.

"Well, you see, Ginny told me all about you, Harry," said Riddle. "Your whole fascinating history. " His eyes roved over the lightning scar on Harry's forehead, and their expression grew hungrier. "I knew I must find out more about you, talk to you, meet you if I could. So I decided to show you my famous capture of that great oaf, Hagrid, to gain your trust -"

"Hagrid's my friend," said Harry, his voice now shaking. "And you framed him, didn't you? I thought you made a mistake, but -"

Riddle laughed his high laugh again.

"It was my word against Hagrid's, Harry. Well, you can imagine how it looked to old Armando Dippet. On the one hand, Tom Riddle, poor but brilliant, parentless but so brave, school prefect, model student ... on the other hand, big, blundering Hagrid, in trouble every other week, trying to raise werewolf cubs under his bed, sneaking off to the Forbidden Forest to wrestle trolls ... but I

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admit, even I was surprised how well the plan worked. I thought someone must realize that Hagrid couldn't possibly be the Heir of Slytherin. It had taken me five whole years to find out everything I could about the Chamber of Secrets and discover the secret entrance ... as though Hagrid had the brains, or the power!

"Only the Transfiguration teacher, Dumbledore, seemed to think Hagrid was innocent. He persuaded Dipper to keep Hagrid and train him as gamekeeper. Yes, I think Dumbledore might have guessed Dumbledore never seemed to like me as much as the other teachers did

"I bet Dumbledore saw right through you," said Harry, his teeth gritted.

"Well, he certainly kept an annoyingly close watch on me after Hagrid was expelled," said Riddle carelessly. "I knew it wouldn't be safe to open the Chamber again while I was still at school. But I wasn't going

to waste those long years I'd spent searching for it. I decided to leave behind a diary, preserving my sixteen-year-old self in its pages, so that one day, with luck, I would be able to lead another in my footsteps, and finish Salazar Slytherin's noble work."

"Well, you haven't finished it," said Harry triumphantly. "No one's died this time, not even the cat. In a few hours the Mandrake Draught will be ready and everyone who was Petrified will be all right again --"

"Haven't I already told you," said Riddle quietly, "that killing Mudbloods doesn't matter to me anymore? For many months now, my new target has been -you."

Harry stared at him.

"Imagine how angry I was when the next time my diary was

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opened, it was Ginny who was writing to me, not you. She saw you with the diary, you see, and panicked. "What if you found out how to work it, and I repeated all her secrets to you? What if, even worse, I told you who'd been strangling roosters? So the foolish little brat waited

until your dormitory was deserted and stole it back. But I knew what I must do. It was clear to me that you were on the trail of Slytherin's heir. From everything Ginny had told me about you, I knew you would go to any lengths to solve the mystery --

particularly if one of your best friends was attacked. And Ginny had told me the whole school was buzzing because you could speak Parseltongue

"So I made Ginny write her own farewell on the wall and come down here to wait. She struggled and cried and became very boring. But there isn't much life left in her She put too much into the diary, into me. Enough to let me leave its pages at last I have been waiting for you to appear since we arrived here. I knew you'd come. I have many questions for you, Harry Potter."

"Like what?" Harry spat, fists still clenched.

"Well," said Riddle, smiling pleasantly, "how is it that you a skinny boy with no extraordinary magical talent - managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time? How did you escape with nothing but a scar, while Lord Voldemort's powers were destroyed?"

There was an odd red gleam in his hungry eyes now.

"Why do you care how I escaped?" said Harry slowly. "Voldemort was after your time

"Voldemort," said Riddle softly, "is my past, present, and future, Harry Potter"

He pulled Harry's wand from his pocket and began to trace it through the air, writing three shimmering words:

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

Then he waved the wand once, and the letters of his name rearranged themselves:

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

"You see?" he whispered. "It was a name I was already using at Hogwarts, to my most intimate friends only, of course. You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father's name forever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother's side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch? No, Harry - I fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!"

Harry's brain seemed to have jammed. He stared numbly at Riddle, at the orphaned boy who had grown up to murder Harry's own parents, and so many others At last he forced himself to speak.

"You're not," he said, his quiet voice full of hatred.

"Not what?" snapped Riddle.

"Not the greatest sorcerer in the world," said Harry, breathing fast. "Sorry to disappoint you and all that, but the greatest wizard in the world is Albus Dumbledore. Everyone says so. Even when you were strong, you didn't dare try and take over at Hogwarts. Dumbledore saw through you when you were at school and he still frightens you now, wherever you're hiding these days -"

The smile had gone from Riddle's face, to be replaced by a very ugly look.

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"Dumbledore's been driven out of this castle by the mere memory of me!" he hissed.

"He's not as gone as you might think!" Harry retorted. He was speaking at random, wanting to scare Riddle, wishing rather than believing it to be true

Riddle opened his mouth, but froze.

Music was coming from somewhere. Riddle whirled around to stare down the empty Chamber. The music was growing louder. It was eerie, spine-tingling, unearthly; it lifted the hair on Harry's scalp and made his heart feel as though it was swelling to twice its normal size. Then, as the music reached such a pitch that Harry felt it vibrating inside his own ribs, flames erupted at the top of the nearest pillar.

A crimson bird the size of a swan had appeared, piping its weird music to the vaulted ceiling. It had a glittering golden tail as long as a peacock's and gleaming golden talons, which were gripping a ragged bundle.

A second later, the bird was flying straight at Harry. It dropped the ragged thing it was carrying at his feet, then landed heavily on his

shoulder. As it folded its great wings, Harry looked up and saw it had a long, sharp golden beak and a beady black eye.

The bird stopped singing. It sat still and warm next to Harry's cheek, gazing steadily at Riddle.

"That's a phoenix said Riddle, staring shrewdly back at it.

"Fawkes?" Harry breathed, and he felt the bird's golden claws squeeze his shoulder gently

"And that -" said Riddle, now eyeing the ragged thing that Fawkes had dropped, "that's the old school Sorting Hat -"

So it was. Patched, frayed, and dirty, the hat lay motionless at Harry's feet.

Riddle began to laugh again. He laughed so hard that the dark chamber rang with it, as though ten Riddles were laughing at once

"This is what Dumbledore sends his defender! A songbird and an old hat! Do you feel brave, Harry Potter? Do you feel safe now?"

Harry didn't answer. He might not see what use Fawkes or the Sorting Hat were, but he was no longer alone, and he waited for Riddle to stop laughing with his courage mounting.

"To business, Harry," said Riddle, still smiling broadly. "Twice - in your past, in my future - we have met. And twice I failed to kill you. How did you survive? Tell me everything. The longer you talk," he added softly, "the longer you stay alive."

Harry was thinking fast, weighing his chances. Riddle had the wand. He, Harry, had Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, neither of which would be much good in a duel. It looked bad, all right ... but the longer Riddle stood there, the more life was dwindling out of Ginny ... and in the meantime, Harry noticed suddenly, Riddle's outline was becoming clearer, more solid If it had to be a fight between him and Riddle, better sooner than later.

"No one knows why you lost your powers when you attacked me," said Harry abruptly. "I don't know myself But I know why you couldn't kill me. Because my mother died to save me. My common Muggle-born mother," he added, shaking with suppressed rage. "She stopped you killing me. And I've seen the real you, I saw you last year. You're a wreck. You're barely alive. That's where all your power got you. You're in hiding. You're ugly, you're foul -"

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Riddle's face contorted. Then he forced it into an awful smile. "So. Your mother died to save you. Yes, that's a powerful countercharm. I can see now ... there is nothing special about you, after all. I wondered, you see. There are strange likenesses between us, after all. Even you must have noticed. Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself We even look something alike ... but after all, it was merely a lucky chance that saved you from me. That's

all I wanted to know."

Harry stood, tense, waiting for Riddle to raise his wand. But Riddle's twisted smile was widening again.

"Now, Harry, I'm going to teach you a little lesson. Let's match the powers of Lord Voldemort, Heir of Salazar Slytherin, against famous Harry Potter, and the best weapons Dumbledore can give him"

He cast an amused eye over Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, then walked away. Harry, fear spreading up his numb legs, watched Riddle stop between the high pillars and look up into the stone face of Slytherin, high above him in the half-darkness. Riddle opened his mouth wide and hissed - but Harry understood what he was saying

"Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four. "

Harry wheeled around to look up at the statue, Fawkes swaying on his shoulder.

Slytherin's gigantic stone face was moving. Horrorstruck, Harry saw his mouth opening, wider and wider, to make a huge black hole.

And something was stirring inside the statue's mouth. Something was slithering up from its depths. 31

Harry backed away until he hit the dark Chamber wall, and as he shut his eyes tight he felt Fawkes' wing sweep his cheek as he took flight. Harry wanted to shout, "Don't leave me!" but what chance did a phoenix have against the king of serpents?

Something huge hit the stone floor of the Chamber. Harry felt it shudder - he knew what was happening, he could sense it, could almost see the giant serpent uncoiling itself from Slytherin's mouth. Then he heard Riddle's hissing voice:

"Kill him. "

The basilisk was moving toward Harry; he could hear its heavy body slithering heavily across the dusty floor. Eyes still tightly shut, Harry began to run blindly sideways, his hands outstretched, feeling his way - Voldemort was laughing

Harry tripped. He fell hard onto the stone and tasted blood the serpent was barely feet from him, he could hear it coming

There was a loud, explosive spitting sound right above him, and then something heavy hit Harry so hard that he was smashed into the wall. Waiting for fangs to sink through his body he heard more mad hissing, something thrashing wildly off the pillars

He couldn't help it - he opened his eyes wide enough to squint at what was going on.

The enormous serpent, bright, poisonous green, thick as an oak trunk, had raised itself high in the air and its great blunt head was weaving drunkenly between the pillars. As Harry trembled, ready to close his eyes if it turned, he saw what had distracted the snake.

Fawkes was soaring around its head, and the basilisk was snapping

furiously at him with fangs long and thin as sabers

Fawkes dived. His long golden beak sank out of sight and a

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sudden shower of dark blood spattered the floor. The snake's tail thrashed, narrowly missing Harry, and before Harry could shut his eyes, it turned - Harry looked straight into its face and saw that its eyes, both its great, bulbous yellow eyes, had been punctured by the phoenix; blood was streaming to the floor, and the snake was spitting in agony.

"NO!" Harry heard Riddle screaming. "LEAVE THE BIRD! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU. YOU CAN STILL SMELL HIM. KILL HIM!"

The blinded serpent swayed, confused, still deadly. Fawkes was circling its head, piping his eerie song, jabbing here and there at its scaly nose as the blood poured from its ruined eyes.

"Help me, help me," Harry muttered wildly, "someone - anyone

The snake's tail whipped across the floor again. Harry ducked. Something soft hit his face.

The basilisk had swept the Sorting Hat into Harry's arms. Harry seized it. It was all he had left, his only chance - he rammed it onto his head and threw himself flat onto the floor as the basilisk's tail swung over him again.

Help me - help me - Harry thought, his eyes screwed tight under the hat.
Please help me

There was no answering voice. Instead, the hat contracted, as though an invisible hand was squeezing it very tightly.

Something very hard and heavy thudded onto the top of Harry's head, almost knocking him out. Stars winking in front of his eyes, he grabbed the top of the hat to pull it off and felt something long and hard beneath it.

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A gleaming silver sword had appeared inside the hat, its handle glittering with rubies the size of eggs.

"KILL THE BOY! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU.
SNIFF -- SMELL HIM."

Harry was on his feet, ready. The basilisk's head was falling, its body coiling around, hitting pillars as it twisted to face him. He could see the vast, bloody eye sockets, see the mouth stretching wide, wide enough to swallow him whole, lined with fangs long as his sword, thin, glittering, venomous -

It lunged blindly -- Harry dodged and it hit the Chamber wall. It lunged again, and its forked tongue lashed Harry's side. He raised the sword

in both his hands -

The basilisk lunged again, and this time its aim was true -- Harry threw his whole weight behind the sword and drove it to the hilt into the roof of the serpent's mouth -

But as warm blood drenched Harry's arms, he felt a searing pain just above his elbow. One long, poisonous fang was sinking deeper and deeper into his arm and it splintered as the basilisk keeled over sideways and fell, twitching, to the floor.

Harry slid down the wall. He gripped the fang that was spreading poison through his body and wrenched it out of his arm. But he knew it was too late. White-hot pain was spreading slowly and steadily from the wound. Even as he dropped the fang and watched his own blood soaking his robes, his vision went foggy. The Chamber was dissolving in a whirl of dull color.

A patch of scarlet swam past, and Harry heard a soft clatter of claws beside him.

"Fawkes," said Harry thickly. "You were fantastic, Fawkes"

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He felt the bird lay its beautiful head on the spot where the serpent's fang had pierced him.

He could hear echoing footsteps and then a dark shadow moved in front of him.

"You're dead, Harry Potter," said Riddle's voice above him. "Dead. Even Dumbledore's bird knows it. Do you see what he's doing, Potter? He's crying."

Harry blinked. Fawke's head slid in and out of focus. Thick, pearly tears were trickling down the glossy feathers.

"I'm going to sit here and watch you die, Harry Potter. Take your time. I'm in no hurry."

Harry felt drowsy. Everything around him seemed to be spinning.

"So ends the famous Harry Potter," said Riddle's distant voice. "Alone in the Chamber of Secrets, forsaken by his friends, defeated at last by the Dark Lord he so unwisely challenged. You'll be back with your dear Mudblood mother soon, Harry... She bought you twelve years of borrowed time ... but Lord Voldemort got you in the end, as you knew he must"

If this is dying, thought Harry, it's not so bad.

Even the pain was leaving him

But was this dying? Instead of going black, the Chamber seemed to be coming back into focus. Harry gave his head a little shake and there was Fawkes, still resting his head on Harry's arm. A pearly patch of tears was shining all around the wound -- except that there was no wound

"Get away, bird," said Riddle's voice suddenly. "Get away from him - I said, get away --"

Harry raised his head. Riddle was pointing Harry's wand at Fawkes; there was a bang like a gun, and Fawkes took flight again in a whirl of gold and scarlet.

"Phoenix tears. - ." said Riddle quietly, staring at Harry's arm. "Of course ... healing powers ... I forgot. . ."

He looked into Harry's face. "But it makes no difference. In fact, I prefer it this way. Just you and me, Harry Potter ... you and me....

He raised the wand

Then, in a rush of wings, Fawkes had soared back overhead and something fell into Harry's lap -- the diary.

For a split second, both Harry and Riddle, wand still raised, stared at it.

Then, without thinking, without considering, as though he had meant to do it all along, Harry seized the basilisk fang on the floor next to him and plunged it straight into the heart of the book.

There was a long, dreadful, piercing scream. Ink spurted out of the diary in torrents, streaming over Harry's hands, flooding the floor. Riddle was writhing and twisting, screaming and flailing and then

He had gone. Harry's wand fell to the floor with a clatter and there was silence. Silence except for the steady drip drip of ink still oozing from the diary. The basilisk venom had burned a sizzling hole right through it.

Shaking all over, Harry pulled himself up. His head was spinning as though he'd just traveled miles by Floo powder. Slowly, he gathered together his wand and the Sorting Hat, and, with a huge tug, retrieved the glittering sword from the roof of the basilisk's mouth.

Then came a faint moan from the end of the Chamber. Ginny was stirring. As Harry hurried toward her, she sat up. Her bemused

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eyes traveled from the huge form of the dead basilisk, over Harry, in his blood-soaked robes, then to the diary in his hand. She drew a great, shuddering gasp and tears began to pour down her face.

"Harry -- oh, Harry -- I tried to tell you at b-breakfast, but I c-couldn't say it in front of Percy -- it was me, Harry -- but I -- I s-swear I d-didn't mean to -- R-Riddle made me, he t-took me over -- and - how did you kill that -- that thing? W-where's Riddle? The last thing I r-remember is him coming out of the diary --"

" It's all right," said Harry, holding up the diary, and showing Ginny the fang hole, "Riddle's finished. Look! Him and the basilisk. C'mon, Ginny, let's get out of here --"

"I'm going to be expelled!" Ginny wept as Harry helped her awkwardly to her feet. "I've looked forward to coming to Hogwarts ever since B-Bill came and n-now I'll have to leave and -- w-what'll Mum and Dad say?"

Fawkes was waiting for them, hovering in the Chamber entrance. Harry urged Ginny forward; they stepped over the motionless coils of the dead basilisk, through the echoing gloom, and back into the tunnel. Harry heard the stone doors close behind them with a soft hiss.

After a few minutes' progress up the dark tunnel, a distant sound of slowly shifting rock reached Harry's ears.

"Ron!" Harry yelled, speeding up. "Ginny's okay! I've got her!"

He heard Ron give a strangled cheer, and they turned the next bend to see his eager face staring through the sizable gap he had managed to make in the rock fall.

"Ginny!" Ron thrust an arm through the gap in the rock to pull

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her through first. "You're alive! I don't believe it! What happened?" How - what -- where did that bird come from?"

Fawkes had swooped through the gap after Ginny.

"He's Dumbledore's," said Harry, squeezing through himself

"How come you've got a sword?" said Ron, gaping at the glittering weapon in Harry's hand.

"I'll explain when we get out of here," said Harry with a sideways glance at Ginny, who was crying harder than ever.

"But --"

"Later," Harry said shortly. He didn't think it was a good idea to tell Ron yet who'd been opening the Chamber, not in front of Ginny, anyway. "Where's Lockhart?"

"Back there," said Ron, still looking puzzled but jerking his head up the tunnel toward the pipe. "He's in a bad way. Come and see."

Led by Fawkes, whose wide scarlet wings emitted a soft golden glow in the darkness, they walked all the way back to the mouth of the pipe. Gilderoy Lockhart was sitting there, humming placidly to himself.

"His memory's gone," said Ron. "The Memory Charm backfired. Hit him instead of us. Hasn't got a clue who he is, or where he is, or who we are. I told him to come and wait here. He's a danger to himself"

Lockhart peered good-naturedly up at them all.

"Hello," he said. "Odd sort of place, this, isn't it? Do you live here?"

"No," said Ron, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

Harry bent down and looked up the long, dark pipe.

"Have you thought how we're going to get back up this?" he said to Ron.

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Ron shook his head, but Fawkes the phoenix had swooped past Harry and was now fluttering in front of him, his beady eyes bright in the dark. He was waving his long golden tail feathers. Harry looked uncertainly at him.

"He looks like he wants you to grab hold. . ." said Ron, looking perplexed. "But you're much too heavy for a bird to pull up there -"

"Fawkes," said Harry, "isn't an ordinary bird." He turned quickly to the others. "We've got to hold on to each other. Ginny, grab Ron's hand. Professor Lockhart --"

"He means you," said Ron sharply to Lockhart.

"You hold Ginny's other hand --"

Harry tucked the sword and the Sorting Hat into his belt, Ron took hold of the back of Harry's robes, and Harry reached out and took hold of Fawkes's strangely hot tail feathers.

An extraordinary lightness seemed to spread through his whole body and the next second, in a rush of wings, they were flying upward through the pipe. Harry could hear Lockhart dangling below him, saying, "Amazing! Amazing! This is just like magic!" The chill air was whipping through Harry's hair, and before he'd stopped enjoying the ride, it was over -- all four of them were hitting the wet floor of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, and as Lockhart straightened his hat, the sink that hid the pipe was sliding back into place.

Myrtle goggled at them.

"You're alive," she said blankly to Harry.

"There's no need to sound so disappointed," he said grimly, wiping flecks of blood and slime off his glasses.

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"Oh, well ... I'd just been thinking ... if you had died, you'd have been welcome to share my toilet," said Myrtle, blushing silver.

"Urgh!" said Ron as they left the bathroom for the dark, deserted corridor outside. "Harry! I think Myrtle's grown fond of you! You've got competition, Ginny!"

But tears were still flooding silently down Ginny's face.

"Where now?" said Ron, with an anxious look at Ginny. Harry pointed.

Fawkes was leading the way, glowing gold along the corridor. They strode after him, and moments later, found themselves outside Professor McGonagall's office.

Harry knocked and pushed the door open.

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or a moment there was silence as Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Lockhart stood in the doorway, covered in muck and slime and (in Harry's case) blood. Then there was a scream.

"Ginny!"

It was Mrs. Weasley, who had been sitting crying in front of the fire. She leapt to her feet, closely followed by Mr. Weasley, and both of them flung themselves on their daughter.

Harry, however, was looking past them. Professor Dumbledore was standing by the mantelpiece, beaming, next to Professor McGonagall, who was taking great, steady gasps, clutching her chest. Fawkes went whooshing past Harry's ear and settled on Dumbledore's shoulder, just as Harry found himself and Ron being swept into Mrs. Weasleys tight embrace.

"You saved her! You saved her! How did you do it?"

"I think we'd all like to know that," said Professor McGonagall weakly.

Mrs. Weasley let go of Harry, who hesitated for a moment, then walked over to the desk and laid upon it the Sorting Hat, the rubyencrusted sword, and what remained of Riddle's diary.

Then he started telling them everything. For nearly a quarter of an hour he spoke into the rapt silence: He told them about hearing the disembodied voice, how Hermione had finally realized that he was hearing a basilisk in the pipes; how he and Ron had followed the spiders into the forest, that Aragog had told them where the last victim of the basilisk had died; how he had guessed that Moaning Myrtle had been the victim, and that the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets might be in her bathroom

"Very well," Professor McGonagall prompted him as he paused, "so you found out where the entrance was -- breaking a hundred school rules into pieces along the way, I might add - but how on earth did you all get out of there alive, Potter?"

So Harry, his voice now growing hoarse from all this talking, told them about Fawkes's timely arrival and about the Sorting Hat giving him the sword. But then he faltered. He had so far avoided mentioning Riddle's diary -- or Ginny. She was standing with her head against Mrs. Weasley's shoulder, and tears were still coursing silently down her cheeks. What if they expelled her? Harry thought in panic. Riddle's diary didn't work anymore How could they prove it had been he who'd made her do it all?

Instinctively, Harry looked at Dumbledore, who smiled faintly, the firelight glancing off his half-moon spectacles.

"\What interests me most," said Dumbledore gently, "is how Lord Voldemort managed to enchant Ginny, when my sources tell me he is currently in hiding in the forests of Albania."

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Relief -- warm, sweeping, glorious relief -- swept over Harry. "W- what's that?" said Mr. Weasley in a stunned voice. "YouKnow-Who? En-enchant Ginny? But Ginny's not ... Ginny hasn't been ... has she?"

"It was this diary," said Harry quickly, picking it up and showing it to Dumbledore. "Riddle wrote it when he was sixteen"

Dumbledore took the diary from Harry and peered keenly down his long, crooked nose at its burnt and soggy pages.

"Brilliant," he said softly. "Of course, he was probably the most brilliant student Hogwarts has ever seen." He turned around to the Weasleys, who were looking utterly bewildered.

"Very few people know that Lord Voldemort was once called Tom Riddle. I taught him myself, fifty years ago, at Hogwarts. He disappeared after leaving the school ... traveled far and wide ... sank so deeply into the Dark Arts, consorted with the very worst of our kind, underwent so many dangerous, magical transformations, that when he resurfaced as Lord Voldemort, he was barely recognizable. Hardly anyone connected Lord Voldemort with the clever, handsome boy who was once Head Boy here."

"But, Ginny," said Mrs. Weasley. "What's our Ginny got to do with - with -- him?"

"His d-diary!" Ginny sobbed. "I've b-been writing in it, and he's been w-writing back all year --"

"tinny!" said Mr. Weasley, flabbergasted. "Haven't I taught you anything. What have I always told you? Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain? Why didn't you show the diary to me, or your mother? A suspicious object like that, it was clearly full of Dark Magic ='

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"I d-didn't know," sobbed Ginny. "I found it inside one of the books Mum got me. I th-thought someone had just left it in there and forgotten about it --"

"Miss Weasley should go up to the hospital wing right away," Dumbledore interrupted in a firm voice. "This has been a terrible ordeal for her. There will be no punishment. Older and wiser wizards than she have been hoodwinked by Lord Voldemort." He strode over to the door and opened it. "Bed rest and perhaps a large, steaming mug of hot chocolate. I always find that cheers me up," he added, twinkling kindly down at her. "You will find that Madam Pomfrey is still awake. She's just giving out Mandrake juice -- I daresay the basilisk's victims will be waking up any moment."

"So Hermione's okay!" said Ron brightly.

"There has been no lasting harm done, Ginny," said Dumbledore.

Mrs. Weasley led Ginny out, and Mr. Weasley followed, still looking deeply shaken.

"You know, Minerva," Professor Dumbledore said thoughtfully to Professor McGonagall, "I think all this merits a good feast. Might I ask you to go and alert the kitchens?"

"Right," said Professor McGonagall crisply, also moving to the door. "I'll leave you to deal with Potter and Weasley, shall I?"

"Certainly," said Dumbledore.

She left, and Harry and Ron gazed uncertainly at Dumbledore. What exactly had Professor McGonagall meant, deal with them? Surely - surely - they weren't about to be punished?

"I seem to remember telling you both that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules," said Dumbledore.

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Ron opened his mouth in horror.

"Which goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words," Dumbledore went on, smiling. "You will both receive Special Awards for Services to the School and -- let me see -- yes, I think two hundred points apiece for Gryffindor."

Ron went as briglitly pink as Lockhart's valentine flowers and closed his mouth again.

"But one of us seems to be keeping mightily quiet about his part in this dangerous adventure," Dumbledore added. "Why so modest, Gilderoy?"

Harry gave a start. He had completely forgotten about Lockhart. He turned and saw that Lockhart was standing in a corner of the room, still wearing his vague smile. When Dumbledore addressed him, Lockhart looked over his shoulder to see who he was talking to.

"Professor Dumbledore," Ron said quickly, "there was an accident down in the Chamber of Secrets. Professor Lockhart --"

"Am I a professor?" said Lockhart in mild surprise. "Goodness. I expect I was hopeless, was I?"

"He tried to do a Memory Charm and the wand backfired," Ron explained quietly to Dumbledore.

"Dear me," said Dumbledore, shaking his head, his long silver mustache quivering. "Impaled upon your own sword, Gilderoy!"

"Sword?" said Lockhart dimly. "Haven't got a sword. That boy has, though." He pointed at Harry. "He'll lend you one."

"Would you mind taking Professor Lockhart up to the infirmary, too?" Dumbledore said to Ron. "I'd like a few more words with Harry

Lockhart ambled out. Ron cast a curious look back at Dumbledore and Harry as he closed the door.

Dumbledore crossed to one of the chairs by the fire.

"Sit down, Harry," he said, and Harry sat, feeling unaccountably nervous.

"First of all, Harry, I want to thank you," said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling again. "You must have shown me real loyalty down in the Chamber. Nothing but that could have called Fawkes to you."

He stroked the phoenix, which had fluttered down onto his knee. Harry grinned awkwardly as Dumbledore watched him.

"And so you met Tom Riddle," said Dumbledore thoughtfully. "I imagine he was most interested in you"

Suddenly, something that was nagging at Harry came tumbling out of his mouth.

"Professor Dumbledore . . . Riddle said I'm like him. Strange likenesses, he said

"Did he, now?" said Dumbledore, looking thoughtfully at Harry from under his thick silver eyebrows. "And what do you think, Harry?"

"I don't think I'm like him!" said Harry, more loudly than he'd intended. "I mean, I'm -- I'm in Gryffindor, I'm"

But he fell silent, a lurking doubt resurfacing in his mind.

"Professor," he started again after a moment. "The Sorting Hat told me I'd -- I'd have done well in Slytherin. Everyone thought I was Slytherin's heir for a while . . . because I can speak Parseltongue

"You can speak Parseltongue, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly, "because Lord Voldemort -- who is the last remaining ancestor

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of Salazar Slytherin -- can speak Parseltongue. Unless I'm much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar. Not something he intended to do, I'm sure

"Voldemort put a bit of himself in me?" Harry said, thunderstruck.

"It certainly seems so."

"So I should be in Slytherin," Harry said, looking desperately into Dumbledore's face. "The Sorting Hat could see Slytherin's power in me, and it --"

"Put you in Gryffindor," said Dumbledore calmly. "Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. His own very rare gift, Parseltongue - resourcefulness - determination -- a certain disregard for rules," he

added, his mustache quivering again. "Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think."

"It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry in a defeated voice, "because I asked not to go in Slytherin . . ."

`Exactly, "said Dumbledore, beaming once more. "Which makes you very different from Tom Riddle. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." Harry sat motionless in his chair, stunned. "If you want proof, Harry, that you belong in Gryffindor, I suggest you look more closely at this."

Dumbledore reached across to Professor McGonagall's desk, picked up the blood-stained silver sword, and handed it to Harry. Dully, Harry turned it over, the rubies blazing in the firelight. And then he saw the name engraved just below the hilt.

Godric Gryffindor

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"Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that out of the hat, Harry," said Dumbledore simply.

For a minute, neither of them spoke. Then Dumbledore pulled open one of the drawers in Professor McGonagall's desk and took out a quill and a bottle of ink.

What you need, Harry, is some food and sleep. I suggest you go down to the feast, while I write to Azkaban -- we need our gamekeeper back. And I must draft an advertisement for the Daily Prophet, too," he added thoughtfully. "We'll be needing a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher... Dear me, we do seem to run through them, don't we?"

Harry got up and crossed to the door. He had just reached for the handle, however, when the door burst open so violently that it bounced back off the wall.

Lucius Malfoy stood there, fury in his face. And cowering behind his legs, heavily wrapped in bandages, was Dobby.

"Good evening, Lucius," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

Mr. Malfoy almost knocked Harry over as he swept into the room. Dobby went scurrying in after him, crouching at the hem of his cloak, a look of abject terror on his face.

The elf was carrying a stained rag with which he was attempting to finish cleaning Mr. Malfoys shoes. Apparently Mr. Malfoy had set out in a great hurry, for not only were his shoes half-polished, but his usually sleek hair was disheveled. Ignoring the elf bobbing apologetically around his ankles, he fixed his cold eyes upon Dumbledore.

"So!" he said "You've come back. The governors suspended you, but you still saw fit to return to Hogwarts."

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"Well, you see, Lucius," said Dumbledore, smiling serenely, "the other eleven governors contacted me today. It was something like being caught in a hailstorm of owls, to tell the truth. They'd heard that Arthur Weasleys daughter had been killed and wanted me back here at once. They seemed to think I was the best man for the job after all. Very strange tales they told me, too Several of them seemed to think that you had threatened to curse their families if they didn't agree to suspend me in the first place."

Mr. Malfoy went even paler than usual, but his eyes were still slits of fury.

"So -- have you stopped the attacks yet?" he sneered. "Have you caught the culprit?"

"We have," said Dumbledore, with a smile.

"Well?" said Mr. Malfoy sharply. "Who is it?"

"The same person as last time, Lucius," said Dumbledore. "But this time, Lord Voldemort was acting through somebody else. By means of this diary."

He held up the small black book with the large hole through the center, watching Mr. Malfoy closely. Harry, however, was watching Dobby.

The elf was doing something very odd. His great eyes fixed meaningfully on Harry, he kept pointing at the diary, then at Mr. Malfoy, and then hitting himself hard on the head with his fist.

"I see. . ." said Mr. Malfoy slowly to Dumbledore.

"A clever plan," said Dumbledore in a level voice, still staring Mr. Malfoy straight in the eye. "Because if Harry here" --Mr. Malfoy shot Harry a swift, sharp look -- "and his friend Ron hadn't discovered this book, why -- Ginny Weasley might have taken all

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the blame. No one would ever have been able to prove she hadn't acted of her own free will

Mr. Malfoy said nothing. His face was suddenly masklike.

"And imagine," Dumbledore went on, "what might have happened then The Weasleys are one of our most prominent pure-blood families. Imagine the effect on Arthur Weasley and his Muggle Protection Act, if his own daughter was discovered attacking and - killing Muggle-borns Very fortunate the diary was discovered, and Riddle's memories wiped from it. "Who knows what the consequences might have been otherwise

Mr. Malfoy forced himself to speak.

"Very fortunate," he said stiffly.

And still, behind his back, Dobby was pointing, first to the diary, then to Lucius Malfoy, then punching himself in the head.

And Harry suddenly understood. He nodded at Dobby, and Dobby backed into a corner, now twisting his ears in punishment.

"Don't you want to know how Ginny got hold of that diary, Mr. Malfoy?" said Harry.

Lucius Malfoy rounded on him.

"How should I know how the stupid little girl got hold of it?" he said.

"Because you gave it to her," said Harry. "In Flourish and Blotts. You picked up her old Transfiguration book and slipped the diary inside it, didn't you?"

He saw Mr. Malfoy's white hands clench and unclench.

"Prove it," he hissed.

"Oh, no one will be able to do that," said Dumbledore, smiling at Harry. "Not now that Riddle has vanished from the book. On

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the other hand, I would advise you, Lucius, not to go giving out any more of Lord Voldemort's old school things. If any more of them find their way into innocent hands, I think Arthur Weasley, for one, will make sure they are traced back to you

Lucius Malfoy stood for a moment, and Harry distinctly saw his right hand twitch as though he was longing to reach for his wand. Instead, he turned to his house-elf

"We're going, Dobby!"

He wrenched open the door and as the elf came hurrying up to him, he kicked him right through it. They could hear Dobby squealing with pain all the way along the corridor. Harry stood for a moment, thinking hard. Then it came to him -

"Professor Dumbledore," he said hurriedly. "Can I give that diary back to Mr. Malfoy, please?"

"Certainly, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly. "But hurry. The feast, remember

Harry grabbed the diary and dashed out of the office. He could hear Dobby's squeals of pain receding around the corner. Quickly, wondering if this plan could possibly work, Harry took off one of his shoes, pulled off his slimy, filthy sock, and stuffed the diary into it. Then he ran down the dark corridor.

He caught up with them at the top of the stairs.

"Mr. Malfoy," he gasped, skidding to a halt, "I've got something for you --"

And he forced the smelly sock into Lucius Malfoy's hand.

") What the --?"

Mr. Malfoy ripped the sock off the diary, threw it aside, then looked furiously from the ruined book to Harry.

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You'll meet the same sticky end as your parents one of these days, Harry Potter," he said softly. "They were meddlesome fools, too.

He turned to go.

"Come, Dobby. I said, come."

But Dobby didn't move. He was holding up Harry's disgusting, slimy sock, and looking at it as though it were a priceless treasure.

"Master has given a sock," said the elf in wonderment. "Master gave it to Dobby."

"What's that?" spat Mr. Malfoy. "What did you say?"

"Got a sock," said Dobby in disbelief. "Master threw it, and Dobby caught it, and Dobby -- Dobby is free. "

Lucius Malfoy stood frozen, staring at the elf. Then he lunged at Harry.

"You've lost me my servant, boy!"

But Dobby shouted, "You shall not harm Harry Potter!"

There was a loud bang, and Mr. Malfoy was thrown backward. He crashed down the stairs, three at a time, landing in a crumpled heap on the landing below. He got up, his face livid, and pulled out his wand, but Dobby raised a long, threatening finger.

"You shall go now," he said fiercely, pointing down at Mr. Malfoy. "You shall not touch Harry Potter. You shall go now."

Lucius Malfoy had no choice. With a last, incensed stare at the pair of them, he swung his cloak around him and hurried out of sight.

"Harry Potter freed Dobby!" said the elf shrilly, gazing up at Harry, moonlight from the nearest window reflected in his orb-like eyes.
"Harry Potter set Dobby free!"

"Least I could do, Dobby," said Harry, grinning. "Just promise never to try and save my life again."

The elf's ugly brown face split suddenly into a wide, toothy smile.

"I've just got one question, Dobby," said Harry as Dobby pulled on Harry's sock with shaking hands. "You told me all this had nothing to do with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, remember? Well --"

"It was a clue, sir," said Dobby, his eyes widening, as though this was obvious. "Was giving you a clue. The Dark Lord, before he changed his name, could be freely named, you see?"

"Right," said Harry weakly. "Well, I'd better go. There's a feast, and my friend Hermione should be awake by now

Dobby threw his arms around Harry's middle and hugged him.

"Harry Potter is greater by far than Dobby knew!" he sobbed.
"Farewell, Harry Potter!"

And with a final loud crack, Dobby disappeared.

Harry had been to several Hogwarts feasts, but never one quite like this. Everybody was in their pajamas, and the celebration lasted all night. Harry didn't know whether the best bit was Hermione running toward him, screaming "You solved it! You solved it!" or Justin hurrying over from the Hufflepuff table to wring his hand and apologize endlessly for suspecting him, or Hagrid turning up at half past three, cuffing Harry and Ron so hard on the shoulders that they were knocked into their plates of trifle, or his and Ron's four hundred points for Gryffindor securing the House Cup for the second year running, or Professor McGonagall standing up to

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tell them all that the exams had been canceled as a school treat ("Oh, no!" said Hermione), or Dumbledore announcing that, unfortunately, Professor Lockhart would be unable to return next year, owing to the fact that he needed to go away and get his memory back. Quite a few of the teachers joined in the cheering that greeted this news.

"Shame," said Ron, helping himself to a jam doughnut. "He was starting to grow on me."

The rest of the final term passed in a haze of blazing sunshine. Hogwarts was back to normal with only a few, small differences - Defense Against the Dark Arts classes were canceled ("but we've had plenty of practice at that anyway," Ron told a disgruntled Hermione) and Lucius Malfoy had been sacked as a school governor. Draco was no longer strutting around the school as though he owned the place. On the contrary, he looked resentful and sulky. On the other hand, Ginny Weasley was perfectly happy again.

Too soon, it was time for the journey home on the Hogwarts Express. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Ginny got a compartment to themselves. They made the most of the last few hours in which they were allowed to do magic before the holidays. They played Exploding Snap, set off the very last of Fred and George's Filibuster fireworks, and practiced disarming each other by magic. Harry was getting very good at it.

They were almost at King's Cross when Harry remembered something.

"Ginny - what did you see Percy doing, that he didn't want you to tell anyone?"

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"Oh, that," said Ginny, giggling. "Well - Percy's got a girlfriend." Fred dropped a stack of books on George's head.

"What?"

"It's that Ravenclaw prefect, Penelope Clearwater," said Ginny. "That's who he was writing to all last summer. He's been meeting her all over the school in secret. I walked in on them kissing in an empty classroom one day. He was so upset when she was -- you know - attacked. You won't tease him, will you?" she added anxiously.

"Wouldn't dream of it," said Fred, who was looking like his birthday had come early.

"Definitely not," said George, sniggering.

The Hogwarts Express slowed and finally stopped.

Harry pulled out his quill and a bit of parchment and turned to Ron and Hermione.

"This is called a telephone number," he told Ron, scribbling it twice, tearing the parchment in two, and handing it to them. "I told your dad how to use a telephone last summer - he'll know. Call me at the Dursleys', okay? I can't stand another two months with only Dudley to talk to

"Your aunt and uncle will be proud, though, won't they?" said Hermione as they got off the train and joined the crowd thronging toward the enchanted barrier. "When they hear what you did this year?"

"Proud?" said Harry. "Are you crazy? All those times I could've died, and I didn't manage it? They'll be furious

And together they walked back through the gateway to the Muggle world. '

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Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

by J.K. Rowling

CHAPTER ONE

OWL POST

Harry Potter was a highly unusual boy in many ways. For one thing, he hated the summer holidays more than any other time of year. For another, he really wanted to do his homework but was forced to do it in secret, in the dead of night. And he also happened to be a wizard.

It was nearly midnight, and he was lying on his stomach in bed, the blankets drawn right over his head like a tent, a flashlight in one hand and a large leather-bound book (*A History of Magic* by Bathilda Bagshot) propped open against the pillow. Harry moved the tip of his eagle-feather quill down the page, frowning as he looked for something that would help him write his essay, "Witch Burning in the Fourteenth Century Was Completely Pointless discuss."

The quill paused at the top of a likely-looking paragraph. Harry Pushed his round glasses up the bridge of his nose, moved his flashlight closer to the book, and read:

Non-magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at recognizing it. On the rare occasion that they did catch a real witch or wizard, burning had no effect whatsoever. The witch or wizard would perform a basic Flame Freezing Charm and then pretend to shriek with pain while enjoying a gentle, tickling sensation. Indeed, Wendelin the Weird enjoyed being burned so much that she allowed herself to be caught no less than fortyseven times in various disguises.

Harry put his quill between his teeth and reached underneath his pillow for his ink bottle and a roll of parchment. Slowly and very carefully he unscrewed the ink bottle, dipped his quill into it, and began to write, pausing every now and then to listen, because if any of the Dursleys heard the scratching of his quill on their way to the bathroom, he'd probably find himself locked in the cupboard under the stairs for the rest of the summer.

The Dursley family of number four, Privet Drive, was the reason that Harry never enjoyed his summer holidays. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and their son, Dudley, were Harry's only living relatives. They were Muggles, and they had a very medieval attitude toward magic. Harry's dead parents, who had been a witch and wizard themselves, were never mentioned under the Dursleys' roof For years, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had hoped that if they kept Harry as downtrodden as possible, they would be able to squash the magic out of him. To their fury, they had been unsuccessful. These days they lived in terror of anyone finding out that Harry had spent most of the last two years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The most they could do, however, was to lock away Harry's spellbooks, wand, cauldron, and broomstick at the start of the summer break, and forbid him to talk to the neighbors.

This separation from his spellbooks had been a real problem for Harry, because his teachers at Hogwarts had given him a lot of holiday work. One of the essays, a particularly nasty one about shrinking potions, was for Harry's least favorite teacher, Professor Snape, who would be

delighted to have an excuse to give Harry detention for a month. Harry had therefore seized his chance in the first week of the holidays. While Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley had gone out into the front garden to admire Uncle Vernon's new company car (in very loud voices, so that the rest of the street would notice it too), Harry had crept downstairs, picked the lock on the cupboard under the stairs, grabbed some of his books, and hidden them in his bedroom. As long as he didn't leave spots of ink on the sheets, the Dursleys need never know that he was studying magic by night.

Harry was particularly keen to avoid trouble with his aunt and uncle at the moment, as they were already in an especially bad mood with him, all because he'd received a telephone call from a fellow wizard one week into the school vacation.

Ron Weasley, who was one of Harry's best friends at Hogwarts, came from a whole family of wizards. This meant that he knew a lot of things Harry didn't, but had never used a telephone before. Most unluckily, it had been Uncle Vernon who had answered the call.

"Vernon Dursley speaking."

Harry, who happened to be in the room at the time, froze as he heard Ron's voice answer.

"HELLO? HELLO? CAN YOU HEAR ME? I -- WANT -- TO -- TALK -- TO -- HARRY -- POTTER!"

Ron was yelling so loudly that Uncle Vernon jumped and held the receiver a foot away from his ear, staring at it with an expression of mingled fury and alarm.

"WHO IS THIS?" he roared in the direction of the mouthpiece. "WHO ARE YOU?"

"RON -- WEASLEY!" Ron bellowed back, as though he and Uncle Vernon were speaking from opposite ends of a football field. "I'M -- A -- FRIEND -- OF -- HARRY'S -- FROM -- SCHOOL --"

Uncle Vernon's small eyes swiveled around to Harry, who was rooted to the spot.

"THERE IS NO HARRY POTTER HERE!" he roared, now holding the receiver at arm's length, as though frightened it might explode. "I DON'T KNOW WHAT SCHOOL YOURE TALKING ABOUT! NEVER CONTACT ME AGAIN! DON'T YOU COME NEAR MY FAMILY!"

And he threw the receiver back onto the telephone as if dropping a poisonous spider.

The fight that had followed had been one of the worst ever.

"HOW DARE YOU GIVE THIS NUMBER TO PEOPLE LIKE -- PEOPLE LIKE YOU!" Uncle Vernon had roared, spraying Harry with spit.

Ron obviously realized that he'd gotten Harry into trouble, because he hadn't called again. Harry's other best friend from Hogwarts, Hermione Granger, hadn't been in touch either. Harry suspected that Ron had warned Hermione not to call, which was a pity, because Hermione, the cleverest witch in Harry's year, had Muggle parents, knew perfectly well

how to use a telephone, and would probably have had enough sense not to say that she went to Hogwarts.

So Harry had had no word from any of his wizarding friends for five long weeks, and this summer was turning out to be almost as bad as the last one. There was just one very small improvement -- after swearing that he wouldn't use her to send letters to any of his friends, Harry had been allowed to let his owl, Hedwig, out at night. Uncle Vernon had given in because of the racket Hedwig made if she was locked in her cage all the time.

Harry finished writing about Wendelin the Weird and paused to listen again. The silence in the dark house was broken only by the distant, grunting snores of his enormous cousin, Dudley. It must be very late, Harry thought. His eyes were itching with tiredness. Perhaps he'd finish this essay tomorrow night....

He replaced the top of the ink bottle; pulled an old pillowcase from under his bed; put the flashlight, A History of Magic, his essay, quill, and ink inside it; got out of bed; and hid the lot under a loose floorboard under his bed. Then he stood up, stretched, and checked the time on the luminous alarm clock on his bedside table.

It was one o'clock in the morning. Harry's stomach gave a funny jolt. He had been thirteen years old, without realizing it, for a whole hour.

Yet another unusual thing about Harry was how little he looked forward to his birthdays. He had never received a birthday card in his life. The Dursleys had completely ignored his last two birthdays, and he had no reason to suppose they would remember this one.

Harry walked across the dark room, past Hedwig's large, empty cage, to the open window. He leaned on the sill, the cool night air pleasant on his face after a long time under the blankets. Hedwig had been absent for two nights now. Harry wasn't worried about her: she'd been gone this long before. But he hoped she'd be back soon -- she was the only living creature in this house who didn't flinch at the sight of him.

Harry, though still rather small and skinny for his age, had grown a few inches over the last year. His jet-black hair, however, was just as it always had been -- stubbornly untidy, whatever he did to it. The eyes behind his glasses were bright green, and on his forehead, clearly visible through his hair, was a thin scar, shaped like a bolt of lightning.

Of all the unusual things about Harry, this scar was the most extraordinary of all. It was not, as the Dursleys had pretended for ten years, a souvenir of the car crash that had killed Harry's parents, because Lily and James Potter had not died in a car crash. They had been murdered, murdered by the most feared Dark wizard for a hundred years, Lord Voldemort. Harry had escaped from the same attack with nothing more than a scar on his forehead, where Voldemort's curse, instead of killing him, had rebounded upon its originator. Barely alive, Voldemort had fled....

But Harry had come face-to-face with him at Hogwarts. Remembering their last meeting as he stood at the dark window, Harry had to admit he was lucky even to have reached his thirteenth birthday.

He scanned the starry sky for a sign of Hedwig, perhaps soaring

back to him with a dead mouse dangling from her beak, expecting praise. Gazing absently over the rooftops, it was a few seconds before Harry realized what he was seeing.

Silhouetted against the golden moon, and growing larger every moment, was a large, strangely lopsided creature, and it was flapping in Harry's direction. He stood quite still, watching it sink lower and lower. For a split second he hesitated, his hand on the window latch, wondering whether to slam it shut. But then the bizarre creature soared over one of the street lamps of Privet Drive, and Harry, realizing what it was, leapt aside.

Through the window soared three owls, two of them holding up the third, which appeared to be unconscious. They landed with a soft flump on Harry's bed, and the middle owl, which was large and gray, keeled right over and lay motionless. There was a large package tied to its legs.

Harry recognized the unconscious owl at once -- his name was Errol, and he belonged to the Weasley family. Harry dashed to the bed, untied the cords around Errol's legs, took off the parcel, and then carried Errol to Hedwig's cage. Errol opened one bleary eye, gave a feeble hoot of thanks, and began to gulp some water.

Harry turned back to the remaining owls. One of them, the large snowy female, was his own Hedwig. She, too, was carrying a parcel and looked extremely pleased with herself. She gave Harry an affectionate nip with her beak as he removed her burden, then flew across the room to join Errol.

Harry didn't recognize the third owl, a handsome tawny one, but he knew at once where it had come from, because in addition to a third package, it was carrying a letter bearing the Hogwarts crest. When Harry relieved this owl of its burden, it ruffled its feathers importantly, stretched its wings, and took off through the window into the night.

Harry sat down on his bed and grabbed Errol's package, ripped off the brown paper, and discovered a present wrapped in gold, and his first ever birthday card. Fingers trembling slightly, he opened the envelope. Two pieces of paper fell out -- a letter and a newspaper clipping.

The clipping had clearly come out of the wizarding newspaper, the Daily Prophet, because the people in the black-and-white picture were moving. Harry picked up the clipping, smoothed it out, and read:

MINISTRY OF MAGIC EMPLOYEE SCOOPS GRAND PRIZE

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, has won the annual Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw.

A delighted Mr. Weasley told the Daily Prophet, "We will be spending the gold on a summer holiday in Egypt, where our eldest son, Bill, works as a curse breaker for Gringotts Wizarding Bank."

The Weasley family will be spending a month in Egypt, returning for the start of the new school year at Hogwarts, which five of the Weasley children currently attend.

Harry scanned the moving photograph, and a grin spread across his face

as he saw all nine of the Weasleys waving furiously at him, standing in front of a large pyramid. Plump little Mrs. Weasley; tail, balding Mr. Weasley; six sons; and one daughter, all (though the black-and-white picture didn't show it) with flaming-red hair. Right in the middle of the picture was Ron, tall and gangling, with his pet rat, Scabbers, on his shoulder and his arm around his little sister, Ginny.

Harry couldn't think of anyone who deserved to win a large pile of gold more than the Weasleys, who were very nice and extremely poor. He picked up Ron's letter and unfolded it.

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday!

Look, I'm really sorry about that telephone call. I hope the Muggles didn't give you a hard time. I asked Dad, and he reckons I shouldn't have shouted.

It's amazing here in Egypt. Bill's taken us around all the tombs and you wouldn't believe the curses those old Egyptian wizards put on them. Mum wouldn't let Ginny come in the last one. There were all these mutant skeletons in there, of Muggles who'd broken in and grown extra heads and stuff.

I couldn't believe it when Dad won the Daily Prophet Draw. Seven hundred galleons! Most of it's gone on this trip, but they're going to buy me a new wand for next year.

Harry remembered only too well the occasion when Ron's old wand had snapped. It had happened when the car the two of them had been flying to Hogwarts had crashed into a tree on the school grounds.

We'll be back about a week before term starts and we'll be going up to London to get my wand and our new books. Any chance of meeting you there?

Don't let the Muggles get you down!

Try and come to London,

Ron

P.S. Percy's Head Boy. He got the letter last week.

Harry glanced back at the photograph. Percy, who was in his seventh and final year at Hogwarts, was looking particularly smug. He had pinned his Head Boy badge to the fez perched jauntily on top of his neat hair, his horn-rimmed glasses flashing in the Egyptian sun.

Harry now turned to his present and unwrapped it. Inside was what looked like a miniature glass spinning top. There was another note from Ron beneath it.

Harry -- this is a Pocket Sneakoscope. If there's someone untrustworthy around, it's supposed to light up and spin. Bill says it's rubbish sold for wizard tourists and isn't reliable, because it kept lighting up at dinner last night. But he didn't realize Fred and George had put beetles in his soup.

Bye --

Ron

Harry put the Pocket Sneakoscope on his bedside table, where it stood quite still, balanced on its point, reflecting the luminous hands of his clock. He looked at it happily for a few seconds, then picked up the parcel Hedwig had brought.

Inside this, too, there was a wrapped present, a card, and a letter, this time from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

Ron wrote to me and told me about his phone call to your Uncle Vernon. I do hope you're all right.

I'm on holiday in France at the moment and I didn't know how I was going to send this to you -- what if they'd opened it at customs? -- but then Hedwig turned up! I think she wanted to make sure you got something for your birthday for a change. I bought your present by owl-order; there was an advertisement in the Daily Prophet (I've been getting it delivered; it's so good to keep up with what's going on in the wizarding world). Did you see that picture of Ron and his family a week ago? I bet he's learning loads. I'm really jealous -- the ancient Egyptian wizards were fascinating.

There's some interesting local history of witchcraft here, too. I've rewritten my whole History of Magic essay to include some of the things I've found out, I hope it's not too long -- it's two rolls of parchment more than Professor Binns asked for.

Ron says he's going to be in London in the last week of the holidays. Can you make it? Will your aunt and uncle let you come? I really hope you can. If not, I'll see you on the Hogwarts Express on September first!

Love from Hermione

P.S. Ron says Percy's Head Boy. I'll bet Percy's really pleased Ron doesn't seem too happy about it

Harry laughed as he put Hermione's letter aside and picked up her present. It was very heavy. Knowing Hermione, he was sure it would be a large book full of very difficult spells -- but it wasn't. His heart gave a huge bound as he ripped back the paper and saw a sleek black leather case, with silver words stamped across it, reading Broomstick Servicing Kit.

"Wow, Hermione!" Harry whispered, unzipping the case to look inside.

There was a large jar of Fleetwood's High-Finish Handle Polish, a pair of gleaming silver Tall-Twig Clippers, a tiny brass compass to clip on your broom for long journeys, and a Handbook of Do-It-Yourself Broomcare.

Apart from his friends, the thing that Harry missed most about Hogwarts was Quidditch, the most popular sport in the magical world -- highly dangerous, very exciting, and played on broomsticks. Harry happened to be a very good Quidditch player; he had been the youngest person in a

century to be picked for one of the Hogwarts House teams. One of Harry's most prized possessions was his Nimbus Two Thousand racing broom.

Harry put the leather case aside and picked up his last parcel. He recognized the untidy scrawl on the brown paper at once: this was from Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper. He tore off the top layer of paper and glimpsed something green and leathery, but before he could unwrap it properly, the parcel gave a strange quiver, and whatever was inside it snapped loudly -- as though it had jaws.

Harry froze. He knew that Hagrid would never send him anything dangerous on purpose, but then, Hagrid didn't have a normal person's view of what was dangerous. Hagrid had been known to befriend giant spiders, buy vicious, three-headed dogs from men in pubs, and sneak illegal dragon eggs into his cabin.

Harry poked the parcel nervously. It snapped loudly again. Harry reached for the lamp on his bedside table, gripped it firmly in one hand, and raised it over his head, ready to strike. Then he seized the rest of the wrapping paper in his other hand and pulled.

And out fell -- a book. Harry just had time to register its handsome green cover, emblazoned with the golden title *The Monster Book of Monsters*, before it flipped onto its edge and scuttled sideways along the bed like some weird crab.

"Uh-oh," Harry muttered.

The book toppled off the bed with a loud clunk and shuffled rapidly across the room. Harry followed it stealthily. The book was hiding in the dark space under his desk. Praying that the Dursleys were still fast asleep, Harry got down on his hands and knees and reached toward it.

"Ouch!"

The book snapped shut on his hand and then flapped past him, still scuttling on its covers. Harry scrambled around, threw himself forward, and managed to flatten it. Uncle Vernon gave a loud, sleepy grunt in the room next door.

Hedwig and Errol watched interestedly as Harry clamped the struggling book tightly in his arms, hurried to his chest of drawers, and pulled out a belt, which he buckled tightly around it. The Monster Book shuddered angrily, but could no longer flap and snap, so Harry threw it down on the bed and reached for Hagrid's card.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday!

Think you might find this useful for next year. Won't say no more here. Tell you when I see you. Hope the Muggles are treating you right.

All the best,

Hagrid

It struck Harry as ominous that Hagrid thought a biting book would come in useful, but he put Hagrid's card up next to Ron's and Hermione's, grinning more broadly than ever. Now there was only the letter from

Hogwarts left.

Noticing that it was rather thicker than usual, Harry slit open the envelope, pulled out the first page of parchment within, and read:

Dear Mr. Potter,

Please note that the new school year will begin on September the first. The Hogwarts Express will leave from King's Cross station, platform nine and three-quarters, at eleven o'clock.

Third years are permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade on certain weekends. Please give the enclosed permission form to your parent or guardian to sign.

A list of books for next year is enclosed. Yours sincerely,

Professor M. McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Harry pulled out the Hogsmeade permission form and looked at it, no longer grinning. It would be wonderful to visit Hogsmeade on weekends; he knew it was an entirely wizarding village, and he had never set foot there. But how on earth was he going to persuade Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia to sign the form?

He looked over at the alarm clock. It was now two o'clock in the morning.

Deciding that he'd worry about the Hogsmeade form when he woke up, Harry got back into bed and reached up to cross off another day on the chart he'd made for himself, counting down the days left until his return to Hogwarts. Then he took off his glasses and lay down, eyes open, facing his three birthday cards.

Extremely unusual though he was, at that moment Harry Potter felt just like everyone else -- glad, for the first time in his life, that it was his birthday.

CHAPTER TWO

AUNT MARGE'S BIG MISTAKE

Harry went down to breakfast the next morning to find the three Dursleys already sitting around the kitchen table. They were watching a brand-new television, a welcome-home-for-the-summer present for Dudley, who had been complaining loudly about the long walk between the fridge and the television in the living room. Dudley had spent most of the summer in the kitchen, his piggy little eyes fixed on the screen and his five chins wobbling as he ate continually.

Harry sat down between Dudley and Uncle Vernon, a large, beefy man with very little neck and a lot of mustache. Far from wishing Harry a happy birthday, none of the Dursleys made any sign that they had noticed Harry enter the room, but Harry was far too used to this to care. He helped himself to a piece of toast and then looked up at the reporter on the television, who was halfway through a report on an escaped convict:

"... The public is warned that Black is armed and extremely dangerous. A

special hot line has been set up, and any sighting of Black should be reported immediately."

"No need to tell us he's no good," snorted Uncle Vernon, staring over the top of his newspaper at the prisoner. "Look at the state of him, the filthy layabout! Look at his hair!"

He shot a nasty look sideways at Harry, whose untidy hair had always been a source of great annoyance to Uncle Vernon. Compared to the man on the television, however, whose gaunt face was surrounded by a matted, elbow-length tangle, Harry felt very well groomed indeed.

The reporter had reappeared.

"The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries will announce today --"

"Hang on!" barked Uncle Vernon, staring furiously at the reporter. "You didn't tell us where that maniac's escaped from! \What use is that? Lunatic could be coming up the street right now!"

Aunt Petunia, who was bony and horse-faced, whipped around and peered intently out of the kitchen window. Harry knew Aunt Petunia would simply love to be the one to call the hot line number. She was the nosiest woman in the world and spent most of her life spying on the boring, law-abiding neighbors.

"When will they learn," said Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his large purple fist, "that hanging's the only way to deal with these people?"

"Very true," said Aunt Petunia, who was still squinting into next door's runner beans.

Uncle Vernon drained his teacup, glanced at his watch, and added, "I'd better be off in a minute, Petunia. Marge's train gets in at ten."

Harry, whose thoughts had been upstairs with the Broomstick Servicing Kit, was brought back to earth with an unpleasant bump.

"Aunt Marge?" he blurted out. "Sh -- she's not coming here, is she?"

Aunt Marge was Uncle Vernon's sister. Even though she was not a blood relative of Harry's (whose mother had been Aunt Petunia's sister), he had been forced to call her "Aunt" all his life. Aunt Marge lived in the country, in a house with a large garden, where she bred bulldogs. She didn't often stay at Privet Drive, because she couldn't bear to leave her precious dogs, but each of her visits stood out horribly vividly in Harry's mind.

At Dudley's fifth birthday party, Aunt Margo had whacked Harry around the shins with her walking stick to stop him from beating Dudley at musical statues. A few years later, she had turned up at Christmas with a computerized robot for Dudley and a box of dog biscuits for Harry. On her last visit, the year before Harry started at Hogwarts, Harry had accidentally trodden on the tail of her favorite dog. Ripper had chased Harry out into the garden and up a tree, and Aunt Marge had refused to call him off until past midnight. The memory of this incident still brought tears of laughter to Dudley's eyes.

"Marge'll be here for a week," Uncle Vernon snarled, 11 and while we're

on the subject" -- he pointed a fat finger threateningly at Harry -- "we need to get a few things straight before I go and collect her."

Dudley smirked and withdrew his gaze from the television. Watching Harry being bullied by Uncle Vernon was Dudley's favorite form of entertainment.

"Firstly," growled Uncle Vernon, "you'll keep a civil tongue in your head when you're talking to Marge."

"All right," said Harry bitterly, "if she does when she's talking to me.

"Secondly," said Uncle Vernon, acting as though he had not heard Harry's reply, "as Marge doesn't know anything about your abnormality, I don't want any -- any funny stuff while she's here.

You behave yourself, got me?"

"I will if she does," said Harry through gritted teeth.

"And thirdly," said Uncle Vernon, his mean little eyes now slits in his great purple face, "we've told Marge you attend St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys."

"What?" Harry yelled.

"And you'll be sticking to that story, boy, or there'll be trouble, spat Uncle Vernon.

Harry sat there, white-faced and furious, staring at Uncle Vernon, hardly able to believe it. Aunt Marge coming for a weeklong visit -- it was the worst birthday present the Dursleys had ever given him, including that pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks.

"Well, Petunia," said Uncle Vernon, getting heavily to his feet, "I'll be off to the station, then. Want to come along for the ride, Dudders?"

"No," said Dudley, whose attention had returned to the television now that Uncle Vernon had finished threatening Harry.

"Duddy's got to make himself smart for his auntie," said Aunt Petunia, smoothing Dudley's thick blond hair. "Mummy's bought him a lovely new bow tie."

Uncle Vernon clapped Dudley on his porky shoulder. "See you in a bit, then," he said, and he left the kitchen.

Harry, who had been sitting in a kind of horrified trance, had a sudden idea. Abandoning his toast, he got quickly to his feet and followed Uncle Vernon to the front door.

Uncle Vernon was pulling on his car coat.

"I'm not taking you," he snarled as he turned to see Harry watching him.

"Like I wanted to come," said Harry coldly. "I want to ask you something."

Uncle Vernon eyed him suspiciously.

"Third years at Hog -- at my school are allowed to visit the village sometimes," said Harry.

"So?" snapped Uncle Vernon, taking his car keys from a hook next to the door.

"I need you to sign the permission form," said Harry in a rush.

"And why should I do that?" sneered Uncle Vernon.

"Well," said Harry, choosing his words carefully, "it'll be hard work, pretending to Aunt Marge I go to that St. Whatsits --"

"St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys!" bellowed Uncle Vernon, and Harry was pleased to hear a definite note of panic in Uncle Vernon's voice.

"Exactly," said Harry, looking calmly up into Uncle Vernon's large, purple face. "It's a lot to remember. I'll have to make it sound convincing, won't I? What if I accidentally let something slip?"

"You'll get the stuffing knocked out of you, won't you?" roared Uncle Vernon, advancing on Harry with his fist raised. But Harry stood his ground.

"Knocking the stuffing out of me won't make Aunt Marge forget what I could tell her," he said grimly.

Uncle Vernon stopped, his fist still raised, his face an ugly puce.

"But if you sign my permission form," Harry went on quickly, "I swear I'll remember where I'm supposed to go to school, and I'll act like a Mug -- like I'm normal and everything."

Harry could tell that Uncle Vernon was thinking it over, even if his teeth were bared and a vein was throbbing in his temple.

"Right," he snapped finally. "I shall monitor your behavior carefully during Marge's visit. If, at the end of it, you've toed the line and kept to the story, I'll sign your ruddy form."

He wheeled around, pulled open the front door, and slammed it so hard that one of the little panes of glass at the top fell out.

Harry didn't return to the kitchen. He went back upstairs to his bedroom. If he was going to act like a real Muggle, he'd better start now. Slowly and sadly he gathered up all his presents and his birthday cards and hid them under the loose floorboard with his homework. Then he went to Hedwig's cage. Errol seemed to have recovered; he and Hedwig were both asleep, heads under their wings. Harry sighed, then poked them both awake.

"Hedwig," he said gloomily, "you're going to have to clear off for a week. Go with Errol. Ron'll look after you. I'll write him a note, explaining. And don't look at me like that" -- Hedwig's large amber eyes were reproachful -- "it's not my fault. It's the only way I'll be allowed to visit Hogsmeade with Ron and Hermione."

Ten minutes later, Errol and Hedwig (who had a note to Ron bound to her leg) soared out of the window and out of sight. Harry, now feeling

thoroughly miserable, put the empty cage away inside the wardrobe.

But Harry didn't have long to brood. In next to no time, Aunt Petunia was shrieking up the stairs for Harry to come down and get ready to welcome their guest.

"Do something about your hair!" Aunt Petunia snapped as he reached the hall.

Harry couldn't see the point of trying to make his hair lie flat. Aunt Marge loved criticizing him, so the untidier he looked, the happier she would be.

All too soon, there was a crunch of gravel outside as Uncle Vernon's car pulled back into the driveway, then the clunk of the car doors and footsteps on the garden path.

"Get the door!" Aunt Petunia hissed at Harry.

A feeling of great gloom in his stomach, Harry pulled the door open.

On the threshold stood Aunt Marge. She was very like Uncle Vernon: large, beefy, and purple-faced, she even had a mustache, though not as bushy as his. In one hand she held an enormous suitcase, and tucked under the other was an old and evil-tempered bulldog.

"Where's my Dudders?" roared Aunt Marge. "Where's my neffy-poo?"

Dudley came waddling down the hall, his blond hair plastered flat to his fat head, a bow tie just visible under his many chins. Aunt Marge thrust the suitcase into Harry's stomach, knocking the wind out of him, seized Dudley in a tight one-armed hug, and planted a large kiss on his cheek.

Harry knew perfectly well that Dudley only put up with Aunt Marge's hugs because he was well paid for it, and sure enough, when they broke apart, Dudley had a crisp twenty-pound note clutched in his fat fist.

"Petunia!" shouted Aunt Marge, striding past Harry as though he was a hat stand. Aunt Marge and Aunt Petunia kissed, or rather, Aunt Marge bumped her large jaw against Aunt Petunia's bony cheekbone.

Uncle Vernon now came in, smiling jovially as he shut the door.

"Tea, Marge?" he said. "And what will Ripper take?"

"Ripper can have some tea out of my saucer," said Aunt Marge as they all proceeded into the kitchen, leaving Harry alone in the hall with the suitcase. But Harry wasn't complaining; any excuse not to be with Aunt Marge was fine by him, so he began to heave the case upstairs into the spare bedroom, taking as long as he could.

By the time he got back to the kitchen, Aunt Marge had been supplied with tea and fruitcake, and Ripper was lapping noisily in the corner. Harry saw Aunt Petunia wince slightly as specks of tea and drool flecked her clean floor. Aunt Petunia hated animals.

"Who's looking after the other dogs, Marge?" Uncle Vernon asked.

"Oh, I've got Colonel Fubster managing them," boomed Aunt Marge. "He's retired now, good for him to have something to do. But I couldn't leave

poor old Ripper. He pines if he's away from me."

Ripper began to growl again as Harry sat down. This directed Aunt Marge's attention to Harry for the first time.

"So!" she barked. "Still here, are you?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Don't you say yes' in that ungrateful tone," Aunt Marge growled. "It's damn good of Vernon and Petunia to keep you. Wouldn't have done it myself. You'd have gone straight to an orphanage if you'd been dumped on my doorstep."

Harry was bursting to say that he'd rather live in an orphanage than with the Dursleys, but the thought of the Hogsmeade form stopped him. He forced his face into a painful smile.

"Don't you smirk at me!" boomed Aunt Marge. "I can see you haven't improved since I last saw you. I hoped school would knock some manners into you." She took a large gulp of tea, wiped her mustache, and said, "Where is it that you send him, again, Vernon?"

"St. Brutus's," said Uncle Vernon promptly. "It's a first-rate institution for hopeless cases."

"I see," said Aunt Marge. "Do they use the cane at St. Brutus's, boy?" she barked across the table.

"Er --"

Uncle Vernon nodded curtly behind Aunt Marge's back.

"Yes," said Harry. Then, feeling he might as well do the thing properly, he added, "all the time."

"Excellent," said Aunt Marge. "I won't have this namby-pamby, wishy-washy nonsense about not hitting people who deserve it. A good thrashing is what's needed in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. Have you been beaten often?"

"Oh, yeah," said Harry, "loads of times."

Aunt Marge narrowed her eyes.

"I still don't like your tone, boy," she said. "If you can speak of your beatings in that casual way, they clearly aren't hitting you hard enough. Petunia, I'd write if I were you. Make it clear that you approve the use of extreme force in this boy's case."

Perhaps Uncle Vernon was worried that Harry might forget their bargain; in any case, he changed the subject abruptly.

"Heard the news this morning, Marge? What about that escaped prisoner, eh?"

As Aunt Marge started to make herself at home, Harry caught himself thinking almost longingly of life at number four without her. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia usually encouraged Harry to stay out of their way, which Harry was only too happy to do. Aunt Marge, on the other

hand, wanted Harry under her eye at all times, so that she could boom out suggestions for his improvement. She delighted in comparing Harry with Dudley, and took huge pleasure in buying Dudley expensive presents while glaring at Harry, as though daring him to ask why he hadn't got a present too. She also kept throwing out dark hints about what made Harry such an unsatisfactory person.

"You mustn't blame yourself for the way the boy's turned out, Vernon," she said over lunch on the third day. "If there's something rotten on the inside, there's nothing anyone can do about it."

Harry tried to concentrate on his food, but his hands shook and his face was starting to burn with anger. Remember the form, he told himself Think about Hogsmeade. Don't say anything. Don't rise

Aunt Marge reached for her glass of wine.

"It's one of the basic rules of breeding," she said. "You see it all the time with dogs. If there's something wrong with the bitch, there'll be something wrong with the pup --"

At that moment, the wineglass Aunt Marge was holding exploded in her hand. Shards of glass flew in every direction and Aunt Marge sputtered and blinked, her great ruddy face dripping.

"Marge!" squealed Aunt Petunia. "Marge, are you all right?"

"Not to worry," grunted Aunt Marge, mopping her face with her napkin. "Must have squeezed it too hard. Did the same thing at Colonel Fubster's the other day. No need to fuss, Petunia, I have a very firm grip..."

But Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were both looking at Harry suspiciously, so he decided he'd better skip dessert and escape from the table as soon as he could.

Outside in the hall, he leaned against the wall, breathing deeply It had been a long time since he'd lost control and made something explode. He couldn't afford to let it happen again. The Hogsmeade form wasn't the only thing at stake -- if he carried on like that, he'd be in trouble with the Ministry of Magic.

Harry was still an underage wizard, and he was forbidden by wizard law to do magic outside school. His record wasn't exactly clean either. Only last summer he'd gotten an official warning that had stated quite clearly that if the Ministry got wind of any more magic in Privet Drive, Harry would face expulsion from Hogwarts.

He heard the Dursleys leaving the table and hurried upstairs out of the way.

Harry got through the next three days by forcing himself to think about his Handbook of Do-It-Yourself Broomcare whenever Aunt Marge started on him. This worked quite well, though it seemed to give him a glazed look, because Aunt Marge started voicing the opinion that he was mentally subnormal.

At last, at long last, the final evening of Marge's stay arrived. Aunt Petunia cooked a fancy dinner and Uncle Vernon uncorked several bottles of wine. They got all the way through the soup and the salmon without a single mention of Harry's faults; during the lemon meringue pie, Uncle

Vernon bored them A with a long talk about Grunnings, his drill-making company; then Aunt Petunia made coffee and Uncle Vernon brought out a bottle of brandy.

"Can I tempt you, Marge?"

Aunt Marge had already had quite a lot of wine. Her huge face was very red.

"Just a small one, then," she chuckled. "A bit more than that... and a bit more... that's the ticket."

Dudley was eating his fourth slice of pie. Aunt Petunia was sipping coffee with her little finger sticking out. Harry really wanted to disappear into his bedroom, but he met Uncle Vernon's angry little eyes and knew he would have to sit it out.

"Aah," said Aunt Marge, smacking her lips and putting the empty brandy glass back down. "Excellent nosh, Petunia. It's normally just a fry-up for me of an evening, with twelve dogs to look after...." She burped richly and patted her great tweed stomach. "Pardon me. But I do like to see a healthy-sized boy," she went on, winking at Dudley. "You'll be a proper-sized man, Dudders, like your father. Yes, I'll have a spot more brandy, Vernon...."

"Now, this one here --"

She jerked her head at Harry, who felt his stomach clench. The Handbook, he thought quickly.

"This one's got a mean, runty look about him. You get that with dogs. I had Colonel Fubster drown one last year. Ratty little thing it was- Weak. Underbred."

Harry was trying to remember page twelve of his book: A Charm to Cure Reluctant Reversers. "It all comes down to blood, as I was saying the other day.

Bad blood will out. Now, I'm saying nothing against your family, Petunia" she patted Aunt Petunia's bony hand with her shovellike one "but your sister was a bad egg. They turn up in the best families. Then she ran off with a wastrel and here's the result right in front of us."

Harry was staring at his plate, a funny ringing in his ears. Grasp your broom firmly by the tail, he thought. But he couldn't remember what came next. Aunt Marge's voice seemed to be boring into him like one of Uncle Vernon's drills.

"This Potter, 5) said Aunt Marge loudly, seizing the brandy bottle and splashing more into her glass and over the tablecloth, "you never told me what he did?"

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were looking extremely tense. Dudley had even looked up from his pie to gape at his parents.

"He -- didn't work," said Uncle Vernon, with half a glance at Harry. "Unemployed."

"As I expected!" said Aunt Marge, taking a huge swig of brandy and wiping her chin on her sleeve. "A no-account, good-for-nothing, lazy

scrounger who --"

"He was not," said Harry suddenly. The table went very quiet. Harry was shaking all over. He had never felt so angry in his life.

"MORE BRANDY!" yelled Uncle Vernon, who had gone very white. He emptied the bottle into Aunt Marge's glass. "You, boy," he snarled at Harry. "Go to bed, go on --"

"No, Vernon," hiccuped Aunt Marge, holding up a hand, her tiny bloodshot eyes fixed on Harry's. "Go on, boy, go on. Proud of your parents, are you? They go and get themselves killed in a car crash (drunk, I expect) --"

'They didn't die in a car crash!' said Harry, who found himself on his feet.

"They died in a car crash, you nasty little liar, and left you to be a burden on their decent, hardworking relatives!" screamed Aunt Marge, swelling with fury. "You are an insolent, ungrateful little --"

But Aunt Marge suddenly stopped speaking. For a moment, it looked as though words had failed her. She seemed to be swelling with inexplicable anger -- but the swelling didn't stop. Her great red face started to expand, her tiny eyes bulged, and her mouth stretched too tightly for speech -- next second, several buttons had just burst from her tweed jacket and pinged off the walls -- she was inflating like a monstrous balloon, her stomach bursting free of her tweed waistband, each of her fingers blowing up like a salami --

"MARGE!" yelled Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia together as Aunt Marge's whole body began to rise off her chair toward the ceiling. She was entirely round, now, like a vast life buoy with piggy eyes, and her hands and feet stuck out weirdly as she drifted up into the air, making apoplectic popping noises. Ripper came skidding into the room, barking madly.

"NOOOOOOO!"

Uncle Vernon seized one of Marge's feet and tried to pull her down again, but was almost lifted from the floor himself. A second later, Ripper leapt forward and sank his teeth into Uncle Vernon's leg.

Harry tore from the dining room before anyone could stop him, heading for the cupboard under the stairs. The cupboard door burst magically open as he reached it. In seconds, he had heaved his trunk to the front door. He sprinted upstairs and threw himself under the bed, wrenching up the loose floorboard, and grabbed the pillowcase full of his books and birthday presents. He wriggled out, seized Hedwig's empty cage, and dashed back downstairs to his trunk, just as Uncle Vernon burst out of the dining room, his trouser leg in bloody tatters.

"COME BACK IN HERE!" he bellowed. "COME BACK AND PUT HER RIGHT!"

But a reckless rage had come over Harry. He kicked his trunk open, pulled out his wand, and pointed it at Uncle Vernon.

"She deserved it," Harry said, breathing very fast. "She deserved what she got. You keep away from me."

He fumbled behind him for the latch on the door.

"I'm going," Harry said. "I've had enough."

And in the next moment, he was out in the dark, quiet street, heaving his heavy trunk behind him, Hedwig's cage under his arm.

CHAPTER THREE

THE KNIGHT BUS

Harry was several streets away before he collapsed onto a low wall in Magnolia Crescent, panting from the effort of dragging his trunk. He sat quite still, anger still surging through him, listening to the frantic thumping of his heart.

But after ten minutes alone in the dark street, a new emotion overtook him: panic. Whichever way he looked at it, he had never been in a worse fix. He was stranded, quite alone, in the dark Muggle world, with absolutely nowhere to go. And the worst of it was, he had just done serious magic, which meant that he was almost certainly expelled from Hogwarts. He had broken the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry so badly, he was surprised Ministry of Magic representatives weren't swooping down on him where he sat.

Harry shivered and looked up and down Magnolia Crescent.

What, was going to happen to him? Would he be arrested, or would he simply be outlawed from the wizarding world? He thought of Ron and Hermione, and his heart sank even lower. Harry was sure that, criminal or not, Ron and Hermione would want to help him now, but they were both abroad, and with Hedwig gone, he had no means of contacting them.

He didn't have any Muggle money, either. There was a little wizard gold in the money bag at the bottom of his trunk, but the rest of the fortune his parents had left him was stored in a vault at Gringotts Wizarding Bank in London. He'd never be able to drag his trunk all the way to London. Unless...

He looked down at his wand, which he was still clutching in his hand. If he was already expelled (his heart was now thumping painfully fast), a bit more magic couldn't hurt. He had the Invisibility Cloak he had inherited from his father -- what if he bewitched the trunk to make it feather-light, tied it to his broomstick, covered himself in the cloak, and flew to London? Then he could get the rest of his money out of his vault and... begin his life as an outcast. It was a horrible prospect, but he couldn't sit on this wall forever, or he'd find himself trying to explain to Muggle police why he was out in the dead of night with a trunkful of spellbooks and a broomstick.

Harry opened his trunk again and pushed the contents aside, looking for the Invisibility Cloak - but before he had found it, he straightened up suddenly, looking around him once more.

A funny prickling on the back of his neck had made Harry feel he was being watched, but the street appeared to be deserted, and no lights shone from any of the large square houses.

He bent over his trunk again, but almost immediately stood up once more, his hand clenched on his wand. He had sensed rather than heard it:

someone or something was standing in the narrow gap between the garage and the fence behind him. Harry squinted at the black alleyway. If only it would move, then he'd know whether it was just a stray cat or -- something else.

"Lumos," Harry muttered, and a light appeared at the end of his wand, almost dazzling him. He held it high over his head, and the pebble-dashed walls of number two suddenly sparkled; the garage door gleamed, and between them Harry saw, quite distinctly, the hulking outline of something very big, with wide, gleaming eyes.

Harry stepped backward. His legs hit his trunk and he tripped. His wand flew out of his hand as he flung out an arm to break his fall, and he landed, hard, in the gutter --

There was a deafening BANG, and Harry threw up his hands to shield his eyes against a sudden blinding light --

With a yell, he rolled back onto the pavement, just in time. A second later, a gigantic pair of wheels and headlights screeched to a halt exactly where Harry had just been lying. They belonged, as Harry saw when he raised his head, to a triple-decker, violently purple bus, which had appeared out of thin air. Gold lettering over the windshield spelled The Knight Bus.

For a split second, Harry wondered if he had been knocked silly by his fall. Then a conductor in a purple uniform leapt out of the bus and began to speak loudly to the night.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. Just stick out your wand hand, step on board) and we can take you anywhere you want to go. My name is Stan Shunpike, and I will be your conductor this eve --"

The conductor stopped abruptly. He had just caught sight of "Harry, who was still sitting on the ground. Harry snatched up his wand again and scrambled to his feet. Close up, he saw that Stan Shunpike was only a few years older than he was, eighteen or nineteen at most, with large, protruding ears and quite a few pimples.

"What were you doin' down there?" said Stan, dropping his professional manner.

"Fell over," said Harry.

"'Choo fall over for?" sniggered Stan.

"I didn't do it on purpose," said Harry, annoyed. One of the knees in his jeans was torn, and the hand he had thrown out to break his fall was bleeding. He suddenly remembered why he had fallen over and turned around quickly to stare at the alleyway between the garage and fence. The Knight Bus's headlamps were flooding it with light, and it was empty.

"'Choo lookin' at?" said Stan.

"There was a big black thing," said Harry, pointing uncertainly into the gap. "Like a dog... but massive..."

He looked a-round at Stan, whose mouth was slightly open. With a feeling

of unease, Harry saw Stan's eyes move to the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Woss that on your 'ead?" said Stan abruptly.

"Nothing," said Harry quickly, flattening his hair over his scar. If the Ministry of Magic was looking for him, he didn't want to make it too easy for them.

"Woss your name?" Stan persisted.

"Neville Longbottom," said Harry, saying the first name that came into his head. "So -- so this bus," he went on quickly, hoping to distract Stan, "did you say it goes anywhere?"

"Yep," said Stan proudly, "anywhere you like, long's it's on land. Can't do nuffink underwater. 'Ere," he said, looking suspicious again, "You did flag us down, dincha? Stuck out your wand 'and, dincha?"

"Yes," said Harry quickly. "Listen, how much would it be to get to London?"

"Eleven Sickles," said Stan, "but for fifteen you get 'or chocolate, and for fifteen you get an 'ot water bottle an' a toofbrush in the color of your choice."

Harry rummaged once more in his trunk, extracted his money bag, and shoved some gold into Stan's hand. He and Stan then lifted his trunk, with Hedwig's cage balanced on top, up the steps of the bus.

There were no seats; instead, half a dozen brass bedsteads stood beside the curtained windows. Candles were burning in brackets beside each bed, illuminating the wood-paneled walls. A tiny wizard in a nightcap at the rear of the bus muttered, "Not now, thanks, I'm pickling some slugs" and rolled over in his sleep.

"You 'ave this one," Stan whispered, shoving Harry's trunk under the bed right behind the driver, who was sitting in an armchair in front of the steering wheel. "This is our driver, Ernie Prang. This ,is Neville Longbottom, Ern. "

Ernie Prang, an elderly wizard wearing very thick glasses, nodded to Harry, who nervously flattened his bangs again and sat down on his bed.

"Take 'er away, Ern," said Stan, sitting down in the armchair next to Ernie's.

There was another tremendous BANG, and the next moment Harry found himself flat on his bed, thrown backward by the speed of the Knight Bus. Pulling himself up, Harry stared out of the dark window and saw that they were now bowling along a completely different street. Stan was watching Harry's stunned face with great enjoyment.

"This is where we was before you flagged us down," he said. "Where are we, Ern? Somewhere in Wales?"

"Ar," said Ernie.

"How come the Muggles don't hear the bus?" said Harry.

"Them!" said Stan contemptuously. "Don' listen properly, do they? Don'

look properly either. Never notice nuffink, they don'."

"Best go wake up Madam Marsh, Stan," said Ern. "We'll be in Abergavenny in a minute."

Stan passed Harry's bed and disappeared up a narrow wooden staircase. Harry was still looking out of the window, feeling increasingly nervous. Ernie didn't seem to have mastered the use of a steering wheel. The Knight Bus kept mounting the pavement, but it didn't hit anything; lines of lampposts, mailboxes, and trash cans jumped out of its way as it approached and back into position once it had passed.

Stan came back downstairs, followed by a faintly green witch wrapped in a traveling cloak.

"'Ere you go, Madam Marsh," said Stan happily as Ern stamped on the brake and the beds slid a foot or so toward the front of the bus. Madam Marsh clamped a handkerchief to her mouth and tottered down the steps. Stan threw her bag out after her and rammed the doors shut; there was another loud BANG, and they were thundering down a narrow country lane, trees leaping out of the way.

Harry wouldn't have been able to sleep even if he had been traveling on a bus that didn't keep banging loudly and jumping a hundred miles at a time. His stomach churned as he fell back to wondering what was going to happen to him, and whether the Dursleys had managed to get Aunt Marge off the ceiling yet.

Stan had unfurled a copy of the Daily Prophet and was now reading with his tongue between his teeth. A large photograph of a sunken-faced man with long, matted hair blinked slowly at Harry from the front page. He looked strangely familiar.

"That man!" Harry said, forgetting his troubles for a moment. "He was on the Muggle news!"

Stanley turned to the front page and chuckled.

"Sirius Black," he said, nodding. "'Course 'e was on the Muggle news, Neville, where you been?"

He gave a superior sort of chuckle at the blank look on Harry's face, removed the front page, and handed it to Harry.

"You oughta read the papers more, Neville."

Harry held the paper up to the candlelight and read:

BLACK STILL AT LARGE

Sirius Black, possibly the most infamous prisoner ever to be held in Azkaban fortress, is still eluding capture, the Ministry of Magic confirmed today.

"We are doing all we can to recapture Black," said the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, this morning, "and we beg the magical community to remain calm."

Fudge has been criticized by some members of the International Federation of Warlocks for informing the Muggle Prime Minister of the

crisis.

"Well, really, I had to, don't you know," said an irritable Fudge. "Black is mad. He's a danger to anyone who crosses him, magic or Muggle. I have the Prime Minister's assurance that he will not breathe a word of Black's true identity to anyone. And let's face it—who'd believe him if he did?"

While Muggles have been told that Black is carrying a gun (a kind of metal wand that Muggles use to kill each other), the magical community lives in fear of a massacre like that of twelve years ago, when Black murdered thirteen people with a single curse.

Harry looked into the shadowed eyes of Sirius Black, the only part of the sunken face that seemed alive. Harry had never met a vampire, but he had seen pictures of them in his Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, and Black, with his waxy white skin, looked just like one.

"Scary-lookin' fing, inee?" said Stan, who had been watching Harry read.

"He murdered thirteen people?" said Harry, handing the page back to Stan, "with one curse?"

"Yep," said Stan, "in front of witnesses an' all. Broad daylight. Big trouble it caused, dinnit, Ern?"

"Ar," said Ern darkly.

Stan swiveled in his armchair, his hands on the back, the better to look at Harry.

"Black woz a big supporter of You-Know-'Oo," he said.

"What, Voldemort?" said Harry, without thinking.

Even Stan's pimples went white; Ern jerked the steering wheel so hard that a whole farmhouse had to jump aside to avoid the bus.

"You outta your tree?" yelped Stan. "'Choo say 'is name for?"

"Sorry," said Harry hastily. "Sorry, I -- I forgot --"

"Forgot!" said Stan weakly. "Blimey, my 'eart's goin' that fast ..."

"So -- so Black was a supporter of You-Know-Who?" Harry prompted apologetically.

"Yeah," said Stan, still rubbing his chest. "Yeah, that's right. Very close to You-Know-'Oo, they say. Anyway, when little 'Arry Potter got the better of You-Know-'Oo --"

Harry nervously flattened his bangs down again.

-- all You-Know-'Oo's supporters was tracked down, wasn't they, Ern? Most of 'em knew it was all over, wiv You-Know-'Oo gone, and they came quiet. But not Sirius Black. I 'eard he thought 'e'd be second-in-command once You-Know-'Oo 'ad taken over.

"Anyway, they cornered Black in the middle of a street full of Muggles an' Black took out 'is wand and 'e blasted 'alf the street apart, an' a

wizard got it, an' so did a dozen Muggles what got in the way. 'Orrible, eh? An' you know what Black did then?" Stan continued in a dramatic whisper.

"What?" said Harry.

"Laughed," said Stan. "Jus' stood there an' laughed. An' when reinforcements from the Ministry of Magic got there, I 'e went wiv em quiet as anyfink, still laughing 'is 'ead off. 'Cos 'e's mad, inee, Ern? Inee mad?"

"If he weren't when he went to Azkaban, he will be now," said Ern in his slow voice. "I'd blow meself up before I set foot in that place. Serves him right, mind you ... after what he did...."

"They 'ad a job coverin' it up, din' they, Ern?" Stan said. "'Ole street blown up an' all them Muggles dead. What was it they said ad 'appened, Ern?"

"Gas explosion," grunted Ernie.

"An' now 'e's out," said Stan, examining the newspaper picture of Black's gaunt face again. "Never been a breakout from Azkaban before, 'as there, Ern? Beats me 'ow 'e did it. Frightenin', eh? Mind, I don't fancy 'is chances against them Azkaban guards, eh, Ern?"

Ernie suddenly shivered.

"Talk about summat else, Stan, there's a good lad. Them Azkaban guards give me the collywobbles."

Stan put the paper away reluctantly, and Harry leaned against the window of the Knight Bus, feeling worse than ever. He couldn't help imagining what Stan might be telling his passengers in a few nights' time.

"'Ear about that 'Arry Potter? Blew up 'is aunt! We 'ad 'im 'ere on the Knight Bus, di'n't we, Ern? 'E was tryin' I to run for it...."

He, Harry, had broken wizard law just like Sirius Black. Was inflating Aunt Marge bad enough to land him in Azkaban? Harry didn't know anything about the wizard prison, though everyone he'd ever heard speak of it did so in the same fearful tone. Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, had spent two months there only last year. Harry wouldn't soon forget the look of terror on Hagrid's face when he had been told where he was going, and Hagrid was one of the bravest people Harry knew.

The Knight Bus rolled through the darkness, scattering bushes and wastebaskets, telephone booths and trees, and Harry lay, restless and miserable, on his feather bed. After a while, Stan remembered that Harry had paid for hot chocolate, but poured it all over Harry's pillow when the bus moved abruptly from Anglesea to Aberdeen. One by one, wizards and witches in dressing gowns and slippers descended from the upper floors to leave the bus. They all looked very pleased to go.

Finally, Harry was the only passenger left.

"Right then, Neville," said Stan, clapping his hands, where abouts in London?"

"Diagon Alley," said Harry.

"Righto," said Stan. "'Old tight, then."

BANG.

They were thundering along Charing Cross Road. Harry sat up and watched buildings and benches squeezing themselves out of the Knight Bus's way. The sky was getting a little lighter. He would lie low for a couple of hours, go to Gringotts the moment it opened, then set off -- where, he didn't know.

Ern slammed on the brakes and the Knight Bus skidded to a halt in front of a small and shabby-looking pub, the Leaky Cauldron, behind which lay the magical entrance to Diagon Alley.

"Thanks," Harry said to Ern.

He jumped down the steps and helped Stan lower his trunk and Hedwig's cage onto the pavement.

"Well," said Harry. "'Bye then!"

But Stan wasn't paying attention. Still standing in the doorway to the bus) he was goggling at the shadowy entrance to the Leaky Cauldron. "There you are, Harry," said a voice.

Before Harry could turn, he felt a hand on his shoulder. At the same time, Stan shouted, "Blimey! Ern, come 'ere! Come 'ere I"

Harry looked up at the owner of the hand on his shoulder and felt a bucketful of ice cascade into his stomach -- he had walked right into Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself.

Stan leapt onto the pavement beside them.

"What didja call Neville, Minister?" he said excitedly.

Fudge, a portly little man in a long, pinstriped cloak, looked cold and exhausted.

"Neville?" he repeated, frowning. "This is Harry Potter."

"I knew it!" Stan shouted gleefully. "Ern! Ern! Guess 'oo Neville is, Ern! 'E's 'Arry Potter! I can see 'is scar!"

"Yes," said Fudge testily, "well, I'm very glad the Knight Bus picked Harry up, but he and I need to step inside the Leaky Cauldron now..."

Fudge increased the pressure on Harry's shoulder, and Harry found himself being steered inside the pub. A stooping figure bearing a lantern appeared through the door behind the bar. It was Tom, the wizened, toothless landlord.

"You've got him, Minister!" said Tom. "Will you be wanting anything? Beer? Brandy?"

"Perhaps a pot of tea," said Fudge, who still hadn't let go of Harry.

There was a loud scraping and puffing from behind them, and Stan and Ern appeared, carrying Harry's trunk and Hedwig's cage and looking around

excitedly.

"'Ow come you di'n't tell us 'oo you are, eh, Neville?" said Stan, beaming at Harry, while Ernie's owlish face peered interestedly over Stan's shoulder.

"And a private parlor, please, Tom," said Fudge pointedly.

'Bye," Harry said miserably to Stan and Ern as Tom beckoned Fudge toward the passage that led from the bar.

"'Bye, Neville!" called Stan.

Fudge marched Harry along the narrow passage after Tom's lantern, and then into a small parlor. Tom clicked his fingers, a fire burst into life in the grate, and he bowed himself out of the room.

"Sit down, Harry," said Fudge, indicating a chair by the fire.

Harry sat down, feeling goose bumps rising up his arms despite the glow of the fire. Fudge took off his pinstriped cloak and tossed it aside, then hitched up the trousers of his bottle-green suit and sat down opposite Harry.

"I am Cornelius Fudge, Harry. The Minister of Magic."

Harry already knew this, of course; he had seen Fudge once before, but as he had been wearing his father's Invisibility Cloak at the time, Fudge wasn't to know that.

Tom the innkeeper reappeared, wearing an apron over his nightshirt and bearing a tray of tea and crumpets. He placed the tray on a table between Fudge and Harry and left the parlor, closing the door behind him.

"Well, Harry," said Fudge, pouring out tea, "you've had us all in a right flap, I don't mind telling you. Running away from your aunt and uncle's house like that! I'd started to think... but you're safe, and that's what matters."

Fudge buttered himself a crumpet and pushed the plate toward Harry.

"Eat, Harry, you look dead on your feet. Now then... You will be pleased to hear that we have dealt with the unfortunate blowing-up of Miss Marjorie Dursley. Two members of the Accidental Magic Reversal Department were dispatched to Privet Drive a few hours ago. Miss Dursley has been punctured and her memory has been modified. She has no recollection of the incident at all. So that's that, and no harm done."

Fudge smiled at Harry over the rim of his teacup, rather like an uncle surveying a favorite nephew. Harry, who couldn't believe his ears, opened his mouth to speak, couldn't think of anything to say, and closed it again.

"Ah, you're worrying about the reaction of your aunt and uncle?" said Fudge. "Well, I won't deny that they are extremely angry, Harry, but they are prepared to take you back next summer as long as you stay at Hogwarts for the Christmas and Easter holidays."

Harry unstuck his throat.

"I always stay at Hogwarts for the Christmas and Easter holidays," he said, "and I don't ever want to go back to Privet Drive."

"Now, now, I'm sure you'll feel differently once you've calmed down," said Fudge in a worried tone. "They are your family, after all, and I'm sure you are fond of each other -- er -- very deep down."

It didn't occur to Harry to put Fudge right. He was still waiting to hear what was going to happen to him now.

"So all that remains," said Fudge, now buttering himself a second crumpet, "is to decide where you're going to spend the last two weeks of your vacation. I suggest you take a room here at the Leaky Cauldron and

"Hang on," blurted Harry. "What about my punishment?"

Fudge blinked. "Punishment?"

"I broke the law!" Harry said. "The Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry!"

"Oh, my dear boy, we're not going to punish you for a little thing like that!" cried Fudge, waving his crumpet impatiently. "It was an accident! We don't send people to Azkaban just for blowing up their aunts!"

But this didn't tally at all with Harry's past dealings with the Ministry of Magic.

"Last year, I got an official warning just because a house-elf smashed a pudding in my uncle's house!" he told Fudge, frowning. "The Ministry of Magic said I'd be expelled from Hogwarts if there was any more magic there!"

Unless Harry's eyes were deceiving him, Fudge was suddenly looking awkward.

"Circumstances change, Harry... We have to take into account... in the present climate... Surely you don't want to be expelled?"

"Of course I don't," said Harry.

"Well then, what's all the fuss about?" laughed Fudge. "Now, have a crumpet, Harry, while I go and see if Tom's got a room for you."

Fudge strode out of the parlor and Harry stared after him. There was something extremely odd going on. Why had Fudge been waiting for him at the Leaky Cauldron, if not to punish him for what he'd done? And now Harry came to think of it, surely it wasn't usual for the Minister of Magic himself to get involved in matters of underage magic?

Fudge came back, accompanied by Tom the innkeeper.

"Room eleven's free, Harry," said Fudge. "I think you'll be very comfortable. just one thing, and I'm sure you'll understand... I don't want you wandering off into Muggle London, all right? Keep to Diagon Alley. And you're to be back here before dark each night. Sure you'll understand. Tom will be keeping an eye on you for me."

"Okay," said Harry slowly, "but why?"

"Don't want to lose you again, do we?" said Fudge with a hearty laugh.
"No, no... best we know where you are.... I mean..."

Fudge cleared his throat loudly and picked up his pinstriped cloak.

"Well, I'll be off, plenty to do, you know..."

"Have you had any luck with Black yet?" Harry asked.

Fudge's finger slipped on the silver fastenings of his cloak.

"What's that? Oh, you've heard -- well, no, not yet, but it's only a matter of time. The Azkaban guards have never yet failed... and they are angrier than I've ever seen them."

Fudge shuddered slightly.

"So, I'll say good-bye."

He held out his hand and Harry, shaking it, had a sudden idea.

"Er -- Minister? Can I ask you something?"

"Certainly," said Fudge with a smile.

"Well, third years at Hogwarts are allowed to visit Hogsmeade, but my aunt and uncle didn't sign the permission form. D'you think you could --?"

Fudge was looking uncomfortable.

"Ah," he said. "No, no, I'm very sorry, Harry, but as I'm not your parent or guardian --"

"But you're the Minister of Magic," said Harry eagerly. "If you gave me permission

"No, I'm sorry, Harry, but rules are rules," said Fudge flatly.

"Perhaps You'll be able to visit Hogsmeade next year. In fact, I think it's best if you don't... yes... well, I'll be off Enjoy your stay, Harry."

And with a last smile and shake of Harry's hand, Fudge left the room. Tom now moved forward, beaming at Harry.

"If you'll follow me, Mr. Potter," he said, "I've already taken your things up..."

Harry followed Tom up a handsome wooden staircase to a door with a brass number eleven on it, which Tom unlocked and opened for him.

Inside was a very comfortable-looking bed, some highly polished oak furniture, a cheerfully crackling fire and, perched on top of the wardrobe -

"Hedwig!" Harry gasped.

The snowy owl clicked her beak and fluttered down onto Harry's arm.

"Very smart owl you've got there, chuckled Tom. "Arrived about five minutes after you did. If there's anything you need, Mr. Potter, don't hesitate to ask."

He gave another bow and left.

Harry sat on his bed for a long time, absentmindedly stroking Hedwig. The sky outside the window was changing rapidly from deep, velvety blue to cold, steely gray and then, slowly, to pink shot with gold. Harry could hardly believe that he'd left Privet Drive only a few hours ago, that he wasn't expelled, and that he was now facing two completely Dursley-free weeks.

"It's been a very weird night, Hedwig," he yawned.

And without even removing his glasses, he slumped back onto his pillows and fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LEAKY CAULDRON

It took Harry several days to get used to his strange new freedom. Never before had he been able to get up whenever he wanted or eat whatever he fancied. He could even go wherever he pleased, as long as it was in Diagon Alley, and as this long cobbled street was packed with the most fascinating wizarding shops in the world, Harry felt no desire to break his word to Fudge and stray back into the Muggle world.

Harry ate breakfast each morning in the Leaky Cauldron, where he liked watching the other guests: funny little witches from the country, up for a day's shopping; venerable-looking wizards arguing over the latest article in Transfiguration Today; wild-looking warlocks; raucous dwarfs; and once, what looked suspiciously like a hag, who ordered a plate of raw liver from behind a thick woollen balaclava.

After breakfast Harry would go out into the backyard, take out his wand, tap the third brick from the left above the trash bit,, and stand back as the archway into Diagon Alley opened in the wall.

Harry spent the long sunny days exploring the shops and eating under the brightly colored umbrellas outside cafes, where his fellow diners were showing one another their purchases ("it , s a lunascope, old boy -- no more messing around with moon charts, see?") or else discussing the case of Sirius Black ("personalty, I won't let any of the children out alone until he's back in Azkaban"). Harry didn't have to do his homework under the blankets by flashlight anymore; now he could sit in the bright sunshine outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, finishing all his essays with occasional help from Florean Fortescue himself, who, apart from knowing a great deal about medieval witch burnings, gave Harry free sundaes every half an hour.

Once Harry had refilled his money bag with gold Galleons, silver Sickles, and bronze Knuts from his vault at Gringotts, he had to exercise a lot of self-control not to spend the whole lot at once. He had to keep reminding himself that he had five years to go at Hogwarts, and how it would feel to ask the Dursleys for money for spellbooks, to stop himself from buying a handsome set of solid gold Gobstones (a wizarding game rather like marbles, in which the stones squirt a

nasty-smelling liquid into the other player's face when they lose a point). He was sorely tempted, too, by the perfect, moving model of the galaxy in a large glass ball, which would have meant he never had to take another Astronomy lesson. But the thing that tested Harry's resolution most appeared in his favorite shop, Quality Quidditch Supplies, a week after he'd arrived at the Leaky Cauldron.

Curious to know what the crowd in the shop was staring at, Harry edged his way inside and squeezed in among the excited witches and wizards until he glimpsed a newly erected podium, on which was mounted the most magnificent broom he had ever seen in his life.

"Just come out -- prototype --" a square-jawed wizard was telling his companion.

"It's the fastest broom in the world, isn't it, Dad?" squeaked a boy younger than Harry, who was swinging off his father's arm.

"Irish International Side's Just put in an order for seven of these beauties!" the proprietor of the shop told the crowd. "And they're favorites for the World Cup!"

A large witch in front of Harry moved, and he was able to read the sign next to the broom:

** THE FIREBOLT **

THIS STATE-OF-THE-ART PACING BROOM SPORTS A STREAM-LINED, SUPERFINE HANDLE OF ASH, TREATED WITH A DIAMOND-HARD POLISH AND HAND- NUMBERED WITH ITS OWN REGISTRATION NUMBER. EACH INDIVIDUALLY SELECTED BIRCH TWIG IN THE BROOMTAIL HAS BEEN HONED TO AERODYNAMIC PERFECTION, GIVING THE FIREBOLT UNSURPASSABLE BALANCE AND PINPOINT PRECISION. THE FIREBOLT HAS AN ACCELERATION OF 150 MILES AN HOUR IN TEN SECONDS AND INCORPORATES AN UNBREAKABLE BRAKING CHARM. PRICE ON REQUEST.

Price on request... Harry didn't like to think how much gold the Firebolt would cost. He had never wanted anything as much in his whole life -- but he had never lost a Quidditch match on his Nim bus Two Thousand, and what was the point in emptying his Gringotts vault for the Firebolt, when he had a very good broom already? Harry didn't ask for the price, but he returned, almost every day after that, just to look at the Firebolt.

There were, however, things that Harry needed to buy. He went to the Apothecary to replenish his store of potions ingredients, and as his school robes were now several inches too short in the arm and leg, he visited Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions and bought new ones. Most important of all, he had to buy his new schoolbooks, which would include those for his two new subjects, Care of Magical Creatures and Divination.

Harry got a surprise as he looked in at the bookshop window. Instead of the usual display of gold- embossed spellbooks the size of paving slabs, there was a large iron cage behind the glass that held about a hundred copies of The Monster Book of Monsters. Torn pages were flying everywhere as the books grappled with each other, locked together in furious wrestling matches and snapping aggressively.

Harry pulled his booklist out of his pocket and consulted it for the first time. The Monster Book of Monsters was listed as the required book

for Care of Magical Creatures. Now Harry understood why Hagrid had said it would come in useful. He felt relieved; he had been wondering whether Hagrid wanted help with some terrifying new pet.

As Harry entered Flourish and Blotts, the manager came hurrying toward him.

"Hogwarts?" he said abruptly. "Come to get your new books?"

"Yes," said Harry, "I need --"

"Get out of the way," said the manager impatiently, brushing Harry aside. He drew on a pair of very thick gloves, picked up a large, knobbly walking stick, and proceeded toward the door of the Monster Books' cage.

"Hang on," said Harry quickly, "I've already got one of those."

"Have you?" A look of enormous relief spread over the manager's face. "Thank heavens for that. I've been bitten five times already this morning --"

A loud ripping noise rent the air; two of the Monster Books had seized a third and were pulling it apart.

"Stop it! Stop it!" cried the manager, poking the walking stick through the bars and knocking the books apart. "I'm never stocking them again, never! It's been bedlam! I thought we'd seen the worst when we bought two hundred copies of the Invisible Book of Invisibility -cost a fortune, and we never found them.... Well... is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Yes," said Harry, looking down his booklist, "I need Unfogging the Future by Cassandra Vablatsky."

"Ah, starting Divination, are you?" said the manager, stripping off his gloves and leading Harry into the back of the shop, where there was a corner devoted to fortune-telling. A small table was stacked with volumes such as Predicting the Unpredictable: Insulate Yourself Against Shocks and Broken Balls: When Fortunes Turn Foul.

"Here you are,,,' said the manager, who had climbed a set of steps to take down a thick, black-bound book. "Unfogging the Future. Very good guide to all your basic fortune-telling methods - palmistry, crystal balls, bird entrails.

But Harry wasn't listening. His eyes had fallen on another book, which was among a display on a small table: Death Omens.- What to Do When You Know the Worst Is Coming.

"Oh, I wouldn't read that if I were you," said the manager lightly, looking to see what Harry was staring at. "You'll start seeing death omens everywhere. It's enough to frighten anyone to death. "

But Harry continued to stare at the front cover of the book; it showed a black dog large as a bear, with gleaming eyes. It looked oddly familiar...

The manager pressed Unfogging the Future into Harry's hands.

"Anything else?" he said.

"Yes," said Harry, tearing his eyes away from the dog's and dazedly consulting his booklist. "Er -- I need Intermediate Transfiguration and The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Three."

Harry emerged from Flourish and Blotts ten minutes later with his new books under his arms and made his way back to the Leaky Cauldron, hardly noticing where he was going and bumping into several people.

He tramped up the stairs to his room, went inside, and tipped his books onto his bed. Somebody had been in to tidy; the windows were open and sun was pouring inside. Harry could hear the buses rolling by in the unseen Muggle street behind him and the sound of the invisible crowd below in Diagon Alley. He caught sight of himself in the mirror over the basin.

"It can't have been a death omen," he told his reflection defiantly. "I was panicking when I saw that thing in Magnolia Crescent.... It was probably just a stray dog...."

He raised his hand automatically and tried to make his hair lie flat

"You're fighting a losing battle there, dear," said his mirror in a vvheezy voice.

As the days slipped by, Harry started looking wherever he went for a sign of Ron or Hermione. Plenty of Hogwarts students were arriving in Diagon Alley now, with the start of term so near. Harry met Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, his fellow Gryffindors, in Quality Quidditch Supplies, where they too were ogling the Firebolt; he also ran into the real Neville Longbottom, a round-faced, forgetful boy, outside Flourish and Blotts. Harry didn't stop to chat; Neville appeared to have mislaid his booklist and was being told off by his very formidable-looking grandmother. Harry hoped she never found out that he'd pretended to be Neville while on the run from the Ministry of Magic.

Harry woke on the last day of the holidays, thinking that he would at least meet Ron and Hermione tomorrow, on the Hogwarts Express. He got up, dressed, went for a last look at the Firebolt, and was just wondering where he'd have lunch, when someone yelled his name and he turned.

"Harry! HARRY!"

They were there, both of them, sitting outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor -- Ron looking incredibly freckly, Her,, one very brown, both waving frantically at him.

"Finally!" said Ron, grinning at Harry as he sat down. "We went to the Leaky Cauldron, but they said you'd left, and we went to Flourish and Blotts, and Madam Malkin's, and --"

"I got all my school stuff last week," Harry explained. "And how come You knew I'm staying at the Leaky Cauldron?" "Dad," said Ron simply.

Mr. Weasley, who worked at the Ministry of Magic, would of course have heard the whole story of what had happened to Aunt Marge.

"Did you really blow up your aunt, Harry?" said Hermione in a very

serious voice.

"I didn't mean to," said Harry, while Ron roared with laughter. "I just -- lost control."

"It's not funny, Ron," said Hermione sharply. "Honestly, I'm amazed Harry wasn't expelled."

"So am I," admitted Harry. "Forget expelled, I thought I was going to be arrested." He looked at Ron. "Your dad doesn't know why Fudge let me off, does he?"

"Probably 'cause it's you, isn't it?" shrugged Ron, still chuckling. "Famous Harry Potter and all that. I'd hate to see what the Ministry'd do to me if I blew up an aunt. Mind you, they'd have to dig me up first, because Mum would've killed me. Anyway, you can ask Dad yourself this evening. We're staying at the Leaky Cauldron tonight too! So you can come to King's Cross with us tomorrow! Hermione's there as well!"

Hermione nodded, beaming. "Mum and Dad dropped me off this morning with all my Hogwarts things."

"Excellent!" said Harry happily. "So, have you got all your new books and stuff?"

"Look at this," said Ron, pulling a long thin box out of a bag and opening it. "Brand-new wand. Fourteen inches, willow, containing one unicorn tail-hair. And we've got all our books --" He pointed at a large bag under his chair. "What about those Monster Books, eh? The assistant nearly cried when we said we wanted two."

"What's all that, Hermione?" Harry asked, pointing at not one but three bulging bags in the chair next to her.

"Well, I'm taking more new subjects than you, aren't I?" said Hermione. "Those are my books for Arithmancy, Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, the Study of Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies --"

"What are you doing Muggle Studies for?" said Ron, rolling his eyes at Harry. "You're Muggle-born! Your mum and dad are Muggles! You already know all about Muggles!"

"But it'll be fascinating to study them from the wizarding point of view," said Hermione earnestly.

"Are you planning to eat or sleep at all this year, Hermione?" asked Harry, while Ron sniggered. Hermione ignored them.

"I've still got ten Galleons," she said, checking her purse. "It's my birthday in September, and Mum and Dad gave me some money to get myself an early birthday present."

"How about a nice book?" said Ron innocently.

"No, I don't think so," said Hermione composedly. "I really want an owl. I mean, Harry's got Hedwig and you've got Errol --"

"I haven't," said Ron. "Errol's a family owl. All I've got is Scabbers." He pulled his pet rat out of his pocket. "And I want to get him checked

over," he added, placing Scabbers on the table in front of them. "I don't think Egypt agreed with him."

Scabbers was looking thinner than usual, and there was a definite droop to his whiskers.

"There's a magical creature shop just over there," said Harry, who knew Diagon Alley very well by now. "You could see if they've got anything for Scabbers, and Hermione can get her owl,"

So they paid for their ice cream and crossed the street to the Magical Menagerie.

There wasn't much room inside. Every inch of wall was hidden by cages. It was smelly and very noisy because the occupants of these cages were all squeaking, squawking, jabbering, or hissing. The witch behind the counter was already advising a wizard on the care of double-ended newts, so Harry, Ron, and Hermione waited, examining the cages.

A pair of enormous purple toads sat gulping wetly and feasting on dead blowflies. A gigantic tortoise with a jewel-encrusted shell was glittering near the window. Poisonous orange snails were oozing slowly up the side of their glass tank, and a fat white rabbit kept changing into a silk top hat and back again with a loud popping noise. Then there were cats of every color, a noisy cage of ravens, a basket of funny custard-colored furballs that were humming loudly, and on the counter, a vast cage of sleek black rats that were playing some sort of skipping game using their long, bald tails.

The double-ended newt wizard left, and Ron approached the counter.

"It's my rat," he told the witch. "He been a bit off-color ever since I brought him back from Egypt."

"Bang him on the counter," said the witch, pulling a pair of heavy black spectacles out of her pocket.

Ron lifted Scabbers out of his inside pocket and placed him next to the cage of his fellow rats, who stopped their skipping tricks and scuffled to the wire for a better look.

Like nearly everything Ron owned, Scabbers the rat was secondhand (he had once belonged to Ron's brother Percy) and a bit battered. Next to the glossy rats in the cage, he looked especially woebegone.

"Hm," said the witch, picking up Scabbers. "How old is this rat?"

"Dunno," said Ron. "Quite old. He used to belong to my brother."

"What powers does he have?" said the witch, examining Scabbers closely.

"Er --" The truth was that Scabbers had never shown the faintest trace of interesting powers. The witch's eyes moved from Scabbers's tattered left ear to his front paw, which had a toe missing, and tutted loudly.

"He's been through the mill, this one," she said.

"He was like that when Percy gave him to me," said Ron defensively.

"An ordinary common or garden rat like this can't be expected to live

longer than three years or so," said the witch. "Now, if you were looking for something a bit more hard-wearing, you might like one of these --"

She indicated the black rats, who promptly started skipping again. Ron muttered, "Show-offs."

"Well, if you Don't want a replacement, you can try this rat tonic," said the witch, reaching under the counter and bringing out a small red bottle.

"Okay," said Ron. "How much -- OUCH!"

Ron buckled as something huge and orange came soaring from the top of the highest cage, landed on his head, and then propelled itself, spitting madly, at Scabbers.

"NO, CROOKSHANKS, NO!" cried the witch, but Scabbers, shot from between her hands like a bar of soap, landed splay-legged on the floor, and then scampered for the door.

"Scabbers!" Ron shouted, racing out of the shop after him; Harry followed.

It took them nearly ten minutes to catch Scabbers, who had taken refuge under a wastepaper bin outside Quality Quidditch Supplies. Ron stuffed the trembling rat back into his pocket and straightened up, massaging his head.

"What was that?"

"It was either a very big cat or quite a small tiger," said Harry.

"Where's Hermione?"

"Probably getting her owl

They made their way back up the crowded street to the Magical Menagerie. As they reached it, Hermione came out, but she wasn't carrying an owl. Her arms were clamped tightly around the enormous ginger cat.

"You bought that monster?" said Ron, his mouth hanging open.

"He's gorgeous, isn't he?" said Hermione, glowing.

That was a matter of opinion, thought Harry. The cat's ginger fur was thick and fluffy, but it was definitely a bit bowlegged and its face looked grumpy and oddly squashed, as though it had run headlong into a brick wall. Now that Scabbers was out of sight, however, the cat was purring contentedly in Hermione's arms.

"Hermione, that thing nearly scalped me!" said Ron.

"He didn't mean to, did you, Crookshanks?" said Hermione.

"And what about Scabbers?" said Ron, pointing at the lump in his chest pocket. "He needs rest and relaxation! How's he going to get it with that thing around?"

"That reminds me, you forgot your rat tonic," said Hermione, slapping

the small red bottle into Ron's hand. "And stop worrying, Crookshanks will be sleeping in my dormitory and Scabbers in yours, what's the problem? Poor Crookshanks, that witch said he'd been in there for ages; no one wanted him."

"Wonder why," said Ron sarcastically as they set off toward the Leaky Cauldron.

They found Mr. Weasley sitting in the bar, reading the Daily prophet.

"Harry!" he said, smiling as he looked up. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks," said Harry as he, Ron, and Hermione joined Mr. Weasley with A their shopping.

Mr. Weasley put down his paper, and Harry saw the now familiar picture of Sirius Black staring up at him.

"They still haven't caught him, then?" he asked.

"No," said Mr. Weasley, looking extremely grave. "They've pulled us all off our regular jobs at the Ministry to try and find him, but no luck so far."

"Would we get a reward if we caught him?" asked Ron. "It'd be good to get some more money --"

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron," said Mr. Weasley, who on closer inspection looked very strained. "Black's not going to be caught by a thirteen-year-old wizard. It's the Azkaban guards who'll get him back, You mark my words."

At that moment Mrs. Weasley entered the bar, laden with shopping bags and followed by the twins, Fred and George, who were about to start their fifth year at Hogwarts; the newly elected Head Boy, Percy; and the Weasleys' youngest child and only girl, Ginny.

Ginny, who had always been very taken with Harry, seemed even more heartily embarrassed than usual when she saw him, perhaps because he had saved her life during their previous year at Hogwarts. She went very red and muttered "hello" without looking at him. Percy, however, held out his hand solemnly as though he and Harry had never met and said, "Harry. How nice to see you.

"Hello, Percy," said Harry, trying not to laugh.

I hope you're well?" said Percy pompously, shaking hands. It was rather like being introduced to the mayor.

"Very well, thanks --"

"Harry!" said Fred, elbowing Percy out of the way and bowing deeply. "Simply splendid to see you, old boy --"

"Marvelous," said George, pushing Fred aside and seizing Harry's hand in turn. "Absolutely spiffing."

Percy scowled.

"That's enough, now," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Mum!" said Fred as though he'd only just spotted her and seizing her hand too. "How really corking to see you --"

"I said, that's enough," said Mrs. Weasley, depositing her shopping in an empty chair. "Hello, Harry, dear. I suppose you've heard our exciting news?" She pointed to the brand-new silver badge on Percy's chest. "Second Head Boy in the family!" she said, swelling with pride.

"And last," Fred muttered under his breath.

I don't doubt that," said Mrs. Weasley, frowning suddenly. "I notice they haven't made you two prefects."

"What do we want to be prefects for?" said George, looking revolted at the very idea. "It'd take all the fun out of life."

Ginny giggled.

"You want to set a better example for your sister!" snapped Mrs. Weasley.

"Ginny's got other brothers to set her an example, Mother," said Percy loftily. "I'm going up to change for dinner..."

He disappeared and George heaved a sigh.

"We tried to shut him in a pyramid," he told Harry. "But Mum spotted us."

Dinner that night was a very enjoyable affair. Tom the innkeeper put three tables together in the parlor, and the seven Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione ate their way through five delicious courses.

"How're we getting to King's Cross tomorrow, Dad?" asked Fred as they dug into a sumptuous chocolate pudding.

"The Ministry's providing a couple of cars," said Mr. Weasley.

Everyone looked up at him.

"Why?" said Percy curiously.

"It's because of you, Perce," said George seriously. "And there'll be little flags on the hoods, with HB on them"

-- for Humongous Bighead," said Fred.

Everyone except Percy and Mrs. Weasley snorted into their pudding.

"Why are the Ministry providing cars, Father?" Percy asked again, in a dignified voice.

"Well, as we haven't got one anymore," said Mr. Weasley,

-- and as I work there, they're doing me a favor --"

His voice was casual, but Harry couldn't help noticing that Mr. Weasley's ears had gone red, just like Ron's did when he was under pressure.

"Good thing, too," said Mrs. Weasley briskly. "Do you realize how much luggage you've all got between you? A nice sight you'd be on the Muggle Underground.... You are all packed, aren't you?"

"Ron hasn't put all his new things in his trunk yet," said Percy, in a long-suffering voice. "He's dumped them on my bed."

"You'd better go and pack properly, Ron, because we won't have much time in the morning," Mrs. Weasley called down the table. Ron scowled at Percy.

After dinner everyone felt very full and sleepy. One by one they made their way upstairs to their rooms to check their things for the next day. Ron and Percy were next door to Harry. He had just closed and locked his own trunk when he heard angry voices through the wall, and went to see what was going on.

The door of number twelve was ajar and Percy was shouting.

"It was here, on the bedside table, I took it off for polishing

"I haven't touched it, all right?" Ron roared back.

"What's up?" said Harry.

"My Head Boy badge is gone," said Percy, rounding on Harry.

"So's Scabbers's rat tonic," said Ron, throwing things out of his trunk to look. "I think I might've left it in the bar --"

"You're not going anywhere till you've found my badge!" yelled Percy.

"I'll get Scabbers's stuff, I'm packed," Harry said to Ron, and he went downstairs.

Harry was halfway along the passage to the bar, which was now very dark, when he heard another pair of angry voices coming from the parlor. A second later, he recognized them as Mr. and Mrs.

Weasleys'. He hesitated, not wanting them to know he'd heard them arguing, when the sound of his own name made him stop, then move closer to the parlor door.

--makes no sense not to tell him," Mr. Weasley was saying heatedly. "Harry's got a right to know. I've tried to tell Fudge, but he insists on treating Harry like a child. He's thirteen years old and --"

"Arthur, the truth would terrify him!" said Mrs. Weasley shrilly. "Do you really want to send Harry back to school with that hanging over him? For heaven's sake, he's happy not knowing!"

"I don't want to make him miserable, I want to put him on his guard!" retorted Mr. Weasley. "You know what Harry and Ron are like, wandering off by themselves -- they've ended up in the Forbidden Forest twice! But Harry mustn't do that this year! When I think what could have happened to him that night he ran away from home! If the Knight Bus hadn't picked him up, I'm prepared to bet he would have been dead before the Ministry found him."

"But he's not dead, he's fine, so what's the point

"Molly, they say Sirius Black's mad, and maybe he is, but he was clever enough to escape from Azkaban, and that's supposed to be impossible. It's been three weeks, and no one's seen hide nor hair of him, and I don't care what Fudge keeps telling the Daily Prophet, we're no nearer catching Black than inventing self-spelling wands. The only thing we know for sure is what Black's after

"But Harry will be perfectly safe at Hogwarts."

"We thought Azkaban was perfectly safe. If Black can break out of Azkaban, he can break into Hogwarts."

"But no one's really sure that Black's after Harry

There was a thud on wood, and Harry was sure Mr. Weasley had banged his fist on the table.

"Molly, how many times do I have to tell you? They didn't report it in the press because Fudge wanted it kept quiet, but Fudge went out to Azkaban the night Black escaped. The guards told Fudge that Blacks been talking in his sleep for a while now. Always the same words: 'He's at Hogwarts... he's at Hogwarts.' Black is deranged, Molly, and he wants Harry dead. If you ask me, he thinks murdering Harry will bring You-Know-Who back to power. Black lost everything the night Harry stopped You-Know-Who, and he's had twelve years alone in Azkaban to brood on that...."

There was a silence. Harry leaned still closer to the door, desperate to hear more.

"Well, Arthur, you must do what you think is right. But you're forgetting Albus Dumbledore. I don't think anything could hurt Harry at Hogwarts while Dumbledore's headmaster. I suppose he knows about all this?"

"Of course he knows. We had to ask him if he minds the Azkaban guards stationing themselves around the entrances to the school grounds. He wasn't happy about it, but he agreed."

"Not happy? Why shouldn't he be happy, if they're there to catch Black?"

"Dumbledore isn't fond of the Azkaban guards," said Mr. Weasley heavily. "Nor am I, if it comes to that... but when you're dealing with a wizard like Black, you sometimes have to join forces with those you'd rather avoid."

"If they save Harry then I will never say another word against them, said Mr. Weasley wearily. "It's late, Molly, we'd better go up...."

Harry heard chairs move. As quietly as he could, he hurried down the passage to the bar and out of sight. The parlor door opened, and a few seconds later footsteps told him that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were climbing the stairs.

The bottle of rat tonic was lying under the table they had sat at earlier. Harry waited until he heard Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's bedroom door close, then headed back upstairs with the bottle.

Fred and George were crouching in the shadows on the landing, heaving with laughter as they listened to Percy dismantling his and Ron's room in search of his badge.

"We've got it," Fred whispered to Harry. "We've been improving it."

The badge now read Bighead Boy.

Harry forced a laugh, went to give Ron the rat tonic, then shut himself in his room and lay down on his bed.

So Sirius Black was after him. This explained everything. Fudge had been lenient with him because he was so relieved to find him alive. He'd made Harry promise to stay in Diagon Alley where there were plenty of wizards to keep an eye on him. And he was sending two Ministry cars to take them all to the station tomorrow, so that the Weasleys could look after Harry until he was on the train.

Harry lay listening to the muffled shouting next door and wondered why he didn't feel more scared. Sirius Black had murdered thirteen people with one curse; Mr. and Mrs. Weasley obviously thought Harry would be panic-stricken if he knew the truth. But Harry happened to agree wholeheartedly with Mrs. Weasley that the safest place on earth was wherever Albus Dumbledore happened to be. Didn't people always say that Dumbledore was the only person Lord Voldemort had ever been afraid of? Surely Black, as Voldemort's right-hand man, would be just as frightened of him?

And then there were these Azkaban guards everyone kept talking about. They seemed to scare most people senseless, and if they were stationed all around the school, Black's chances of getting inside seemed very remote.

No, all in all, the thing that bothered Harry most was the fact that his chances of visiting Hogsmeade now looked like zero. Nobody would want Harry to leave the safety of the castle until Black was caught; in fact, Harry suspected his every move would be carefully watched until the danger had passed.

He scowled at the dark ceiling. Did they think he couldn't look after himself? He'd escaped Lord Voldemort three times; he wasn't completely useless....

Unbidden, the image of the beast in the shadows of Magnolia Crescent crossed his mind. What to do when you know the worst is coming...

"I'm not going to be murdered," Harry said out loud.

"That's the spirit, dear," said his mirror sleepily.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DEMENTOR

Tom woke Harry the next morning with his usual toothless grin and a cup of tea. Harry got dressed and was just persuading a disgruntled Hedwig to get back into her cage when Ron banged his way into the room, pulling a sweatshirt over his head and looking irritable.

"The sooner we get on the train, the better," he said. "At least I can

get away from Percy at Hogwarts. Now he's accusing me of dripping tea on his photo of Penelope Clearwater. You know," Ron grimaced, "his girlfriend. She's hidden her face under the frame because her nose has gone all blotchy..."

"I've got something to tell you," Harry began, but they were interrupted by Fred and George, who had looked in to congratulate Ron on infuriating Percy again.

They headed down to breakfast, where Mr. Weasley was reading the front page of the Daily Prophet with a furrowed brow and Mrs. Weasley was telling Hermione and Ginny about a love potion she'd made as a young girl. All three of them were rather giggly.

"What were you saying?" Ron asked Harry as they sat down.

"Later," Harry muttered as Percy stormed in.

Harry had no chance to speak to Ron or Hermione in the chaos of leaving; they were too busy heaving all their trunks down the Leaky Cauldron's narrow staircase and piling them up near the door, with Hedwig and Hermes, Percy's screech owl, perched on top in their cages. A small wickerwork basket stood beside the heap of trunks, spitting loudly.

"It's all right, Crookshanks," Hermione cooed through the wickerwork. "I'll let you out on the train."

"You won't," snapped Ron. "What about poor Scabbers, eh?"

He pointed at his chest, where a large lump indicated that Scabbers was curled up in his pocket.

Mr. Weasley, who had been outside waiting for the Ministry cars, stuck his head inside.

"They're here, he said. "Harry, come on."

Mr. Weasley marched Harry across the short stretch of pavement toward the first of two old- fashioned dark green cars, each of which was driven by a furtive-looking wizard wearing a suit of emerald velvet.

"In you get, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, glancing up and down the crowded street.

Harry got into the back of the car and was shortly joined by Hermione, Ron, and, to Ron's disgust, Percy.

The journey to King's Cross was very uneventful compared with Harry's trip on the Knight Bus. The Ministry of Magic cars seemed almost ordinary. though Harry noticed that they could slide through gaps that Uncle Vernon's new company car certainly couldn't have managed. They reached King's Cross with twenty minutes to spare; the Ministry drivers found them trolleys, unloaded their trunks, touched their hats in salute to Mr. Weasley, and drove away, somehow managing to jump to the head of an unmoving line at the traffic lights.

Mr. Weasley kept close to Harry's elbow all the way into the station.

"Right then," he said, glancing around them. "Let's do this in pairs, as there are so many of us. I'll go through first with Harry."

Mr. Weasley strolled toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten, pushing Harry's trolley and apparently very interested in the InterCity 125 that had just arrived at platform nine. With a meaningful look at Harry, he leaned casually against the barrier. Harry imitated him.

In a moment, they had fallen sideways through the solid metal onto platform nine and three-quarters and looked up to see the Hogwarts Express, a scarlet steam engine, puffing smoke over a platform packed with witches and wizards seeing their children onto the train.

Percy and Ginny suddenly appeared behind Harry. They were panting and had apparently taken the barrier at a run.

"Ah, there's Penelope!" said Percy, smoothing his hair and going pink again. Ginny caught Harry's eye, and they both turned away to hide their laughter as Percy strode over to a girl with long, curly hair, walking with his chest thrown out so that she couldn't miss his shiny badge. stood back to let him on. They leaned out of the window and waved at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley until the train turned a corner and blocked them from view.

"I need to talk to you in private," Harry muttered to Ron and Hermione as the train picked up speed.

"Go away, Ginny," said Ron.

"Oh, that's nice," said Ginny huffily, and she stalked off.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off down the corridor, looking for an empty compartment, but all were full except for the one at the very end of the train.

This had only one occupant, a man sitting fast asleep next to the window. Harry, Ron, and Hermione checked on the threshold. The Hogwarts Express was usually reserved for students and they had never seen an adult there before, except for the witch who pushed the food cart.

The stranger was wearing an extremely shabby set of wizard's robes that had been darned in several places. He looked ill and exhausted. Though quite young, his light brown hair was flecked with gray.

"Who d'you reckon he is?" Ron hissed as they sat down and slid the door shut, taking the seats farthest away from the window.

"Professor R. J. Lupin," whispered Hermione at once.

"How d'you know that?"

"It's on his case," she replied, pointing at the luggage rack over the man's head, where there was a small, battered case held together with a large quantity of neatly knotted string. The name Professor R. J. Lupin was stamped across one corner in peeling letters.

"Wonder what he teaches?" said Ron, frowning at Professor Lupin's pallid profile.

"That's obvious," whispered Hermione. "There's only one vacancy, isn't there? Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had already had two Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, both of whom had lasted only one year. There were rumors that the job was jinxed.

"well, I hope he's up to it," said Ron doubtfully. "He looks like on, good hex would finish him off, doesn't he? Anyway..." He turned to Harry. "What were you going to tell us?"

Harry explained all about Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's argument and the warning Mr. Weasley had just given him. When he'd finished, Ron looked thunderstruck, and Hermione had her hands over her mouth. She finally lowered them to say, "Sirius Black escaped to come after you? Oh, Harry... you'll have to be really, really careful. don't go looking for trouble, Harry --"

"I Don't go looking for trouble," said Harry, nettled. "Trouble usually finds me."

"How thick would Harry have to be, to go looking for a nutter who wants to kill him?" said Ron shakily.

They were taking the news worse than Harry had expected. Both Ron and Hermione seemed to be much more frightened of Black than he was.

"No one knows how he got out of Azkaban," said Ron uncomfortably. "No one's ever done it before. And he was a top-security prisoner too."

"But they'll catch him, won't they?" said Hermione earnestly. "I Mean, they've got all the Muggles looking out for him too...." "What's that noise?" said Ron suddenly.

A faint, tinny sort of whistle was coming from somewhere. The, looked all around the compartment.

"It's coming from your trunk, Harry," said Ron, standing UP and reaching into the luggage rack. A moment later he had pulled the Pocket Sneakoscope out from between Harry's robes. It was spinning very fast in the palm of Ron's hand and glowing brilliantly.

"Is that a Sneakoscope?" said Hermione interestedly, standing up for a better look.

"Yeah... mind you, it's a very cheap one," Ron said. "It went haywire just as I was tying it to Errol's leg to send it to Harry."

"Were you doing anything untrustworthy at the time?" said Hermione shrewdly.

"No! Well... I wasn't supposed to be using Errol. You know he's not really up to long journeys... but how else was I supposed to get Harry's present to him?"

"Stick it back in the trunk," Harry advised as the Sneakoscope whistled piercingly, "or it'll wake him up."

He nodded toward Professor Lupin. Ron stuffed the Sneakoscope into a particularly horrible pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks, which deadened the sound, then closed the lid of the trunk on it.

"We could get it checked in Hogsmeade," said Ron, sitting back down.

"They sell that sort of thing in Dervish and Bangs, magical instruments and stuff. Fred and George told me."

"Do you know much about Hogsmeade?" asked Hermione keenly. "I've read it's the only entirely non-Muggle settlement in Britain --"

"Yeah, I think it is," said Ron in an offhand sort of way.

"But that's not why I want to go. I just want to get inside Honey Dukes."

"What's that?" said Hermione.

"It's this sweetshop," said Ron, a dreamy look coming over his face, "where they've got everything... Pepper Imps -- they make you smoke at the mouth -- and great fat Chocoballs full of strawberry mousse and clotted cream, and really excellent sugar quills, which you can suck in class and just look like you're thinking what to write next --"

"But Hogsmeade's a very interesting place, isn't it?" Hermione pressed on eagerly. "In Sites of Historical Sorcery it says the inn was the headquarters for the 1612 goblin rebellion, and the Shrieking Shades supposed to be the most severely haunted building in Britain --"

-- and massive sherbert balls that make you levitate a few inches off the ground while you're sucking them," said Ron, who was plainly not listening to a word Hermione was saying.

Hermione looked around at Harry.

"Won't it be nice to get out of school for a bit and explore Hogsmeade?"

"Spect it will," said Harry heavily. "You'll have to tell me when You've found out."

"What d'you mean?" said Ron.

"I can't go. The Dursleys didn't sign my permission form, and Fudge wouldn't either."

Ron looked horrified.

"You're not allowed to come? But -- no way -- McGonagall or someone will give you permission --" muscled; Crabbe was taller, with a pudding-bowl haircut and a very thick neck; Goyle had short, bristly hair and long, gorilla-ish arms.

"Well, look who it is," said Malfoy in his usual lazy drawl, pulling open the compartment door. "Potty and the Weasel."

Crabbe and Goyle chuckled trollishly.

"I heard your father finally got his hands on some gold this summer, Weasley," said Malfoy. "Did your mother die of shock?"

Ron stood up so quickly he knocked Crookshanks's basket to the floor. Professor Lupin gave a snort.

"Who's that?" said Malfoy, taking an automatic step backward as he spotted Lupin.

"New teacher," said Harry, who got to his feet, too, in case he needed to hold Ron back. "What were you saying, Malfoy?"

Malfoy's pale eyes narrowed; he wasn't fool enough to pick a fight right under a teacher's nose.

"C'mon," he muttered resentfully to Crabbe and Goyle, and they disappeared.

Harry and Ron sat down again, Ron massaging his knuckles.

"I'm not going to take any crap from Malfoy this year," he said angrily. "I mean it. If he makes one more crack about my family, I'm going to get hold of his head and --"

Ron made a violent gesture in midair.

"Ron," hissed Hermione, pointing at Professor Lupin, "be careful..."

But Professor Lupin was still fast asleep.

The rain thickened as the train sped yet farther north; the windows were now a solid, shimmering gray, which gradually darkened until lanterns flickered into life all along the corridors and over the luggage racks. The train rattled, the rain hammered, the wind roared, but still, Professor Lupin slept.

"We must be nearly there," said Ron, leaning forward to look past Professor Lupin at the now completely black window.

The words had hardly left him when the train started to slow down.

"Great," said Ron, getting up and walking carefully past Professor Lupin to try and see outside. "I'm starving. I want to get to the feast....

"We can't be there yet," said Hermione, checking her watch.

"So why're we stopping?"

The train was getting slower and slower. As the noise of the pistons fell away, the wind and rain sounded louder than ever against the windows.

Harry, who was nearest the door, got up to look into the corridor. All along the carriage, heads were sticking curiously out of their compartments.

The train came to a stop with a jolt, and distant thuds and bangs told them that luggage had fallen out of the racks. Then, without warning, all the lamps went out and they were plunged into total darkness.

"'What's going on?" said Ron's voice from behind Harry.

"Ouch!" gasped Hermione. "Ron, that was my foot!"

Harry felt his way back to his seat.

"D'you think we've broken down?"

"Dunno..."

There was a squeaking sound, and Harry saw the dim black outline of Ron, wiping a patch clean on the window and peering out.

"There's something moving out there," Ron said. "I think people are coming aboard...."

The compartment door suddenly opened and someone fell painfully over Harry's legs.

"Sorry -- d'you know what's going on? -- Ouch -- sorry

"Hullo, Neville," said Harry, feeling around in the dark and pulling Neville up by his cloak.

"Harry? Is that you? What's happening?"

"No idea -- sit down --"

There was a loud hissing and a yelp of pain; Neville had tried to sit on Crookshanks.

"I'm going to go and ask the driver what's going on," came Hermione's voice. Harry felt her pass him, heard the door slide open again, and then a thud and two loud squeals of pain.

"Who's that?"

"Who's that?"

"Ginny?"

"Hermione?"

"What are you doing?"

"I was looking for Ron --" "Come in and sit down --"

"Not here!" said Harry hurriedly. "I'm here!"

"Ouch!" said Neville.

"Quiet!" said a hoarse voice suddenly.

Professor Lupin appeared to have woken up at last. Harry could hear movements in his corner.

None of them spoke.

There was a soft, crackling noise, and a shivering light filled the compartment. Professor Lupin appeared to be holding a handful of flames. They illuminated his tired, gray face, but his eyes looked alert and wary.

"Stay where you are," he said in the same hoarse voice, and he got slowly to his feet with his handful of fire held out in front of him.

But the door slid slowly open before Lupin could reach it.

Standing in the doorway, illuminated by the shivering flames in Lupin's hand, was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Its face was completely hidden beneath its hood. Harry's eyes darted downward, and what he saw made his stomach contract. There was a hand protruding from the cloak and it was glistening, grayish, slimy-looking, and scabbed, like something dead that had decayed in water...

But it was visible only for a split second. As though the creature beneath the cloak sensed Harry's gaze, the hand was suddenly withdrawn into the folds of its black cloak.

And then the thing beneath the hood, whatever it was, drew a long, slow, rattling breath, as though it were trying to suck something more than air from its surroundings.

An intense cold swept over them all. Harry felt his own breath catch in his chest. The cold went deeper than his skin. It was inside his chest, it was inside his very heart....

Harry's eyes rolled up into his head. He couldn't see. He was drowning in cold. There was a rushing in his ears as though of water. He was being dragged downward, the roaring growing louder. .

And then, from far away, he heard screaming, terrible, terrified, pleading screams. He wanted to help whoever it was, he tried to move his arms, but couldn't... a thick white fog was swirling around him, inside him -

"Harry! Harry! Are you all right?"

Someone was slapping his face.

"W -- what?"

Harry opened his eyes; there were lanterns above him, and the floor was shaking -- the Hogwarts Express was moving again and the lights had come back on. He seemed to have slid out of his seat onto the floor. Ron and Hermione were kneeling next to him, and above them he could see Neville and Professor Lupin watching. Harry felt very sick; when he put up his hand to push his glasses back on, he felt cold sweat on his face.

Ron and Hermione heaved him back onto his seat.

"Are you okay?" Ron asked nervously.

"Yeah," said Harry, looking quickly toward the door. The hooded creature had vanished. "What happened? Where's that -- that thing? Who screamed?"

"No one screamed," said Ron, more nervously still.

Harry looked around the bright compartment. Ginny and Neville looked back at him, both very pale.

"But I heard screaming --"

A loud snap made them all jump. Professor Lupin was breaking an enormous slab of chocolate into pieces.

"Here," he said to Harry, handing him a particularly large piece. "Eat it. It'll help."

Harry took the chocolate but didn't eat it.

"What was that thing?" he asked Lupin.

"A dementor," said Lupin, who was now giving chocolate to everyone else.
"One of the dementors of Azkaban."

Everyone stared at him. Professor Lupin crumpled up the empty chocolate wrapper and put it in his pocket.

"Eat," he repeated. "It'll help. I need to speak to the driver, excuse me..."

He strolled past Harry and disappeared into the corridor.

"Are you sure you're okay, Harry?" said Hermione, watching Harry anxiously.

"I Don't get it.... What happened?" said Harry, wiping more sweat off his face.

"Well -- that thing -- the dementor -- stood there and looked around (I mean, I think it did, I couldn't see its face) -- and you -- you

"I thought you were having a fit or something," said Ron, who still looked scared. "You went sort of rigid and fell out of your seat and started twitching -- 11

"And Professor Lupin stepped over you, and walked toward the dementor, and pulled out his wand," said Hermione, "and he said, 'None of us is hiding Sirius Black under our cloaks. Go.' But the dementor didn't move, so Lupin muttered something, and a silvery thing shot out of his wand at it, and it turned around and sort of glided away.... "

"It was horrible," said Neville, in a higher voice than usual. "Did YOU feel how cold it got when it came in?"

I felt weird," said Ron, shifting his shoulders uncomfortably. "Like I'd never be cheerful again...."

Ginny, who was huddled in her corner looking nearly as bad as Harry felt, gave a small sob; Hermione went over and put a comforting arm around her.

"But didn't any of you -- fall off your seats?" said Harry awkwardly.

"No," said Ron, looking anxiously at Harry again. "Ginny was shaking like mad, though...."

Harry didn't understand. He felt weak and shivery, as though he were recovering from a bad bout of flu; he also felt the beginnings of shame. Why had he gone to pieces like that, when no one else had?

Professor Lupin had come back. He paused as he entered, looked around, and said, with a small smile, "I haven't poisoned that chocolate, you know...."

Harry took a bite and to his great surprise felt warmth spread suddenly to the tips of his fingers and toes.

"We'll be at Hogwarts in ten minutes," said Professor Lupin. "Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry didn't ask how Professor Lupin knew his name.

"Fine," he muttered, embarrassed.

They didn't talk much during the remainder of the journey. At long last, the train stopped at Hogsmeade station, and there was a great scramble to get outside; owls hooted, cats meowed, and Neville's pet toad croaked loudly from under his hat. It was freezing on the tiny platform; rain was driving down in icy sheets.

"Firs' years this way!" called a familiar voice. Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned and saw the gigantic outline of Hagrid at the other end of the platform, beckoning the terrified-looking new students forward for their traditional journey across the lake.

"All right, you three?" Hagrid yelled over the heads of the crowd. They waved at him, but had no chance to speak to him because the mass of people around them was shunting them away along the platform. Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed the rest of the school along the platform and out onto a rough mud track, where at least a hundred stagecoaches awaited the remaining students, each pulled, Harry could only assume, by an invisible horse, because when they climbed inside and shut the door, the coach set off all by itself, bumping and swaying in procession.

The coach smelled faintly of mold and straw. Harry felt better since the chocolate, but still weak. Ron and Hermione kept looking at him sideways, as though frightened he might collapse again.

As the carriage trundled toward a pair of magnificent wrought iron gates, flanked with stone columns topped with winged boars,

Harry saw two more towering, hooded dementors, standing guard on either side. A wave of cold sickness threatened to engulf him again; he leaned back into the lumpy seat and closed his eyes until they had passed the gates. The carriage picked up speed on the long, sloping drive up to the castle; Hermione was leaning out of the tiny window, watching the many turrets and towers draw nearer. At last, the carriage swayed to a halt, and Hermione and Ron got out.

As Harry stepped down, a drawling, delighted voice sounded in his ear.

"You fainted, Potter? Is Longbottom telling the truth? You actually fainted?"

Malfoy elbowed past Hermione to block Harry's way up the stone steps to the castle, his face gleeful and his pale eyes glinting maliciously. "Shove off, Malfoy," said Ron, whose jaw was clenched.

"Did you faint as well, Weasley?" said Malfoy loudly. "Did the scary old dementor frighten you too, Weasley?"

"Is there a problem?" said a mild voice. Professor Lupin had just gotten out of the next carriage.

Malfoy gave Professor Lupin an insolent stare, which took in the patches on his robes and the delapidated suitcase. With a tiny hint of sarcasm

in his voice, he said, "Oh, no -- er -- Professor," then he smirked at Crabbe and Goyle and led them up the steps into the castle.

Hermione prodded Ron in the back to make him hurry, and the three of them joined the crowd swarming up the steps, through the giant oak front doors, into the cavernous entrance hall, which was lit with flaming torches, and housed a magnificent marble staircase that led to the upper floors.

The door into the Great Hall stood open at the right; Harry followed the crowd toward it, but had barely glimpsed the enchanted ceiling, which was black and cloudy tonight, when a voice called, "Potter! Granger! I want to see you both!"

Harry and Hermione turned around, surprised. Professor McGonagall, Transfiguration teacher and head of Gryffindor House, was calling over the heads of the crowd. She was a sternlooking witch who wore her hair in a tight bun; her sharp eyes were framed with square spectacles. Harry fought his way over to her with a feeling of foreboding: Professor McGonagall had a way of making him feel he must have done something wrong.

"There's no need to look so worried -- I just want a word in MY office," she told them. "Move along there, Weasley."

Ron stared as Professor McGonagall ushered Harry and Hermione away from the chattering crowd; they accompanied her across the entrance hall, up the marble staircase, and along a corridor.

Once they were in her office, a small room with a large, welcoming fire, Professor McGonagall motioned Harry and Hermione to sit down. She settled herself behind her desk and said abruptly, "Professor Lupin sent an owl ahead to say that you were taken ill on the train, Potter."

Before Harry could reply, there was a soft knock on the door and Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, came bustling in.

Harry felt himself going red in the face. It was bad enough that he'd passed out, or whatever he had done, without everyone making all this fuss.

"I'm fine," he said, "I don't need anything

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Madam Pomfrey, ignoring this and bending down to stare closely at him. "I suppose you've been doing something dangerous again?"

"It was a dementor, Poppy," said Professor McGonagall.

They exchanged a dark look, and Madam Pomfrey clucked disapprovingly.

"Setting dementors around a school, she muttered, pushing back Harry's hair and feeling his forehead. "He won't be the last one who collapses. Yes, he's all clammy. Terrible things, they are, and the effect they have on people who are already delicate

"I'm not delicate!" said Harry crossly.

"Of course you're not," said Madam Pomfrey absentmindedly, now taking his pulse.

"What does he need?" said Professor McGonagall crisply. "Bed rest? Should he perhaps spend tonight in the hospital wing?"

"I'm fine!" said Harry, jumping up. The thought of what Draco Malfoy would say if he had to go to the hospital wing was torture.

"Well, he should have some chocolate, at the very least," said Madam Pomfrey, who was now trying to peer into Harry's eyes.

"I've already had some," said Harry. "Professor Lupin gave me some. He gave it to all of us."

"Did he, now?" said Madam Pomfrey approvingly. "So we've finally got a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who knows his remedies?"

"Are you sure you feel all right, Potter?" Professor McGonagall said sharply.

"Yes," said Harry.

"Very well. Kindly wait outside while I have a quick word with Miss Granger about her course schedule, then we can go down to the feast together."

Harry went back into the corridor with Madam Pomfrey, who left for the hospital wing, muttering to herself. He had to wait only a few minutes; then Hermione emerged looking very happy about something, followed by Professor McGonagall, and the three of them made their way back down the marble staircase to the Great Hall.

It was a sea of pointed black hats; each of the long House tables was lined with students, their faces glimmering by the light of thousands of candles, which were floating over the tables in midair. Professor Flitwick, who was a tiny little wizard with a shock of white hair, was carrying an ancient hat and a three-legged stool out of the hall.

"Oh," said Hermione softly, "we've missed the Sorting!"

New students at Hogwarts were sorted into Houses by trying on the sorting Hat, which shouted out the House they were best suited to (Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, or Slytherin). Professor McGonagall strode off toward her empty seat at the staff table, and Harry and Hermione set off in the other direction, as quietly as possible, toward the Gryffindor table. People looked around at them as they passed along the back of the hall, and a few of them pointed at Harry. Had the story of his collapsing in front of the dementor traveled that fast?

He and Hermione sat down on either side of Ron, who had saved them seats.

"What was all that about?" he muttered to Harry.

Harry started to explain in a whisper, but at that moment the headmaster stood up to speak, and he broke off.

Professor Dumbledore, though very old, always gave an impression of great energy. He had several feet of long silver hair and beard, half-moon spectacles, and an extremely crooked nose. He was often described as the greatest wizard of the age, but that wasn't why Harry

respected him. You couldn't help trusting Albus Dumbledore, and as Harry watched him beaming around at the students, he felt really calm for the first time since the dementor had entered the train compartment.

"Welcome!" said Dumbledore, the candlelight shimmering on his beard. "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! I have a few things to say to you all, and as one of them is very serious, I think it best to get it out of the way before you become befuddled by our excellent feast...."

Dumbledore cleared his throat and continued, "As you will all be aware after their search of the Hogwarts Express, our school is presently playing host to some of the dementors of Azkaban, who are here on Ministry of Magic business."

He paused, and Harry remembered what Mr. Weasley had said about Dumbledore not being happy with the dementors guarding the school.

"They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds," Dumbledore continued, "and while they are with us, I must make it plain that nobody is to leave school without permission. Dementors are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises -- or even Invisibility Cloaks," he added blandly, and Harry and Ron glanced at each other. "It is not in the nature of a dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you. I look to the prefects, and our new Head Boy and Girl, to make sure that no student runs afoul of the dementors," he said.

Percy, who was sitting a few seats down from Harry, puffed out his chest again and stared around impressively. Dumbledore paused again; he looked very seriously around the hall, and nobody moved or made a sound.

"On a happier note," he continued, I am pleased to welcome two new teachers to our ranks this year.

"First, Professor Lupin, who has kindly consented to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

There was some scattered, rather unenthusiastic applause. Only those who had been in the compartment on the train with Professor Lupin clapped hard, Harry among them. Professor Lupin looked particularly shabby next to all the other teachers in their best robes.

"Look at Snape!" Ron hissed in Harry's ear.

Professor Snape, the Potions master, was staring along the staff table at Professor Lupin. It was common knowledge that Snape wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, but even Harry, who hated Snape, was startled at the expression twisting his thin, sallow face. It was beyond anger: it was loathing. Harry knew that expression only too well; it was the look Snape wore every time he set eyes on Harry.

"As to our second new appointment," Dumbledore continued as the lukewarm applause for Professor Lupin died away. "Well, I am sorry to tell you that Professor Kettleburn, our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, retired at the end of last year in order to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs. However, I am delighted to say that his place will be filled by none other than Rubeus Hagrid, who has agreed to take on this teaching job in addition to his gamekeeping duties."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another, stunned. Then they

joined in with the applause, which was tumultuous at the Gryffindor table in particular. Harry leaned forward to see Hagrid, who was ruby-red in the face and staring down at his enormous hands, his wide grin hidden in the tangle of his black beard.

"We should've known!" Ron roared, pounding the table. "Who else would have assigned us a biting book?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were the last to stop clapping, and as Professor Dumbledore started speaking again, they saw that Hagrid was wiping his eyes on the tablecloth.

"Well, I think that's everything of importance," said Dumbledore. "Let the feast begin!"

The golden plates and goblets before them filled suddenly with food and drink. Harry, suddenly ravenous, helped himself to everything he could reach and began to eat.

It was a delicious feast; the hall echoed with talk, laughter, and the clatter of knives and forks. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were eager for it to finish so that they could talk to Hagrid. They knew how much being made a teacher would mean to him. Hagrid wasn't a fully qualified wizard; he had been expelled from Hogwarts in his third year for a crime he had not committed. It had been Harry, Ron, and Hermione who had cleared Hagrid's name last year.

At long last, when the last morsels of pumpkin tart had melted from the golden platters, Dumbledore gave the word that it was time for them all to go to bed, and they got their chance.

"Congratulations, Hagrid!" Hermione squealed as they reached the teachers' table.

"All down ter you three," said Hagrid, wiping his shining face on his napkin as he looked up at them., "Can' believe it... great man, Dumbledore... came straight down to me hut after Professor Kettleburn said he'd had enough.... It's what I always wanted. --"

Overcome with emotion, he buried his face in his napkin, and Professor McGonagall shooed them away.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined the Gryffindors streaming up the marble staircase and, very tired now, along more corridors, UP more and more stairs, to the hidden entrance to Gryffindor Tower's large portrait of a fat lady in a pink dress asked them, "Password?"

"Coming through, coming through!" Percy called from behind the crowd.
"The new password's 'Fortuna Major'!"

"Oh no," said Neville Longbottom sadly. He always had trouble remembering the passwords.

Through the portrait hole and across the common room, the girls and boys divided toward their separate staircases. Harry climbed the spiral stair with no thought in his head except how glad he was to be back. They reached their familiar, circular dormitory with its five four-poster beds, and Harry, looking around, felt he was home at last.

TALONS AND TEA LEAVES

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the Great Hall for breakfast the next day, the first thing they saw was Draco Malfoy, who seemed to be entertaining a large group of Slytherins with a very funny story. As they passed, Malfoy did a ridiculous impression of a swooning fit and there was a roar of laughter.

"Ignore him," said Hermione, who was right behind Harry. "Just ignore him, it's not worth it...."

"Hey, Potter!" shrieked Pansy Parkinson, a Slytherin girl with a face like a pug. "Potter! The dementors are coming, Potter! Woooooooooo!"

Harry dropped into a seat at the Gryffindor table, next to George Weasley.

"New third-year course schedules," said George, passing then, over. "What's up with you, Harry?"

"Malfoy," said Ron, sitting down on George's other side and glaring over at the Slytherin table.

George looked up in time to see Malfoy pretending to faint with terror again.

"That little git," he said calmly. "He wasn't so cocky last night when the dementors were down at our end of the train. Came running into our compartment, didn't he, Fred?"

"Nearly wet himself," said Fred, with a contemptuous glance at Malfoy.

"I wasn't too happy myself," said George. "They're horrible things, those dementors...."

"Sort of freeze your insides, don't they?" said Fred.

"You didn't pass out, though, did you?" said Harry in a low voice.

"Forget it, Harry," said George bracingly. "Dad had to go out to Azkaban one time, remember, Fred? And he said it was the worst place he'd ever been, he came back all weak and shaking.... They suck the happiness out of a place, dementors. Most of the prisoners go mad in there."

"Anyway, we'll see how happy Malfoy looks after our first Quidditch match," said Fred. "Gryffindor versus Slytherin, first game of the season, remember?"

The only time Harry and Malfoy had faced each other in a Quidditch match, Malfoy had definitely come off worse. Feeling slightly more cheerful, Harry helped himself to sausages and fried tomatoes.

Hermione was examining her new schedule.

"Ooh, good, we're starting some new subjects today," she said happily. "Villains are these, that trespass upon my private lands! Come I. Scorn at my fall, perchance? Draw, you knaves, you dogs!"

They watched in astonishment as the little knight tugged his sword out

of its scabbard and began brandishing it violently, hopping up and down in rage. But the sword was too long for him; a particularly wild swing made him overbalance, and he landed facedown in the grass.

"Are you all right?" said Harry, moving closer to the picture.

"Get back, you scurvy braggart! Back, you rogue!"

The knight seized his sword again and used it to push himself back up, but the blade sank deeply into the grass and, though he pulled with all his might, he couldn't get it out again. Finally, he had to flop back down onto the grass and push up his visor to mop his sweating face.

"Listen," said Harry, taking advantage of the knight's exhaustion, "we're looking for the North Tower. You don't know the way, do you?"

"A quest!" The knight's rage seemed to vanish instantly. He clanked to his feet and shouted, "Come follow me, dear friends, and we shall find our goal, or else shall perish bravely in the charge!"

He gave the sword another fruitless tug, tried and failed to mount the fat pony, gave up, and cried, "On foot then, good sirs and gentle lady! On! On!"

And he ran, clanking loudly, into the left side of the frame and out of sight.

They hurried after him along the corridor, following the sound of his armor. Every now and then they spotted him running through a picture ahead.

"Be of stout heart, the worst is yet to come!" yelled the knight, and they saw him reappear in front of an alarmed group of women in crinolines, whose picture hung on the wall of a narrow spiral staircase.

Puffing loudly, Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the tightly spiraling steps, getting dizzier and dizzier, until at last they heard the murmur of voices above them and knew they had reached the classroom.

"Farewell!" cried the knight, popping his head into a painting of some sinister-looking monks. "Farewell, my comrades-in-arms! If ever you have need of noble heart and steely sinew, call upon Sir Cadogan!"

"Yeah, we'll call you," muttered Ron as the knight disappeared, "if we ever need someone mental."

They climbed the last few steps and emerged onto a tiny landing, where most of the class was already assembled. There were no doors off this landing, but Ron nudged Harry and pointed at the ceiling, where there was a circular trapdoor with a brass plaque on it.

"'Sibyll Trelawney, Divination teacher,'" Harry read. "How're we supposed to get up there?"

As though in answer to his question, the trapdoor suddenly opened, and a silvery ladder descended right at Harry's feet. Everyone got quiet.

"After you," said Ron, grinning, so Harry climbed the ladder first.

He emerged into the strangest-looking classroom he had ever seen. In

fact, it didn't look like a classroom at all, more like a cross between someone's attic and an old-fashioned tea shop. At least twenty small, circular tables were crammed inside it, all surrounded by chintz armchairs and fat little poufs. Everything was lit with a dim, crimson light; the curtains at the windows were all closed, and the many lamps were draped with dark red scarves. It was stiflingly warm, and the fire that was burning under the crowded mantelpiece was giving off a heavy, sickly sort of perfume as it heated a large copper kettle. The shelves running around the circular walls were crammed with dusty-looking feathers, stubs of candles, many packs of tattered playing cards, countless silvery crystal balls, and a huge array of teacups.

Ron appeared at Harry's shoulder as the class assembled around them, all talking in whispers.

"Where is she?" Ron said.

A voice came suddenly out of the shadows, a soft, misty sort of voice.

"Welcome," it said. "How nice to see you in the physical world at last."

Harry's immediate impression was of a large, glittering insect. Professor Trelawney moved into the firelight, and they saw that she was very thin; her large glasses magnified her eyes to several times their natural size, and she was draped in a gauzy spangled shawl. Innumerable chains and beads hung around her spindly neck, and her arms and hands were encrusted with bangles and rings.

"Sit, my children, sit," she said, and they all climbed awkwardly into armchairs or sank onto poufs. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat themselves around the same round table.

"Welcome to Divination," said Professor Trelawney, who had seated herself in a winged armchair in front of the fire. "My name is professor Trelawney. You may not have seen me before. I find that descending too often into the hustle and bustle of the main school clouds my Inner Eye."

Nobody said anything to this extraordinary pronouncement. Professor Trelawney delicately rearranged her shawl and continued, "So you have chosen to study Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you.. Books can take you only so far in this field...."

At these words, both Harry and Ron glanced, grinning, at Hermione, who looked startled at the news that books wouldn't be much help in this subject.

"Many witches and wizards, talented though they are in the area of loud bangs and smells and sudden disappearings, are yet unable to penetrate the veiled mysteries of the future," Professor Trelawney went on, her enormous, gleaming eyes moving from face to nervous face. "It is a Gift granted to few. You, boy," she said suddenly to Neville, who almost toppled off his pouf. "Is your grandmother well?"

"I think so," said Neville tremulously.

"I wouldn't be so sure if I were you, dear," said Professor Trelawney, the firelight glinting on her long emerald earrings. Neville gulped.

Professor Trelawney continued placidly. "We will be covering the basic methods of Divination this year. The first term will be devoted to reading the tea leaves. Next term we shall progress to palmistry. By the way, my dear," she shot suddenly at Parvati Patil, "beware a red-haired man."

Parvati gave a startled look at Ron, who was right behind her and edged her chair away from him.

"In the second term," Professor Trelawney went on, "we shall progress to the crystal ball -- if we have finished with fire omens, that is. Unfortunately, classes will be disrupted in February by a nasty bout of flu. I myself will lose my voice. And around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever."

A very tense silence followed this pronouncement, but Professor Trelawney seemed unaware of it.

"I wonder, dear," she said to Lavender Brown, who was nearest and shrank back in her chair, "if you could pass me the largest silver teapot?"

Lavender, looking relieved, stood up, took an enormous teapot from the shelf, and put it down on the table in front of Professor Trelawney.

"Thank you, my dear. Incidentally, that thing you are dreading -- it will happen on Friday the sixteenth of October."

Lavender trembled.

"Now, I want you all to divide into pairs. Collect a teacup from the shelf, come to me, and I will fill it. Then sit down and drink, drink until only the dregs remain. Swill these around the cup three times with the left hand, then turn the cup upside down on its saucer, wait for the last of the tea to drain away, then give your cup to your partner to read. You will interpret the patterns using pages five and six of Unfogging the Future. I shall move among you, helping and instructing. Oh, and dear" -- she caught Neville by the arm as he made to stand up -- "after you've broken your first cup, would you be so kind as to select one of the blue patterned ones? I'm rather attached to the pink."

Sure enough, Neville had no sooner reached the shelf of teacups when there was a tinkle of breaking china. Professor Trelawney swept over to him holding a dustpan and brush and said, "One of the blue ones, then, dear, if you wouldn't mind... thank you. . . ."

When Harry and Ron had had their teacups filled, they went back to their table and tried to drink the scalding tea quickly. They swilled the dregs around as Professor Trelawney had instructed, then drained the cups and swapped over.

"Right," said Ron as they both opened their books at pages five and six. "What can you see in mine?"

"A load of soggy brown stuff," said Harry. The heavily perfumed smoke in the room was making him feel sleepy and stupid.

"Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!" Professor Trelawney cried through the gloom.

Harry tried to pull himself together.

"Right, you've got a crooked sort of cross..." He consulted Unfogging the Future. "That means you're going to have 'trials and suffering' -- sorry about that -- but there's a thing that could be the sun... hang on... that means 'great happiness'... so you're going to suffer but be very happy...."

"You need your Inner Eye tested, if you ask me," said Ron, and they both had to stifle their laughs as Professor Trelawney gazed in their direction.

"My turn..." Ron peered into Harry's teacup, his forehead wrinkled with effort. "There's a blob a bit like a bowler hat," he said. "Maybe you're going to work for the Ministry of Magic..."

He turned the teacup the other way up.

"But this way it looks more like an acorn.... What's that?" He scanned his copy of Unfogging the Future. "'A windfall, unexpected gold.' Excellent, you can lend me some... and there's a thin, here," he turned the cup again, "that looks like an animal... yeah, if that was its head... it looks like a hippo... no, a sheep..."

Professor Trelawney whirled around as Harry let out a snort of laughter.

"Let me see that, my dear," she said reprovingly to Ron, sweeping over and snatching Harry's cup from him. Everyone went quiet to watch.

Professor Trelawney was staring into the teacup, rotating it counterclockwise.

"The falcon... my dear, you have a deadly enemy."

"But everyone knows that," said Hermione in a loud whisper. Professor Trelawney stared at her.

"Well, they do," said Hermione. "Everybody knows about Harry and You-Know-Who."

Harry and Ron stared at her with a mixture of amazement and admiration. They had never heard Hermione speak to a teacher like that before. Professor Trelawney chose not to reply. She lowered her huge eyes to Harry's cup again and continued to turn it.

"The club... an attack. Dear, dear, this is not a happy cup....

I thought that was a bowler hat," said Ron sheepishly.

"The skull... danger in your path, my dear...."

Everyone was staring, transfixed, at Professor Trelawney, who gave the cup a final turn, gasped, and then screamed.

There was another tinkle of breaking china; Neville had smashed his second cup. Professor Trelawney sank into a vacant armchair, her glittering hand at her heart and her eyes closed.

"My dear boy... my poor, dear boy no it is kinder not to say... . no... don't ask me...."

"What is it, Professor?" said Dean Thomas at once. Everyone had got to their feet, and slowly they crowded around Harry and Ron's table, pressing close to Professor Trelawney's chair to get a good look at Harry's cup.

"My dear," Professor Trelawney's huge eyes opened dramatically,

"You have the Grim."

"The what?" said Harry.

He could tell that he wasn't the only one who didn't understand; Dean Thomas shrugged at him and Lavender Brown looked puzzled, but nearly everybody else clapped their hands to their mouths in horror.

"The Grim, my dear, the Grim!" cried Professor Trelawney, who looked shocked that Harry hadn't understood. "The giant, spectral dog that haunts churchyards! My dear boy, it is an omen -- the worst omen -- of death!"

Harry's stomach lurched. That dog on the cover of Death Omens in Flourish and Blotts -the dog in the shadows of Magnolia Crescent... Lavender Brown clapped her hands to her mouth too. Everyone was looking at Harry, everyone except Hermione, who had gotten up and moved around to the back of Professor Trelawney's chair.

"I don't think it looks like a Grim," she said flatly.

Professor Trelawney surveyed Hermione with mounting dislike.

"You'll forgive me for saying so, my dear, but I perceive very little aura around you. Very little receptivity to the resonances of the future." Seamus Finnigan was tilting his head from side to side.

"It looks like a Grim if you do this," he said, with his eyes almost shut, "but it looks more like a donkey from here," he said, leaning to the left.

"When you've all finished deciding whether I'm going to die or not!" said Harry, taking even himself by surprise. Now nobody seemed to want to look at him.

"I think we will leave the lesson here for today," said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest voice. "Yes... please pack away your things...."

Silently the class took their teacups back to Professor Trelawney, packed away their books, and closed their bags. Even Ron was avoiding Harry's eyes.

"Until we meet again," said Professor Trelawney faintly, "fair fortune be yours. Oh, and dear" -- she pointed at Neville -- "you'll be late next time, so mind you work extra-hard to catch up."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione descended Professor Trelawney's ladder and the winding stair in silence, then set off for Professor McGonagall's Transfiguration lesson. It took them so long to find her classroom that, early as they had left Divination, they were only just in time.

Harry chose a seat right at the back of the room, feeling as though he were sitting in a very bright spotlight; the rest of the class kept shooting furtive glances at him, as though he were about to drop dead at any moment. He hardly heard what Professor McGonagall was telling them about Animagi (wizards who could transform at will into animals), and wasn't even watching when she transformed herself in front of their eyes into a tabby cat with spectacle markings around her eyes.

"Really, what has got into you all today?" said Professor McGonagall, turning back into herself with a faint pop, and staring around at them all. "Not that it matters, but that's the first time my transformation's not got applause from a class."

Everybody's heads turned toward Harry again, but nobody spoke. Then Hermione raised her hand.

"Please, Professor, we've just had our first Divination class, and we were reading the tea leaves, and --"

"Ah, of course," said Professor McGonagall, suddenly frowning.

"There is no need to say any more, Miss Granger. Tell me, which of you will be dying this year?"

Everyone stared at her.

"Me," said Harry, finally.

"I see," said Professor McGonagall, fixing Harry with her beady eyes. "Then you should know, Potter, that Sibyll Trelawney has predicted the death of one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them has died yet. Seeing death omens is her favorite way of greeting a new class. If it were not for the fact that I never speak ill of my colleagues --"

Professor McGonagall broke off, and they saw that her nostrils had gone white. She went on, more calmly, "Divination is one of the most imprecise branches of magic. I shall not conceal from you that I have very little patience with it. True Seers are very rare, and Professor Trelawney --"

She stopped again, and then said, in a very matter-of-fact tone, "You look in excellent health to me, Potter, so you will excuse me if I don't let you off homework today. I assure you that if you die, you need not hand it in."

Hermione laughed. Harry felt a bit better. It was harder to feel scared of a lump of tea leaves away from the dim red light and befuddling perfume of Professor Trelawney's classroom. Not everyone was convinced, however. Ron still looked worried, and Lavender whispered, "But what about Neville's cup?"

When the Transfiguration class had finished, they joined the crowd thundering toward the Great Hall for lunch.

"Ron, cheer up," said Hermione, pushing a dish of stew toward him. "You heard what Professor McGonagall said."

Ron spooned stew onto his plate and picked up his fork but didn't start.

"Harry," he said, in a low, serious voice, "You haven't seen a great black dog anywhere, have you?"

"Yeah, I have," said Harry. "I saw one the night I left the Dursleys'."

Ron let his fork fall with a clatter.

"Probably a stray," said Hermione calmly.

Ron looked at Hermione as though she had gone mad.

"Hermione, if Harry's seen a Grim, that's -- that's bad," he said. "My -- my uncle Bilius saw one and -- and he died twenty-four hours later!"

"Coincidence," said Hermione airily, pouring herself some pumpkin juice.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" said Ron, starting to get angry. "Grims scare the living daylights out of most wizards!"

"There you are, then," said Hermione in a superior tone. "They see the Grim and die of fright. The Grim's not an omen, it's the cause of death! And Harry's still with us because he's not stupid enough to see one and think, right, well, I'd better kick the bucket then!"

Ron mouthed wordlessly at Hermione, who opened her bag, took out her new Arithmancy book, and propped it open against the juice jug.

"I think Divination seems very woolly," she said, searching for her page. "A lot of guesswork, if you ask me."

"There was nothing woolly about the Grim in that cup!" said Ron hotly.

"You didn't seem quite so confident when you were telling Harry it was a sheep," said Hermione coolly.

"Professor Trelawney said you didn't have the right aura! You just don't like being bad at something for a change!"

He had touched a nerve. Hermione slammed her Arithmancy book down on the table so hard that bits of meat and carrot flew everywhere.

"If being good at Divination means I have to pretend to see death omens in a lump of tea leaves, I'm not sure I'll be studying it much longer! That lesson was absolute rubbish compared with my Arithmancy class!"

She snatched up her bag and stalked away.

Ron frowned after her.

"What's she talking about?" he said to Harry. "She hasn't been to an Arithmancy class yet."

Harry was pleased to get out of the castle after lunch. Yesterday's rain had cleared; the sky was a clear, pale gray, and the grass was springy and damp underfoot as they set off for their first ever Care of Magical Creatures class.

Ron and Hermione weren't speaking to each other. Harry walked beside them in silence as they went down the sloping lawns to Hagrid's hut on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It was only when he spotted three

only-too-familiar backs ahead of them that he realized they must be having these lessons with the Slytherins. Malfoy was talking animatedly to Crabbe and Goyle, who were chortling. Harry was quite sure he knew what they were talking about.

Hagrid was waiting for his class at the door of his hut. He stood in his moleskin overcoat, with Fang the boarhound at his heels, looking impatient to start.

"C'mon, now, get a move on!" he called as the class approached. "Got a real treat for yeh today! Great lesson comin' up! Everyone here? Right, follow me!"

For one nasty moment, Harry thought that Hagrid was going to lead them into the forest; Harry had had enough unpleasant experiences in there to last him a lifetime. However, Hagrid strolled off around the edge of the trees, and five minutes later, they found themselves outside a kind of paddock. There was nothing in there.

"Everyone gather 'round the fence here!" he called. "That's it -- make sure yeh can see -- now, firs' thing yeh'll want ter do is open yer books --"

"How?" said the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy.

"Eh?" said Hagrid.

"How do we open our books?" Malfoy repeated. He took out his copy of The Monster Book of Monsters, which he had bound shut with a length of rope. Other people took theirs out too; some, like Harry, had belted their book shut; others had crammed them inside tight bags or clamped them together with binder clips.

"Hasn' -- hasn' anyone bin able ter open their books?" said Hagrid, looking crestfallen.

The class all shook their heads.

"Yeh've got ter stroke 'em," said Hagrid, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. "Look --"

He took Hermione's copy and ripped off the Spellotape that bound it. The book tried to bite, but Hagrid ran a giant forefinger down its spine, and the book shivered, and then fell open and lay quiet in his hand.

"Oh, how silly we've all been!" Malfoy sneered. "We should have stroked them! why didn't we guess!"

"I -- I thought they were funny," Hagrid said uncertainly to Hermione.

"Oh, tremendously funny!" said Malfoy. "Really witty, giving us books that try and rip our hands off!"

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Harry quietly. Hagrid was looking downcast and Harry wanted Hagrid's first lesson to be a success.

"Righ' then," said Hagrid, who seemed to have lost his thread, "so -- so yeh've got yer books an' -- an' -- now yeh need the Magical Creatures. Yeah. So I'll go an' get 'em. Hang on..."

He strode away from them into the forest and out of sight.

"God, this place is going to the dogs," said Malfoy loudly. "That oaf teaching classes, my father'll have a fit when I tell him

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry repeated.

"Careful, Potter, there's a dementor behind you

"Oooooooh!" squealed Lavender Brown, pointing toward the opposite side of the paddock.

Trotting toward them were a dozen of the most bizarre creatures Harry had ever seen. They had the bodies, hind legs, and tails of horses, but the front legs, wings, and heads of what seemed to be giant eagles, with cruel, steel-colored beaks and large, brilliantly, orange eyes. The talons on their front legs were half a foot long and deadly looking. Each of the beasts had a thick leather collar around its neck, which was attached to a long chain, and the ends of all of these were held in the vast hands of Hagrid, who came jogging into the paddock behind the creatures.

"Gee up, there!" he roared, shaking the chains and urging the creatures toward the fence where the class stood. Everyone drew back slightly as Hagrid reached them and tethered the creatures to the fence.

"Hippogriffs!" Hagrid roared happily, waving a hand at them. "Beau'iful, aren' they?"

Harry could sort of see what Hagrid meant. Once you got over the first shock of seeing something that was, half horse, half bird, you started to appreciate the hippogriffs' gleaming coats, changing smoothly from feather to hair, each of them a different color: stormy gray, bronze, pinkish roan, gleaming chestnut, and inky black.

"So," said Hagrid, rubbing his hands together and beaming around, "if yeh wan' ter come a bit nearer --"

No one seemed to want to. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, approached the fence cautiously.

"Now, firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud," said Hagrid. "Easily offended, hippogriffs are. Don't never insult one, 'cause it might be the last thing yeh do."

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle weren't listening; they were talking in an undertone and Harry had a nasty feeling they were plotting how best to disrupt the lesson.

"Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff ter make the firs' move," Hagrid continued. "It's polite, see? Yeh walk toward him, and yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed ter touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish, 'cause those talons hurt."

"Right -- who wants ter go first?"

Most of the class backed farther away in answer. Even Harry, Ron, and Hermione had misgivings. The hippogriffs were tossing their fierce heads and flexing their powerful wings; they didn't seem to like being tethered like this.

"No one?" said Hagrid, with a pleading look.

"I'll do it," said Harry.

There was an intake of breath from behind him, and both Lavender and Parvati whispered, "Oooh, no, Harry, remember your tea leaves!"

Harry ignored them. He climbed over the paddock fence.

"Good man, Harry!" roared Hagrid. "Right then -- let's see how yeh get on with Buckbeak."

He untied one of the chains, pulled the gray hippogriff away from its fellows, and slipped off its leather collar. The class on the other side of the paddock seemed to be holding its breath. Malfoy's eyes were narrowed maliciously.

"Easy) now, Harry," said Hagrid quietly. "Yeh've got eye contact, now try not ter blink.... Hippogriffs don' trust yeh if yeh blink too much...."

Harry's eyes immediately began to water, but he didn't shut them. Buckbeak had turned his great, sharp head and was staring at Harry with one fierce orange eye. "Tha's it," said Hagrid. "Tha's it, Harry... now, bow."

Harry didn't feel much like exposing the back of his neck to Buckbeak, but he did as he was told. He gave a short bow and then looked up.

The hippogriff was still staring haughtily at him. It didn't move.

"Ah," said Hagrid, sounding worried. "Right -- back away, now, Harry, easy does it

But then, to Harry's enormous surprise, the hippogriff suddenly bent its scaly front knees and sank into what was an unmistakable bow.

"Well done, Harry!" said Hagrid, ecstatic. "Right -- yeh can touch him! Pat his beak, go on!"

Feeling that a better reward would have been to back away, Harry moved slowly toward the hippogriff and reached out toward it. He patted the beak several times and the hippogriff closed its eyes lazily, as though enjoying it.

The class broke into applause, all except for Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were looking deeply disappointed.

"Righ' then, Harry," said Hagrid. "I reckon he might' let yeh ride him!"

This was more than Harry had bargained for. He was used to a broomstick; but he wasn't sure a hippogriff would be quite the same.

"Yeh climb up there, jus' behind the wing joint," said Hagrid, "an' mind yeh don' pull any of his feathers out, he won' like that...."

Harry put his foot on the top of Buckbeak's wing and hoisted himself onto its back. Buckbeak stood up. Harry wasn't sure where to hold on; everything in front of him was covered with feathers.

"Go on, then'" roared Hagrid, slapping the hippogriffs hindquarters.

Without warning, twelve-foot wings flapped open on either side of Harry, he just had time to seize the hippogriff around the neck before he was soaring upward. It was nothing like a broomstick, and Harry knew which one he preferred; the hippogriff's wings beat uncomfortably on either side of him, catching him under his legs and making him feel he was about to be thrown off; the glossy feathers slipped under his fingers and he didn't dare get a stronger grip; instead of the smooth action of his Nimbus Two Thousand, he now felt himself rocking backward and forward as the hindquarters of the hippogriff rose and fell with its wings.

Buckbeak flew him once around the paddock and then headed back to the ground; this was the bit Harry had been dreading; he leaned back as the smooth neck lowered, feeling he was going to slip off over the beak, then felt a heavy thud as the four ill-assorted feet hit the ground. He just managed to hold on and push himself straight again.

"Good work, Harry!" roared Hagrid as everyone except Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle cheered. "Okay, who else wants a go?"

Emboldened by Harry's success, the rest of the class climbed cautiously into the paddock. Hagrid untied the hippogriffs one by one, and soon people were bowing nervously, all over the paddock. Neville ran repeatedly backward from his, which didn't seem to want to bend its knees. Ron and Hermione practiced on the chestnut, while Harry watched.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had taken over Buckbeak. He had bowed to Malfoy, who was now patting his beak, looking disdainful.

"This is very easy," Malfoy drawled, loud enough for Harry to, hear him. "I knew it must have been, if Potter could do it.... I bet you're not dangerous at all, are you?" he said to the hippogriff. "Are you, you great ugly brute?"

It happened in a flash of steely talons; Malfoy let out a highpitched scream and next moment, Hagrid was wrestling Buckbeak back into his collar as he strained to get at Malfoy, who lay curled in the grass, blood blossoming over his robes.

"I'm dying!" Malfoy yelled as the class panicked. "I'm dying, look at me! It's killed me!"

"Yer not dyin'!" said Hagrid, who had gone very white. "Someone help me -- gotta get him outta here --"

Hermione ran to hold open the gate as Hagrid lifted Malfoy easily. As they passed, Harry saw that there was a long, deep gash on Malfoy's arm; blood splattered the grass and Hagrid ran with him, up the slope toward the castle.

Very shaken, the Care of Magical Creatures class followed at a walk. The Slytherins were all shouting about Hagrid.

"They should fire him straight away!" said Pansy Parkinson, who was in tears.

"It was Malfoy's fault!" snapped Dean Thomas. Crabbe and Goyle flexed

their muscles threateningly.

They all climbed the stone steps into the deserted entrance hall.

"I'm going to see if he's okay!" said Pansy, and they all watched her run up the marble staircase. The Slytherins, still muttering about Hagrid, headed away in the direction of their dungeon common room; Harry, Ron, and Hermione proceeded upstairs to Gryffindor Tower.

"You think he'll be all right?" said Hermione nervously.

"Course he will. Madam Pomfrey can mend cuts in about a second," said Harry, who had had far worse injuries mended magically by the nurse.

"That was a really bad thing to happen in Hagrid's first class, though, wasn't it?" said Ron, looking worried. "Trust Malfoy to mess things up for him...."

They were among the first to reach the Great Hall at dinnertime, hoping to see Hagrid, but he wasn't there.

"They wouldn't fire him, would they?" said Hermione anxiously, not touching her steak-and-kidney pudding.

"They'd better not," said Ron, who wasn't eating either.

Harry was watching the Slytherin table. A large group including Crabbe and Goyle was huddled together, deep in conversation. Harry was sure they were cooking up their own version of how Malfoy had been injured.

"Well, you can't say it wasn't an interesting first day back," said Ron gloomily.

They went up to the crowded Gryffindor common room after dinner and tried to do the homework Professor McGonagall had given them, but all three of them kept breaking off and glancing Out of the tower window.

"There's a light on in Hagrid's window," Harry said suddenly.

Ron looked at his watch.

"If we hurried, we could go down and see him. It's still quite early..."

I don't know," Hermione said slowly, and Harry saw her glance at him.

"I'm allowed to walk across the grounds, " he said Pointedly. "Sirius Black hasn't got past the dementors yet, has he?"

So they put their things away and headed out of the portrait hole, glad to meet nobody on their way to the front doors, as they weren't entirely sure they were supposed to be out.

The grass was still wet and looked almost black in the twilight. When they reached Hagrid's hut, they knocked, and a voice growled, "C'min."

Hagrid was sitting in his shirtsleeves at his scrubbed wooden table; his boarhound, Fang, had his head in Hagrid's lap. One look told them that Hagrid had been drinking a lot; there was a pewter tankard almost as big as a bucket in front of him, and he seemed to be having difficulty getting them into focus.

"'Spect it's a record," he said thickly, when he recognized them. "Don' reckon they've ever had a teacher who lasted on'y a day before."

"You haven't been fired, Hagrid!" gasped Hermione.

"Not yet," said Hagrid miserably, taking a huge gulp of whatever was in the tankard. "But's only a matter o' time, i' n't it, after Malfoy..."

"How is he?" said Ron as they all sat down. "It wasn't serious, was it?"

"Madam Pomfrey fixed him best she could," said Hagrid dully, "but he's sayin' it's still agony... covered in bandages... moanin'..

"He's faking it, " said Harry at once. "Madam Pomfrey can mend anything. She regrew half my bones last year. Trust Malfoy to milk it for all it's worth."

"School gov'nors have bin told, o' course," said Hagrid miserably. "They reckon I started too big. Shoulda left hippogriffs fer later... done flobberworms or summat.... Jus' thought it'd make a good firs' lessons all my fault...."

"It's all Malfoy's fault, Hagrid!" said Hermione earnestly.

"We're witnesses," said Harry. "You said hippogriffs attack if you insult them. It's Malfoy's problem that he wasn't listening. We'll tell Dumbledore what really happened."

"Yeah, don't worry, Hagrid, we'll back you up," said Ron.

Tears leaked out of the crinkled corners of Hagrid's beetle-black eyes. He grabbed both Harry and Ron and pulled them into a bone-breaking hug.

"I think you've had enough to drink, Hagrid," said Hermione firmly. She took the tankard from the table and went outside to empty it.

"At, maybe she's right," said Hagrid, letting go of Harry and Ron, who both staggered away, rubbing their ribs. Hagrid heaved himself out of his chair and followed Hermione unsteadily outside. They heard a loud splash.

"What's he done?" said Harry nervously as Hermione came back in with the empty tankard.

"Stuck his head in the water barrel," said Hermione, putting the tankard away.

Hagrid came back, his long hair and beard sopping wet, wiping the water out of his eyes.

"That's better," he said, shaking his head like a dog and drenching them all. "Listen, it was good of yeh ter come an' see me, I really --

Hagrid stopped dead, staring at Harry as though he'd only just realized he was there.

"WHAT D'YEH THINK YOU'RE DOIN', EH?" he roared, so suddenly that they jumped a foot in the air. "YEH'RE NOT TO GO WANDERIN' AROUND AFTER DARK, HARRY! AN, YOU TWO! LETTIN' HIM!"

Hagrid strode over to Harry, grabbed his arm, and pulled him to the door.

"C'mon!" Hagrid said angrily. "I'm takin' yer all back up ter school, an' don' let me catch yeh walkin' down ter see me after dark again. I'm not worth that!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BOGGART IN THE WARDROBE

Malfoy didn't reappear in classes until late on Thursday morning, when the Slytherins and Gryffindors were halfway through double Potions. He swaggered into the dungeon, his right arm covered in bandages and bound up in a sling, acting, in Harry's opinion, as though he were the heroic survivor of some dreadful battle.

"How is it, Draco?" simpered Pansy Parkinson. "Does it hurt much?"

"Yeah," said Malfoy, putting on a brave sort of grimace. But Harry saw him wink at Crabbe and Goyle when Pansy had looked away.

"Settle down, settle down," said Professor Snape idly.

Harry and Ron scowled at each other; Snape wouldn't have said "settle down" if they'd walked in late, he'd have given them detention. But Malfoy had always been able to get away with anything in Snape's classes; Snape was head of Slytherin House, and generality favored his own students above all others.

They were making a new potion today, a Shrinking Solution. Malfoy set up his cauldron right next to Harry and Ron, so that they were preparing their ingredients on the same table.

"Sir," Malfoy called, "sir, I'll need help cutting up these daisy roots, because of my arm --"

"Weasley, cut up Malfoy's roots for him," said Snape without looking up.

Ron went brick red.

"There's nothing wrong with your arm," he hissed at Malfoy.

Malfoy smirked across the table.

"Weasley, you heard Professor Snape; cut up these roots."

Ron seized his knife, pulled Malfoy's roots toward him, and began to chop them roughly, so that they were all different sizes.

"Professor," drawled Malfoy, "Weasley's mutilating my roots, sit."

Snape approached their table, stared down his hooked nose at the roots, then gave Ron an unpleasant smile from beneath his long, greasy black hair.

"Change roots with Malfoy, Weasley."

"But, sit --!"

Ron had spent the last quarter of an hour carefully shredding his own roots into exactly equal pieces.

"Now," said Snape in his most dangerous voice.

Ron shoved his own beautifully cut roots across the table a, Malfoy, then took up the knife again.

"And, sir, I'll need this shrivelfig skinned," said Malfoy, his voice full of malicious laughter.

"Potter, you can skin Malfoy's shrivelfig," said Snape, giving Harry the look of loathing he always reserved just for him.

Harry took Malfoy's shrivelfig as Ron began trying to repair the damage to the roots he now had to use. Harry skinned the shrivelfig as fast as he could and flung it back across the table at Malfoy without speaking. Malfoy was smirking more broadly than ever.

"Seen your pal Hagrid lately?" he asked them quietly.

"None of your business," said Ron jerkily, without looking up.

"I'm afraid he won't be a teacher much longer," said Malfoy in a tone of mock sorrow. "Father's not very happy about my injury --"

"Keep talking, Malfoy, and I'll give you a real injury," snarled Ron.

-- he's complained to the school governors. And to the Ministry of Magic. Father's got a lot of influence, you know. And a lasting injury like this" -- he gave a huge, fake sigh -- "who knows if my arm'll ever be the same again?"

"So that's why you're putting it on," said Harry, accidentally beheading a dead caterpillar because his hand was shaking in anger. "To try to get Hagrid fired."

"Well," said Malfoy, lowering his voice to a whisper, "partly, Potter. But there are other benefits too. Weasley, slice my caterpillars for me."

A few cauldrons away, Neville was in trouble. Neville regularly went to pieces in Potions lessons; it was his worst subject, and his great fear of Professor Snape made things ten times worse. His potion, which was supposed to be a bright, acid green, had turned --

"Orange, Longbottom," said Snape, ladling some up and allowing to splash back into the cauldron, so that everyone could see.

"Orange. Tell me, boy, does anything penetrate that thick skull of yours? Didn't you hear me say, quite clearly, that only one -tat spleen was needed? Didn't I state plainly that a dash of leech juice would suffice? What do I have to do to make you understand, Longbottom?"

Neville was pink and trembling. He looked as though he was on the verge of tears.

"Please, sir," said Hermione, "please, I could help Neville put it right --"

"I don't remember asking you to show off, Miss Granger," said Snape coldly, and Hermione went as pink as Neville. "Longbottom, at the end of this lesson we will feed a few drops of this potion to your toad and see what happens. Perhaps that will encourage you to do it properly."

Snape moved away, leaving Neville breathless with fear.

"Help me!" he moaned to Hermione.

"Hey, Harry," said Seamus Finnigan, leaning over to borrow Harry's brass scales, "have you heard? Daily Prophet this morning -- they reckon Sirius Black's been sighted."

"Where?" said Harry and Ron quickly. On the other side of the table, Malfoy looked up, listening closely.

"Not too far from here," said Seamus, who looked excited. "It was a Muggle who saw him. 'Course, she didn't really understand. The Muggles think he's just an ordinary criminal, don't they? So she phoned the telephone hot line. By the time the Ministry of Magic got there, he was gone."

"Not too far from here..." Ron repeated, looking significantly at Harry. He turned around and saw Malfoy watching closely. "What, Malfoy? Need something else skinned?"

But Malfoy's eyes were shining malevolently, and they were fixed Harry. He leaned across the table.

Black single-handed, Potter?"

"Thinking Of trying to catch

"Yeah, that's right," said Harry offhandedly.

Malfoys thin mouth was curving in a mean smile.

"Of course, if it was me," he said quietly, "I'd have done something before now. I wouldn't be staying in school like a good boy, I'd be out there looking for him."

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" said Ron roughly.

"Don't you know, Potter?" breathed Malfoy, his pate eyes narrowed.

"Know what?"

Malfoy let out a low, sneering laugh.

"Maybe you'd rather not risk your neck," he said. "Want to leave it to the dementors, do you? But if it was me, I'd want revenge. I'd hunt him down myself."

"What are you talking about?" said Harry angrily, but at that moment Snape called, "You should have finished adding your ingredients by now; this potion needs to stew before it can be drunk, so clear away while it simmers and then we'll test Longbottom's..."

Crabbe and Goyle laughed openly, watching Neville sweat as he stirred

his potion feverishly. Hermione was muttering instructions to him out of the corner of her mouth, so that Snape wouldn't see. Harry and Ron packed away their unused ingredients and went to wash their hands and ladles in the stone basin in the corner.

"What did Malfoy mean?" Harry muttered to Ron as he stuck his hands under the icy jet that poured from the gargoyle's mouth "Why would I want revenge on Black? He hasn't done anything to me -- yet.

"He's making it up," said Ron savagely. "He's trying to make you do something stupid...."

The end of the lesson in sight, Snape strode over to Neville, who was cowering by his cauldron.

"Everyone gather 'round," said Snape, his black eyes glittering, and watch what happens to Longbottom's toad. If he has managed to produce a Shrinking Solution, it will shrink to a tadpole. If, as I don't doubt, he has done it wrong, his toad is likely to be poisoned."

The Gryffindors watched fearfully. The Slytherins looked excited. Snape picked up Trevor the toad in his left hand and dipped a small spoon into Neville's potion, which was now green. He trickled a few drops down Trevor's throat.

There was a moment of hushed silence, in which Trevor gulped; then there was a small pop, and Trevor the tadpole was wriggling in Snape's palm.

The Gryffindors burst into applause. Snape, looking sour, pulled a small bottle from the pocket of his robe, poured a few drops on top of Trevor, and he reappeared suddenly, fully grown.

"Five points from Gryffindor," said Snape, which wiped the smiles from every face. "I told you not to help him, Miss Granger. Class dismissed."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the steps to the entrance hall. Harry was still thinking about what Malfoy had said, while Ron was seething about Snape.

"Five points from Gryffindor because the potion was all right!

Why didn't You lie, Hermione? You should've said Neville did it all by himself!"

Hermione didn't answer. Ron looked around.

"Where is she?"

Harry turned too. They were at the top of the steps now, watching the rest of the class pass them, heading for the Great Hall and lunch.

"She was right behind us," said Ron, frowning.

Malfoy passed them, walking between Crabbe and Goyle. He smirked at Harry and disappeared.

"There she is," said Harry.

Hermione was panting slightly, hurrying up the stairs; one hand clutched her bag, the other seemed to be tucking something down the front of her

robes.

"How did you do that?" said Ron.

"What?" said Hermione, joining them.

"One minute you were right behind us, the next moment, you were back at the bottom of the stairs again."

"What?" Hermione looked slightly confused. "Oh -- I had to go back for something. Oh no --"

A seam had split on Hermione's bag. Harry wasn't surprised; he could see that it was crammed with at least a dozen large and heavy books.

"Why are you carrying all these around with you?" Ron asked her.

"You know how many subjects I'm taking," said Hermione breathlessly. "Couldn't hold these for me, could you?"

"But --" Ron was turning over the books she had handed him, looking at the covers. "You haven't got any of these subjects today. It's only Defense Against the Dark Arts this afternoon."

"Oh yes," said Hermione vaguely, but she packed all the books back into her bag just the same. I hope there's something good for lunch, I'm starving," she added, and she marched off toward the Great Hall.

"D'you get the feeling Hermione's not telling us something? Ron asked Harry.

Professor Lupin wasn't there when they arrived at his first Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. They all sat down, took out their books, quills, and parchment, and were talking when he finally entered the room. Lupin smiled vaguely and placed his tatty old briefcase on the teacher's desk. He was as shabby as ever but looked healthier than he had on the train, as though he had had a few square meals.

"Good afternoon," he said. "Would you please put all your books back in your bags. Today's will be a practical lesson. You will need only your wands."

A few curious looks were exchanged as the class put away their books. They had never had a practical Defense Against the Dark Arts before, unless you counted the memorable class last year when their old teacher had brought a cageful of pixies -to class and set them loose.

"Right then," said Professor Lupin, when everyone was ready. "If you'd follow me."

Puzzled but interested, the class got to its feet and followed Professor Lupin out of the classroom. He led them along the deserted corridor and around a corner, where the first thing they saw was Peeves the Poltergeist, who was floating upside down in midair and stuffing the nearest keyhole with chewing gum.

Peeves didn't look up until Professor Lupin was two feet away; then he wiggled his curly-toed feet and broke into song.

"Loony, loopy Lupin," Peeves sang. "Loony, loopy Lupin, loony, loopy

Lupin --"

Rude and unmanageable as he almost always was, Peeves usually showed some respect toward the teachers. Everyone looked quickly at Professor Lupin to see how he would take this; to their surprise, he was still smiling.

"I'd take that gum out of the keyhole if I were you, Peeves," he said pleasantly. "Mr. Filch won't be able to get in to his brooms."

Filch was the Hogwarts caretaker, a bad-tempered, failed wizard who waged a constant war against the students and, indeed, Peeves. However, Peeves paid no attention to Professor Lupin's words, except to blow a loud wet raspberry.

Professor Lupin gave a small sigh and took out his wand.

"This is a useful little spell, he told the class over his shoulder. "Please watch closely."

He raised the wand to shoulder height, said, "Waddiwasi! "and pointed it at Peeves.

With the force of a bullet, the wad of chewing gum shot out of the keyhole and straight down Peeves's left nostril; he whirled upright and zoomed away, cursing.

"Cool, sit!" said Dean Thomas in amazement.

"Thank you, Dean," said Professor Lupin, putting his wand away again. "Shall we proceed?"

They set off again, the class looking at shabby Professor Lupin with increased respect. He led them down a second corridor and stopped, right outside the staffroom door.

"Inside, please," said Professor Lupin, opening it and standing back.

The staffroom, a long, paneled room full of old, mismatched chairs, was empty except for one teacher. Professor Snape was sitting in a low armchair, and he looked around as the class filed in. His eyes were glittering and there was a nasty sneer playing around his mouth. As Professor Lupin came in and made to close the door behind him, Snape said, "Leave it open, Lupin. I'd rather not witness this."

He got to his feet and strode past the class, his black robes billowing behind him. At the doorway he turned on his heel and said, "Possibly no one's warned you, Lupin, but this class contains Neville Longbottom. I would advise you not to entrust him with anything difficult. Not unless Miss Granger is hissing instructions in his ear."

Neville went scarlet. Harry glared at Snape; it was bad enough that he bullied Neville in his own classes, let alone doing it in front of other teachers.

Professor Lupin had raised his eyebrows.

"I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation," he said, "and I am sure he will perform it admirably."

Neville's face went, if possible, even redder. Snape's lip curled, but he left, shutting the door with a snap.

"Now, then," said Professor Lupin, beckoning the class toward the end of the room, where there was nothing but an old wardrobe where the teachers kept their spare robes. As Professor Lupin went to stand next to it, the wardrobe gave a sudden wobble, banging off the wall.

"Nothing to worry about," said Professor Lupin calmly because a few people had jumped backward in alarm. "There's a boggart in there."

Most people seemed to feel that this was something to worry about. Neville gave Professor Lupin a look of pure terror, and Seamus Finnigan eyed the now rattling doorknob apprehensively.

"Boggarts like dark, enclosed spaces," said Professor Lupin. "Wardrobes, the gap beneath beds, the cupboards under sinks -- I've even met one that had lodged itself in a grandfather clock. This one moved in yesterday afternoon, and I asked the headmaster if the staff would leave it to give my third years some practice."

"So, the first question we must ask ourselves is, what is a boggart?"

Hermione put up her hand.

"It's a shape-shifter," she said. "It can take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most."

"Couldn't have put it better myself," said Professor Lupin, and Hermione glowed. "So the boggart sitting in the darkness within has not yet assumed a form. He does not yet know what will frighten the person on the other side of the door. Nobody knows what a boggart looks like when he is alone, but when I let him out, he will immediately become whatever each of us most fears."

"This means," said Professor Lupin, choosing to ignore Neville's 'mall sputter of terror, "that we have a huge advantage over the boggart before we begin. Have you spotted it, Harry?"

Trying to answer a question with Hermione next to him, bobbing up and down on the balls of her feet with her hand in the air, was very off-putting, but Harry had a go.

"Er -- because there are so many of us, it won't know what shape it should be?"

"Precisely," said Professor Lupin, and Hermione put her hand down, looking a little disappointed. "It's always best to have company when you're dealing with a boggart. He becomes confused. Which should he become, a headless corpse or a flesh-eating slug? I once saw a boggart make that very mistake -- tried to frighten two people at once and turned himself into half a slug. Not remotely frightening."

"The charm that repels a boggart is simple, yet it requires force of mind. You see, the thing that really finishes a boggart is laughter. What you need to do is force it to assume a shape that you find amusing."

"We will practice the charm without wands first. After me, please ... Riddikulus!"

"Riddikulus!" said the class together.

"Good," said Professor Lupin. "Very good. But that was the easy part, I'm afraid. You see, the word alone is not enough. And this is where you come in, Neville."

The wardrobe shook again, though not as much as Neville, who walked forward as though he were heading for the gallows.

"Right, Neville," said Professor Lupin. "First things first: what would you say is the thing that frightens you most in the world?"

Neville's lips moved, but no noise came out.

"didn't catch that, Neville, sorry," said Professor Lupin cheerfully.

Neville looked around rather wildly, as though begging someone to help him, then said, in barely more than a whisper, "Professor Snape."

Nearly everyone laughed. Even Neville grinned apologetically. Professor Lupin, however, looked thoughtful.

"Professor Snape... hmm... Neville, I believe you live with your grandmother?"

"Er -- yes," said Neville nervously. "But -- I don't want the boggart to turn into her either."

"No, no, you misunderstand me," said Professor Lupin, now smiling. "I wonder, could you tell us what sort of clothes your grandmother usually wears?"

Neville looked startled, but said, "Well... always the same hat. A tall one with a stuffed vulture on top. And a long dress... green, normally... and sometimes a fox-fur scarf."

"And a handbag?" prompted Professor Lupin.

"A big red one," said Neville.

"Right then," said Professor Lupin. "Can you picture those clothes very clearly, Neville? Can you see them in your mind's eye?"

"Yes," said Neville uncertainty, plainly wondering what was coming next.

"When the boggart bursts out of this wardrobe, Neville, and sees You, it will assume the form of Professor Snape," said Lupin. "And You will raise your wand -- thus -- and cry 'Riddikulus' -- and concentrate hard on your grandmother's clothes. If all goes well, Professor Boggart Snape will be forced into that vulture-topped hat, and that green dress, with that big red handbag."

There was a great shout of laughter. The wardrobe wobbled more violently.

"If Neville is successful, the boggart is likely to shift his attention to each of us in turn," said Professor Lupin. "I would like all of you to take a moment now to think of the thing that scares you most, and imagine how you might force it to look comical...."

The room went quiet. Harry thought... 'What scared him most in the world?

His first thought was Lord Voldemort -- a Voldemort returned to full strength. But before he had even started to plan a possible counterattack on a boggart-Voldemort, a horrible image came floating to the surface of his mind....

A rotting, glistening hand, slithering back beneath a black cloak ... a long, rattling breath from an unseen mouth... then a cold so penetrating it felt like drowning....

Harry shivered, then looked around, hoping no one had noticed. Many people had their eyes shut tight. Ron was muttering to himself, "Take its legs off " Harry was sure he knew what that was about. Ron's greatest fear was spiders.

"Everyone ready?" said Professor Lupin.

Harry felt a lurch of fear. He wasn't ready. How could you make a dementor less frightening? But he didn't want to ask for more time; everyone else was nodding and rolling up their sleeves.

"Neville, we're going to back away," said Professor Lupin. "Let you have a clear field, all right? I'll call the next person forward.... Everyone back, now, so Neville can get a clear shot --"

They all retreated, backed against the walls, leaving Neville alone beside the wardrobe. He looked pale and frightened, but he had pushed up the sleeves of his robes and was holding his wand ready.

"On the count of three, Neville," said Professor Lupin, who was pointing his own wand at the handle of the wardrobe. "One two -- three -- now!"

A jet of sparks shot from the end of Professor Lupin's wand and hit the doorknob. The wardrobe burst open. Hook-nosed and menacing, Professor Snape stepped out, his eyes flashing at Neville.

Neville backed away, his wand up, mouthing wordlessly. Snape was bearing down upon him, reaching inside his robes.

"R -- r -- riddikulus! "squeaked Neville.

There was a noise like a whip crack. Snape stumbled; he was wearing a long, lace-trimmed dress and a towering hat topped with a moth-eaten vulture, and he was swinging a huge crimson handbag.

There was a roar of laughter; the boggart paused, confused, and Professor Lupin shouted, "Parvati! Forward!"

Parvati walked forward, her face set. Snape rounded on her. There was another crack, and where he had stood was a bloodstained, bandaged mummy; its sightless face was turned to Parvati and it began to walk toward her very slowly, dragging its feet, its stiff arms rising --

"Riddikulus!" cried Parvati.

A bandage unraveled at the mummy's feet; it became entangled, fell face

forward, and its head rolled off.

"Seamus!" roared Professor Lupin.

Seamus darted past Parvati.

Crack! Where the mummy had been was a woman with floorlength black hair and a skeletal, green-tinged face -- a banshee. She opened her mouth wide and an unearthly sound filled the room, a long, wailing shriek that made the hair on Harry's head stand on end -- 'Riddikulus!' shouted Seamus.

The banshee made a rasping noise and clutched her throat; her voice was gone.

Crack! The banshee turned into a rat, which chased its tail in a circle, then -- crack! -- became a rattlesnake, which slithered and writhed before -- crack! -- becoming a single, bloody eyeball.

'It's confused!' shouted Lupin. "We're getting there! Dean!"

Dean hurried forward.

Crack! The eyeball became a severed hand, which flipped over and began to creep along the floor like a crab.

"Riddikulus!" yelled Dean.

'There was a snap, and the hand was trapped in a mousetrap.

"Excellent! Ron, you next!"

Ron leapt forward.

Crack!

Quite a few people screamed. A giant spider, six feet tall and covered in hair, was advancing on Ron, clicking its pincers menacingly. For a moment, Harry thought Ron had frozen. Then --

"Riddikulus!" bellowed Ron, and the spider's legs vanished; it rolled over and over; Lavender Brown squealed and ran out of its way and it came to a halt at Harry's feet. He raised his wand, ready, but --

"Here!" shouted Professor Lupin suddenly, hurrying forward. Crack!

The legless spider had vanished. For a second, everyone looked wildly around to see where it was. Then they saw a silvery-white orb hanging in the air in front of Lupin, who said, "Riddikulus!" almost lazily.

Crack!

"Forward, Neville, and finish him off!" said Lupin as the boggart landed on the floor as a cockroach. Crack! Snape was back. This time Neville charged forward looking determined.

"Riddikulus!" he shouted, and they had a split second's view of Snape in his lacy dress before Neville let out a great "Ha!" of laughter, and the boggart exploded, burst into a thousand tiny wisps of smoke, and was gone.

"Excellent!" cried Professor Lupin as the class broke into applause.
"Excellent) Neville. Well done, everyone.... Let me See... five points
to Gryffindor for every person to tackle the boggart -- ten for Neville
because he did it twice... and five each to Hermione and Harry."

"But I didn't do anything," said Harry.

"You and Hermione answered my questions correctly at the start of the
class, Harry," Lupin said lightly. "Very well, everyone, an excellent
lesson. Homework, kindly read the chapter on boggarts and summarize it
for me... to be handed in on Monday. That will be all."

Talking excitedly, the class left the staffroom. Harry, however, wasn't
feeling cheerful. Professor Lupin had deliberately stopped him from
tackling the boggart. Why? Was it because he'd seen Harry collapse on
the train, and thought he wasn't up to much? Had he thought Harry would
pass out again?

But no one else seemed to have noticed anything.

"Did you see me take that banshee?" shouted Seamus. "And the hand!" said
Dean, waving his own around.

"And Snape in that hat!" "And my mummy!"

I wonder why Professor Lupin's frightened of crystal balls?" said
Lavender thoughtfully.

"That was the best Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson we've ever had,
wasn't it?" said Ron excitedly as they made their way back to the
classroom to get their bags.

"He seems like a very good teacher," said Hermione approvingly. "But I
wish I could have had a turn with the boggart --"

"What would it have been for you?" said Ron, sniggering. "A piece of
homework that only got nine out of ten?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

FLIGHT OF THE FAT FADY

In no time at all, Defense Against the Dark Arts had become most
people's favorite class. Only Draco Malfoy and his gang of Slytherins
had anything bad to say about Professor Lupin.

"Look at the state of his robes," Malfoy would say in a loud whisper as
Professor Lupin passed. "He dresses like our old houseelf "

But no one else cared that Professor Lupin's robes were patched and
frayed. His next few lessons were just as interesting as the first.
After boggarts, they studied Red Caps, nasty little goblin like
creatures that lurked wherever there had been bloodshed: in the dungeons
of castles and the potholes of deserted battlefields, waiting to
bludgeon those who had gotten lost. From Red Caps they moved on to
kappas, creepy. water-dwellers that looked like scaly monkeys, with
webbed hands itching to strangle unwitting waders in their ponds.

Harry only wished he was as happy with some of his other classes. Worst

of all was Potions. Snape was in a particularly vindictive mood these days, and no one was in any doubt why. The story of the boggart assuming Snape's shape, and the way that Neville had dressed it in his grandmother's clothes, had traveled through the school like wildfire. Snape didn't seem to find it funny. His eyes flashed menacingly at the very mention of Professor Lupin's name, and he was bullying Neville worse than ever.

Harry was also growing to dread the hours he spent in Professor Trelawney's stifling tower room, deciphering lopsided shapes and symbols, trying to ignore the way Professor Trelawney's enormous eyes filled with tears every time she looked at him. He couldn't like Professor Trelawney, even though she was treated with respect bordering on reverence by many of the class. Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown had taken to haunting Professor Trelawney's tower room at lunch times, and always returned with annoyingly superior looks on their faces, as though they knew things the others didn't. They had also started using hushed voices whenever they spoke to Harry, as though he were on his deathbed.

Nobody really liked Care of Magical Creatures, which, after the action-packed first class, had become extremely dull. Hagrid seemed to have lost his confidence. They were now spending lesson after lesson learning how to look after flobberworms, which had to be some of the most boring creatures in existence.

"Why would anyone bother looking after them?" said Ron, after yet another hour of poking shredded lettuce down the flobberworms' throats.

At the start of October, however, Harry had something else to occupy him, something so enjoyable it more than made up for his unsatisfactory classes. The Quidditch season was approaching, and Oliver Wood, Captain of the Gryffindor team, called a meeting on Thursday evening to discuss tactics for the new season.

There were seven people on a Quidditch team: three Chasers, whose job it was to score goals by putting the Quaffle (a red, soccer-sized ball) through one of the fifty-foot-high hoops at each

end of the field; two Beaters, who were equipped with heavy bats to repel the Bludgers (two heavy black balls that zoomed around trying to attack the players); a Keeper, who defended the goal

posts, and the Seeker, who had the hardest job of all, that of catching the Golden Snitch, a tiny, winged, walnut-sized ball, whose capture ended the game and earned the Seeker's team an extra one hundred and fifty points.

Oliver Wood was a burly seventeen-year-old, now in his seventh and final year at Hogwarts. There was a quiet sort of desperation in his voice as he addressed his six fellow team members in the chilly locker rooms on the edge of the darkening Quidditch field.

"This is our last chance -- my last chance -- to win the Quidditch Cup," he told them, striding up and down in front of them. "I'll be leaving at the end of this year. I'll never get another shot at it."

"Gryffindor hasn't won for seven years now. Okay, so we've had the worst luck in the world -- injuries -- then the tournament getting called off last year Wood swallowed, as though the memory still brought a lump to his throat. "But we also know we've got the

best-ruddy-team-in-the-school," he said, punching a fist into his other hand, the old manic glint back in his eye. "We've got three superb Chasers."

Wood pointed at Alicia Spinner, Angelina Johnson, and Katie Bell.

"We've got two unbeatable Beaters."

"Stop it, Oliver, you're embarrassing us," said Fred and George Weasley together, pretending to blush.

"And we've got a Seeker who has never failed to win us a match!" Wood rumbled, glaring at Harry with a kind of furious pride. "And me," he added as an afterthought.

"We think you're very good too, Oliver," said George.

"Spanking good Keeper," said Fred.

"The point is," Wood went on, resuming his pacing, "the Quidditch Cup should have had our name on it these last two years. Ever since Harry joined the team, I've thought the thing was in the bag. But we haven't got it, and this year's the last chance we'll get to finally see our name on the thing...."

Wood spoke so dejectedly that even Fred and George looked sympathetic.

"Oliver, this year's our year," said Fred.

"We'll do it, Oliver!" said Angelina.

"Definitely," said Harry.

Full of determination, the team started training sessions, three evenings a week. The weather was getting colder and wetter, the nights darker, but no amount of mud, wind, or rain could tarnish Harry's wonderful vision of finally winning the huge, silver Quidditch Cup.

Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room one evening after training, cold and stiff but pleased with the way practice had gone, to find the room buzzing excitedly.

"What's happened?", he asked Ron and Hermione, who were sitting in two of the best chairs by the fireside and completing some star charts for Astronomy.

"First Hogsmeade weekend," said Ron, pointing at a notice that had appeared on the battered old bulletin board. "End of October. Halloween."

"Excellent," said Fred, who had followed Harry through the portrait hole. "I need to visit Zonko's. I'm nearly out of Stink Pellets."

Harry threw himself into a chair beside Ron, his high spirits ebbing away. Hermione seemed to read his mind.

"Harry, I'm sure you'll be able to go next time," she said. "They're bound to catch Black soon. He's been sighted once already."

"Black's not fool enough to try anything in Hogsmeade," said Ron. "Ask

McGonagall if you can go this time, Harry. The next one might not be for ages --"

"Ron!" said Hermione. "Harry's supposed to stay in school--"

"He can't be the only third year left behind," said Ron. "Ask McGonagall, go on, Harry --"

"Yeah, I think I will," said Harry, making up his mind.

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but at that moment Crookshanks leapt lightly onto her lap. A large, dead spider was dangling from his mouth.

"Does he have to eat that in front of us?" said Ron, scowling.

"Clever Crookshanks, did you catch that all by yourself?" said Hermione.

Crookshanks; slowly chewed up the spider, his yellow eyes fixed insolently on Ron.

"Just keep him over there, that's all," said Ron irritably, turning back to his star chart. "I've got Scabbers asleep in my bag."

Harry yawned. He really wanted to go to bed, but he still had his own star chart to complete. He pulled his bag toward him, took out parchment, ink, and quill, and started work.

"You can copy mine, if you like," said Ron, labeling his last star with a flourish and shoving the chart toward Harry.

Hermione, who disapproved of copying, pursed her lips but didn't say anything. Crookshanks was still staring unblinkingly at Ron, flicking the end of his bushy tail. Then, without warning, he pounced.

"OY!" Ron roared, seizing his bag as Crookshanks sank four sets of claws deep inside it and began tearing ferociously. "GET OFF, YOU STUPID ANIMAL!"

Ron tried to pull the bag away from Crookshanks, but Crookshanks clung on, spitting and slashing.

"Ron, don't hurt him!" squealed Hermione; the whole common room was watching; Ron whirled the bag around, Crookshanks still clinging to it, and Scabbers came flying out of the top -

"CATCH THAT CAR!" Ron yelled as Crookshanks freed himself from the remnants of the bag, sprang over the table, and chased after the terrified Scabbers.

George Weasley made a lunge for Crookshanks but missed; Scabbers streaked through twenty pairs of legs and shot beneath an old chest of drawers. Crookshanks skidded to a halt, crouched low on his bandy legs, and started making furious swipes beneath it with his front paw.

Ron and Hermione hurried over; Hermione grabbed Crookshanks around the middle and heaved him away; Ron threw himself onto his stomach and, with great difficulty, pulled Scabbers out by the tail.

"Look at him!" he said furiously to Hermione, dangling Scabbers in front of her. "He's skin and bone! You keep that cat away from him!"

"Crookshanks doesn't understand it's wrong!" said Hermione, her voice shaking. "All cats chase rats, Ron!"

"There's something funny about that animal!" said Ron, who was trying to persuade a frantically wiggling Scabbers back into his pocket. "It heard me say that Scabbers was in my bag!"

"Oh, what rubbish," said Hermione impatiently. "Crookshanks could smell him, Ron, how else d'you think --"

"That cat's got it in for Scabbers!" said Ron, 'ignoring the people around him, who were starting to giggle. "And Scabbers was here first, and he's ill!"'

Ron marched through the common room and out of sight up the stairs to the boys' dormitories.

Ron was still in a bad mood with Hermione next day. He barely talked to her all through Herbology, even though he, Harry, and Hermione were working together on the same puffapod.

"How's Scabbers?" Hermione asked timidly as they stripped fat pink pods from the plants and emptied the shining beans into a wooden pail.

"He's hiding at the bottom of my bed, shaking," said Ron angrily, missing the pail and scattering beans over the greenhouse floor.

"Careful, Weasley, careful!" cried Professor Sprout as the beans burst into bloom before their very eyes.

They had Transfiguration next. Harry, who had resolved to ask Professor McGonagall after the lesson whether he could go into Hogsmeade with the rest, joined the line outside the class trying to decide how he was going to argue his case. He was distracted, however, by a disturbance at the front of the line.

Lavender Brown seemed to be crying. Parvati had her arm around her and was explaining something to Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, who were looking very serious.

"What's the matter, Lavender?" said Hermione anxiously as she, Harry, and Ron went to join the group.

"She got a letter from home this morning," Parvati whispered. "It's her rabbit, Binky. He's been killed by a fox."

"Oh," said Hermione, "I'm sorry, Lavender."

"I should have known!" said Lavender tragically. "You know what day it is?"

"Er --"

"The sixteenth of October! 'That thing you're dreading, it will happen on the sixteenth of October!' Remember? She was right, she was right!"

The whole class was gathered around Lavender now. Seamus shook his head seriously. Hermione hesitated; then she said, "You -- you were dreading Binky being killed by a fox?"

"Well, not necessarily by a fox," said Lavender, looking up at Hermione with streaming eyes, "but I was obviously dreading him dying, wasn't I?"

"Oh," said Hermione. She paused again. Then

"Was Binky an old rabbit?"

"N -- no!" sobbed Lavender. "H -- he was only a baby!"

Parvati tightened her arm around Lavender's shoulders.

"But then, why would you dread him dying?" said Hermione.

Parvati glared at her.

"Well, look at it logically," said Hermione, turning to the rest of the group- "I mean, Binky didn't even die today, did he? Lavender just got the news today--" Lavender wailed loudly. "- and she can't have been dreading it, because it's come as a real shock --"

"Don't mind Hermione, Lavender," said Ron loudly, "she doesn't think other people's pets matter very much."

Professor McGonagall opened the classroom door at that moment, which was perhaps lucky; Hermione and Ron were looking daggers at each other, and when they got into class, they seated themselves on either side of Harry and didn't talk to each other for the whole class.

Harry still hadn't decided what he was going to say to Professor McGonagall when the bell rang at the end of the lesson, but it was she who brought up the subject of Hogsmeade first.

"One moment, please !" she called as the class made to leave. "As you're all in my House, you should hand Hogsmeade permission forms to me before Halloween. No form, no visiting the village, so don't forget!"

Neville put up his hand.

"Please, Professor, I -- I think I've lost

"Your grandmother sent yours to me directly, Longbottom," said Professor McGonagall. "She seemed to think it was safer. Well, that's all, you may leave."

"Ask her now," Ron hissed at Harry.

"Oh. but --" Hermione began.

"Go for it, Harry," said Ron stubbornly.

Harry waited for the rest of the class to disappear, then headed nervously for Professor McGonagall's desk.

"Yes, Potter?" Harry took a deep breath.

"Professor, my aunt and uncle -- er -- forgot to sign my form," he said.

Professor McGonagall looked over her square spectacles at him but didn't say anything.

"So -- er d'you think it would be all right mean, will It be okay if I -- if I go to Hogsmeade?"

Professor McGonagall looked down and began shuffling papers on her desk.

"I'm afraid not, Potter," she said. "You heard what I said. No form, no visiting the village. That's the rule."

"But -- Professor, my aunt and uncle -- you know, they're Muggles, they don't really understand about -- about Hogwarts forms and stuff," Harry said, while Ron egged him on with vigorous nods. "If you said I could go --"

"But I don't say so," said Professor McGonagall, standing up and piling her papers neatly into a drawer. "The form clearly states that the parent or guardian must give permission." She turned to look at him, with an odd expression on her face. Was it pity? "I'm sorry, Potter, but that's my final word. You had better hurry, or you'll be late for your next lesson."

There was nothing to be done. Ron called Professor McGonagall a lot of names that greatly annoyed Hermione; Hermione assumed an "all-for-the-best" expression that made Ron even angrier, and Harry had to endure everyone in the class talking loudly and happily about what they were going to do first, once they got into Hogsmeade.

"There's always the feast," said Ron, in an effort to cheer Harry UP. "You know, the Halloween feast, in the evening."

"Yeah," said Harry gloomily, "great."

The Halloween feast was always good, but it would taste a lot better if he was coming to it after a day in Hogsmeade with everyone else. Nothing anyone said made him feel any better about being left behind. Dean Thomas, who was good with a quill, had offered to forge Uncle Vernon's signature on the form, but as Harry had already told Professor McGonagall he hadn't had it signed, that was no good. Ron halfheartedly suggested the Invisibility Cloak, but Hermione stamped on that one, reminding Ron what Dumbledore had told them about the dementors being able to see through them. Percy had what were possibly the least helpful words of comfort.

"They make a fuss about Hogsmeade, but I assure you, Harry, it's not all it's cracked up to be," he said seriously. "All right, the sweetshop's rather good, and Zonko's Joke Shop's frankly dangerous, and yes, the Shrieking Shack's always worth a visit, but really, Harry, apart from that, you're not missing anything."

On Halloween morning, Harry awoke with the rest and went down to breakfast, feeling thoroughly depressed, though doing his best to act normally.

"We'll bring you lots of sweets back from Honeydukes," said Hermione, looking desperately sorry for him.

"Yeah, loads," said Ron. He and Hermione had finally forgotten their squabble about Crookshanks in the face of Harry's difficulties.

"Don't worry about me," said Harry, in what he hoped was at, offhand

voice, "I'll see you at the feast. Have a good time."

He accompanied them to the entrance hall, where Filch, the caretaker, was standing inside the front doors, checking off names against a long list, peering suspiciously into every face, and making sure that no one was sneaking out who shouldn't be going.

"Staying here, Potter?" shouted Malfoy, who was standing in line with Crabbe and Goyle. "Scared of passing the dementors?"

Harry ignored him and made his solitary way up the marble staircase, through the deserted corridors, and back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Password?" said the Fat Lady, jerking out of a doze.

"Fortuna Major," said Harry listlessly.

The portrait swung open and he climbed through the hole into the common room. It was full of chattering first and second years, and a few older students, who had obviously visited Hogsmeade so often the novelty had worn off

"Harry! Harry! Hi, Harry!"

It was Colin Creevey, a second year who was deeply in awe of Harry and never missed an opportunity to speak to him.

"Aren't you going to Hogsmeade, Harry? Why not? Hey" -- Colin looked eagerly around at his friends -- "you can come and sit with us, if you like, Harry!"

"Er -- no, thanks, Colin," said Harry, who wasn't in the mood to have a lot of people staring avidly at the scar on his forehead. "I -- I've got to go to the library, got to get some work done."

After that, he had no choice but to turn right around and head back out of the portrait hole again.

"What was the point waking me up?" the Fat Lady called grumpily after him as he walked away.

Harry wandered dispiritedly toward the library, but halfway there he changed his mind; he didn't feel like working. He turned around and came face-to-face with Filch, who had obviously just seen off the last of the Hogsmeade visitors.

"What are you doing?" Filch snarled suspiciously.

"Nothing," said Harry truthfully.

"Nothing!" spat Filch, his jowls quivering unpleasantly. "A likely story! Sneaking around on your own -- why aren't you in Hogsmeade buying Stink Pellets and Belch Powder and Whizzing Worms like the rest of your nasty little friends?"

Harry shrugged.

"Well, get back to your common room where you belong!" snapped Filch, and he stood glaring until Harry had passed out of sight.

But Harry didn't go back to the common room; he climbed a staircase, thinking vaguely of visiting the Owlery to see Hedwig, and was walking along another corridor when a voice from inside one of the rooms said, "Harry?"

Harry doubled back to see who had spoken and met Professor Lupin, looking around his office door.

"What are you doing?" said Lupin, though in a very different voice from Filch. "Where are Ron and Hermione?"

"Hogsmeade," said Harry, in a would-be casual voice.

"Ah," said Lupin. He considered Harry for a moment. "Why don't you come in? I've just taken delivery of a grindylow for our next lesson." "A what?" said Harry. I

He followed Lupin into his office. In the corner stood a very large tank of water. A sickly green creature with sharp little horns had its face pressed against the glass, pulling faces and flexing its long, spindly fingers.

"Water demon," said Lupin, surveying the grindylow thoughtfully. "We shouldn't have much difficulty with him, not after the kappas. The trick is to break his grip. You notice the abnormally long fingers? Strong, but very brittle."

The grindylow bared its green teeth and then buried itself in a tangle of weeds in a corner.

"Cup of tea?" Lupin said, looking around for his kettle. "I was just thinking of making one."

"All right," said Harry awkwardly.

Lupin tapped the kettle with his wand and a blast of steam issued suddenly from the spout.

"Sit down," said Lupin, taking the lid off a dusty tin. "I've only got teabags, I'm afraid -- but I daresay you've had enough of tea leaves?"

Harry looked at him. Lupin's eyes were twinkling.

"How did you know about that?" Harry asked.

"Professor McGonagall told me," said Lupin, passing Harry a chipped mug of tea. "You're not worried, are you?"

"No," said Harry.

He thought for a moment of telling Lupin about the dog he'd seen in Magnolia Crescent but decided not to. He didn't want Lupin to think he was a coward, especially since Lupin already seemed to think he couldn't cope with a boggart.

Something of Harry's thoughts seemed to have shown on his face, because Lupin said, "Anything worrying you, Harry?"

"No," Harry lied. He drank a bit of tea and watched the grindylow brandishing a fist at him. "Yes," he said suddenly, putting his tea down

on Lupin's desk. "You know that day we fought the boggart?"

"Yes," said Lupin slowly.

"Why didn't you let me fight it?" said Harry abruptly.

Lupin raised his eyebrows.

"I would have thought that was obvious, Harry," he said, sounding surprised.

Harry, who had expected Lupin to deny that he'd done any such thing, was taken aback.

"Why?" he said again.

"Well," said Lupin, frowning slightly, "I assumed that if the boggart faced you, it would assume the shape of Lord Voldemort."

Harry stared. Not only was this the last answer he'd expected, but Lupin had said Voldemort's name. The only person Harry had ever heard say the name aloud (apart from himself) was Professor Dumbledore.

"Clearly, I was wrong," said Lupin, still frowning at Harry. "But I didn't think it a good idea for Lord Voldemort to materialize in the staffroom. I imagined that people would panic."

"I didn't think of Voldemort," said Harry honestly. "I -- I remembered those dementors."

"I see," said Lupin thoughtfully. "Well, well... I'm impressed." He smiled slightly at the look of surprise on Harry's face. "That suggests that what you fear most of all is -- fear. Very wise, Harry."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, so he drank some more tea.

"So you've been thinking that I didn't believe you capable of fighting the boggart?" said Lupin shrewdly.

"Well... yeah," said Harry. He was suddenly feeling a lot happier. "Professor Lupin, you know the dementors --"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in," called Lupin.

The door opened, and in came Snape. He was carrying a goblet, which was smoking faintly, and stopped at the sight of Harry, his black eyes narrowing.

"Ah, Severus," said Lupin, smiling. "Thanks very much. Could you leave it here on the desk for me?"

Snape set down the smoking goblet, his eyes wandering between Harry and Lupin.

"I was just showing Harry my grindylow," said Lupin pleasantly, pointing at the tank.

"Fascinating," said Snape, without looking at it. "You should drink that

directly, Lupin."

"Yes, Yes, I will," said Lupin.

"I made an entire cauldronful," Snape continued. "If you need more.

"I should probably take some again tomorrow. Thanks very much, Severus."

"Not at all," said Snape, but there was a look in his eye Harry didn't like. He backed out of the room, unsmiling and watchful.

Harry looked curiously at the goblet. Lupin smiled.

"Professor Snape has very kindly concocted a potion for me," he said. "I have never been much of a potion-brewer and this one is particularly complex." He picked up the goblet and sniffed it. "Pity sugar makes it useless," he added, taking a sip and shuddering.

"Why --?" Harry began. Lupin looked at him and answered the unfinished question.

"I've been feeling a bit off-color," he said. "This potion is the only thing that helps. I am very lucky to be working alongside Professor Snape; there aren't many wizards who are up to making it."

Professor Lupin took another sip and Harry had a crazy urge to knock the goblet out of his hands.

"Professor Snape's very interested in the Dark Arts, he blurted out.

"Really?" said Lupin, looking only mildly interested as he took another gulp of potion.

"Some people reckon --" Harry hesitated, then plunged recklessly on, "some people reckon he'd do anything to get the Defense Against the Dark Arts job."

Lupin drained the goblet and pulled a face.

"Disgusting," he said. "Well, Harry, I'd better get back to work. see you at the feast later."

"Right," said Harry, putting down his empty teacup.

The empty goblet was still smoking.

"There you go," said Ron. "We got as much as we could carry."

A shower of brilliantly colored sweets fell into Harry's lap. It was dusk, and Ron and Hermione had just turned up in the common room, pink-faced from the cold wind and looking as though they'd had the time of their lives.

"Thanks," said Harry, picking up a packet of tiny black Pepper Imps. "What's Hogsmeade like? Where did you go?"

By the sound of it -- everywhere. Dervish and Bangs, the wizarding equipment shop, Zonko's Joke Shop, into the Three Broomsticks for foaming mugs of hot butterbeer, and many places besides.

"The post office, Harry! About two hundred owls, all sitting on shelves, all color-coded depending on how fast you want your letter to get there!"

"Honeydukes has got a new kind of fudge; they were giving out free samples, there's a bit, look --"

"We think we saw an ogre, honestly, they get all sorts at the Three Broomsticks --"

"Wish we could have brought you some butterbeer, really warms you up --"

"What did you do?" said Hermione, looking anxious. "Did you get any work done?"

"No," said Harry. "Lupin made me a cup of tea in his office. And then Snape came in...."

He told them all about the goblet. Ron's mouth fell open.

"Lupin drank it?" he gasped. "Is he mad?"

Hermione checked her watch.

"We'd better go down, you know, the feast'll be starting in five minutes They hurried through the portrait hole and into the crowd, still discussing Snape.

"But if he -- you know" -- Hermione dropped her voice, glancing nervously around -- "if he was trying to poison Lupin -- he wouldn't have done it in front of Harry."

"Yeah, maybe," said Harry as they reached the entrance hall and crossed into the Great Hall. It had been decorated with hundreds and hundreds of candle-filled pumpkins, a cloud of fluttering live bats, and many flaming orange streamers, which were swimming lazily across the stormy ceiling like brilliant watersnakes.

The food was delicious; even Hermione and Ron, who were full to bursting with Honeydukes sweets, managed second helpings of everything. Harry kept glancing at the staff table. Professor Lupin

looked cheerful and as well as he ever did; he was talking animatedly to tiny little Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher. Harry moved his eyes along the table, to the place where Snape sat. Was he imagining it, or were Snape's eyes flickering toward Lupin more often than was natural?

The feast finished with an entertainment provided by the Hogwarts ghosts. They popped out of the walls and tables to do a bit of formation gliding; Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, had a great success with a reenactment of his own botched beheading.

It had been such a pleasant evening that Harry's good mood couldn't even be spoiled by Malfoy, who shouted through the crowd as they all left the hall, "The dementors send their love, Potter!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed the rest of the Gryffindors along the usual path to Gryffindor Tower, but when they reached the corridor that ended with the portrait of the Fat Lady, they found it jammed with students.

"Why isn't anyone going in?" said Ron curiously.

Harry peered over the heads in front of him. The portrait seemed to be closed.

"Let me through, please," came Percy's voice, and he came bustling importantly through the crowd. "What's the holdup here? You can't all have forgotten the password -- excuse me, I'm Head Boy --"

And then a silence fell over the crowd, from the front first, so that a chill seemed to spread down the corridor. They heard Percy say, in a suddenly sharp voice, "Somebody get Professor Dumbledore. Quick."

People's heads turned; those at the back were standing on tiptoe.

"What's going on?" said Ginny, who had just arrived.

A moment later, Professor Dumbledore was there, sweeping toward the portrait; the Gryffindors squeezed together to let him through, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved closer to see what the trouble was.

"Oh, my --" Hermione grabbed Harry's arm.

The Fat Lady had vanished from her portrait, which had been slashed so viciously that strips of canvas littered the floor; great chunks of it had been torn away completely.

Dumbledore took one quick look at the ruined painting and turned, his eyes somber, to see Professors McGonagall, Lupin, and Snape hurrying toward him.

"We need to find her," said Dumbledore. "Professor McGonagall, please go to Mr. Filch at once and tell him to search every painting in the castle for the Fat Lady."

"You'll be lucky!" said a cackling voice.

It was Peeves the Poltergeist, bobbing over the crowd and looking delighted, as he always did, at the sight of wreckage or worry.

"What do you mean, Peeves?" said Dumbledore calmly, and Peeves's grin faded a little. He didn't dare taunt Dumbledore. Instead he adopted an oily voice that was no better than his cackle. "Ashamed, Your Headship, sit. Doesn't want to be seen. She's a horrible mess. Saw her running through the landscape up on the fourth floor, sir, dodging between the trees. Crying something dreadful," he said happily. "Poor thing," he added unconvincingly.

"Did she say who did it?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Oh yes, Professorhead," said Peeves, with the air of one cradling a large bombshell in his arms. "He got very angry when she wouldn't let him in, you see." Peeves flipped over and grinned at Dumbledore from between his own legs. "Nasty temper he's got, that Sirius Black."

CHAPTER NINE

GRIM DEFEAT

Professor Dumbledore sent all the Gryffindors back to the Great Hall, where they were joined ten minutes later by the students from Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin, who all looked extremely confused.

"The teachers and I need to conduct a thorough search of the castle," Professor Dumbledore told them as Professors McGonagall and Flitwick closed all doors into the hall. "I'm afraid that, for your own safety, you will have to spend the night here. I want the prefects to stand guard over the entrances to the hall and I am leaving the Head Boy and Girl in charge. Any disturbance should be reported to me immediately," he added to Percy, who was looking immensely proud and important. "Send word with one of the ghosts."

Professor Dumbledore paused, about to leave the hall, and said, "Oh, yes, you'll be needing..."

One casual wave of his wand and the long tables flew to the edges of the hall and stood themselves against the walls; another wave, and the floor was covered with hundreds of squashy purple sleeping bags.

"Sleep well," said Professor Dumbledore, closing the door behind him.

The hall immediately began to buzz excitedly; the Gryffindors were telling the rest of the school what had just happened.

"Everyone into their sleeping bags!" shouted Percy. "Come on, now, no more talking! Lights out in ten minutes!"

"C'mon," Ron said to Harry and Hermione; they seized three sleeping bags and dragged them into a corner.

"Do you think Black's still in the castle?" Hermione whispered anxiously.

"Dumbledore obviously thinks he might be," said Ron.

"It's very lucky he picked tonight, you know," said Hermione as they climbed fully dressed into their sleeping bags and propped themselves on their elbows to talk. "The one night we weren't in the tower...."

I reckon he's lost track of time, being on the run," said Ron. "Didn't realize it was Halloween. Otherwise he'd have come bursting in here."

Hermione shuddered.

All around them, people were asking one another the same question: "How did he get in?"

"Maybe he knows how to Apparate," said a Ravenclaw a few feet away, "Just appear out of thin air, you know."

"Disguised himself, probably," said a Hufflepuff fifth year. "He could've flown in," suggested Dean Thomas.

"Honestly, am I the only person who's ever bothered to read Hogwarts, A History?" said Hermione crossly to Harry and Ron.

"Probably," said Ron. "Why?"

"Because the castle's protected by more than walls, You know,,, said

Hermione. "There are all sorts of enchantments on it, to stop people entering by stealth. You can't just Apparate in here. And I'd like to see the disguise that could fool those dementors. They're guarding every single entrance to the grounds. They'd have seen him fly in too. And Fitch knows all the secret passages, they'll have them covered...."

"The lights are going out now!" Percy shouted. "I want everyone in their sleeping bags and no more talking!"

The candles all went out at once. The only light now came from the silvery ghosts, who were drifting about talking seriously to the prefects, and the enchanted ceiling, which, like the sky outside, was scattered with stars. What with that, and the whispering that still filled the hall, Harry felt as though he were sleeping outdoors in a light wind.

Once every hour, a teacher would reappear in the hall to check that everything was quiet. Around three in the morning, when many students had finally fallen asleep, Professor Dumbledore came in. Harry watched him looking around for Percy, who had been prowling between the sleeping bags, telling people off for talking. Percy was only a short way away from Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who quickly pretended to be asleep as Dumbledore's footsteps drew nearer.

"Any sign of him, Professor?" asked Percy in a whisper.

"No. All well here?"

"Everything under control, sir."

"Good. There's no point moving them all now. I've found a temporary guardian for the Gryffindor portrait hole. You'll be able to move them back in tomorrow."

"And the Fat Lady, sir?"

"Hiding in a map of Argyllshire on the second floor. Apparently she refused to let Black in without the password, so he attacked. She's still very distressed, but once she's calmed down, I'll have Mr. Filch restore her."

Harry heard the door of the hall creak open again, and more footsteps.

"Headmaster?" It was Snape. Harry kept quite still, listening hard. "The whole of the third floor has been searched. He's not there. And Filch has done the dungeons; nothing there either."

"What about the Astronomy tower? Professor Trelawney's room? The Owlery?"

"All searched."

"Very well, Severus. I didn't really expect Black to linger."

"Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?" asked Snape.

Harry raised his head very slightly off his arms to free his other ear,

"Many, Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next."

Harry opened his eyes a fraction and squinted up to where they stood; Dumbledore's back was to him, but he could see Percy's face, rapt with attention, and Snape's profile, which looked angry.

"You remember the conversation we had, Headmaster, just before -- ah -- the start of term?" said Snape, who was barely opening his lips, as though trying to block Percy out of the conversation.

"I do, Severus," said Dumbledore, and there was something like warning in his voice.

"It seems -- almost impossible -- that Black could have entered the school without inside help. I did express my concerns whet, you appointed --"

"I do not believe a single person inside this castle would have helped Black enter it," said Dumbledore, and his tone made it so clear that the subject was closed that Snape didn't reply. "I must go down to the dementors," said Dumbledore. I said I would inform them when our search was complete."

"Didn't they want to help, sit?" said Percy.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore coldly. "But I'm afraid no dementor will cross the threshold of this castle while I am headmaster."

Percy looked slightly abashed. Dumbledore left the hall, walking quickly and quietly. Snape stood for a moment, watching the headmaster with an expression of deep resentment on his face; then he too left.

Harry glanced sideways at Ron and Hermione. Both of them had their eyes open too, reflecting the starry ceiling.

"\What was all that about?" Ron mouthed.

The school talked of nothing but Sirius Black for the next few days. The theories about how he had entered the castle became wilder and wilder; Hannah Abbott, from Hufflepuff, spent much of their next Herbology class telling anyone who'd listen that Black could turn into a flowering shrub.

The Fat Lady's ripped canvas had been taken off the wall and

Replaced with the portrait of Sir Cadogan and his fat gray pony. Nobody was very happy about this. Sir Cadogan spent half his time challenging people to duels, and the rest thinking up ridiculously complicated passwords, which he changed at least twice a day.

"He's a complete lunatic," said Seamus Finnigan angrily to Percy. "Can't we get anyone else?"

"None of the other pictures wanted the job," said Percy. "Frightened of what happened to the Fat Lady. Sir Cadogan was the only one brave enough to volunteer."

Sir Cadogan, however, was the least of Harry's worries. He was now being closely watched. Teachers found excuses to walk along corridors with him, and Percy Weasley (acting, Harry suspected, on his mother's orders) was tailing him everywhere like an extremely pompous guard dog. To cap it all, Professor McGonagall summoned Harry into her office, with such a

somber expression on her face Harry thought someone must have died.

"There's no point hiding it from you any longer, Potter," she said in a very serious voice. "I know this will come as a shock to you, but Sirius Black --"

"I know he's after me," said Harry wearily. "I heard Ron's dad telling his mum. Mr. Weasley works for the Ministry of Magic."

Professor McGonagall seemed very taken aback. She stared at Harry for a moment or two, then said, "I see! Well, in that case, Potter, you'll understand why I don't think it's a good idea for you to be practicing Quidditch in the evenings. Out on the field with only Your team members, it's very exposed, Potter --"

"We've got our first match on Saturday!" said Harry, outraged. "I've got to train, Professor!"

Professor McGonagall considered him intently. Harry knew she was deeply interested in the Gryffindor team's prospects; it had been she, after all, who'd suggested him as Seeker in the first Place. He waited, holding his breath.

"Hmm..." Professor McGonagall stood up and stared out of the window at the Quidditch field, just visible through the rain. "Well... goodness knows, I'd like to see us win the Cup at last... but all the same, Potter... I'd be happier if a teacher were present. I'll ask Madam Hooch to oversee your training sessions."

The weather worsened steadily as the first Quidditch match drew nearer. Undaunted, the Gryffindor team was training harder than ever under the eye of Madam Hooch. Then, at their final training session before Saturday's match, Oliver Wood gave his team some unwelcome news.

"We're not playing Slytherin!" he told them, looking very angry. "Flint's just been to see me. We're playing Hufflepuff instead."

"Why?" chorused the rest of the team.

"Flint's excuse is that their Seeker's arm's still injured," said Wood, grinding his teeth furiously. "But it's obvious why they're doing it. Don't want to play in this weather. Think it'll damage their chances...."

There had been strong winds and heavy rain all day, and as Wood spoke, they heard a distant rumble of thunder.

"There's nothing wrong with Malfoy's arm!" said Harry furiously. "He's faking it!"

"I know that, but we can't prove it," said Wood bitterly, "And we've been practicing all those moves assuming we're playing Slytherin, and instead it's Hufflepuff, and their style's quite different. They've got a new Captain and Seeker, Cedric Diggory --"

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie suddenly giggled.

"What?" said Wood, frowning at this lighthearted behavior.

"He's that tall, good-looking one, isn't he?" said Angelina.

"Strong and silent," said Katie, and they started to giggle again.

"He's only silent because he's too thick to string two words together," said Fred impatiently. "I don't know why you're worried, Oliver, Hufflepuff is a pushover. Last time we played them, Harry caught the Snitch in about five minutes, remember?"

"We were playing in completely different conditions!" Wood shouted, his eyes bulging slightly. "Diggory's put a very strong side together! He's an excellent Seeker! I was afraid you'd take it like this! We mustn't relax! We must keep our focus! Slytherin is trying to wrong-foot us! We must win!"

"Oliver, calm down!" said Fred, looking slightly alarmed. "We're taking Hufflepuff very seriously. Seriously."

The day before the match, the winds reached howling point and the rain fell harder than ever. It was so dark inside the corridors and classrooms that extra torches and lanterns were lit. The Slytherin team was looking very smug indeed, and none more so than Malfoy.

"Ah, if only my arm was feeling a bit better!" he sighed as the gale outside pounded the windows.

Harry had no room in his head to worry about anything except the match tomorrow. Oliver Wood kept hurrying up to him between classes and giving him tips. The third time this happened, Wood talked for so long that Harry suddenly realized he was ten minutes late for Defense Against the Dark Arts, and set off at a run with Wood shouting after him, "Diggory's got a very fast swerve, Harry, so you might want to try looping him --"

Harry skidded to a halt outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, pulled the door open, and dashed inside.

"Sorry I'm late, Professor Lupin. I --"

But it wasn't Professor Lupin who looked up at him from the teacher's desk; it was Snape.

"This lesson began ten minutes ago, Potter, so I think we'll make it ten points from Gryffindor. Sit down."

But Harry didn't move.

"Where's Professor Lupin?" he said.

"He says he is feeling too ill to teach today," said Snape with a twisted smile. "I believe I told you to sit down?"

But Harry stayed where he was.

"What's wrong with him?"

Snape's black eyes glittered.

"Nothing life-threatening," he said, looking as though he wished it were. "Five more points from Gryffindor, and if I have to ask you to sit down again, it will be fifty."

Harry walked slowly to his seat and sat down. Snape looked around at the class.

"As I was saying before Potter interrupted, Professor Lupin has not left any record of the topics you have covered so far --"

"Please, sir, we've done boggarts, Red Caps, kappas, and grindylows," said Hermione quickly, "and we're just about to start --"

"Be quiet," said Snape coldly. "I did not ask for information. I was merely commenting on Professor Lupin's lack of organization."

"He's the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we've ever had," said Dean Thomas boldly, and there was a murmur of agreement from the rest of the class. Snape looked more menacing than ever.

"You are easily satisfied. Lupin is hardly overtaxing you -- I ,Would expect first years to be able to deal with Red Caps and grindylows. Today we shall discuss --"

Harry watched him flick through the textbook, to the very back chapter, which he must know they hadn't covered.

"Werewolves," said Snape.

"But, sir," said Hermione, seemingly unable to restrain herself, "we're not supposed to do werewolves yet, we're due to start hinkypunks --"

"Miss Granger," said Snape in a voice of deadly calm, "I was under the impression that I am teaching this lesson, not you. And I am telling you all to turn to page 394." He glanced around again. 'All of you! Now!"

With many bitter sidelong looks and some sullen muttering, the class opened their books.

"Which of you can tell me how we distinguish between the werewolf and the true wolf?" said Snape.

Everyone sat in motionless silence; everyone except Hermione, whose hand, as it so often did, had shot straight into the air.

"Anyone?" Snape said, ignoring Hermione. His twisted smile was back. "Are you telling me that Professor Lupin hasn't even taught you the basic distinction between --"

"We told you," said Parvati suddenly, "we haven't got as far as werewolves yet, we're still on --"

"Silence!" snarled Snape. "Well, well, well, I never thought I'd meet a third-year class who wouldn't even recognize a werewolf when they saw one. I shall make a point of informing Professor Dumbledore how very behind you all are...."

"Please, sir," said Hermione, whose hand was still in the air, "the werewolf differs from the true wolf in several small ways. The snout of the werewolf --"

"That is the second time you have spoken out of turn, Miss Granger," said Snape coolly. "Five more points from Gryffindor for being an insufferable know-it-all."

Hermione went very red, put down her hand, and stared at the floor with her eyes full of tears. It was a mark of how much the class loathed Snape that they were all glaring at him, because every one of them had called Hermione a know-it-all at least once, and Ron, who told Hermione she was a know-it-all at least twice a week, said loudly, "You asked us a question and she knows the answer! Why ask if you don't want to be told?"

The class knew instantly he'd gone too far. Snape advanced on Ron slowly, and the room held its breath.

"Detention, Weasley," Snape said silkily, his face very close to Ron's. "And if I ever hear you criticize the way I teach a class again, you will be very sorry indeed."

No one made a sound throughout the rest of the lesson. They sat and made notes on werewolves from the textbook, while Snape prowled up and down the rows of desks, examining the work they had been doing with Professor Lupin.

"Very poorly explained... That is incorrect, the kappa is more commonly found in Mongolia.... Professor Lupin gave this eight out of ten? I wouldn't have given it three...."

When the bell rang at last, Snape held them back.

"You will each write an essay, to be handed in to me, on the ways you recognize and kill werewolves. I want two rolls of parchment or, the subject, and I want them by Monday morning. It is time somebody took this class in hand. Weasley, stay behind, we need to arrange your detention."

Harry and Hermione left the room with the rest of the class, who waited until they were well out of earshot, then burst into a furious tirade about Snape.

"Snape's never been like this with any of our other Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, even if he did want the job," Harry said to Hermione. "Why's he got it in for Lupin? D'you think this is all because of the boggart?"

"I don't know," said Hermione pensively. "But I really hope Professor Lupin gets better soon...."

Ron caught up with them five minutes later, in a towering rage.

"D'you know what that --" (he called Snape something that made Hermione say "Ron!") "-- is making me do? I've got to scrub out the bedpans in the hospital wing. Without magic!" He was breathing deeply, his fists clenched. "Why couldn't Black have hidden in Snape's office, eh? He could have finished him off for us!"

Harry woke extremely early the next morning; so early that it was still dark. For a moment he thought the roaring of the wind had woken him. Then he felt a cold breeze on the back of his neck and sat bolt upright -- Peeves the Poltergeist had been floating next to him, blowing hard in his ear.

"What did you do that for?" said Harry furiously. Peeves puffed out his

cheeks, blew hard, and zoomed backward out of the room, cackling.

Harry fumbled for his alarm clock and looked at it. It was half past four. Cursing Peeves, he rolled over and tried to get back to sleep, but it was very difficult, now that he was awake, to ignore the sounds of the thunder rumbling overhead, the pounding of the wind against the castle walls, and the distant creaking of the trees in the Forbidden Forest. In a few hours he would be out on the Quidditch field, battling through that gale. Finally, he gave up any thought of more sleep, got up, dressed, picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand, and walked quietly out of the dormitory.

As Harry opened the door, something brushed against his leg. He bent down just in time to grab Crookshanks by the end of his bushy tail and drag him outside.

"You know, I reckon Ron was right about you," Harry told Crookshanks suspiciously. "There are plenty of mice around this place -- go and chase them. Go on," he added, nudging Crookshanks down the spiral staircase with his foot. "Leave Scabbers alone."

The noise of the storm was even louder in the common room. Harry knew better than to think the match would be canceled; Quidditch matches weren't called off for trifles like thunderstorms. Nevertheless, he was starting to feel very apprehensive. Wood had pointed out Cedric Diggory to him in the corridor; Diggory was a fifth year and a lot bigger than Harry. Seekers were usually light

and speedy, but Diggory's weight would be an advantage in this weather because he was less likely to be blown off course.

Harry whiled away the hours until dawn in front of the fire, getting up every now and then to stop Crookshanks from sneaking up

the boys' staircase again. At long last Harry thought it must be time for breakfast, so he headed through the portrait hole alone.

"Stand and fight, you mangy cur!" yelled Sir Cadogan.

"Oh, shut up," Harry yawned.

He revived a bit over a large bowl of porridge, and by the time he'd started on toast, the rest of the team had turned up.

"It's going to be a tough one," said Wood, who wasn't eating anything.

"Stop worrying, Oliver," said Alicia soothingly, "we don't mind a bit of rain."

But it was considerably more than a bit of rain. Such was the popularity of Quidditch that the whole school turned out to watch the match as usual, but they ran down the lawns toward the Quidditch field, heads bowed against the ferocious wind, umbrellas being whipped out of their hands as they went. Just before he entered the locker room, Harry saw Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, laughing and pointing at him from under an enormous umbrella on their way to the stadium.

The team changed into their scarlet robes and waited for Wood's usual pre-match pep talk, but it didn't come. He tried to speak several times, made an odd gulping noise, then shook his head hopelessly and beckoned

them to follow him.

The wind was so strong that they staggered sideways as they walked out onto the field. If the crowd was cheering, they couldn't hear it over the fresh rolls of thunder. Rain was splattering over Harry's glasses. How on earth was he going to see the Snitch in this?

The Hufflepuffs were approaching from the opposite side of the field, wearing canary-yellow robes. The Captains walked up to each other and shook hands; Diggory smiled at Wood but Wood no, looked as though he had lockjaw and merely nodded. Harry saw Madam Hooch's mouth form the words, "Mount Your brooms,,, He pulled his right foot out of the mud with a squelch and swung it over his Nimbus Two Thousand. Madam Hooch put her whistle to her lips and gave it a blast that sounded shrill and distant they were off

Harry rose fast, but his Nimbus was swerving slightly with the wind. He held it as steady as he could and turned, squinting into the rain.

Within five minutes Harry was soaked to his skin and frozen, hardly able to see his teammates, let alone the tiny Snitch. He flew backward and forward across the field past blurred red and yellow shapes, with no idea of what was happening in the rest of the game. He couldn't hear the commentary over the wind. The crowd was hidden beneath a sea of cloaks and battered umbrellas. Twice Harry came very close to being unseated by a Bludger; his vision was so clouded by the rain on his glasses he hadn't seen them coming.

He lost track of time. It was getting harder and harder to hold his broom straight. The sky was getting darker, as though night had decided to come early. Twice Harry nearly hit another player, without knowing whether it was a teammate or opponent; everyone was now so wet, and the rain so thick, he could hardly tell them apart....

With the first flash of lightning came the sound of Madam Hooch's whistle; Harry could just see the outline of Wood through the thick rain, gesturing him to the ground. The whole team splashed down into the mud.

"I called for time-out!" Wood roared at his team. "Come on, under here --"

They huddled at the edge of the field under a large umbrella; Harry took off his glasses and wiped them hurriedly on his robes.

"What's the score?"

"We're fifty points up," said Wood, "but unless we get the Snitch soon, we'll be playing into the night."

"I've got no chance with these on," Harry said exasperatedly, waving his glasses.

At that very moment, Hermione appeared at his shoulder; she was holding her cloak over her head and was, inexplicably, beaming.

"I've had an idea, Harry! Give me your glasses, quick!"

He handed them to her, and as the team watched in amazement, Hermione tapped them with her wand and said, "Impervius!"

"There!" she said, handing them back to Harry. "They'll repel water!"

Wood looked as though he could have kissed her.

"Brilliant!" he called hoarsely after her as she disappeared into the crowd. "Okay, team, let's go for it!"

Hermione's spell had done the trick. Harry was still numb with cold, still wetter than he'd ever been in his life, but he could see. Full of fresh determination, he urged his broom through the turbulent air, staring in every direction for the Snitch, avoiding a Bludger, ducking beneath Diggory, who was streaking in the opposite direction....

There was another clap of thunder, followed immediately by forked lightning. This was getting more and more dangerous. Harry needed to get the Snitch quickly -

He turned, intending to head back toward the middle of the field, but at that moment, another flash of lightning illuminated the stands, and Harry saw something that distracted him completely, the silhouette of an enormous shaggy black dog, clearly imprinted against the sky, motionless in the topmost, empty row of seats.

Harry's numb hands slipped on the broom handle and his Nimbus dropped a few feet. Shaking his sodden bangs out of his eyes, he squinted back into the stands. The dog had vanished.

"Harry!" came Wood's anguished yell from the Gryffindor goal posts.
"Harry, behind you!"

Harry looked wildly around. Cedric Diggory was pelting up the field, and a tiny speck of gold was shimmering in the rain-filled air between them -

With a jolt of panic, Harry threw himself flat to the broomhandle and zoomed toward the Snitch.

"Come on!" he growled at his Nimbus as the rain whipped his face.
'Taster!'

But something odd was happening. An eerie silence was falling across the stadium. The wind, though as strong as ever, was forgetting to roar. It was as though someone had turned off the sound, as though Harry had gone suddenly deaf -- what was going on?

And then a horribly familiar wave of cold swept over him, inside him, just as he became aware of something moving on the field below...

Before he'd had time to think, Harry had taken his eyes off the Snitch and looked down.

At least a hundred dementors, their hidden faces pointing up at him, were standing beneath him. It was as though freezing water were rising in his chest, cutting at his insides. And then he heard it again.... Someone was screaming, screaming inside his head... a woman...

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl... stand aside, now...."

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead --"

Numbing, swirling white mist was filling Harry's brain.... What was he doing? Why was he flying? He needed to help her... She was going to die.... She was going to be murdered....

He was falling, falling through the icy mist.

"Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy....

A shrill voice was laughing, the woman was screaming, and Harry knew no more.

"Lucky the ground was so soft."

"I thought he was dead for sure."

"But he didn't even break his glasses."

Harry could hear the voices whispering, but they made no sense whatsoever. He didn't have a clue where he was, or how he'd got there, or what he'd been doing before he got there. All he knew was that every inch of him was aching as though it had been beaten.

"That was the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life."

Scariest... the scariest thing... hooded black figures... cold ... screaming...

Harry's eyes snapped open. He was lying in the hospital wing. The Gryffindor Quidditch team, spattered with mud from head to foot, was gathered around his bed. Ron and Hermione were also there, looking as though they'd just climbed out of a swimming pool.

"Harry!" said Fred, who looked extremely white underneath, the mud.
"How're you feeling?"

It was as though Harry's memory was on fast forward. The lightning -- the Grim -- the Snitch -- and the dementors...

"What happened?" he said, sitting up so suddenly they all gasped.

"You fell off," said Fred. "Must've been -- what -- fifty feet?"

"We thought you'd died," said Alicia, who was shaking.

Hermione made a small, squeaky noise. Her eyes were extremely bloodshot.

"But the match," said Harry. "What happened? Are we doing a replay?"

No one said anything. The horrible truth sank into Harry like a stone.

"We didn't -- lose?"

"Diggory got the Snitch," said George. "Just after you fell. He didn't realize what had happened. When he looked back and saw you on the ground, he tried to call it off. Wanted a rematch. But they won fair and square... even Wood admits it."

"Where is Wood?" said Harry, suddenly realizing he wasn't there.

"Still in the showers," said Fred. "We think he's trying to drown himself."

Harry put his face to his knees, his hands gripping his hair. Fred grabbed his shoulder and shook it roughly.

"C'mon, Harry, you've never missed the Snitch before."

"There had to be one time you didn't get it," said George.

"It's not over yet," said Fred. "We lost by a hundred points"

"Right? So if Hufflepuff loses to Ravenclaw and we beat Ravenclaw and Slytherin --."

"Hufflepuff'll have to lose by at least two hundred points," said George.

"But if they beat Ravenclaw..."

"No Way, Ravenclaw is too good. But if Slytherin loses against Hufflepuff..."

"It all depends on the points -- a margin of a hundred either way."

Harry lay there, not saying a word. They had lost... for the first time ever, he had lost a Quidditch match.

After ten minutes or so, Madam Pomfrey came over to tell the team to leave him in peace.

"We'll come and see you later," Fred told him. "Don't beat yourself up, Harry, you're still the best Seeker we've ever had."

The team trooped out, trailing mud behind them. Madam Pomfrey shut the door behind them, looking disapproving. Ron and Hermione moved nearer to Harry's bed.

"Dumbledore was really angry," Hermione said in a quaking voice. "I've never seen him like that before. He ran onto the field as You fell, waved his wand, and you sort of slowed down before you hit the ground. Then he whirled his wand at the dementors. Shot silver stuff at them. They left the stadium right away... He was furious they'd come onto the grounds. We heard him --"

"Then he magicked you onto a stretcher," said Ron. "And walked up to school with you floating on it. Everyone thought you were --"

His voice faded, but Harry hardly noticed. He was thinking about what the dementors had done to him... about the screaming voice. He looked up and saw Ron and Hermione lookin, at him so anxiously that he quickly cast around for something matter-of-fact to say.

"Did someone get my Nimbus?"

Ron and Hermione looked quickly at each other.

"Er --"

"What?" said Harry, looking from one to the other.

"Well... when you fell off, it got blown away," said Hermione hesitantly.

"And?"

"And it hit -- it hit -- oh, Harry -- it hit the Whomping Willow."

Harry's insides lurched. The Whomping Willow was a very violent tree that stood alone in the middle of the grounds.

"And?" he said, dreading the answer.

"Well, you know the Whomping Willow," said Ron. "It -- it doesn't like being hit."

"Professor Flitwick brought it back just before you came around, said Hermione in a very small voice.

Slowly, she reached down for a bag at her feet, turned it upside down, and tipped a dozen bits of splintered wood and twig onto the bed, the only remains of Harry's faithful, finally beaten broomstick.

CHAPTER TEN

THE MARAUDER'S MAP

Madam Pomfrey insisted on keeping Harry in the hospital wing for the rest of the weekend. He didn't argue or complain, but he wouldn't let her throw away the shattered remnants of his Nimbus Two Thousand. He knew he was being stupid, knew that the Nimbus was beyond repair, but Harry couldn't help it; he felt as though he'd lost one of his best friends.

He had a stream of visitors, all intent on cheering him up. Hagrid sent him a bunch of earwiggy flowers that looked like yellow cabbages, and Ginny Weasley, blushing furiously, turned up with a get-well card she had made herself, which sang shrilly unless Harry kept it shut under his bowl of fruit. The Gryffindor team visited again on Sunday morning, this time accompanied by Wood, who told Harry (in a hollow, dead sort of voice) that he didn't blame

him in the slightest. Ron and Hermione left Harry's bedside only at night- But nothing anyone said or did could make Harry feel any better, because they knew only half of what was troubling him.

He hadn't told anyone about the Grim, not even Ron -and Hermione, because he knew Ron would panic and Hermione would scoff. The fact remained, however, that it had now appeared twice, and both appearances had been followed by near-fatal accidents; the first time, he had nearly been run over by the Knight Bus; the second, fallen fifty feet from his broomstick. Was the Grim going to haunt him until he actually died? Was he going to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder for the beast?

And then there were the dementors. Harry felt sick and humiliated every

time he thought of them. Everyone said the dementors were horrible, but no one else collapsed every time they went near one. No one else heard echoes in their head of their dying parents.

Because Harry knew who that screaming voice belonged to now. He had heard her words, heard them over and over again during the night hours in the hospital wing while he lay awake, staring at the strips of moonlight on the ceiling. When the dementors approached him, he heard the last moments of his mother's life, her attempts to protect him, Harry, from Lord Voldemort, and Voldemort's laughter before he murdered her.... Harry dozed fitfully, sinking into dreams full of clammy, rotted hands and petrified pleading, jerking awake to dwell again on his mother's voice.

It was a relief to return to the noise and bustle of the main school on Monday, where he was forced to think about other things, eve', if he had to endure Draco Malfoys taunting. Malfoy was almost beside himself with glee at Gryffindor's defeat. He had finally taken off his bandages, and celebrated having the full use of both arms again by doing spirited imitations of Harry falling off his broom. Malfoy spent much of their next Potions class doing dementor imitations across the dungeon; Ron finally cracked and flung a large, slippery crocodile heart at Malfoy, which hit him in the face and caused Snape to take fifty points from Gryffindor.

"If Snape's teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts again, I'm skiving off," said Ron as they headed toward Lupin's classroom after lunch.
"Check who's in there, Hermione."

Hermione peered around the classroom door.

"It's okay!"

Professor Lupin was back at work. It certainly looked as though he had been ill. His old robes were hanging more loosely on him and there were dark shadows beneath his eyes; nevertheless, he smiled at the class as they took their seats, and they burst at once into an explosion of complaints about Snape's behavior while Lupin had been ill.

"It's not fair, he was only filling in, why should he give us homework?"

"We don't know anything about werewolves two rolls of parchment!"

"Did you tell Professor Snape we haven't covered them yet?" Lupin asked, frowning slightly.

The babble broke out again.

"Yes, but he said we were really behind he wouldn't listen --"

-- two rolls of parchment!"

Professor Lupin smiled at the look of indignation on every face.

"Don't worry. I'll speak to Professor Snape. You don't have to do the essay."

"Oh no," said Hermione, looking very disappointed. "I've already finished it!"

They had a very enjoyable lesson. Professor Lupin had brought along a glass box containing a hinkypunk, a little one-legged creature who looked as though he were made of wisps of smoke, rather frail and harmless looking.

"Lures travelers into bogs," said Professor Lupin as they took notes. "You notice the lantern dangling from his hand? Hops ahead -people follow the light -- then --"

The hinkypunk made a horrible squelching noise against the glass.

When the bell rang, everyone gathered up their things and headed for the door, Harry among them, but --

"Wait a moment, Harry," Lupin called. "I'd like a word."

Harry doubled back and watched Professor Lupin covering the hinkypunk's box with a cloth.

"I heard about the match," said Lupin, turning back to his desk and starting to pile books into his briefcase, "and I'm sorry about your broomstick. Is there any chance of fixing it?"

"No," said Harry. "The tree smashed it to bits."

Lupin sighed.

"They planted the Whomping Willow the same year that I arrived at Hogwarts. People used to play a game, trying to get near enough to touch the trunk. In the end, a boy called Davey Gudgeon nearly lost an eye, and we were forbidden to go near it. No broomstick would have a chance."

"Did you hear about the dementors too?" said Harry with difficulty.

Lupin looked at him quickly.

"Yes, I did. I don't think any of us have seen Professor Dumbledore that angry. They have been growing restless for some time -- furious at his refusal to let them inside the grounds.... I suppose they were the reason you fell?"

"Yes," said Harry. He hesitated, and then the question he had to ask burst from him before he could stop himself." Why? Why do they affect me like that? Am I just --?"

"It has nothing to do with weakness," said Professor Lupin sharply, as though he had read Harry's mind. "The dementors affect you worse than the others because there are horrors in your past that the others don't have."

A ray of wintery sunlight fell across the classroom, illuminating Lupin's gray hairs and the lines on his young face.

"Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them. Even Muggles feel their presence, though they can't see them. Get too near a dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself... soul-less and evil. You'll be left with

nothing but the worst experiences of your life. And the worst that happened to you, Harry, is enough to make anyone fall off their broom. You have nothing to feel ashamed of."

"When they get near me --" Harry stared at Lupin's desk, his throat tight. "I can hear Voldemort murdering my mum."

Lupin made a sudden motion with his arm as though to grip Harry's shoulder, but thought better of it. There was a moment's silence, then --

"Why did they have to come to the match?" said Harry bitterly.

"They're getting hungry," said Lupin coolly, shutting his briefcase with a snap. "Dumbledore won't let them into the school, so their supply of human prey has dried up.... I don't think they could resist the large crowd around the Quidditch field. All that excitement ... emotions running high... it was their idea of a feast."

"Azkaban must be terrible," Harry muttered. Lupin nodded grimly.

"The fortress is set on a tiny island, way out to sea, but they don't need walls and water to keep the prisoners in, not when they're all trapped inside their own heads, incapable of a single cheery thought. Most of them go mad within weeks."

"But Sirius Black escaped from them," Harry said slowly. "He got away..."

Lupin's briefcase slipped from the desk; he had to stoop quickly to catch it.

"Yes," he said, straightening up, "Black must have found a way to fight them. I wouldn't have believed it possible.... Dementors are supposed to drain a wizard of his powers if he is left with them too long...."

"You made that dementor on the train back off," said Harry suddenly.

"There are -- certain defenses one can use," said Lupin. "But there was only one dementor on the train. The more there are, the more difficult it becomes to resist."

"What defenses?" said Harry at once. "Can you teach me?"

"I don't pretend to be an expert at fighting dementors, Harry, quite the contrary..."

"But if the dementors come to another Quidditch match, I need to be able to fight them --"

Lupin looked into Harry's determined face, hesitated, then said, "Well... all right. I'll try and help. But it'll have to wait until next term, I'm afraid. I have a lot to do before the holidays. I chose a very inconvenient time to fall ill."

What with the promise of anti-dementor lessons from Lupin, the thought that he might never have to hear his mother's death again, and the fact that Ravenclaw flattened Hufflepuff in their Quidditch match at the end of November, Harry's mood took a definite upturn. Gryffindor were not out of the running after all, although they could not afford to lose

another match. Wood became repossessed of his manic energy, and worked his team as hard as ever in the chilly haze of rain that persisted into December. Harry saw no hint of a dementor within the grounds. Dumbledore's anger seemed to be keeping them at their stations at the entrances.

Two weeks before the end of the term, the sky lightened suddenly to a dazzling, opaline white and the muddy grounds were revealed one morning covered in glittering frost. Inside the castle, there was a buzz of Christmas in the air. Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, had already decorated his classroom with shimmering lights that turned out to be real, fluttering fairies. The students were all happily discussing their plans for the holidays. Both Ron and Hermione had decided to remain at Hogwarts, and though Ron said it was because he couldn't stand two weeks with Percy, and Hermione insisted she needed to use the library, Harry wasn't fooled; they were doing it to keep him company, and he was very grateful.

To everyone's delight except Harry's, there was to be another Hogsmeade trip on the very last weekend of the term.

"We can do all our Christmas shopping there!" said Hermione. "Mum and Dad would really love those Toothflossing Stringmints from Honeydukes!"

Resigned to the fact that he would be the only third year staying behind again, Harry borrowed a copy of Which Broomstick from Wood, and decided to spend the day reading up on the different makes. He had been riding one of the school brooms at team practice, an ancient Shooting Star, which was very slow and jerky; he definitely needed a new broom of his own.

On the Saturday morning of the Hogsmeade trip, Harry bid good-bye to Ron and Hermione, who were wrapped in cloaks and scarves, then turned up the marble staircase alone, and headed back toward Gryffindor Tower. Snow had started to fall outside the windows, and the castle was very still and quiet.

"Psst -- Harry!"

He turned, halfway along the third-floor corridor, to see Fred and George peering out at him from behind a statue of a humpbacked, one-eyed witch.

"What are you doing?" said Harry curiously. "How come you're not going to Hogsmeade?"

"We've come to give you a bit of festive cheer before we go," said Fred, with a mysterious wink. "Come in here...."

He nodded toward an empty classroom to the left of the one-eyed statue. Harry followed Fred and George inside. George closed the door quietly and then turned, beaming, to look at Harry.

"Early Christmas present for you, Harry," he said.

Fred pulled something from inside his cloak with a flourish and laid it on one of the desks. It was a large, square, very worn piece of parchment with nothing written on it. Harry, suspecting one of Fred and George's jokes, stared at it.

"What's that supposed to be?"

"This, Harry, is the secret of our success," said George, patting the parchment fondly.

"It's a wrench, giving it to you," said Fred, "but we decided last night, your need's greater than ours."

"Anyway, we know it by heart," said George. "We bequeath it to you. We don't really need it anymore."

"And what do I need with a bit of old parchment?" said Harry.

"A bit of old parchment!" said Fred, closing his eyes with a grimace as though Harry had mortally offended him. "Explain, George."

"Well... when we were in our first year, Harry -- young, carefree, and innocent --"

Harry snorted. He doubted whether Fred and George had ever been innocent.

"Well, more innocent than we are now -- we got into a spot of bother with Filch."

"We let off a Dungbomb in the corridor and it upset him for some reason --"

"So he hauled us off to his office and started threatening us with the usual --" detention disembowelment and we couldn't help noticing a drawer in one of his filing cabinets marked Confiscated and Highly Dangerous.

"Don't tell me --" said Harry, starting to grin.

"Well, what would you've done?" said Fred. "George caused a diversion by dropping another Dungbomb, I whipped the drawer open, and grabbed -- this."

"It's not as bad as it sounds, you know," said George. "We don't reckon Filch ever found out how to work it. He probably suspected what it was, though, or he wouldn't have confiscated it."

"And you know how to work it?"

"Oh yes," said Fred, smirking. "This little beauty's taught us more than all the teachers in this school."

"You're winding me up," said Harry, looking at the ragged old bit of parchment.

"Oh, are we?" said George.

He took out his wand, touched the parchment lightly, and said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

And at once, thin ink lines began to spread like a spider's web from the point that George's wand had touched. They joined each other, they crisscrossed, they fanned into every corner of the parchment; then words began to blossom across the top, great, curly green words, that

proclaimed:

Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers are proud to present THE MARAUDER'S MAP

It was a map showing every detail of the Hogwarts castle and grounds. But the truly remarkable thing were the tiny ink dots moving around it, each labeled with a name in minuscule writing. Astounded, Harry bent over it. A labeled dot in the top left corner showed that Professor Dumbledore was pacing his study; the caretaker's cat, Mrs. Norris, was prowling the second floor; and Peeves the Poltergeist was currently bouncing around the trophy room. And as Harry's eyes traveled up and down the familiar corridors, he noticed something else.

This map showed a set of passages he had never entered. And many of them seemed to lead -

"Right into Hogsmeade," said Fred, tracing one of them with his finger. "There are seven in all. Now, Filch knows about these four" -- he pointed them out -- "but we're sure we're the only ones who know about these. Don't bother with the one behind the mirror on the fourth floor. We used it until last winter, but it's caved in -- completely blocked. And we don't reckon anyone's ever used this one, because the Whomping Willow's planted right over the entrance. But this one here, this one leads right into the cellar of Honeydukes. We've used it loads of times. And as you might've noticed, the entrance is right outside this room, through that one-eyed old crone's hump."

"Moony, Wormtaill Padfoot, and Prongs," sighed George, patting the heading of the map. "We owe them so much."

"Noble men, working tirelessly to help a new generation of lawbreakers," said Fred solemnly.

"Right," said George briskly. "Don't forget to wipe it after you've used it or anyone can read it," Fred said warningly.

"Just tap it again and say, 'Mischief managed!' And it'll go blank."

"So, young Harry," said Fred, in an uncanny impersonation of Percy, "mind you behave yourself."

"See you in Honeydukes," said George, winking.

They left the room, both smirking in a satisfied sort of way.

Harry stood there, gazing at the miraculous map. He watched the tiny ink Mrs. Norris turn left and pause to sniff at something on the floor. If Filch really didn't know... he wouldn't have to pass the dementors at all....

But even as he stood there, flooded with excitement, something Harry had once heard Mr. Weasley say came floating out of his memory.

Never trust anything that can think for itself, if you can't see where it keeps its brain.

This map was one of those dangerous magical objects Mr. Weasley had been

warning against.... Aids for Magical Mischief Makers... but then, Harry reasoned, he only wanted to use it to get into Hogsmeade, it wasn't as though he wanted to steal anything or attack anyone... and Fred and George had been using it for years without anything horrible happening....

Harry traced the secret passage to Honeydukes with his finger.

Then, quite suddenly, as though following orders, he rolled up the map, stuffed it inside his robes, and hurried to the door of the classroom. He opened it a couple of inches. There was no one outside. Very carefully, he edged out of the room and behind the statue of the one-eyed witch.

What did he have to do? He pulled out the map again and saw to his astonishment, that a new ink figure had appeared upon it, labeled Harry Potter. This figure was standing exactly where the real Harry was standing, about halfway down the third-floor corridor.

Harry watched carefully. His little Ink self appeared to be tapping the witch with his minute wand. Harry quickly took out his real wand and tapped the statue. Nothing happened. He looked back at the map. The tiniest speech bubble had appeared next to his figure. The word inside said, "Dissendium."

"Dissendium!" Harry whispered, tapping the stone witch again.

At once, the statue's hump opened wide enough to admit a fairly thin person. Harry glanced quickly up and down the corridor, then tucked the map away again, hoisted himself into the hole headfirst, and pushed himself forward.

He slid a considerable way down what felt like a stone slide, then landed on cold, damp earth. He stood up, looking around. It was pitch dark. He held up his wand, muttered, "Lumos! " and saw that he was in a very narrow, low, earthy passageway. He raised the map, tapped it with the tip of his wand, and muttered, "Mischief managed!" The map went blank at once. He folded it carefully, tucked it inside his robes, then, heart beating fast, both excited and apprehensive, he set off.

The passage twisted and turned, more like the burrow of a giant rabbit than anything else. Harry hurried along it, stumbling now and then on the uneven floor, holding his wand out in front of him.

It took ages, but Harry had the thought of Honeydukes to sustain him. After what felt like an hour, the passage began to rise. Panting, Harry sped up, his face hot, his feet very cold.

Ten minutes later, he came to the foot of some worn stone steps, which rose out of sight above him. Careful not to make any noise, Harry began to climb. A hundred steps, two hundred steps, he lost count as he climbed, watching his feet.... Then, without warning, his head hit something hard.

It seemed to be a trapdoor. Harry stood there, massaging the top of his head, listening. He couldn't hear any sounds above him. Very slowly, he pushed the trapdoor open and peered over the edge.

He was in a cellar, which was full of wooden crates and boxes. Harry

climbed out of the trapdoor and replaced it -- it blended so perfectly with the dusty floor that it was impossible to tell it was there. Harry crept slowly toward the wooden staircase that led upstairs. Now he could definitely hear voices, not to mention the tinkle of a bell and the opening and shutting of a door.

Wondering what he ought to do, he suddenly heard a door open much closer at hand; somebody was about to come downstairs.

"And get another box of Jelly Slugs, dear, they've nearly cleaned us out --" said a woman's voice.

A pair of feet was coming down the staircase. Harry leapt behind an enormous crate and waited for the footsteps to pass. He heard the man shifting boxes against the opposite wall. He might not get another chance --

Quickly and silently, Harry dodged out from his hiding place and climbed the stairs; looking back, he saw an enormous backside and shiny bald head, buried in a box. Harry reached the door at the top of the stairs, slipped through it, and found himself behind the counter of Honeydukes -- he ducked, crept sideways, and then straightened up.

Honeydukes was so crowded with Hogwarts students that no one looked twice at Harry. He edged among them, looking around, and suppressed a laugh as he imagined the look that would spread over Dudley's piggy face if he could see where Harry was now.

There were shelves upon shelves of the most succulent-looking sweets imaginable. Creamy chunks of nougat, shimmering pink squares of coconut ice, fat, honey-colored toffees; hundreds of different kinds of chocolate in neat rows; there was a large barrel of Every Flavor Beans, and another of Fizzing Whizbees, the levitating sherbert balls that Ron had mentioned; along yet another wall were "Special Effects" -- sweets: Droobles Best Blowing Gum (which filled a room with bluebell-colored bubbles that refused to pop for days), the strange, splintery Toothflossing Stringmints, tiny black Pepper Imps ("breathe fire for your friends!"), Ice Mice ("hear your teeth chatter and squeak!"), peppermint creams shaped like toads ("hop realistically in the stomach!"), fragile sugar-spun quills, and exploding bonbons.

Harry squeezed himself through a crowd of sixth years and saw a sign hanging in the farthest corner of the shop (UNUSUAL TASTES). Ron and Hermione were standing underneath it, examining a tray of blood-flavored lollipops. Harry sneaked up behind them.

"Ugh, no, Harry won't want one of those, they're for vampires, I expect," Hermione was saying.

"How about these?" said Ron, shoving a jar of Cockroach Clusters under Hermione's nose.

"Definitely not," said Harry.

Ron nearly dropped the jar.

"Harry!" squealed Hermione. "What are you doing here? How -- how did you --?"

"Wow!" said Ron, looking very impressed, "you've learned to Apparate!"

"'Course I haven't," said Harry. He dropped his voice so that none of the sixth years could hear him and told them all about the Marauder's Map.

"How come Fred and George never gave it to me!" said Ron, outraged. "I'm their brother!"

"But Harry isn't going to keep it!" said Hermione, as though the idea were ludicrous. "He's going to hand it in to Professor McGonagall, aren't you, Harry?"

"No, I'm not!" said Harry.

"Are you mad?" said Ron, goggling at Hermione. "Hand in something that good?"

"If I hand it in, I'll have to say where I got it! Filch would know Fred and George had nicked it!"

"But what about Sirius Black?" Hermione hissed. "He could be using one of the passages on that map to get into the castle! The teachers have got to know!"

"He can't be getting in through a passage," said Harry quickly. "There are seven secret tunnels on the map, right? Fred and George reckon Filch already knows about four of them. And of the other three -- one of them's caved in, so no one can get through it. One of them's got the Whomping Willow planted over the entrance, so you can't get out of it. And the one I just came through -well -- it's really hard to see the entrance to it down in the cellar, so unless he knew it was there..."

Harry hesitated. What if Black did know the passage was there?

Ron, however, cleared his throat significantly, and pointed to a notice pasted on the inside of the sweetshop door.

-----BY ORDER OF ----- THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Customers are reminded that until further notice, dementors will be patrolling the streets of Hogsmeade every night after sundown. This measure has been put in place for the safety of Hogsmeade residents and will be lifted upon the recapture of Sirius Black. It is therefore advisable that you complete your shopping well before nightfall.

Merry Christmas!

"See?" said Ron quietly. "I'd like to see Black try and break into Honeydukes with dementors swarming all over the village. Anyway, Hermione, the Honeydukes owners would hear a break-in, wouldn't they? They live over the shop!"

"Yes, but but --" Hermoine seemed to be struggling to find another problem. "Look, Harry still shouldn't be coming into Hogsmeade. He hasn't got a signed form! If anyone finds out, he'll be in so much trouble! And it's not nightfall yet -- what if Sirius Black turns up today? Now?"

"He'd have a job spotting Harry in this," said Ron, nodding through the mullioned windows at the thick, swirling snow. "Come on, Hermione, it's

Christmas. Harry deserves a break."

Hermione bit her lip, looking extremely worried.

"Are you going to report me?" Harry asked her, grinning.

"Oh -- of course not -- but honestly, Harry --"

"Seen the Fizzing Whizbees, Harry?" said Ron, grabbing him and leading him over to their barrel. "And the Jelly Slugs? And the Acid Pops? Fred gave me one of those when I was seven -- it burnt a hole right through my tongue. I remember Mum walloping him with her broomstick." Ron stared broodingly into the Acid Pop box. "Reckon Fred'd take a bit of Cockroach Cluster if I told him they were peanuts?"

When Ron and Hermione had paid for all their sweets, the three of them left Honeydukes for the blizzard outside.

Hogsmeade looked like a Christmas card; the little thatched cottages and shops were all covered in a layer of crisp snow; there were holly wreaths on the doors and strings of enchanted candles hanging in the trees.

Harry shivered; unlike the other two, he didn't have his cloak. They headed up the street, heads bowed against the wind, Ron and Hermione shouting through their scarves.

"That's the post office

"Zonko's is up there --"

"We could go up to the Shrieking Shack

"Tell you what," said Ron, his teeth chattering, "shall we go for a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks?"

Harry was more than willing; the wind was fierce and his hands were freezing, so they crossed the road, and in a few minutes were entering the tiny inn.

It was extremely crowded, noisy, warm, and smoky. A curvy sort of woman with a pretty face was serving a bunch of rowdy warlock' up at the bar.

"That's Madam Rosmerta," said Ron. "I'll get the drinks, shall I?" he added, going slightly red.

Harry and Hermione made their way to the back of the room, , , her, there was a small, vacant table between the window and a handsome Christmas tree, which stood next to the fireplace. Ron came back five minutes later, carrying three foaming tankards of hot butterbeer.

"Merry Christmas!" he said happily, raising his tankard.

Harry drank deeply. It was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted and seemed to heat every bit of him from the inside.

A sudden breeze ruffled his hair. The door of the Three Broomsticks had opened again. Harry looked over the rim of his tankard and choked.

Professors McGonagall and Flitwick had just entered the pub with a

flurry of snowflakes, shortly followed by Hagrid, who was deep in conversation with a portly man in a lime-green bowler hat and a pinstriped cloak -- Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic.

In an instant, Ron and Hermione had both placed hands on the top of Harry's head and forced him off his stool and under the table. Dripping with butterbeer and crouching out of sight, Harry clutched his empty tankard and watched the teachers' and Fudge's feet move toward the bar, pause, then turn and walk right toward him.

Somewhere above him, Hermione whispered, *Mobiliarbus!*"

The Christmas tree beside their table rose a few inches off the ground, drifted sideways, and landed with a soft thump right in front of their table, hiding them from view. Staring through the dense lower branches, Harry saw four sets of chair legs move back from the table right beside theirs, then heard the grunts and sighs If the teachers and minister as they sat down.

Next he saw another pair of feet, wearing sparkly turquoise high heels, and heard a woman's voice. "A small gillywater --"

"Mine," said Professor McGonagall's voice.

"Four pints of mulled mead --"

"Ta, Rosmerta," said Hagrid.

"A cherry syrup and soda with ice and umbrella --"

"Mmm!" said Professor Flitwick, smacking his lips.

"So you'll be the red currant rum, Minister."

"Thank you, Rosmerta, m'dear," said Fudge's voice. "Lovely to see you again, I must say. Have one yourself, won't you? Come and join us...."

"Well, thank you very much, Minister."

Harry watched the glittering heels march away and back again. His heart was pounding uncomfortably in his throat. Why hadn't it occurred to him that this was the last weekend of term for the teachers to& And how long were they going to sit there? He needed time to sneak back into Honeydukes if he wanted to return to school tonight.... Hermione's leg gave a nervous twitch next to him.

"So, what brings you to this neck of the woods, Minister?" came Madam Rosmerta's voice.

Harry saw the lower part of Fudge's thick body twist in his chair as though he were checking for eavesdroppers. Then he said in a quiet voice, "What else, m'dear, but Sirius Black? I daresay you heard what happened up at the school at Halloween?"

I did hear a rumor," admitted Madam Rosmerta.

"Did you tell the whole pub, Hagrid?" said Professor McGonagall exasperatedly.

"Do you think Blacks still in the area, Minister?" whispered Madam

Rosmerta.

"I'm sure of it," said Fudge shortly.

"You know that the dementors have searched the whole village twice?" said Madam Rosmerta, a slight edge to her voice. "Scared all my customers away... It's very bad for business, Minister."

"Rosmerta, dear, I don't like them any more than you do," said Fudge uncomfortably. "Necessary precaution... unfortunate, but there YOU are.... I've just met some of them. They're in a fury against Dumbledore -- he won't let them inside the castle grounds."

"I should think not," said Professor McGonagall sharply. "How are we supposed to teach with those horrors floating around?"

"Hear, hear!" squeaked tiny Professor Flitwick, whose feet were dangling a foot from the ground.

"All the same," demurred Fudge, "they are here to protect you all from something much worse.... We all know what Black's capable of..."

"Do you know, I still have trouble believing it," said Madam Rosmerta thoughtfully. "Of all the people to go over to the Dark Side, Sirius Black was the last I'd have thought... I mean, I remember him when he was a boy at Hogwarts. If you'd told me then what he was going to become, I'd have said you'd had too much mead."

"You don't know the half of it, Rosmerta," said Fudge gruffly. "The worst he did isn't widely known."

"The worst?" said Madam Rosmerta, her voice alive with curiosity, "Worse than murdering all those poor people, you mean?"

"I certainly do," said Fudge.

"I ca' A believe that. What could possibly be worse?" "You say you remember him at Hogwarts, Rosmerta," mur- mured Professor McGonagall. "Do you remember who his-best friend was?"

"Naturally," said Madam Rosmerta, with a small laugh. "Never saw one without the other, did you? The number of times I had them in here -- ooh, they used to make me laugh. Quite the double act, Sirius Black and James Potter!"

Harry dropped his tankard with a loud clunk. Ron kicked him.

"Precisely," said Professor McGonagall. "Black and Potter. Ringleaders of their little gang. Both very bright, of course -- exceptionally bright, in fact -- but I don't think we've ever had such a pair of troublemakers --"

"I dunno," chuckled Hagrid. "Fred and George Weasley could give 'em a run fer their money."

"You'd have thought Black and Potter were brothers!" chimed in Professor Flitwick. "Inseparable!"

"Of course they were," said Fudge. "Potter trusted Black beyond all his other friends. Nothing changed when they left school. Black was best man

when James married Lily. Then they named him godfather to Harry. Harry has no idea, of course. You can imagine how the idea would torment him."

"Because Black turned out to be in league with You-Know-Who?" whispered Madam Rosmerta.

"Worse even than that, rn'dear...." Fudge dropped his voice and proceeded in a sort of low rumble. "Not many people are aware that the Potters knew You-Know-Who was after them. Dumbledore, who was of course working tirelessly against You-Know-Who, had a number of useful spies. One of them tipped him off, and he alerted James and Lily at once. He advised them to go into hiding. Well, of course, You-Know-Who wasn't an easy person to hide from. Dumbledore told them that their best chance was the Fidelius Charm."

"How does that work?" said Madam Rosmerta, breathless with interest. Professor Flitwick cleared his throat.

"An immensely complex spell," he said squeakily, "involving the magical concealment of a secret inside a single, living soul. The information is hidden inside the chosen person, or Secret-Keeper, and is henceforth impossible to find -- unless, of course, the Secret-Keeper chooses to divulge it. As long as the Secret-Keeper refused to speak, You-Know-Who could search the village where Lily and James were staying for years and never find them, not even if he had his nose pressed against their sitting room window!"

"So Black was the Potters' Secret-Keeper?" whispered Madam Rosmerta.

"Naturally," said Professor McGonagall. "James Potter told Dumbledore that Black would die rather than tell where they were, that Black was planning to go into hiding himself... and yet, Dumbledore remained worried. I remember him offering to be the Potters' Secret-Keeper himself."

"He suspected Black?" gasped Madam Rosmerta.

"He was sure that somebody close to the Potters had been keeping You-Know-Who informed of their movements," said Professor McGonagall darkly. "Indeed, he had suspected for some time that someone on our side had turned traitor and was passing a lot of information to You-Know-Who."

"But James Potter insisted on using Black?"

"He did," said Fudge heavily. "And then, barely a week after the Fidelius Charm had been performed --" "Black betrayed them?" breathed Madam Rosmerta.

"He did indeed. Black was tired of his double-agent role, he was ready to declare his support openly for You-Know-Who, and he seems to have planned this for the moment of the Potters' death. But, as we all know, You-Know-Who met his downfall in little Harry Potter. Powers gone, horribly weakened, he fled. And this left Black in a very nasty position indeed. His master had fallen at the very moment when he, Black, had shown his true colors as a traitor. He had no choice but to run for it --"

"Filthy, stinkin' turncoat!" Hagrid said, so loudly that half the bar went quiet.

"Shh!" said Professor McGonagall.

"I met him!" growled Hagrid. "I musta bin the last ter see him before he killed all them people! It was me what rescued Harry from Lily an' James's house after they was killed! jus' got him outta the ruins, poor little thing, with a great slash across his forehead, an' his parents dead... an' Sirius Black turns up, on that flyin' motorbike he used ter ride. Never occurred ter me what he was doin' there. I didn' know he'd bin Lily an' James's Secret-Keeper. Thought he'd jus' heard the news o' You-Know-Who's attack an' come ter see what he could do. White an' shakin', he was. An' yeh know what I did? I COMFORTED THE MURDERIN' TRAITOR!" Hagrid roared.

"Hagrid, please!" said Professor McGonagall. "Keep your voice down!"

"How was I ter know he wasn' upset abou' Lily an' James? It was You-Know-Who he cared abou'! An' then he says, 'Give Harry ter me, Hagrid, I'm his godfather, I'll look after him --' Ha! But I'd had me orders from Dumbledore, an' I told Black no, Dumbledore said Harry was ter go ter his aunt an' uncle's. Black argued, but in the end he gave in. Told me ter take his motorbike ter get Harry there. 'I won't need it anymore,' he says.

"I shoulda known there was somethin' fishy goin' on then. He loved that motorbike, what was he givin' it ter me for? Why wouldn' he need it anymore? Fact was, it was too easy ter trace. Dumbledore knew he'd bin the Potters' Secret-Keeper. Black knew he was goin' ter have ter run fer it that night, knew it was a matter o' hours before the Ministry was after him.

"But what if I'd given Harry to him, eh? I bet he'd 've pitched him off the bike halfway out ter sea. His bes' friends' son! But when a wizard goes over ter the Dark Side, there's nothin' and no one that matters to em anymore...."

A long silence followed Hagrid's story. Then Madam Rosmerta said with some satisfaction, "But he didn't manage to disappear, did he? The Ministry of Magic caught up with him next day!"

"Alas, if only we had," said Fudge bitterly. "It was not we who found him. It was little Peter Pettigrew -- another of the Potters' friends. Maddened by grief, no doubt, and knowing that Black had been the Potters' Secret-Keeper, he went after Black himself."

"Pettigrew... that fat little boy who was always tagging around after them at Hogwarts?" said Madam Rosmerta.

"Hero-worshipped Black and Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "Never quite in their league, talent-wise. I was often rather ,harp with him. You can imagine how I -how I regret that now..." She sounded as though she had a sudden head cold.

"There, now, Minerva," said Fudge kindly, "Pettigrew died a hero's death. Eyewitnesses -- Muggles, of course, we wiped their, memories later -- told us how Pettigrew cornered Black. They say he was sobbing, 'Lily and James, Sirius! How could you?' And then he went for his wand. Well, of course, Black was quicker. Blew Pettigrew to smithereens...."

Professor McGonagall blew her nose and said thickly, "Stupid boy ...

foolish boy... he was always hopeless at dueling... should have left it to the Ministry...."

"I tell yeh, if I'd got ter Black before little Pettigrew did, I wouldn't 've messed around with wands -- I'd 've ripped him limb -- from -- limb," Hagrid growled.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Hagrid," said Fudge sharply. "Nobody but trained Hit Wizards from the Magical Law Enforcement Squad would have stood a chance against Black once he was cornered. I was Junior Minister in the Department of Magical Catastrophes at the time, and I was one of the first on the scene after Black murdered all those people. I -- I will never forget it. I still dream about it sometimes. A crater in the middle of the street, so deep it had cracked the sewer below. Bodies everywhere. Muggles screaming. And Black standing there laughing, with what was left of Pettigrew in front of him... a heap of bloodstained robes and a few -- a few fragments --"

Fudge's voice stopped abruptly. There was the sound of five noses being blown.

"Well, there you have it, Rosmerta," said Fudge thickly. "Black was taken away by twenty members of the Magical Law Enforcement 'Squad and Pettigrew received the Order of Merlin, First Class, which I think was some comfort to his poor mother. Blades been in Azkaban ever since."

Madam Rosmerta let out a long sigh.

"Is it true he's mad, Minister?"

"I wish I could say that he was," said Fudge slowly. "I certainly believe his master's defeat unhinged him for a while. The murder of Pettigrew and all those Muggles was the action of a cornered and desperate man -- cruel... pointless. Yet I met Black on my last inspection of Azkaban. You know, most of the prisoners in there sit muttering to themselves in the dark; there's no sense in them... but I was shocked at how normal Black seemed. He spoke quite rationally to me. It was unnerving. You'd have thought he was merely bored -- asked if I'd finished with my newspaper, cool as you please, said he missed doing the crossword. Yes, I was astounded at how little effect the dementors seemed to be having on him -- and he was one of the most heavily guarded in the place, you know. Dementors outside his door day and night."

"But what do you think he's broken out to do?" said Madam Rosmerta. "Good gracious, Minister, he isn't trying to rejoin You-Know-Who, is he?"

I daresay that is his -- er -- eventual plan," said Fudge evasively. "But we hope to catch Black long before that. I must say, You-Know-Who alone and friendless is one thing... but give him back his most devoted servant, and I shudder to think how quickly he'll rise again...."

There was a small chink of glass on wood. Someone had set down their glass.

"You know, Cornelius, if you're dining with the headmaster, he'd better head back up to the castle," said Professor McGonagall.

One by one, the pairs of feet in front of Harry took the weight of their owners once more; hems of cloaks swung into sight, and Madam Rosemerta's

glittering heels disappeared behind the bar. The door of the Three Broomsticks opened again, there was another flurry of snow, and the teachers had disappeared.

"Harry?"

Ron's and Hermione's faces appeared under the table. They were both staring at him, lost for words.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FIREBOLT

Harry didn't have a very clear idea of how he had managed to get back into the Honeydukes cellar, through the tunnel, and into the castle once more. All he knew was that the return trip seemed to take no time at all, and that he hardly noticed what he was doing, because his head was still pounding with the conversation he had just heard.

Why had nobody ever told him? Dumbledore, Hagrid, Mr. Weasley, Cornelius Fudge... why hadn't anyone ever mentioned the fact that Harry's parents had died because their best friend had betrayed them?

Ron and Herinione watched Harry nervously all through dintier, not daring to talk about what they'd overheard, because Percy was sitting close by them. When they went upstairs to the crowded common room, it was to find Fred and George had set off half a dozen Dungbombs in a fit of end-of-term high spirits. Harry, who didn't want Fred and George asking him whether he'd reached Hogsmeade or not, sneaked quietly up to the empty dormitory and headed straight for his bedside cabinet. He pushed his books aside and quickly found what he was looking for -- the leather-bound photo album Hagrid had given him two years ago, which was full of wizard pictures of his mother and father. He sat down on his bed, drew the hangings around him, and started turning the pages, searching, until...

He stopped on a picture of his parents' wedding day. There was his father waving up at him, beaming, the untidy black hair Harry had inherited standing up in all directions. There was his mother, alight with happiness, arm in arm with his dad. And there ... that must be him. Their best man... Harry had never given him a thought before.

If he hadn't known it was the same person, he would never have guessed it was Black in this old photograph. His face wasn't sunken and waxy, but handsome, full of laughter. Had he already been working for Voldemort when this picture had been taken? Was he already planning the deaths of the two people next to him? Did he realize he was facing twelve years in Azkaban, twelve years that would make him unrecognizable?

But the dementors don't affect him, Harry thought, staring into the handsome, laughing face. He doesn't have to hear my Min screaming if they get too close -

Harry slammed the album shut, reached over and stuffed it back into his cabinet, took off his robe and glasses and got into bed, making sure the hangings were hiding him from view.

The dormitory door opened.

"Harry?" said Ron's voice uncertainly.

But Harry still, pretending to be asleep. He heard Ron leave again, and rolled over on his back, his eyes wide open.

A hatred such as he had never known before was coursing through Harry like poison. He could see Black laughing at him through the darkness, as though somebody had pasted the picture from the album over his eyes. He watched, as though somebody was playing him a piece of film, Sirius Black blasting Peter Pettigrew (who resembled Neville Longbottom) into a thousand pieces. He could hear (though having no idea what Black's voice might sound like) a low, excited mutter. "It has happened, My Lord... the Potters have made me their Secret-Keeper and then came another voice, laughing shrilly, the same laugh that Harry heard inside his head whenever the dementors drew near....

"Harry, you -- you look terrible."

Harry hadn't gotten to sleep until daybreak. He had awoken to find the dormitory deserted, dressed, and gone down the spiral staircase to a common room that was completely empty except for Ron, who was eating a Peppermint Toad and massaging his stomach, and Hermione, who had spread her homework over three tables.

"Where is everyone?" said Harry.

"Gone! It's the first day of the holidays, remember?" said Ron, watching Harry closely. "It's nearly lunchtime; I was going to come and wake you up in a minute."

Harry slumped into a chair next to the fire. Snow was still falling outside the windows. Crookshanks was spread out in front of the fire like a large, ginger rug.

"You really don't look well, you know," Hermione said, peering anxiously into his face.

"I'm fine," said Harry.

"Harry, listen," said Hermione, exchanging a look with Ron, you must be really upset about what we heard yesterday. But the thing is, you mustn't go doing anything stupid."

"Like what?" said Harry.

"Like trying to go after Black," said Ron sharply.

Harry could tell they had rehearsed this conversation while he had been asleep. He didn't say anything.

"You won't, will you, Harry?" said Hermione.

"Because Black's not worth dying for," said Ron.

Harry looked at them. They didn't seem to understand at all.

"D'you know what I see and hear every time a dementor gets too near me?" Ron and Hermione shook their heads, looking apprehensive. "I can hear my mum screaming and pleading with Voldemort. And if you'd heard your mum screaming like that, just about to be killed, you wouldn't forget it in

a hurry. And if you found out someone who was supposed to be a friend of hers betrayed her and sent Voldemort after her --"

"There's nothing you can do!" said Hermione, looking stricken. "The dementors will catch Black and he'll go back to Azkaban and -- and serve him right!"

"You heard what Fudge said. Black isn't affected by Azkaban like normal people are. It's not a punishment for him like it is for the others."

"So what are you saying?" said Ron, looking very tense. "You want to -- to kill Black or something?"

"Don't be silly," said Herinione in a panicky voice. "Harry doesn't want to kill anyone, do you, Harry?"

Again, Harry didn't answer. He didn't know what he wanted to do. All he knew was that the idea of doing nothing, while Black was at liberty, was almost more than he could stand.

Malfoy knows," he said abruptly. "Remember what he said to me in Potions? 'If it was me, I'd hunt him down myself... I'd want revenge.'

"You're going to take Malfoy's advice instead of ours?" said Ron furiously. "Listen... you know what Pettigrew's mother got back after Black had finished with him? Dad told me -- the Order of Merlin, First Class, and Pettigrew's finger in a box. That was the biggest bit of him they could find. Black's a madman, Harry, and he's dangerous --"

"Malfoy's dad must have told him," said Harry, ignoring Ron. "He was right in Voldemort's inner circle --"

"Say You-Know-Who, will you?" interjected Ron angrily.

-- so obviously, the Malfoys knew Black was working for Voldemort --"

-- and Malfoy'd love to see you blown into about a million pieces, like Pettigrew! Get a grip. Malfoy's just hoping you'll get Yourself killed before he has to play you at Quidditch."

"Harry, please," said Hermione, her eyes now shining with tears, "Please be sensible. Black did a terrible, terrible thing, but d-don't Put Yourself in danger, it's what Black wants.... Oh, Harry, you'd be Playing right into Black's hands if you went looking for him. Your mum and dad wouldn't want you to get hurt, would they? They'd never want you to go looking for Black!"

"I'll never know what they'd have wanted, because thanks to Black, I've never spoken to them," said Harry shortly.

There was a silence in which Crookshanks stretched luxuriously flexing his claws. Ron's pocket quivered.

"Look," said Ron, obviously casting around for a change of subject, "it's the holidays! It's nearly Christmas! Let's -- let's go down and see Hagrid. We haven't visited him for ages!"

"No!" said Hermione quickly. "Harry isn't supposed to leave the castle, Ron --"

"Yeah, let's go," said Harry, sitting up, "and I can ask him how come he never mentioned Black when he told me all about my parents!"

Further discussion of Sirius Black plainly wasn't what Ron had had in mind.

"Or we could have a game of chess, he said hastily, "or Gobstones. Percy left a set --"

"No, let's visit Hagrid," said Harry firmly.

So they got their cloaks from their dormitories and set off through the portrait hole ("Stand and fight, you yellow-bellied mongrels!"), down through the empty castle and out through the oak front doors.

They made their way slowly down the lawn, making a shallow trench in the glittering, powdery snow, their socks and the hemms of their cloaks soaked and freezing. The Forbidden Forest looked as though it had been enchanted, each tree smattered with silver, and Hagrid's cabin looked like an iced cake.

Ron knocked, but there was no answer.

"He's not out, is he?" said Hermione, who was shivering under her cloak.

Ron had his ear to the door.

"There's a weird noise," he said. "Listen -- is that Fang?"

Harry and Hermione put their ears to the door too. From inside the cabin came a series of low, throbbing moans.

"Think we'd better go and get someone?" said Ron nervously.

"Hagrid!" called Harry, thumping the door. "Hagrid, are you in there."

There was a sound of heavy footsteps, then the door creaked open. Hagrid stood there with his eyes red and swollen, tears splashing down the front of his leather vest.

"YWe heard?" he bellowed, and he flung himself onto Harry's neck.

Hagrid being at least twice the size of a normal man, this was no laughing matter. Harry, about to collapse under Hagrid's weight, was rescued by Ron and Hermione, who each seized Hagrid under an arm and heaved him back into the cabin. Hagrid allowed himself to be steered into a chair and slumped over the table, sobbing uncontrollably, his face glazed with tears that dripped down into his tangled beard.

"Hagrid, what is it?" said Hermione, aghast.

Harry spotted an official-looking letter lying open on the table.

"What's this, Hagrid?"

Hagrid's sobs redoubled, but he shoved the letter toward Harry, who Picked it up and read aloud:

Dear Mr. Hagrid,

Further to our inquiry into the attack by a hippogriff on a student in your class, we have accepted the assurances of Professor Dumbledore that you bear no responsibility for the regrettable incident.

"Well, that's okay then, Hagrid!" said Ron, clapping Hagrid on the shoulder. But Hagrid continued to sob, and waved one of his gigantic hands, inviting Harry to read on.

However, we must register our concern about the hippogriff in question. We have decided to uphold the official complaint of Mr. Lucius Malfoy, and this matter will therefore be taken to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The hearing will take place on April 20th, and we ask you to present yourself and your hippogriff at the Committee's offices in London on that date. In the meantime, the hippogriff should be kept tethered and isolated. Yours in fellowship...

There followed a list of the school governors.

"Oh," said Ron. "But you said Buckbeak isn't a bad hippogriff, Hagrid. I bet he'll get off

"Yeh don' know them gargoyles at the Committee fer the Disposal o' Dangerous Creatures!" choked Hagrid, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "They've got it in fer interestin' creatures!"

A sudden sound from the corner of Hagrid's cabin made Harry, Ron, and Hermione whip around. Buckbeak the hippogriff was lying in the corner, chomping on something that was oozing blood all over the floor.

"I couldn't leave him tied up out there in the snow!" choked Hagrid. "All on his own! At Christmas."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another. They had never seen eye to eye with Hagrid about what he called "interesting creatures" and other people called "terrifying monsters." Or' the other hand, there didn't seem to be any particular harm in Buckbeak. In fact, by Hagrid's usual standards, he was positively cute.

"You'll have to put up a good strong defense, Hagrid," said Hermione, sitting down and laying a hand on Hagrid's massive forearm. "I'm sure you can prove Buckbeak is safe."

"Won't make no diff'rence!" sobbed Hagrid. "Them Disposal devils, they're all in Lucius Malfoy's pocket! Scared o' him! Ad if I lose the case, Buckbeak --"

Hagrid drew his finger swiftly across his throat, then gave a great wail and lurched forward, his face in his arms.

"What about Dumbledore, Hagrid?" said Harry.

"He's done more'n enough fer me already," groaned Hagrid. "Got enough on his plate what with keepin' them dementors outta the castle, an' Sirius Black lurkin' around --"

Ron and Hermione looked quickly at Harry, as though expecting him to start berating Hagrid for not telling him the truth about Black. But Harry couldn't bring himself to do it, not now that he saw Hagrid so miserable and scared.

"Listen, Hagrid," he said, "you can't give up. Hermione's right, You just need a good defense. You can call us as witnesses --"

"I'm sure I've read about a case of hippogriff-baiting," said Hermione thoughtfully, "where the hippogriff got off I'll look it up for you, Hagrid, and see exactly what happened."

Hagrid howled still more loudly. Harry and Hermione looked at Ron to help them.

"Er -- shall I make a cup of tea?" said Ron.

Harry stared at him.

"It's what my mum does whenever someone's upset," Ron muttered, shrugging.

At last, after many more assurances of help, with a steaming mug of tea in front of him, Hagrid blew his nose on a handkerchief the size of a tablecloth and said, "Yer right. I can't afford to go ter pieces. Gotta pull meself together.....

Fang the boarhound came timidly out from under the table and laid his head on Hagrid's knee.

"I've not bin meself lately," said Hagrid, stroking Fang with one hand and mopping his face with the other. "Worried abou' Buckbeak, an' no one likin' me classes --"

"We do like them!" lied Hermione at once.

"Yeah, they're great!" said Ron, crossing his fingers under the table.
"Er -- how are the flobberworms?"

"Dead," said Hagrid gloomily. "Too much lettuce."

"Oh no!" said Ron, his lip twitching.

"An' them dementors make me feel ruddy terrible an' all," said Hagrid, with a sudden shudder. "Gotta walk past 'em ev'ry time I want a drink in the Three Broomsticks. 'S like bein' back in Azkaban --"

He fell silent, gulping his tea. Harry, Ron, and Hermione watched him breathlessly. They had never heard Hagrid talk about his brief spell in Azkaban before. After a pause, Hermione said timidly, "Is it awful in there, Hagrid?"

"Yeh've no idea," said Hagrid quietly. "Never bin anywhere like it. Thought I was goin' mad. Kep' goin' over horrible stuff in me mind... the day I got expelled from Hogwarts... day me dad died... day I had ter let Norbert go...."

His eyes filled with tears. Norbert was the baby dragon Hagrid had once won in a game of cards.

"Yeh can't really remember who yeh are after a while. An' yeh can't really see the point o' livin' at all. I used ter hope I'd jus' die in me sleep. When they let me out, it was like bein' born again, ev'rythin' I came floodin' back, it was the bes' feelin' in the world. Mind, the dementors weren't keen on lettin' me go."

"But you were innocent!" said Hermione.

Hagrid snorted.

"Think that matters to them? They don' care. Long as they've got a couple o' hundred humans stuck there with 'em, so they can leech all the happiness out of 'em, they don' give a damn who's guilty an' who's not."

Hagrid went quiet for a moment, staring into his tea. Then he said quietly, "Thought o' jus' letting Buckbeak go... tryin' ter make him fly away... but how d'yeh explain ter a hippogriff it's gotta go inter hidin'? An' -an' I'm scared o' breakin' the law...." He looked up at them, tears leaking down his face again. "I don' ever want ter go back ter Azkaban."

The trip to Hagrid's, though far from fun, had nevertheless had the effect Ron and Hermione had hoped. Though Harry had by no means forgotten about Black, he couldn't brood constantly on revenge if he wanted to help Hagrid win his case against the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. He, Ron, and Hermione went to the library the next day and returned to the empty common room laden with books that might help prepare a defense for Buckbeak. The three of them sat in front of the roaring fire, slowly turning the pages of dusty volumes about famous cases If marauding beasts, speaking occasionally when they ran across something relevant.

"Here's something... there was a case in 1722... but the hippogriff was convicted -- ugh, look what they did to it, that's disgusting --"

"This might help, look -- a manticore savaged someone in 1296, and they let the manticore off -- oh -- no, that was only because everyone was too scared to go near it."

Meanwhile, in the rest of the castle, the usual magnificent Christmas decorations had been put up, despite the fact that hardly any of the students remained to enjoy them. Thick streamers of holly and mistletoe were strung along the corridors, mysterious lights shone from inside every suit of armor, and the Great Hall was filled with its usual twelve Christmas trees, glittering with golden stars. A powerful and delicious smell of cooking pervaded the corridors, and by Christmas Eve, it had grown so strong that even Scabbers poked his nose out of the shelter of Ron's pocket to sniff hopefully at the air.

On Christmas morning, Harry was woken by Ron throwing his pillow at him.

"Oy! Presents!"

Harry reached for his glasses and put them on, squinting through the semi-darkness to the foot of his bed, where a small heap of parcels had appeared. Ron was already ripping the paper off his own presents.

'Another sweater from Mum... maroon again... see if you've got one.'

Harry had. Mrs. Weasley had sent him a scarlet sweater with the Gryffindor lion knitted on the front, also a dozen home-baked mince pies, some Christmas cake, and a box of nut brittle. As he moved all these things aside, he saw a long, thin package lying underneath.

"What's that?" said Ron, looking over, a freshly unwrapped pair of

maroon socks in his hand.

"Dunno..."

Harry ripped the parcel open and gasped as a magnificent, gleaming broomstick rolled out onto his bedspread. Ron dropped his socks and jumped off his bed for a closer look.

"I don't believe it," he said hoarsely.

It was a Firebolt, identical to the dream broom Harry had gone to see every day in Diagon Alley. Its handle glittered as he picked it up. He could feel it vibrating and let go; it hung in midair, unsupported, at exactly the right height for him to mount it. His eyes moved from the golden registration number at the top of the handle, right down to the perfectly smooth, streamlined birch twigs that made up the tail.

"Who sent it to you?" said Ron in a hushed voice.

"Look and see if there's a card," said Harry.

Ron ripped apart the Firebolt's wrappings.

"Nothing! Blimey, who'd spend that much on you?"

"Well," said Harry, feeling stunned, "I'm betting it wasn't the Dursleys."

I bet it was Dumbledore," said Ron, now walking around and around the Firebolt, taking in every glorious inch. "He sent you the Invisibility Cloak anonymously...."

"That was my dad's, though," said Harry. "Dumbledore was just Passing it on to me. He wouldn't spend hundreds of Galleons on me. He can't go giving students stuff like this --"

"That's why he wouldn't say it was from him!" said Ron. "In case some git like Malfoy said it was favoritism. Hey, Harry" -- Ron gave a great whoop of laughter -- "Malfoy! Wait till he sees you on this! He'll be sick as a pig! This is an international standard broom, this is!"

"I can't believe this," Harry muttered, running a hand along the Firebolt, while Ron sank onto Harry's bed, laughing his head off at the thought of Malfoy. "Who -?"

"I know," said Ron, controlling himself, "I know who it could've been -- Lupin!"

"What?" said Harry, now starting to laugh himself "Lupin? Listen, if he had this much gold, he'd be able to buy himself some new robes."

"Yeah, but he likes you," said Ron. "And he was away when your Nimbus got smashed, and he might've heard about it and decided to visit Diagon Alley and get this for you --"

"What d'you mean, he was away?" said Harry. "He was ill when I was playing in that match."

"Well, he wasn't in the hospital wing," said Ron. "I was there, cleaning out the bedpans on that detention from Snape, remember?"

Harry frowned at Ron.

"I can't see Lupin affording something like this."

"What're you two laughing about?"

Hermione had just come in, wearing her dressing gown and carrying Crookshanks, who was looking very grumpy, with a string of tinsel tied around his neck.

"Don't bring him in here!" said Ron, hurriedly snatching Scabbers from the depths of his bed and stowing him in his pajama pocket.

But Hermione wasn't listening. She dropped Crookshanks onto Seamus's empty bed and stared, open-mouthed, at the Firebolt.

"Oh, Harry! Who sent you that?"

"No idea," said Harry. "There wasn't a card or anything with it."

To his great surprise, Hermione did not appear either excited or intrigued by the news. On the contrary, her face fell, and she bit her lip.

"What's the matter with you?" said Ron.

"I don't know," said Hermione slowly, "but it's a bit odd, isn't it? I mean, this is supposed to be quite a good broom, isn't it?"

Ron sighed exasperatedly.

"It's the best broom there is, Hermione," he said.

"So it must've been really expensive...."

"Probably cost more than all the Slytherins' brooms put together," said Ron happily.

"Well... who'd send Harry something as expensive as that, and not even tell him they'd sent it?" said Hermione.

"Who cares?" said Ron impatiently. "Listen, Harry, can I have a go on it? Can I?"

"I don't think anyone should ride that broom just yet!" said Hermione shrilly.

Harry and Ron looked at her.

"What d'you think Harry's going to do with it -- sweep the floor?" said Ron.

But before Hermione could answer, Crookshanks sprang from Seamus's bed, right at Ron's chest.

"GET -- HIM -- OUT -- OF -- HERE!" Ron bellowed as Crookshanks's claws ripped his pajamas and Scabbers attempted a wild escape over his shoulder. Ron seized Scabbers by the tail and aimed a misjudged kick at Crookshanks that hit the trunk at the end of Harry's bed, knocking it

over and causing Ron to hop up and down, howling with pain.

Crookshanks's fur suddenly stood on end. A shrill, tint,, whistling was filling the room. The Pocket Sneakoscope had become dislodged from Uncle Vernon's old socks and was whirling and gleaming on the floor.

I forgot about that!" Harry said, bending down and picking up the Sneakoscope. I never wear those socks if I can help it....

The Sneakoscope whirled and whistled in his palm. Crookshanks was hissing and spitting at it.

"You'd better take that cat out of here, Hermione," said Ron furiously, sitting on Harry's bed nursing his toe. "Can't you shut that thing up?" he added to Harry as Hermione strode out of the room, Crookshanks's yellow eyes still fixed maliciously on Ron.

Harry stuffed the Sneakoscope back inside the socks and threw it back into his trunk. All that could be heard now were Ron's stifled moans of pain and rage. Scabbers was huddled in Ron's hands. It had been a while since Harry had seen him out of Ron's pocket, and he was unpleasantly surprised to see that Scabbers, once so fat, was now very skinny; patches of fur seemed to have fallen out too

"He's not looking too good, is he?" Harry said.

"It's stress!" said Ron. "He'd be fine if that big stupid furball left him alone!"

But Harry, remembering what the woman at the Magical Menagerie had said about rats living only three years, couldn't help feeling that unless Scabbers had powers he had never revealed, he was reaching the end of his life. And despite Ron's frequent complaints that Scabbers was both boring and useless, he was sure Ron would be very miserable if Scabbers died.

Christmas spirit was definitely thin on the ground in the Gryffindor common room that morning. Hermione had shut Crookshanks in her dormitory, but was furious with Ron for trying to kick him; Ron was still fuming about Crookshanks's fresh attempt to eat Scabbers. Harry gave up trying to make them talk to each other and devoted himself to examining the Firebolt, which he had brought down to the common room with him. For some reason this seemed to annoy Hermione as well; she didn't say anything, but she kept looking darkly at the broom as though it too had been criticizing her cat.

At lunchtime they went down to the Great Hall, to find that the House tables had been moved against the walls again, and that a single table, set for twelve, stood in the middle of the room. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Sprout, and Flitwick were there, along with Filch, the caretaker, who had taken off his usual brown coat and was wearing a very old and rather moldy- looking tailcoat. There were only three other students, two extremely nervous-looking first years and a sullen-faced Slytherin fifth year.

"Merry Christmas!" said Dumbledore as Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached the table. "As there are so few of us, it seemed foolish to use the House tables.... Sit down, sit down!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down side by side at the end of the table.

"Crackers!" said Dumbledore enthusiastically, offering the end of a large silver noisemaker to Snape, who took it reluctantly and tugged. With a bang like a gunshot, the cracker flew apart to reveal a large, pointed witch's hat topped with a stuffed vulture.

Harry, remembering the boggart, caught Ron's eye and they both grinned; Snape's mouth thinned and he pushed the hat toward Dumbledore, who swapped it for his wizard's hat at once.

"Dig in!" he advised the table, beaming around.

As Harry was helping himself to roast potatoes, the doors of the Great Hall opened again. It was Professor Trelawney, gliding toward them as though on wheels. She had put on a green sequined dress in honor of the occasion, making her look more than ever like a glittering, oversized dragonfly.

"Sibyll, this is a pleasant surprise!" said Dumbledore, standing up.

"I have been crystal gazing, Headmaster," said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest, most faraway voice, "and to my astonishment, I saw myself abandoning my solitary luncheon and coming to join you. Who am I to refuse the promptings of fate? I at once hastened from my tower, and I do beg you to forgive my lateness...."

"Certainly, certainly," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Let me draw you up a chair --"

And he did indeed draw a chair in midair with his wand, which revolved for a few seconds before falling with a thud between Professors Snape and McGonagall. Professor Trelawney, however, did not sit down; her enormous eyes had been roving around the table, and she suddenly uttered a kind of soft scream.

I dare not, Headmaster! If I join the table, we shall be thirteen! Nothing could be more unlucky! Never forget that when thirteen dine together, the first to rise will be the first to die!"

"We'll risk it, Sibyll," said Professor McGonagall impatiently. "Do sit down, the turkey's getting stone cold."

Professor Trelawney hesitated, then lowered herself into the empty chair, eyes shut and mouth clenched tight, as though expecting a thunderbolt to hit the table. Professor McGonagall poked a large spoon into the nearest tureen.

"Tripe, Sibyll?"

Professor Trelawney ignored her. Eyes open again, she looked around once more and said, "But where is dear Professor Lupin?"

"I'm afraid the poor fellow is ill again," said Dumbledore, indicating that everybody should start serving themselves. "Most unfortunate that it should happen on Christmas Day."

"But surely you already knew that, Sibyll?" said Professor McGonagall, her eyebrows raised.

Professor Trelawney gave Professor McGonagall a very cold look.

"Certainly I knew, Minerva, 11 she said quietly. "But one does not parade the fact that one is All-Knowing. I frequently act as though I am not possessed of the Inner Eye, so as not to make others nervous.

"That explains a great deal," said Professor McGonagall tartly.

Professor Trelawney's voice suddenly became a good deal less misty.

"If you must know, Minerva, I have seen that poor Professor Lupin will not be with us for very long. He seems aware, himself, that his time is short. He positively fled when I offered to crystal gaze for him --"

"Imagine that," said Professor McGonagall dryly.

I doubt," said Dumbledore, in a cheerful but slightly raised voice, which put an end to Professor McGonagall and Professor Trelawney's conversation, "that Professor Lupin is in any immediate danger. Severus, you've made the potion for him again?"

"Yes, Headmaster," said Snape. "W -- what?" said Harry, scrambling to his feet. "Why?"

"It will need to be checked for jinxes," said Professor McGonagall. "Of course, I'm no expert, but I daresay Madam Hooch and Professor Flitwick will strip it down --"

"Strip it down?" repeated Ron, as though Professor McGonagall was mad.

"It shouldn't take more than a few weeks," said Professor McGonagall. "You will have it back if we are sure it is jinx-free."

"There's nothing wrong with it!" said Harry, his voice shaking slightly. "Honestly, Professor --"

"You can't know that, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, quite kindly, "not until you've flown it, at any rate, and I'm afraid that is out of the question until we are certain that it has not been tampered with. I shall keep you informed."

Professor McGonagall turned on her heel and carried the Firebolt out of the portrait hole, which closed behind her. Harry stood staring after her, the tin of High-Finish Polish still clutched in his hands. Ron, however, rounded on Hermione.

"What did you go running to McGonagall for?

Hermione threw her book aside. She was still pink in the face, but stood up and faced Ron defiantly.

"Because I thought -- and Professor McGonagall agrees with me -- that that broom was probably sent to Harry by Sirius Black!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE PATRONUS

Harry knew that Hermione had meant well, but that didn't stop him from being angry with her. He had been the owner of the best broom in the world for a few short hours, and now, because of her interference, he

didn't know whether he would ever see it again. He was positive that there was nothing wrong with the Firebolt now, but what sort of state would it be in once it had been subjected to all sorts of anti-jinx tests?

Ron was furious with Hermione too. As far as he was concerned, the stripping-down of a brand-new Firebolt was nothing less than criminal damage. Hermione, who remained convinced that she had acted for the best, started avoiding the common room. Harry and Ron supposed she had taken refuge in the library and didn't try to persuade her to come back. All in all, they were glad when the rest of the school returned shortly after New Year, and Gryffindor Tower became crowded and noisy again. Wood sought Harry out on the night before term started.

"Had a good Christmas?" he said, and then, without waiting for an answer, he sat down, lowered his voice, and said, "I've been, doing some thinking over Christmas, Harry. After last match, you know. If the dementors come to the next one... I mean... we can't afford you to -- well --"

Wood broke off, looking awkward.

"I'm working on it," said Harry quickly. "Professor Lupin said he'd train me to ward off the dementors. We should be starting this week. He said he'd have time after Christmas."

"Ah," said Wood, his expression clearing. "Well, in that case -- I really didn't want to lose you as Seeker, Harry. And have you ordered a new broom yet?"

"No," said Harry.

"What! You'd better get a move on, you know -- you can't ride that Shooting Star against Ravenclaw!"

"He got a Firebolt for Christmas," said Ron.

"A Firebolt? No! Seriously? A -- a real Firebolt?"

"Don't get excited, Oliver," said Harry gloomily. "I haven't got it anymore. It was confiscated." And he explained all about how the Firebolt was now being checked for jinxes.

"Jinxed? How could it be jinxed?"

"Sirius Black" Harry said wearily. "He's supposed to be after me. So McGonagall reckons he might have sent it."

Waving aside the information that a famous murderer was after his Seeker, Wood said, "But Black couldn't have bought a Firebolt! He's on the run! The whole country's on the lookout for him! How could he just walk into Quality Quidditch Supplies and buy a broomstick?"

"I know," said Harry, "but McGonagall still wants to strip it down --"

Wood went pale.

"I'll go and talk to her, Harry," he promised. "I'll make her see reason.... A Firebolt... a real Firebolt, on our team... She wants Gryffindor to win as much as we do.... I'll make her see sense. A

Firebolt..."

Classes started again the next day. The last thing anyone felt like doing was spending two hours on the grounds on a raw January morning, but Hagrid had provided a bonfire full of salamanders for their enjoyment, and they spent an unusually good lesson collecting dry wood and leaves to keep the fire blazing while the flame-loving lizards scampered up and down the crumbling, white-hot logs. The first Divination lesson of the new term was much less fun; Professor Trelawney was now teaching them palmistry, and she lost no time in informing Harry that he had the shortest life line she had ever seen.

It was Defense Against the Dark Arts that Harry was keen to get to; after his conversation with Wood, he wanted to get started on his anti-dementor lessons as soon as possible.

"Ah yes," said Lupin, when Harry reminded him of his promise at the end of class. "Let me see... how about eight o'clock on Thursday evening? The History of Magic classroom should be large enough.... I'll have to think carefully about how we're going to do this.... We can't bring a real dementor into the castle to practice on...."

"Still looks ill, doesn't he?" said Ron as they walked down the corridor, heading to dinner. "What d'you reckon's the matter with him?"

There was a loud and impatient "tuh" from behind them. It was Hermione, who had been sitting at the feet of a suit of armor, repacking her bag, which was so full of books it wouldn't close.

"And what are you tutting at us for?" said Ron irritably.

"Nothing," said Hermione in a lofty voice, heaving her bag back over her shoulder.

"Yes, you were," said Ron. "I said I wonder what's wrong with Lupin, and you --"

"Well, isn't it obvious?" said Hermione, with a look of maddening superiority.

"If you don't want to tell us, don't," snapped Ron.

"Fine," said Hermione haughtily, and she marched off.

"She doesn't know," said Ron, staring resentfully after Hermione. "She's just trying to get us to talk to her again."

At eight o'clock on Thursday evening, Harry left Gryffindor Tower for the History of Magic classroom. It was dark and empty when he arrived, but he lit the lamps with his wand and had waited only five minutes when Professor Lupin turned up, carrying a large packing case, which he heaved onto Professor Binns's desk.

"What's that?" said Harry.

"Another boggart," said Lupin, stripping off his cloak. "I've been combing the castle ever since Tuesday, and very luckily, I found this one lurking inside Mr. Filch's filing cabinet. It's the nearest we'll get to a real dementor. The boggart will turn into a dementor when he sees you, so we'll be able to practice on him. I can store him in my

office when we're not using him; there's a cupboard under my desk he'll like."

"Okay," said Harry, trying to sound as though he wasn't apprehensive at all and merely glad that Lupin had found such a good substitute for a real dementor.

"So..." Professor Lupin had taken out his own wand, and indicated that Harry should do the same. "The spell I am going to try and teach you is highly advanced magic, Harry -- well beyond ordinary Wizarding Level. It is called the Patronus Charm."

"How does it work?" said Harry nervously.

"Well, when it works correctly, It conjures up a Patronus," said Lupin, "which is a kind of anti- dementor -- a guardian that acts as a shield between you and the dementor."

Harry had a sudden vision of himself crouching behind a Hagridsized figure holding a large club. Professor Lupin continued, "The Patronus is a kind of positive force, a projection of the very things that the dementor feeds upon -- hope, happiness, the desire to survive -- but it cannot feel despair, as real humans can, so the dementors can't hurt it. But I must warn you, Harry, that the charm might be too advanced for you. Many qualified wizards have difficulty with it."

"What does a Patronus look like?" said Harry curiously.

"Each one is unique to the wizard who conjures it."

"And how do you conjure it?"

"With an incantation, which will work only if you are concentrating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory."

Harry cast his mind about for a happy memory. Certainly, nothing that had happened to him at the Dursleys' was going to do. Finally, he settled on the moment when he had first ridden a broomstick.

"Right," he said, trying to recall as exactly as possible the wonderful, soaring sensation of his stomach.

"The incantation is this --" Lupin cleared his throat. "Expecto patronum!"

"Expecto patronum," Harry repeated under his breath, "expecto patronum."

"Concentrating hard on your happy memory?"

"Oh -- yeah --" said Harry, quickly forcing his thoughts back to that first broom ride. "Expecto patrono -- no, patronum -- sorry -- expecto patronum, expecto patronum"

Something whooshed suddenly out of the end of his wand; it looked like a wisp of silvery gas.

"Did you see that?" said Harry excitedly. "Something happened!"

"Very good," said Lupin, smiling. "Right, then -- ready to try it on a

dementor?"

"Yes," Harry said, gripping his wand very tightly, and moving into the middle of the deserted classroom. He tried to keep his mind on flying, but something else kept intruding.... Any second now, he might hear his mother again... but he shouldn't think that, or he would hear her again, and he didn't want to... or did he?

Lupin grasped the lid of the packing case and pulled.

A dementor rose slowly from the box, its hooded face turned toward Harry, one glistening, scabbed hand gripping its cloak. The lamps around the classroom flickered and went out. The dementor stepped from the box and started to sweep silently toward Harry, drawing a deep, rattling breath. A wave of piercing cold broke over him --

"Expecto patronum!" Harry yelled. "Expecto patronum! Expecto --"

But the classroom and the dementor were dissolving.... Harry was failing again through thick white fog, and his mother's voice was louder than ever, echoing inside his head -- "Not Harry! Not Harry! please -- I'll do anything!"

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

"Harry!"

Harry jerked back to life. He was lying flat on his back on the floor. The classroom lamps were alight again. He didn't have to ask what had happened.

"Sorry," he muttered, sitting up and feeling cold sweat trickling down behind his glasses.

"Are you all right?" said Lupin.

"Yes..." Harry pulled himself up on one of the desks and leaned against it.

"Here --" Lupin handed him a Chocolate Frog. "Eat this before we try again. I didn't expect you to do it your first time; in fact, I would have been astounded if you had."

"It's getting worse," Harry muttered, biting off the Frog's head. "I could hear her louder that time -- and him -- Voldemort

Lupin looked paler than usual. ,

"Harry, if you don't want to continue, I will more than understand --"

"I do!" said Harry fiercely, stuffing the rest of the Chocolate Frog into his mouth. "I've got to! What if the dementors turn up at our match against Ravenclaw? I can't afford to fall off again. If we lose this game we've lost the Quidditch Cup!"

"All right then..." said Lupin. "You might want to select 'other memory, a happy memory, I mean, to concentrate on.... That one doesn't seem to have been strong enough...."

Harry thought hard and decided his feelings when Gryffindor had won the

House Championship last year had definitely qualified as very happy. He gripped his wand tightly again and took up his position in the middle of the classroom.

"Ready?" said Lupin, gripping the box lid.

"Ready," said Harry; trying hard to fill his head with happy thoughts about Gryffindor winning, and not dark thoughts about what was going to happen when the box opened.

"Go!" said Lupin, pulling off the lid. The room went icily cold and dark once more. The dementor glided forward, drawing its breath; one rotting hand was extending toward Harry -

"Expecto patronum!" Harry yelled. "Expecto patronum! Expecto Pat --"

White fog obscured his senses... big, blurred shapes were moving around him... then came a new voice, a man's voice, shouting, panicking --

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off --"

The sounds of someone stumbling from a room -- a door bursting open -- a cackle of high-pitched laughter --

"Harry! Harry... wake up...."

Lupin was tapping Harry hard on the face. This time it was a minute before Harry understood why he was lying on a dusty classroom floor.

"I heard my dad," Harry mumbled. "That's the first time I've ever heard him -- he tried to take on Voldemort himself, to give my mum time to run for it...."

Harry suddenly realized that there were tears on his face mingling with the sweat. He bent his face as low as possible, wiping them off on his robes, pretending to do up his shoelace, so that Lupin wouldn't see.

"You heard James?" said Lupin in a strange voice.

"Yeah..." Face dry, Harry looked up. "Why -- you didn't know my dad, did you?"

"I -- I did, as a matter of fact," said Lupin. "We were friends at Hogwarts. Listen, Harry -- perhaps we should leave it here for tonight. This charm is ridiculously advanced.... I shouln't have suggested putting you through this...."

"No!" said Harry. He got up again. "I'll have one more go! I'm not thinking of happy enough things, that's what it is.... Hang on...."

He racked his brains. A really, really happy memory... one that he could turn into a good, strong Patronus...

The moment when he'd first found out he was a wizard, and would be leaving the Dursleys for Hogwarts! If that wasn't a happy memory, he didn't know what was.... Concentrating very hard on how he had felt when he'd realized he'd be leaving Privet Drive, Harry got to his feet and faced the packing case once more.

"Ready?" said Lupin, who looked as though he were doing this against his

better judgment. "Concentrating hard? All right -- go!"

He pulled off the lid of the case for the third time, and the dementor rose out of it; the room fell cold and dark

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry bellowed. "EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The screaming inside Harry's head had started again -- except this time, it sounded as though it were coming from a badly tuned radio -- softer and louder and softer again -- and he could still see the dementor -- it had halted -- and then a huge, silver shadow came bursting out of the end of Harry's wand, to hover between him and the dementor, and though Harry's legs felt like water, he was still on his feet -- though for how much longer, he wasn't sure --

"Riddikulus!" roared Lupin, springing forward.

There was a loud crack, and Harry's cloudy Patronus vanished along with the dementor; he sank into a chair, feeling as exhausted as if he'd just run a mile, and felt his legs shaking. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Professor Lupin forcing the boggart back into the packing case with his wand; it had turned into a silvery orb again.

"Excellent!" Lupin said, striding over to where Harry sat. "Excellent, Harry! That was definitely a start!"

"Can we have another go? Just one more go?"

"Not now," said Lupin firmly. "You've had enough for one night. Here --"

He handed Harry a large bar of Honeydukes' best chocolate.

"Eat the lot, or Madam Pomfrey will be after my blood. Same time next week?"

"Okay," said Harry. He took a bite of the chocolate and watched Lupin extinguishing the lamps that had rekindled with the disappearance of the dementor. A thought had just occurred to him.

"Professor Lupin?" he said. "If you knew my dad, you must've known Sirius Black as well."

Lupin turned very quickly.

"What gives you that idea?" he said sharply.

"Nothing -- I mean, I just knew they were friends at Hogwarts too...."

Lupin's face relaxed.

"Yes, I knew him," he said shortly. "Or I thought I did. You'd better be off, Harry, it's getting late."

Harry left the classroom, walking along the corridor and around a corner, then took a detour behind a suit of armor and sank down on its plinth to finish his chocolate, wishing he hadn't mentioned Black, as Lupin was obviously not keen on the subject. Then Harry's thoughts wandered back to his mother and father...

He felt drained and strangely empty, even though he was so full of chocolate. Terrible though it was to hear his parents' last moments replayed inside his head, these were the only times Harry had heard their voices since he was a very small child. But he'd never be able to produce a proper Patronus if he half wanted to hear his parents again....

"They're dead," he told himself sternly. "They're dead and listening to echoes of them won't bring them back. You'd better get a grip on yourself if you want that Quidditch Cup."

He stood up, crammed the last bit of chocolate into his mouth, and headed back to Gryffindor Tower.

Ravenclaw played Slytherin a week after the start of term. Slytherin won, though narrowly. According to Wood, this was good news for Gryffindor, who would take second place if they beat Ravenclaw too. He therefore increased the number of team practices to five a leek. This meant that with Lupin's anti-dementor classes, which in themselves were more draining than six Quidditch practices, Harry had just one night a week to do all his homework. Even so, he was showing the strain nearly as much as Hermione, whose immense workload finally seemed to be getting to her. Every night, without fail, Hermione was to be seen in a corner of the common room, several tables spread with books, Arithmancy charts, rune dictionaries, diagrams of Muggles lifting heavy objects, and file upon file of extensive notes; she barely spoke to anybody and snapped when she was interrupted.

"How's she doing it?" Ron muttered to Harry one evening as Harry sat finishing a nasty essay on Undetectable Poisons for Snape. Harry looked up. Hermione was barely visible behind a tottering pile of books.

"Doing what?"

"Getting to all her classes!" Ron said. "I heard her talking to Professor Vector, that Arithmancy witch, this morning. They were going on about yesterday's lesson, but Hermione can't 've been there, because she was with us in Care of Magical Creatures! And Ernie McMillan told me she's never missed a Muggle Studies class, but half of them are at the same time as Divination, and she's never missed one of them either!"

Harry didn't have time to fathom the mystery of Hermione's impossible schedule at the moment; he really needed to get on with Snape's essay. Two seconds later, however, he was interrupted again, this time by Wood.

"Bad news, Harry. I've just been to see Professor McGonagall about the Firebolt. She -- er -- got a bit shirty with me. Told m' I'd got my priorities wrong. Seemed to think I cared more about winning the Cup than I do about you staying alive. Just because I told her I didn't care if it threw you off, as long as you caught the Snitch first." Wood shook his head in disbelief. "Honestly, the way she was yelling at me... you'd think I'd said something terrible... then I asked her how much longer she was going to keep it. He screwed up his face and imitated Professor McGonagall's severe voice. 'As long as necessary, Wood'... I reckon it's time you ordered a new broom, Harry. There's an order form at the back of Which Broomstick... you could get a Nimbus Two Thousand and One, like Malfoy's got."

"I'm not buying anything Malfoy thinks is good," said Harry flatly.

January faded imperceptibly into February, with no change in the bitterly cold weather. The match against Ravenclaw was drawing nearer and nearer, but Harry still hadn't ordered a new broom. He was now asking Professor McGonagall for news of the Firebolt after every Transfiguration lesson, Ron standing hopefully at his shoulder, Hermione rushing past with her face averted.

"No, Potter, you can't have it back yet," Professor McGonagall told him the twelfth time this happened, before he'd even opened his mouth. "We've checked for most of the usual curses, but Professor Flitwick believes the broom might be carrying a Hurling Hex. I shall tell you once we've finished checking it. Now, please stop badgering me."

To make matters even worse, Harry's anti-dementor lessons were not going nearly as well as he had hoped. Several sessions on, he was able to produce an indistinct, silvery shadow every time the boggart-dementor approached him, but his Patronus was too feeble to drive the dementor away. All it did was hover, like a semitransparent cloud, draining Harry of energy as he fought to keep it there. Harry felt angry with himself, guilty about his secret desire to hear his parents' voices again.

"You're expecting too much of yourself," said Professor Lupin, sternly in their fourth week of practice. "For a thirteen-year-old wizard, even an indistinct Patronus is a huge achievement. You aren't passing out anymore, are you?"

I thought a Patronus would -- charge the dementors down or something," said Harry dispiritedly. "Make them disappear --"

"The true Patronus does do that," said Lupin. "But you've achieved a great deal in a very short space of time. If the dementors put in an appearance at your next Quidditch match, You will be able to keep them at bay long enough to get back to the ground."

"You said it's harder if there are loads of them," said Harry.

"I have complete confidence in you," said Lupin, smiling. "Here -- you've earned a drink - something from the Three Broomsticks. You won't have tried it before --"

He pulled two bottles out of his briefcase.

"Butterbeer!" said Harry, without thinking. "Yeah, I like that stuff!"

Lupin raised an eyebrow.

"Oh -Ron and Hermione brought me some back from Hogsmeade," Harry lied quickly.

I see," said Lupin, though he still looked slightly suspicious. "Well -- let's drink to a Gryffindor victory against Ravenclaw! Not that I'm supposed to take sides, as a teacher..." he added hastily

They drank the butterbeer in silence, until Harry voiced something he'd been wondering for a while.

"What's under a dementor's hood?"

Professor Lupin lowered his bottle thoughtfully.

"Hmmm... well, the only people who really know are in no condition to tell us. You see, the dementor lowers its hood only to use its last and worst weapon."

"What's that?"

"They call it the Dementor's Kiss," said Lupin, with a slightly twisted smile. "It's what dementors do to those they wish to destroy utterly. I suppose there must be some kind of mouth under there, because they clamp their jaws upon the mouth of the victim and -- and suck out his soul."

Harry accidentally spat out a bit of butterbeer.

"What -- they kill --?"

"Oh no," said Lupin. "Much worse than that. You can exist without your soul, you know, as long as your brain and heart are still working. But you'll have no sense of self anymore, no memory, no. . . anything. There's no chance at all of recovery. You'll just exist. As an empty shell. And your soul is gone forever... lost."

Lupin drank a little more butterbeer, then said, "It's the fate that awaits Sirius Black. It was in the Daily Prophet this morning. The Ministry have given the dementors permission to perform it if they find him."

Harry sat stunned for a moment at the idea of someone having their soul sucked out through their mouth. But then he thought of Black.

"He deserves it," he said suddenly.

"You think so?" said Lupin lightly. "Do you really think anyone deserves that?"

"Yes," said Harry defiantly. "For... for some things..."

He would have liked to have told Lupin about the conversation he'd overheard about Black in the Three Broomsticks, about Black betraying his mother and father, but it would have involved revealing that he'd gone to Hogsmeade without permission, and he knew Lupin wouldn't be very impressed by that. So he finished his butterbeer, thanked Lupin, and left the History of Magic classroom.

Harry half wished that he hadn't asked what was under a dementor's hood, the answer had been so horrible, and he was so lost in unpleasant thoughts of what it would feel like to have your soul sucked out of you that he walked headlong into Professor McGonagall halfway up the stairs.

"Do watch where you're going, Potter!"

"Sorry, Professor --"

"I've just been looking for you in the Gryffindor common room, Well, here it is, we've done everything we could think of, and there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it at all. You've got a very good friend somewhere, Potter...."

Harry's jaw dropped. She was holding out his Firebolt, and it looked as magnificent as ever.

"I can have it back?" Harry said weakly. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," said Professor McGonagall, and she was actually smiling. "I daresay you'll need to get the feel of it before Saturday's match, won't you? And Potter -- do try and win, won't you? Or we'll be out of the running for the eighth year. in a row, as Professor Snape was kind enough to remind me only last night...."

Speechless, Harry carried the Firebolt back upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower. As he turned a corner, he saw Ron dashing toward him, grinning from ear to ear.

"She gave it to You? Excellent! Listen, can I still have a go on it? Tomorrow?"

"Yeah... anything," said Harry, his heart lighter than it had been in a month. "You know what -- we should make up with Hermione.... She was only trying to help...."

"Yeah, all right," said Ron. "She's in the common room now working, for a change --"

They turned into the corridor to Gryffindor Tower and saw Neville Longbottom, pleading with Sir Cadogan, who seemed to be refusing him entrance.

"I wrote them down!" Neville was saying tearfully. "But I must've dropped them somewhere!"

"A likely tale!" roared Sir Cadogan. Then, spotting Harry and Ron: "Good even, my fine young yeomen! Come clap this loon in irons. He is trying to force entry to the chambers within!"

"Oh, shut up," said Ron as he and Harry drew level with Neville.

"I've lost the passwords!" Neville told them miserably. "I made him tell me what passwords he was going to use this week, because he keeps changing them, and now I don't know what I've done with them!"

"Odds bodikins," said Harry to Sir Cadogan, who looked extremely disappointed and reluctantly swung forward to let them into the common room. There was a sudden, excited murmur as every head turned and the next moment, Harry was surrounded by people exclaiming over his Firebolt.

"Where'd you get it, Harry?"

"Will you let me have a go?" "Have you ridden it yet, Harry?"

"Ravenclaw'll have no chance, they're all on Cleansweep Sevens!"

"Can I just hold it, Harry?"

After ten minutes or so, during which the Firebolt was Passed around and admired from every angle, the crowd dispersed and Harry and Ron had a clear view of Hermione, the only person who hadn't rushed over to them, bent over her work and carefully avoiding their eyes. Harry and Ron approached her table and at last, she looked up.

"I got it back," said Harry, grinning at her and holding up the

Firebolt.

"See, Hermione? There wasn't anything wrong with it!" said Ron.

"Well -- there might have been!" said Hermione. "I mean, at least you know now that it's safe!"

"Yeah, I suppose so," said Harry. "I'd better put it upstairs."

"I'll take it!" said Ron eagerly. "I've got to give Scabbers his rat tonic."

He took the Firebolt and, holding it as if it were made of glass, carried it away up the boys' staircase.

"Can I sit down, then?" Harry asked Hermione.

"I suppose so," said Hermione, moving a great stack of parchment off a chair.

Harry looked around at the cluttered table, at the long Arithmancy essay on which the ink was still glistening, at the even longer Muggle Studies essay ("Explain Why Muggles Need Electricity" and at the rune translation Hermione was now poring over.

"How are you getting through all this stuff?" Harry asked her.

"Oh, well -- you know -- working hard," said Hermione. Close-up, Harry saw that she looked almost as tired as Lupin.

"Why don't you just drop a couple of subjects?" Harry asked, watching her lifting books as she searched for her rune dictionary.

"I couldn't do that!" said Hermione, looking scandalized.

"Arithmancy looks terrible," said Harry, picking up a very complicated-looking number chart.

"Oh no, it's wonderful!" said Hermione earnestly. "It's my favorite subject! It's --"

But exactly what was wonderful about Arithmancy, Harry never found out. At that precise moment, a strangled yell echoed down the boys' staircase. The whole common room fell silent, staring, petrified, at the entrance. Then came hurried footsteps, growing louder and louder -- and then Ron came leaping into view, dragging with him a bedsheet.

"LOOK!" he bellowed, striding over to Hermione's table.

"LOOK!" he yelled, shaking the sheets in her face.

"Ron, what --?"

"SCABBERS! LOOK! SCABBERS!"

Hermione was leaning away from Ron, looking utterly bewildered. Harry looked down at the sheet Ron was holding. There was something red on it. Something that looked horribly like --

"BLOOD!" Ron yelled into the stunned silence. "HE'S GONE! AND YOU KNOW

WHAT WAS ON THE FLOOR?"

"N -- no," said Hermione in a trembling voice.

Ron threw something down onto Hermione's rune translation. Hermione and Harry leaned forward. Lying on top of the weird, spiky shapes were several long, ginger cat hairs.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GRYFFINDOR VERSUS RAVENCLAW

It looked like the end of Ron and Hermione's friendship. Each was so angry with the other that Harry couldn't see how they'd ever make up.

Ron was enraged that Hermione had never taken Crookshanks's attempts to eat Scabbers seriously, hadn't bothered to keep a close enough watch on him, and was still trying to pretend that Crookshanks was innocent by suggesting that Ron look for Scabbers under all the boys' beds. Hermione, meanwhile, maintained fiercely that Ron had no proof that Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers, that the ginger hairs might have been there since Christmas, and that Ron had been prejudiced against her cat ever since Crookshanks had landed on Ron's head in the Magical Menagerie.

Personally, Harry was sure that Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers, and when he tried to point out to Hermione that the evidence all pointed that way, she lost her temper with Harry too.

"Okay, side with Ron, I knew you would!" she said shrilly. "First the Firebolt, now Scabbers, everything's my fault, isn't it! just leave me alone, Harry, I've got a lot of work to do!"

Ron had taken the loss of his rat very hard indeed.

"Come on, Ron, you were always saying how boring Scabbers was," said Fred bracingly. "And he's been off-color for ages, he was wasting away. It was probably better for him to snuff it quickly -- one swallow -- he probably didn't feel a thing."

"Fred!" said Ginny indignantly.

"All he did was eat and sleep, Ron, you said it yourself," said George.

"He bit Goyle for us once!" Ron said miserably. "Remember, Harry?"

"Yeah, that's true," said Harry.

"His finest hour," said Fred, unable to keep a straight face. "Let the scar on Goyle's finger stand as a lasting tribute to his memory. Oh, come on, Ron, get yourself down to Hogsmeade and buy a new rat, what's the point of moaning?"

In a last-ditch attempt to cheer Ron up, Harry persuaded him to come along to the Gryffindor team's final practice before the Ravenclaw match, so that he could have a ride on the Firebolt after they'd finished. This did seem to take Ron's mind off Scabbers for a moment ("Great! Can I try and shoot a few goals on it?") so they set off for the Quidditch field together.

Madam Hooch, who was still overseeing Gryffindor practices to keep an eye on Harry, was just as impressed with the Firebolt as everyone else had been. She took it in her hands before takeoff and gave them the benefit of her professional opinion.

"Look at the balance on it! If the Nimbus series has a fault, it's a slight list to the tail end -- you often find they develop a drag after a few years. They've updated the handle too, a bit slimmer than the Cleansweeps, reminds me of the old Silver Arrows -- a pity they've stopped making them. I learned to fly on one, and a very fine old broom it was too...."

She continued in this vein for some time, until Wood said, "Er -- Madam Hooch? Is it okay if Harry has the Firebolt back? We need to practice...."

"Oh -- right -- here you are, then, Potter," said Madam Hooch. "I'll sit over here with Weasley...."

She and Ron left the field to sit in the stadium, and the Gryffindor team gathered around Wood for his final instructions for tomorrow's match.

"Harry, I've just found out who Ravenclaw is playing as Seeker. It's Cho Chang. She's a fourth year, and she's pretty good.... I really hoped she wouldn't be fit, she's had some problems with injuries...." Wood scowled his displeasure that Cho Chang had made a full recovery, then said, "On the other hand, she rides a Comet Two Sixty, which is going to look like a joke next to the Firebolt." He gave Harry's broom a look of fervent admiration, then said, "Okay, everyone, let's go -- "

And at long last, Harry mounted his Firebolt, and kicked off from the ground.

It was better than he'd ever dreamed. The Firebolt turned with the lightest touch; it seemed to obey his thoughts rather than his grip; it sped across the field at such speed that the stadium turned into a green-and-gray blur; Harry turned it so sharply that Alicia Spinnet screamed, then he went into a perfectly controlled dive, brushing the grassy field with his toes before rising thirty, forty, fifty feet into the air again.

"Harry, I'm letting the Snitch out!" Wood called.

Harry turned and raced a Bludger toward the goal posts; he outstripped it easily, saw the Snitch dart out from behind Wood, and within ten seconds had caught it tightly in his hand.

The team cheered madly. Harry let the Snitch go again, gave it a minute's head start, then tore after it, weaving in and out of the others; he spotted it lurking near Katie Bell's knee, looped her easily, and caught it again.

It was the best practice ever; the team, inspired by the presence of the Firebolt in their midst, performed their best moves faultlessly, and by the time they hit the ground again, Wood didn't have a single criticism to make, which, as George Weasley pointed out, was a first.

"I can't see what's going to stop us tomorrow!" said Wood. "Not unless -- Harry, you've sorted out your dementor problem, haven't you?"

"Yeah," said Harry, thinking of his feeble Patronus and wishing it were stronger.

"The dementors won't turn up again, Oliver. Dumbledore'd go ballistic," said Fred confidently.

"Well, let's hope not," said Wood. "Anyway -- good work, everyone. Let's get back to the tower... turn in early --"

"I'm staying out for a bit; Ron wants a go on the Firebolt," Harry told Wood, and while the rest of the team headed off to the locker rooms, Harry strode over to Ron, who vaulted the barrier to the stands and came to meet him. Madam Hooch had fallen asleep in her seat.

"Here you go," said Harry, handing Ron the Firebolt.

Ron, an expression of ecstasy on his face, mounted the broom and zoomed off into the gathering darkness while Harry walked around the edge of the field, watching him. Night had fallen before Madam Hooch awoke with a start, told Harry and Ron off for not waking her, and insisted that they go back to the castle.

Harry shouldered the Firebolt and he and Ron walked out of the shadowy stadium, discussing the Firebolt's superbly smooth action, its phenomenal acceleration, and its pinpoint turning. They were halfway toward the castle when Harry, glancing to his left, saw something that made his heart turn over -- a pair of eyes, gleaming out of the darkness.

Harry stopped dead, his heart banging against his ribs.

"What's the matter?" said Ron.

Harry pointed. Ron pulled out his wand and muttered, "Lumos!"

A beam of light fell across the grass, hit the bottom of a tree, and illuminated its branches; there, crouching among the budding leaves, was Crookshanks.

"Get out of here!" Ron roared, and he stooped down and seized a stone lying on the grass, but before he could do anything else, Crookshanks had vanished with one swish of his long ginger tail.

"See?" Ron said furiously, chucking the stone down again. "She's still letting him wander about wherever he wants -- probably washing down Scabbers with a couple of birds now...."

Harry didn't say anything. He took a deep breath as relief seeped through him; he had been sure for a moment that those eyes had belonged to the Grim. They set off for the castle once more. slightly ashamed of his moment of panic, Harry didn't say anything to Ron -- nor did he look left or right until they had reached the well-lit entrance hall.

Harry went down to breakfast the next morning with the rest of the boys in his dormitory, all of whom seemed to think the Firebolt deserved a sort of guard of honor. As Harry entered the Great Hall, heads turned in the direction of the Firebolt, and there was a good deal of excited muttering. Harry saw, with enormous satisfaction, that the Slytherin team were all looking thunderstruck.

"Did you see his face?" said Ron gleefully, looking back at Malfoy. "He can't believe it! This is brilliant!"

Wood, too, was basking in the reflected glory of the Firebolt.

"Put it here, Harry," he said, laying the broom in the middle of the table and carefully turning it so that its name faced upward. People from the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables were soon coming over to look. Cedric Diggory came over to congratulate Harry on having acquired such a superb replacement for his Nimbus, and Percy's Ravenclaw girlfriend, Penelope Clearwater, asked if she could actually hold the Firebolt.

"Now, now, Penny, no sabotage!" said Percy heartily as she examined the Firebolt closely. "Penelope and I have got a bet on," he told the team. "Ten Galleons on the outcome of the match!"

Penelope put the Firebolt down again, thanked Harry, and went back to her table.

"Harry -- make sure you win," said Percy, in an urgent whisper. "I haven't got ten Galleons. Yes, I'm coming, Penny!" And-he bustled off to join her in a piece of toast.

"Sure you can manage that broom, Potter?" said a cold, drawling voice.

Draco Malfoy had arrived for a closer look, Crabbe and Goyle right behind him.

"Yeah, reckon so," said Harry casually.

"Got plenty of special features, hasn't it?" said Malfoy, eyes glittering maliciously. "Shame it doesn't come with a parachute -- in case you get too near a dementor."

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered.

"Pity you can't attach an extra arm to yours, Malfoy," said Harry. "Then it could catch the Snitch for you."

The Gryffindor team laughed loudly. Malfoy's pale eyes narrowed, and he stalked away. They watched him rejoin the rest of the Slytherin team, who put their heads together, no doubt asking Malfoy whether Harry's broom really was a Firebolt.

At a quarter to eleven, the Gryffindor team set off for the locker rooms. The weather couldn't have been more different from their match against Hufflepuff. It was a clear, cool day with a very light breeze; there would be no visibility problems this time, and Harry, though nervous, was starting to feel the excitement only a Quidditch match could bring. They could hear the rest of the school moving into the stadium beyond. Harry took off his black school robes, removed his wand from his pocket, and stuck it inside the T-shirt he was going to wear under his Quidditch robes. He only hoped he wouldn't need it. He wondered suddenly whether Professor Lupin was in the crowd, watching.

"You know what we've got to do," said Wood as they prepared to leave the locker rooms. "If we lose this match, we're out of the running. just -- just fly like you did in practice yesterday, and we'll be okay!"

They walked out onto the field to tumultuous applause. The Ravenclaw team, dressed in blue, were already standing in the middle of the field. Their Seeker, Cho Chang, was the only girl on their team. She was shorter than Harry by about a head, and Harry couldn't help noticing, nervous as he was, that she was extremely pretty. She smiled at Harry as the teams faced each other behind their captains, and he felt a slight lurch in the region of his stomach that he didn't think had anything to do with nerves.

"Wood, Davies, shake hands," Madam Hooch said briskly, and Wood shook hands with the Ravenclaw Captain.

"Mount your brooms... on my whistle... three -- two -- one --"

Harry kicked off into the air and the Firebolt zoomed higher and faster than any other broom; he soared around the stadium and began squinting around for the Snitch, listening all the while to the commentary, which was being provided by the Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan.

"They're off, and the big excitement this match is the Firebolt that Harry Potter is flying for Gryffindor. According to Which Broomstick, the Firebolt's going to be the broom of choice for the national teams at this year's World Championship --"

"Jordan, would you mind telling us what's going on in the match?" interrupted Professor McGonagall's voice.

"Right you are, Professor -- just giving a bit of background information -- the Firebolt, incidentally, has a built-in auto-brake and --"

"Jordan!"

"Okay, okay, Gryffindor in possession, Katie Bell of Gryffindor, heading for goal..."

Harry streaked past Katie in the opposite direction, gazing around for a glint of gold and noticing that Cho Chang was tailing him closely. She was undoubtedly a very good flier -- she kept cutting across him, forcing him to change direction.

"Show her your acceleration, Harry!" Fred yelled as he whooshed past in pursuit of a Bludger that was aiming for Alicia.

Harry urged the Firebolt forward as they rounded the Ravenclaw goal posts and Cho fell behind. Just as Katie succeeded in scoring the first goal of the match, and the Gryffindor end of the field went wild, he saw it -- the Snitch was close to the ground, flitting near one of the barriers.

Harry dived; Cho saw what he was doing and tore after him -- Harry was speeding up, excitement flooding him; dives were his speciality, he was ten feet away --

Then a Bludger, hit by one of the Ravenclaw Beaters, came pelting out of nowhere; Harry veered off course, avoiding it by an inch, and in those few, crucial seconds, the Snitch had vanished.

There was a great "Ooooooh" of disappointment from the Gryffindor supporters, but much applause for their Beater from the Ravenclaw end. George Weasley vented his feelings by hitting the second Bludger

directly at the offending Beater, who was forced to roll right over in midair to avoid it.

"Gryffindor leads by eighty points to zero, and look at that Firebolt go! Potter's really putting it through its paces now, see it turn -- Chang's Comet is just no match for it, the Firebolt's precision- balance is really noticeable in these long --"

"JORDAN! ARE YOU BEING PAID TO ADVERTISE FIREBOLTS? GET ON WITH THE COMMENTARY!"

Ravenclaw was pulling back; they had now scored three goals, which put Gryffindor only fifty points ahead -- if Cho got the Snitch before him, Ravenclaw would win. Harry dropped lower, narrowly avoiding a Ravenclaw Chaser, scanning the field frantically -- a glint of gold, a flutter of tiny wings -- the Snitch was circling the Gryffindor goal post --

Harry accelerated, eyes fixed on the speck of gold ahead -- but just then, Cho appeared out of thin air, blocking him --

"HARRY, THIS IS NO TIME TO BE A GENTLEMAN!" Wood roared as Harry swerved to avoid a collision. "KNOCK HER OFF HER BROOM IF YOU HAVE TO!"

Harry turned and caught sight of Cho; she was grinning. The Snitch had vanished again. Harry turned his Firebolt upward and was soon twenty feet above the game. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cho following him.... She'd decided to mark him rather than search for the Snitch herself... All right, then... if she wanted to tail him, she'd have to take the consequences....

He dived again, and Cho, thinking he'd seen the Snitch, tried to follow; Harry pulled out of the dive very sharply; she hurtled downward; he rose fast as a bullet once more, and then saw it, for the third time -- the Snitch was glittering way above the field at the Ravenclaw end.

He accelerated; so, many feet below, did Cho. He was winning, gaining on the Snitch with every second -- then --

"Oh!" screamed Cho, pointing.

Distracted, Harry looked down.

Three dementors, three tall, black, hooded dementors, were looking up at him.

He didn't stop to think. Plunging a hand down the neck of his robes, he whipped out his wand and roared, "Expecto patronum!"

Something silver-white, something enormous, erupted from the end of his wand. He knew it had shot directly at the dementors but didn't pause to watch; his mind still miraculously clear, he looked ahead -- he was nearly there. He stretched out the hand still grasping his wand and just managed to close his fingers over the small, struggling Snitch.

Madam Hooch's whistle sounded. Harry turned around in midair and saw six scarlet blurs bearing down on him; next moment, the whole team was hugging him so hard he was nearly pulled off his broom. Down below he could hear the roars of the Gryffindors in the crowd.

"That's my boy!" Wood kept yelling. Alicia, Angelina, and Katie had all

kissed Harry; Fred had him in a grip so tight Harry felt as though his head would come off. In complete disarray, the team managed to make its way back to the ground. Harry got off his broom and looked up to see a gaggle of Gryffindor supporters sprinting onto the field, Ron in the lead. Before he knew it, he had been engulfed by the cheering crowd.

"Yes!" Ron yelled, yanking Harry's arm into the air. "Yes! Yes!"

"Well done, Harry!" said Percy, looking delighted. "Ten Galleons to me! Must find Penelope, excuse me --"

"Good for you, Harry!" roared Seamus Finnigan.

"Ruddy brilliant!" boomed Hagrid over the heads of the milling Gryffindors.

"That was quite some Patronus," said a voice in Harry's ear.

Harry turned around to see Professor Lupin, who looked both shaken and pleased.

"The dementors didn't affect me at all!" Harry said excitedly. "I didn't feel a thing!"

"That would be because they -- er -- weren't dementors," said Professor Lupin. "Come and see -- "

He led Harry out of the crowd until they were able to see the edge of the field.

"You gave Mr. Malfoy quite a fright," said Lupin.

Harry stared. Lying in a crumpled heap on the ground were Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Marcus Flint, the Slytherin team Captain, all struggling to remove themselves from long, black, hooded robes. It looked as though Malfoy had been standing on Goyle's shoulders. Standing over them, with an expression of the utmost fury on her face, was Professor McGonagall.

"An unworthy trick!" she was shouting. "A low and cowardly attempt to sabotage the Gryffindor Seeker! Detention for all of you, and fifty points from Slytherin! I shall be speaking to Professor Dumbledore about this, make no mistake! Ah, here he comes now!"

If anything could have set the seal on Gryffindor's victory, it was this. Ron, who had fought his way through to Harry's side, doubled up with laughter as they watched Malfoy fighting to extricate himself from the robe, Goyle's head still stuck inside it.

"Come on, Harry!" said George, fighting his way over. "Party! Gryffindor common room, now!"

"Right," said Harry, and feeling happier than he had in ages, he and the rest of the team led the way, still in their scarlet robes, out of the stadium and back up to the castle.

It felt as though they had already won the Quidditch Cup; the party went on all day and well into the night. Fred and George Weasley disappeared for a couple of hours and returned with armfuls of bottles of butterbeer, pumpkin fizz, and several bags full of Honeydukes sweets.

"How did you do that?" squealed Angelina Johnson as George started throwing Peppermint Toads into the crowd.

"With a little help from Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," Fred muttered in Harry's ear.

Only one person wasn't joining in the festivities. Hermione, incredibly, was sitting in a corner, attempting to read an enormous book entitled *Home Life and Social Habits of British Muggles*. Harry broke away from the table where Fred and George had started juggling butterbeer bottles and went over to her.

"Did you even come to the match?" he asked her.

"Of course I did," said Hermione in a strangely high-pitched voice, not looking up. "And I'm very glad we won, and I think you did really well, but I need to read this by Monday."

"Come on, Hermione, come and have some food," Harry said, looking over at Ron and wondering whether he was in a good enough mood to bury the hatchet.

"I can't, Harry. I've still got four hundred and twenty-two pages to read!" said Hermione, now sounding slightly hysterical. "Anyway..." She glanced over at Ron too. "He doesn't want me to join in."

There was no arguing with this, as Ron chose that moment to say loudly, "If Scabbers hadn't just been eaten, he could have had some of those Fudge Flies. He used to really like them --"

Hermione burst into tears. Before Harry could say or do anything, she tucked the enormous book under her arm, and, still sobbing, ran toward the staircase to the girls' dormitories and out of sight.

"Can't you give her a break?" Harry asked Ron quietly.

"No," said Ron flatly. "If she just acted like she was sorry -- but she'll never admit she's wrong, Hermione. She's still acting like Scabbers has gone on vacation or something."

The Gryffindor party ended only when Professor McGonagall turned up in her tartan dressing gown and hair net at one in the morning, to insist that they all go to bed. Harry and Ron climbed the stairs to their dormitory, still discussing the match. At last, exhausted, Harry climbed into bed, twitched the hangings of his four-poster shut to block out a ray of moonlight, lay back, and felt himself almost instantly drifting off to sleep....

He had a very strange dream. He was walking through a forest, his Firebolt over his shoulder, following something silvery-white. It was winding its way through the trees ahead, and he could only catch glimpses of it between the leaves. Anxious to catch up with it, he sped up, but as he moved faster, so did his quarry. Harry broke into a run, and ahead he heard hooves gathering speed. Now he was running flat out, and ahead he could hear galloping. Then he turned a corner into a clearing and -

"AAARRGGHH! NOOO!"

Harry woke as suddenly as though he'd been hit in the face. Disoriented in the total darkness, he fumbled with his hangings, he could hear movements around him, and Seamus Finnigan's voice from the other side of the room: "What's going on?"

Harry thought he heard the dormitory door slam. At last finding the divide in his curtains, he ripped them back, and at the same moment, Dean Thomas lit his lamp.

Ron was sitting up in bed, the hangings torn from one side, a look of utmost terror on his face.

"Black! Sirius Black! With a knife!"

"What?"

"Here! Just now! Slashed the curtains! Woke me up!"

"You sure you weren't dreaming, Ron?" said Dean.

"Look at the curtains! I tell you, he was here!"

They all scrambled out of bed; Harry reached the dormitory door first, and they sprinted back down the staircase. Doors opened behind them, and sleepy voices called after them.

"Who shouted?"

"What're you doing?"

The common room was lit with the glow of the dying fire, still littered with the debris from the party. It was deserted.

"Are you sure you weren't dreaming, Ron?"

"I'm telling you, I saw him!"

"What's all the noise?"

"Professor McGonagall told us to go to bed!"

A few of the girls had come down their staircase, pulling on, dressing gowns and yawning. Boys, too, were reappearing.

"Excellent, are we carrying on?" said Fred Weasley brightly.

"Everyone back upstairs!" said Percy, hurrying into the common room and pinning his Head Boy badge to his pajamas as he spoke.

"Perce -- Sirius Black!" said Ron faintly. "In our dormitory! With a knife! Woke me up!"

The common room went very still.

"Nonsense!" said Percy, looking startled. "You had too much to eat, Ron -- had a nightmare --"

"I'm telling you --"

"Now, really, enough's enough!"

Professor McGonagall was back. She slammed the portrait behind her as she entered the common room and stared furiously around.

"I am delighted that Gryffindor won the match, but this is getting ridiculous! Percy, I expected better of you!"

"I certainly didn't authorize this, Professor!" said Percy, puffing himself up indignantly. "I was just telling them all to get back to bed! My brother Ron here had a nightmare --"

"IT WASN'T A NIGHTMARE!" Ron yelled. "PROFESSOR, I WOKE UP, AND SIRIUS BLACK WAS STANDING OVER ME, HOLDING A KNIFE!"

Professor McGonagall stared at him.

"Don't be ridiculous, Weasley, how could he possibly have gotten through the portrait hole?"

"Ask him!" said Ron, pointing a shaking finger at the back of Sir Cadogan's picture. "Ask him if he saw --"

Glaring suspiciously at Ron, Professor McGonagall pushed the Portrait back open and went outside. The whole common room listened with bated breath. "Sir Cadogan, did you just let a man enter Gryffindor Tower?" "Certainly, good lady!" cried Sir Cadogan.

There was a stunned silence, both inside and outside the common room.

"You -- you did?" said Professor McGonagall. "But -- but the password!"

"He had 'em!" said Sir Cadogan proudly. "Had the whole week's, my lady! Read 'em off a little piece of paper!"

Professor McGonagall pulled herself back through the portrait hole to face the stunned crowd. She was white as chalk.

"Which person," she said, her voice shaking, "which abysmally foolish person wrote down this week's passwords and left them lying around?"

There was utter silence, broken by the smallest of terrified squeaks. Neville Longbottom, trembling from head to fluffy slippers toes, raised his hand slowly into the air.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SNAPE'S GRUDGE

No one in Gryffindor Tower slept that night. They knew that the castle was being searched again, and the whole House stayed awake in the common room, waiting to hear whether Black had been caught. Professor McGonagall came back at dawn, to tell them that he had again escaped.

Throughout the day, everywhere they went they saw signs of tighter security; Professor Flitwick could be seen teaching the front doors to recognize a large picture of Sirius Black; Filch was suddenly bustling up and down the corridors, boarding up everything from tiny cracks in the walls to mouse holes. Sir Cadogan had been fired. His portrait had been taken back to its lonely landing on the seventh floor, and the Fat Lady was back. She had been expertly restored, but was still extremely

nervous, and had agreed to return to her job only on condition that she was given extra protection. A bunch of surly security trolls had been hired to guard her. They paced the corridor in a menacing group, talking in grunts and comparing the size of their clubs.

Harry couldn't help noticing that the statue of the one-eyed witch on the third floor remained unguarded and unblocked. It seemed that Fred and George had been right in thinking that they -- and now Harry, Ron, and Hermione -- were the only ones who knew about the hidden passageway within it.

"D'you reckon we should tell someone?" Harry asked Ron.

"We know he's not coming in through Honeyduke's," said Ron dismissively. "We'd've heard if the shop had been broken into."

Harry was glad Ron took this view. If the one-eyed witch was boarded up too, he would never be able to go into Hogsmeade again.

Ron had become an instant celebrity. For the first time in his life, people were paying more attention to him than to Harry, and it was clear that Ron was rather enjoying the experience. Though still severely shaken by the night's events, he was happy to tell anyone who asked what had happened, with a wealth of detail.

"... I was asleep, and I heard this ripping noise, and I thought it was in my dream, you know? But then there was this draft... I woke up and one side of the hangings on my bed had been pulled down.... I rolled over... and I saw him standing over me... like a skeleton, with loads of filthy hair ... holding this great long knife, must've been twelve inches... and he looked at me, and I looked at him, and then I yelled, and he scampered.

"Why, though?" Ron added to Harry as the group of secondyear girls who had been listening to his chilling tale departed. "Why did he run?"

Harry had been wondering the same thing. Why had Black, having got the wrong bed, not silenced Ron and proceeded to Harry? Black had proved twelve years ago that he didn't mind murdering innocent people, and this time he had been facing five unarmed boys, four of whom were asleep.

"He must've known he'd have a job getting back out of the castle once you'd yelled and woken people up," said Harry thoughtfully. "He'd've had to kill the whole House to get back through the portrait hole... then he would've met the teachers...."

Neville was in total disgrace. Professor McGonagall was so furious with him she had banned him from all future Hogsmeade visits, given him a detention, and forbidden anyone to give him the password into the tower. Poor Neville was forced to wait outside the common room every night for somebody to let him in, while the security trolls leered unpleasantly at him. None of these punishments, however, came close to matching the one his grandmother had in store for him. Two days after Black's break-in, she sent Neville the very worst thing a Hogwarts student could receive over breakfast -- a Howler.

The school owls swooped into the Great Hall carrying the mail as usual, and Neville choked as a huge barn owl landed in front of him, a scarlet envelope clutched in its beak. Harry and Ron, who were sitting opposite him, recognized the letter as a Howler at once -- Ron had got one from

his mother the year before.

"Run for it, Neville," Ron advised.

Neville didn't need telling twice. He seized the envelope, and holding it before him like a bomb, sprinted out of the hall, while the Slytherin table exploded with laughter at the sight of him. They heard the Howler go off in the entrance hall -- Neville's grandmother's voice, magically magnified to a hundred times its Usual volume, shrieking about how he had brought shame on the whole family.

Harry was too busy feeling sorry for Neville to notice immediately that he had a letter too. Hedwig got his attention by nipping him sharply on the wrist.

"Ouch! Oh -- thanks, Hedwig."

Harry tore open the envelope while Hedwig helped herself to some of Neville's cornflakes. The note inside said:

Dear Harry and Ron, How Abut having tea with me this afternoon 'round six? I'll come collect you from the castle. WAIT FOR ME IN THE ENTRANCE HALL; YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED OUT ON YOUR OWN. Cheers, Hagrid

"He probably wants to hear all about Black!" said Ron.

So at six o'clock that afternoon, Harry and Ron left Gryffindor Tower, passed the security trolls at a run, and headed down to the entrance hall.

Hagrid was already waiting for them.

"All right, Hagrid!" said Ron. "S'pose you want to hear about Saturday night, do you?"

"I've already heard all abou' it," said Hagrid, opening the front doors and leading them outside.

"Oh," said Ron, looking slightly put out.

The first thing they saw on entering Hagrid's cabin was Buckbeak, who was stretched out on top of Hagrid's patchwork quilt, his enormous wings folded tight to his body, enjoying a large plate of dead ferrets. Averting his eyes from this unpleasant sight, Harry saw a gigantic, hairy brown suit and a very horrible yellow-and-orange tie hanging from the top of Hagrid's wardrobe door.

"What are they for, Hagrid?" said Harry.

"Buckbeaks case against the Committee fer the Disposal o' Dangerous Creatures," said Hagrid. "This Friday. Him an' me'll be goin' down ter London together. I've booked two beds on the Knight Bus...."

Harry felt a nasty pang of guilt. He had completely forgotten that Buckbeak's trial was so near, and judging by the uneasy look on Ron's face, he had too. They had also forgotten their promise about helping him prepare Buckbeak's defense; the arrival of the Firebolt had driven it clean out of their minds.

Hagrid poured them tea and offered them a plate of Bath buns but they

knew better than to accept; they had had too much experience with Hagrid's cooking.

I got somethin' ter discuss with you two," said Hagrid, sitting himself between them and looking uncharacteristically serious.

"What?" said Harry.

"Hermione," said Hagrid.

"What about her?" said Ron.

"She's in a righ' state, that's what. She's bin comin' down ter visit me a lot since Chris'mas. Bin feelin' lonely. Firs' yeh weren't talking to her because o' the Firebolt, now yer not talkin' to her because her cat --"

-- ate Scabbers!" Ron interjected angrily.

"Because her cat acted like all cats do," Hagrid continued doggedly. "She's cried a fair few times, yeh know. Goin' through a rough time at the moment. Bitten off more'n she can chew, if yeh ask me, all the work she's tryin' ter do. Still found time ter help me with Buckbeak's case, mind.... She's found some really good stuff fer me... reckon he'll stand a good chance now..."

"Hagrid, we should've helped as well -- sorry --" Harry began awkwardly.

"I'm not blamin' yeh!" said Hagrid, waving Harry's apology aside. "Gawd knows yeh've had enough ter be gettin' on with. I've seen yeh practicin' Quidditch ev'ry hour o' the day an' night -- but I gotta tell yeh, I thought you two'd value yer friend more'n broomsticks or rats. Tha's all."

Harry and Ron exchanged uncomfortable looks.

"Really upset, she was, when Black nearly stabbed yeh, Ron. She's got her heart in the right place, Hermione has, an' you two not talkin' to her --"

"If she'd just get rid of that cat, I'd speak to her again!" Ron said angrily. "But she's still sticking up for it! It's a maniac, and she won't hear a word against it!"

"Ah, well, people can be a bit stupid abou' their pets," said Hagrid wisely. Behind him, Buckbeak spat a few ferret bones onto Hagrid's pillow.

They spent the rest of their visit discussing Gryffindor's improved chances for the Quidditch Cup. At nine o'clock, Hagrid walked them back up to the castle.

A large group of people was bunched around the bulletin board when they returned to the common room.

"Hogsmeade, next weekend!" said Ron, craning over the heads to read the new notice. "What d'you reckon?" he added quietly to Harry as they went to sit down.

"Well, Filch hasn't done anything about the passage into Honeydukes...."

Harry said, even more quietly.

"Harry!" said a voice in his right ear. Harry started and looked around at Hermione, who was sitting at the table right behind them and clearing a space in the wall of books that had been hiding her.

"Harry, if you go into Hogsmeade again... I'll tell Professor McGonagall about that map!" said Hermione.

"Can you hear someone talking, Harry?" growled Ron, not looking at Hermione.

"Ron, how can you let him go with you? After what Sirius Black nearly did to you! I mean it, I'll tell --"

"So now you're trying to get Harry expelled!" said Ron furiously.
"Haven't you done enough damage this year?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but with a soft hiss, Crookshanks leapt onto her lap. Hermione took one frightened look at the expression on Ron's face, gathered up Crookshanks, and hurried away toward the girls' dormitories.

"So how about it?" Ron said to Harry as though there had been no interruption. "Come on, last time we went you didn't see anything. You haven't even been inside Zonko's yet!"

Harry looked around to check that Hermione was well out of earshot.

"Okay," he said. "But I'm taking the Invisibility Cloak this time."

On Saturday morning, Harry packed his Invisibility Cloak in his bag, slipped the Marauder's Map into his pocket, and went down to breakfast with everyone else. Hermione kept shooting suspicious looks down the table at him, but he avoided her eye and was careful to let her see him walking back up the marble staircase in the entrance hall as everybody else proceeded to the front doors.

"Bye!" Harry called to Ron. "See you when you get back!"

Ron grinned and winked.

Harry hurried up to the third floor, slipping the Marauder's Map out of his pocket as he went. Crouching behind the one-eyed witch, he smoothed it out. A tiny dot was moving in his direction. Harry squinted at it. The minuscule writing next to it read Neville Longbottom.

Harry quickly pulled out his wand, muttered, "Dissendium!" and shoved his bag into the statue, but before he could climb in himself, Neville came around the corner.

"Harry! I forgot you weren't going to Hogsmeade either!"

"Hi, Neville," said Harry, moving swiftly away from the statue and pushing the map back into his pocket. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing," shrugged Neville. "Want a game of Exploding Snap?"

"Er -- not now -- I was going to go to the library and do that vampire essay for Lupin --"

"I'll come with you!" said Neville brightly. I haven't done it either!"

"Er -- hang on -- yeah, I forgot, I finished it last night!"

"Great, you can help me!" said Neville, his round face anxious. "I don't understand that thing about the garlic at all -- do they have to eat it, or --"

He broke off with a small gasp, looking over Harry's shoulder.

It was Snape. Neville took a quick step behind Harry.

"And what are you two doing here?" said Snape, coming to a halt and looking from one to the other. "An odd place to meet --"

To Harry's immense disquiet, Snape's black eyes flicked to the doorways on either side of them, and then to the one-eyed witch.

"We're not -- meeting here," said Harry. "We just -- met here."

"Indeed?" said Snape. "You have a habit of turning up in unexpected places, Potter, and you are very rarely there for no good reason.... I suggest the pair of you return to Gryffindor Tower, where you belong."

Harry and Neville set off without another word. As they turned the corner, Harry looked back. Snape was running one of his hands over the one-eyed witch's head, examining it closely.

Harry managed to shake Neville off at the Fat Lady by telling him the password, then pretending he'd left his vampire essay in the library and doubling back. Once out of sight of the security trolls, he pulled out the map again and held it close to his nose.

The third floor corridor seemed to be deserted. Harry scanned the map carefully and saw, with a leap of relief, that the tiny dot labeled Severus Snape was now back in its office.

He sprinted back to the one-eyed witch, opened her hump, heaved himself inside, and slid down to meet his bag at the bottom of the stone chute. He wiped the Marauder's Map blank again, then set off at a run.

Harry, completely hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, emerged into the sunlight outside Honeydukes and prodded Ron in the back.

"It's me," he muttered.

"What kept you?" Ron hissed.

"Snape was hanging around."

They set off up the High Street.

"Where are you?" Ron kept muttering out of the corner of his mouth. "Are you still there? This feels weird...."

They went to the post office; Ron pretended to be checking the price of an owl to Bill in Egypt so that Harry could have a good look around. The owls sat hooting softly down at him, at least three hundred of them; from Great Grays right down to tiny little Scops owls ("Local Deliveries

Only"), which were so small they could have sat in the palm of Harry's hand.

Then they visited Zonko's, which was so packed with students Harry had to exercise great care not to tread on anyone and cause a panic. There were jokes and tricks to fulfill even Fred's and George's wildest dreams; Harry gave Ron whispered orders and passed him some gold from under the cloak. They left Zonko's with their money bags considerably lighter than they had been on entering, but their pockets bulging with Dungbombs, Hiccup Sweets, Frog Spawn Soap, and a Nose-Biting Teacup apiece.

The day was fine and breezy, and neither of them felt like staying indoors, so they walked past the Three Broomsticks and climbed a slope to visit the Shrieking Shack, the most haunted dwelling in Britain. It stood a little way above the rest of the village, and even in daylight was slightly creepy, with its boarded windows and dank overgrown garden.

"Even the Hogwarts ghosts avoid it," said Ron as they leaned on the fence, looking up at it. "I asked Nearly Headless Nick... he says he's heard a very rough crowd lives here. No one can get in. Fred and George tried, obviously, but all the entrances are sealed shut...."

Harry, feeling hot from their climb, was just considering taking off the cloak for a few minutes when they heard voices nearby. Someone was climbing toward the house from the other side of the hill; moments later, Malfoy had appeared, followed closely by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy was speaking.

"... should have an owl from Father any time now. He had to go to the hearing to tell them about my arm... about how I couldn't use it for three months...."

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered.

"I really wish I could hear that great hairy moron trying to defend himself... 'There's no 'arm in 'im, 'onest that hippogriff's as good as dead --"

Malfoy suddenly caught sight of Ron. His pale face split in a malevolent grin.

"What are you doing, Weasley?"

Malfoy looked up at the crumbling house behind Ron.

"Suppose You'd love to live here, wouldn't you, Weasley? Dreaming about having your own bedroom? I heard your family all sleep in one room -- is that true?"

Harry seized the back of Ron's robes to stop him from leaping on Malfoy. "Leave him to me," he hissed in Ron's ear.

The opportunity was too perfect to miss. Harry crept silently around behind Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, bent down, and scooped a large handful of mud out of the path.

"We were just discussing your friend Hagrid," Malfoy said to Ron. "Just trying to imagine what he's saying to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. D'you think he'll cry when they cut off his

hippogriff's

SPLAT.

Malfoy's head jerked forward as the mud hit him; his silverblond hair was suddenly dripping in muck.

"What the --?"

Ron had to hold onto the fence to keep himself standing, he was laughing so hard. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle spun stupidly on the spot, staring wildly around, Malfoy trying to wipe his hair clean.

"What was that? 'Who did that?'"

"Very haunted up here, isn't it?" said Ron, with the air of one commenting on the weather.

Crabbe and Goyle were looking scared. Their bulging muscles were no use against ghosts. Malfoy was staring madly around at the deserted landscape.

Harry sneaked along the path, where a particularly sloppy puddle yielded some foul-smelling, green sludge.

SPLATTER.

Crabbe and Goyle caught some this time. Goyle hopped furiously on the spot, trying to rub it out of his small, dull eyes.

"It came from over there!" said Malfoy, wiping his face, and staring at a spot some six feet to the left of Harry.

Crabbe blundered forward, his long arms outstretched like a zombie. Harry dodged around him, picked up a stick, and lobbed it at Crabbe's back. Harry doubled up with silent laughter as Crabbe did a kind of pirouette in midair, trying to see who had thrown it. As Ron was the only person Crabbe could see, it was Ron he started toward, but Harry stuck out his leg. Crabbe stumbled -- and his huge, flat foot caught the hem of Harry's cloak. Harry felt a great tug, then the cloak slid off his face.

For a split second, Malfoy stared at him.

"AAARGH!" he yelled, pointing at Harry's head. Then he turned tail and ran, at breakneck speed, back down the hill, Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

Harry tugged the cloak up again, but the damage was done.

"Harry!" Ron said, stumbling forward and staring hopelessly at the point where Harry had disappeared, "you'd better run for it! If Malfoy tells anyone -- you'd better get back to the castle, quick --" "See you later," said Harry, and without another word, he tore back down the path toward Hogsmeade.

Would Malfoy believe what he had seen? Would anyone believe

Malfoy? Nobody knew about the Invisibility Cloak -- nobody except Dumbledore. Harry's stomach turned over -- Dumbledore would know exactly

what had happened, if Malfoy said any- thing --

Back into Honeydukes, back down the cellar steps, across the stone floor, through the trapdoor -- Harry pulled off the cloak, tucked it under his arm, and ran, flat out, along the passage.... Malfoy would get back first... how long would it take him to find a teacher? Panting, a sharp pain in his side, Harry didn't slow down until he reached the stone slide. He would have to leave the cloak where it was, it was too much of a giveaway in case Malfoy had tipped off a teacher -- he hid it in a shadowy corner, then started to climb, fast as he could, his sweaty hands slipping on the sides of the chute. He reached the inside of the witch's hump, tapped it with his wand, stuck his head through, and hoisted himself out; the hump closed, and just as Harry jumped out from behind the statue, he heard quick footsteps approaching.

It was Snape. He approached Harry at a swift walk, his black robes swishing, then stopped in front of him.

"So," he said.

There was a look of suppressed triumph about him. Harry tried to look innocent, all too aware of his sweaty face and his muddy hands, which he quickly hid in his pockets.

"Come with me, Potter," said Snape.

Harry followed him downstairs, trying to wipe his hands clean on the inside of his robes without Snape noticing. They walked down the stairs to the dungeons and then into Snape's office.

Harry had been in here only once before, and he had been in very serious trouble then too. Snape had acquired a few more slimy horrible things in jars since last time, all standing on shelves behind his desk, glinting in the firelight and adding to the threatening atmosphere.

"Sit," said Snape.

Harry sat. Snape, however, remained, standing.

"Mr. Malfoy has just been to see me with a strange story, Potter," said Snape.

Harry didn't say anything.

"He tells me that he was up by the Shrieking Shack when he ran into Weasley -- apparently alone."

Still, Harry didn't speak.

"Mr. Malfoy states that he was standing talking to Weasley, when a large amount of mud hit him in the back of the head. How do you think that could have happened?"

Harry tried to look mildly surprised.

"I don't know, Professor."

Snape's eyes were boring into Harry's. It was exactly like trying to stare down a hippogriff. Harry tried hard not to blink.

"Mr. Malfoy then saw an extraordinary apparition. Can you imagine what it might have been, Potter?"

"No," said Harry, now trying to sound innocently curious.

"It was your head, Potter. Floating in midair."

There was a long silence.

"Maybe he'd better go to Madam Pomfrey," said Harry. "If he's seeing things like --"

"What would your head have been doing in Hogsmeade, Potter?" said Snape softly. "Your head is not allowed in Hogsmeade. No part of your body has permission to be in Hogsmeade."

"I know that," said Harry, striving to keep his face free of guilt or fear. "It sounds like Malfoy's having hallucin --"

"Malfoy is not having hallucinations," snarled Snape, and he bent down, a hand on each arm of Harry's chair, so that their faces were a foot apart. "If your head was in Hogsmeade, so was the rest of you."

"I've been up in Gryffindor Tower," said Harry. "Like you told --" "Can anyone confirm that?"

Harry didn't say anything. Snape's thin mouth curled into a horrible smile.

"So," he said, straightening up again. "Everyone from the Minister of Magic downward has been trying to keep famous Harry Potter safe from Sirius Black. But famous Harry Potter is a law unto himself Let the ordinary people worry about his safety! Famous Harry Potter goes where he wants to, with no thought for the consequences.

Harry stayed silent. Snape was trying to provoke him into telling the truth. He wasn't going to do it. Snape had no proof -- yet.

"How extraordinarily like your father you are, Potter," Snape said suddenly, his eyes glinting. "He too was exceedingly arrogant. A small amount of talent on the Quidditch field made him think he was a cut above the rest of us too. Strutting around the place with his friends and admirers... The resemblance between you is uncanny."

"My dad didn't strut," said Harry, before he could stop himself. "And neither do I."

"Your father didn't set much store by rules either," Snape went on, pressing his advantage, his thin face full of malice. "Rules were for lesser mortals, not Quidditch Cup-winners. His head was so swollen --"

"SHUT UP!"

Harry was suddenly on his feet. Rage such as he had not felt since his last night in Privet Drive was coursing through him. He didn't care that Snape's face had gone rigid, the black eyes flashing dangerously.

"What did you say to me, Potter?"

"I told you to shut up about my dad!" Harry yelled. I know the truth,

all right? He saved your life! Dumbledore told me! You wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for my dad!"

Snape's sallow skin had gone the color of sour milk.

"And did the headmaster tell you the circumstances in which your father saved my life?" he whispered. "Or did he consider the details too unpleasant for precious Potter's delicate ears?"

Harry bit his lip. He didn't know what had happened and didn't want to admit it -- but Snape seemed to have guessed the truth.

I would hate for you to run away with a false idea of your father, Potter," he said, a terrible grin twisting his face. "Have you been imagining some act of glorious heroism? Then let me correct you -- your saintly father and his friends played a highly amusing joke on me that would have resulted in my death if your father hadn't got cold feet at the last moment. There was nothing brave about what he did. He was saving his own skin as much as mine. Had their joke succeeded, he would have been expelled from Hogwarts."

Snape's uneven, yellowish teeth were bared.

"Turn out your pockets, Potter!" he spat suddenly.

Harry didn't move. There was a pounding in his ears.

"Turn out your pockets, or we go straight to the headmaster! Pull them out, Potter!"

Cold with dread, Harry slowly pulled out the bag of Zonko's tricks and the Marauder's Map.

Snap picked up the Zonko's bag.

"Ron gave them to me," said Harry, praying he'd get a chance to tip Ron off before Snape saw him. "He -brought them back from Hogsmeade last time --"

"Indeed? And you've been carrying them around ever since? How very touching... and what is this?"

Snape had picked up the map. Harry tried with all his might to keep his face impassive.

"Spare bit of parchment," he said with a shrug.

Snape turned it over, his eyes on Harry.

"Surely you don't need such a very old piece of parchment?" he said. "Why don't I just -- throw this away?"

His hand moved toward the fire.

"No!" Harry said quickly.

"So!" said Snape, his long nostrils quivering. "Is this another treasured gift from Mr. Weasley? Or is it -- something else? A letter, perhaps, written in invisible ink? Or -- instructions to get into Hogsmeade without passing the dementors?"

Harry blinked. Snape's eyes gleamed.

"Let me see, let me see...." he muttered, taking out his wand and smoothing the map out on his desk. "Reveal your secret!" he said, touching the wand to the parchment.

Nothing happened. Harry clenched his hands to stop them from shaking.

"Show yourself!" Snape said, tapping the map sharply.

It stayed blank. Harry was taking deep, calming breaths.

"Professor Severus Snape, master of this school, commands you to yield the information you conceal!" Snape said, hitting the map with his wand.

As though an invisible hand were writing upon it, words appeared on the smooth surface of the map.

Mooney presents his compliments to Professor Snape, and begs him to keep his abnormally large nose out of other people's business."

Snape froze. Harry stared, dumbstruck, at the message. But the map didn't stop there. More writing was appearing beneath the first.

"Mr. Prongs agrees with Mr. Moony and would like to add that Professor Snape is an ugle git."

It would have been very funny if the situation hadn't been so serious. And there was more....

"Mr. Padfoot would like to register his astonishment that an idiot like that ever became a professor."

Harry closed his eyes in horror. When he'd opened them, the map had had its last word.

"Mr. Wormtail bids Professor Snape good day, and advises him to wash his hair , the slimeball."

Harry waited for the blow to fall.

"So..." said Snape softly. "We'll see about this...."

He strode across to his fire, seized a fistful of glittering powder from a jar on the fireplace, and threw it into the flames.

"Lupin!" Snape called into the fire. "I want a word!"

Utterly bewildered, Harry stared at the fire. A large shape had appeared in it, revolving very fast. Seconds later, Professor Lupin was clambering out of the fireplace, brushing ash off his shabby robes.

"You called, Severus?" said Lupin mildly.

"I certainly did," said Snape, his face contorted with fury as he strode back to his desk. "I have just asked Potter to empty his pockets. He was carrying this."

Snape pointed at the parchment, on which the words of Messrs. Moony,

Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs were still shining. An odd, closed expression appeared on Lupin's face.

"Well?" said Snape.

Lupin continued to stare at the map. Harry had the impression that Lupin was doing some very quick thinking.

"Well?" said Snape again. "This parchment is plainly full of Dark Magic. This is supposed to be your area of expertise, Lupin. Where do you imagine Potter got such a thing?"

Lupin looked up and, by the merest half-glance in Harry's direction, warned him not to interrupt.

"Full of Dark Magic?" he repeated mildly. "Do you really think so, Severus? It looks to me as though it is merely a piece of parchment that insults anybody who reads it. Childish, but surely not dangerous? I imagine Harry got it from a joke shop --"

"Indeed?" said Snape. His jaw had gone rigid with anger. "You think a joke shop could supply him with such a thing? You don't think it more likely that he got it directly from the manufacturers?"

Harry didn't understand what Snape was talking about. Nor, apparently, did Lupin.

"You mean, by Mr. Wormtail or one of these people?" he said. "Harry, do you know any of these men?"

"No," said Harry quickly.

"You see, Severus?" said Lupin, turning back to Snape. "It looks like a Zonko product to me --"

Right on cue, Ron came bursting into the office. He was completely out of breath, and stopped just short of Snape's desk, clutching the stitch in his chest and trying to speak.

"I -- gave -- Harry -- that -- stuff," he choked. "Bought -- it... in Zonko's... ages -- ago..."

"Well!" said Lupin, clapping his hands together and looking around cheerfully. "That seems to clear that up! Severus, I'll take this back, shall I?" He folded the map and tucked it inside his robes. "Harry, Ron, come with me, I need a word about my vampire essay -- excuse us, Severus --"

Harry didn't dare look at Snape as they left his office. He, Ron, and Lupin walked all the way back into the entrance hall before speaking. Then Harry turned to Lupin.

"Professor, I --"

"I don't want to hear explanations," said Lupin shortly. He glanced around the empty entrance hall and lowered his voice. "I happen to know that this map was confiscated by Mr. Filch many years ago. Yes, I know it's a map," he said as Harry and Ron looked amazed. "I don't want to know how it fell into your possession. I am, however, astounded that you didn't hand it in. Particularly after what happened the last time a

student left information about the castle lying around. And I can't let you have it back, Harry."

Harry had expected that, and was too keen for explanations to protest.

"Why did Snape think I'd got it from the manufacturers?"

"Because...," Lupin hesitated, "because these mapmakers would have wanted to lure you out of school. They'd think it extremely entertaining."

"Do you know them?" said Harry, impressed.

"We've met," he said shortly. He was looking at Harry more seriously than ever before.

"Don't expect me to cover up for you again, Harry. I cannot make you take Sirius Black seriously. But I would have thought that what you have heard when the dementors draw near you would have had more of an effect on you. Your parents gave their lives to keep you alive, Harry. A poor way to repay them -- gambling their sacrifice for a bag of magic tricks."

He walked away, leaving Harry feeling worse by far than he had at any point in Snape's office. Slowly, he and Ron mounted the marble staircase. As Harry passed the one-eyed witch, he remembered the Invisibility Cloak -- it was still down there, but he didn't dare go and get it.

"It's my fault," said Ron abruptly. "I persuaded you to go. Lupin's right, it was stupid, we shouldn't've done it --"

He broke off; they reached the corridor where the security trolls were pacing, and Hermione was walking toward them. One look at her face convinced Harry that she had heard what had happened. His heart plummeted -- had she told Professor McGonagall?

"Come to have a good gloat?" said Ron savagely as she stopped in front of them. "Or have you just been to tell on us?"

"No," said Hermione. She was holding a letter in her hands and her lip was trembling. "I just thought you ought to know... Hagrid lost his case. Buckbeak is going to be executed."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE QUIDDITCH FINAL

He sent me this," Hermione said, holding out the letter.

Harry took it. The parchment was damp, and enormous teardrops had smudged the ink so badly in places that it was very difficult to read.

Dear Hermione, We lost. I'm allowed to bring him back to Hogwarts. Execution date to be fixed. Beaky has enjoyed London. I won't forget all the help you gave us.

Hagrid

"They can't do this," said Harry. "They can't. Buckbeak isn't

dangerous."

"Malfoy's dad's frightened the Committee into it," said Hermione, wiping her eyes. "You know what he's like. They're a bunch of doddery old fools, and they were scared. There'll be an appeal, though, there always is. Only I can't see any hope.... Nothing will have changed."

"Yeah, it will," said Ron fiercely. "You won't have to do all the work alone this time, Hermione. I'll help."

"Oh, Ron!"

Hermione flung her arms around Ron's neck and broke down completely. Ron, looking quite terrified, patted her very awkwardly on the top of the head. Finally, Hermione drew away.

"Ron, I'm really, really sorry about Scabbers..." she sobbed.

"Oh -- well -- he was old," said Ron, looking thoroughly relieved that she had let go of him. "And he was a bit useless. You never know, Mum and Dad might get me an owl now."

The safety measures imposed on the students since Black's second break-in made it impossible for Harry, Ron, and Hermione to go and visit Hagrid in the evenings. Their only chance of talking to him was during Care of Magical Creatures lessons.

He seemed numb with shock at the verdict.

"S'all my fault. Got all tongue-tied. They was all sittin' there in black robes an' I kep' droppin' me notes and forgettin' all them dates yeh looked up fer me, Hermione. An' then Lucius Malfoy stood up an' said his bit, and the Committee jus' did exac'ly what he told 'em...."

"There's still the appeal!" said Ron fiercely. "Don't give up Yet, we're working on it!"

They were walking back up to the castle with the rest of the class. Ahead they could see Malfoy, who was walking with Crabbe and Goyle, and kept looking back, laughing derisively.

"S'no good, Ron," said Hagrid sadly as they reached the castle steps. "That Committee's in Lucius Malfoy's pocket. I'm jus' gonna make sure the rest o' Beaky's time is the happiest he's ever had. I owe him that...."

Hagrid turned around and hurried back toward his cabin, his face buried in his handkerchief.

"Look at him blubber!"

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had been standing just inside the castle doors, listening.

"Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?" said Malfoy. "And he's supposed to be our teacher!"

Harry and Ron both made furious moves toward Malfoy, but Hermione got there first -- SMACK!

She had slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster. Malfoy staggered. Harry, Ron, Crabbe, and Goyle stood flabbergasted as Hermione raised her hand again.

"Don't you dare call Hagrid pathetic, you foul -- you evil --"

"Hermione!" said Ron weakly, and he tried to grab her hand as she swung it back.

"Get off, Ron!"

Hermione pulled out her wand. Malfoy stepped backward. Crabbe and Goyle looked at him for instructions, thoroughly bewildered.

"C'mon," Malfoy muttered, and in a moment, all three of them had disappeared into the passageway to the dungeons.

"Hermione!" Ron said again, sounding both stunned and impressed.

"Harry, you'd better beat him in the Quidditch final!" Hermione said shrilly. "You just better had, because I can't stand it if Slytherin wins!"

"We're due in Charms," said Ron, still goggling at Hermione. "We'd better go."

They hurried up the marble staircase toward Professor Flitwick's classroom.

"You're late, boys!" said Professor Flitwick reprovingly as Harry opened the classroom door. "Come along, quickly, wands out, we're experimenting with Cheering Charms today, we've already divided into pairs --"

Harry and Ron hurried to a desk at the back and opened their bags. Ron looked behind him.

"Where's Hermione gone?"

Harry looked around too. Hermione hadn't entered the classroom, yet Harry knew she had been right next to him when he had opened the door.

"That's weird," said Harry, staring at Ron. "Maybe -- maybe she went to the bathroom or something?"

But Hermione didn't turn up all lesson.

"She could've done with a Cheering Charm on her too," said Ron as the class left for lunch, all grinning broadly -- the Cheering Charms had left them with a feeling of great contentment.

Hermione wasn't at lunch either. By the time they had finished their apple pie, the after-effects of the Cheering Charms were wearing off, and Harry and Ron had started to get slightly worried.

"You don't think Malfoy did something to her?" Ron said anxiously as they hurried upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower.

They passed the security trolls, gave the Fat Lady the password ("Flibbertigibbet"), and scrambled through the portrait hole into the common room.

Hermione was sitting at a table, fast asleep, her head resting on an open Arithmancy book. They went to sit down on either side of her. Harry prodded her awake.

"Wh -- what?" said Hermione, waking with a start and staring wildly around. "Is it time to go? W -- which lesson have we got now?"

"Divination, but it's not for another twenty minutes," said Harry.
"Hermione, why didn't you come to Charms?"

"What? Oh no!" Hermione squeaked. "I forgot to go to Charms!"

"But how could you forget?" said Harry. "You were with us till we were right outside the classroom!"

"I don't believe it!" Hermione wailed. "Was Professor Flitwick angry? Oh, it was Malfoy, I was thinking about him and I lost track of things!"

"You know what, Hermione?" said Ron, looking down at the enormous Arithmancy book Hermione had been using as a pillow. "I reckon you're cracking up. You're trying to do too much."

"No, I'm not!" said Hermione, brushing her hair out of her eyes and staring hopelessly around for her bag. "I just made a mistake, that's all! I'd better go and see Professor Flitwick and say sorry... I'll see you in Divination!"

Hermione joined them at the foot of the ladder to Professor Trelawney's classroom twenty minutes later, looking extremely harrassed.

"I can't believe I missed Cheering Charms! And I bet they come up in our exams; Professor Flitwick hinted they might!"

Together they climbed the ladder into the dim, stifling tower room. Glowing on every little table was a crystal ball full of pearly white mist. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down together at the same rickety table.

"I thought we weren't starting crystal balls until next term," Ron muttered, casting a wary eye around for Professor Trelawney, in case she was lurking nearby.

"Don't complain, this means we've finished palmistry," Harry muttered back. "I was getting sick of her flinching every time she looked at my hands."

"Good day to you!" said the familiar, misty voice, and Professor Trelawney made her usual dramatic entrance out of the shadows. Parvati and Lavender quivered with excitement, their faces lit by the milky glow of their crystal ball.

"I have decided to introduce the crystal ball a little earlier than I had planned," said Professor Trelawney, sitting with her back to the fire and gazing around. "The fates have informed me that your examination in June will concern the Orb, and I am anxious to give you sufficient practice."

Hermione snorted.

"Well, honestly... 'the fates have informed her' who sets the exam? She does! What an amazing prediction!" she said, not troubling to keep her voice low. Harry and Ron choked back laughs.

It was hard to tell whether Professor Trelawney had heard them as her face was hidden in shadow. She continued, however, as though she had not.

"Crystal gazing is a particularly refined art," she said dreamily. "I do not expect any of you to See when first you peer into the Orb's infinite depths. We shall start by practicing relaxing the conscious mind and external eyes" -- Ron began to snigger uncontrollably and had to stuff his fist in his mouth to stifle the noise -- "so as to clear the Inner Eye and the superconscious. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some of you will see before the end of the class."

And so they began. Harry, at least, felt extremely foolish, staring blankly at the crystal ball, trying to keep his mind empty when thoughts such as "this is stupid" kept drifting across it. It didn't help that Ron kept breaking into silent giggles and Hermione kept tutting.

"Seen anything yet?" Harry asked them after a quarter of an hour's quiet crystal gazing.

"Yeah, there's a burn on this table," said Ron, pointing. "Someone's spilled their candle."

"This is such a waste of time," Hermione hissed. "I could be practicing something useful. I could be catching up on Cheering Charms --"

Professor Trelawney rustled past.

"Would anyone like me to help them interpret the shadowy portents within their Orb?" she murmured over the clinking of her bangles.

I don't need help," Ron whispered. "It's obvious what this means. There's going to be loads of fog tonight."

Both Harry and Hermione burst out laughing.

"Now, really!" said Professor Trelawney as everyone's heads turned in their direction. Parvati and Lavender were looking scandalized. "You are disturbing the clairvoyant vibrations!" She approached their table and peered into their crystal ball. Harry felt his heart sinking. He was sure he knew what was coming --

"There is something here!" Professor Trelawney whispered, lowering her face to the ball, so that it was reflected twice in her huge glasses. "Something moving... but what is it?"

Harry was prepared to bet everything he owned, including his Firebolt, that it wasn't good news, whatever it was. And sure enough --

"My dear Professor Trelawney breathed, gazing up at Harry. "It is here, plainer than ever before... my dear, stalking toward you, growing ever closer... the Gr --"

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" said Hermione loudly. "Not that ridiculous Grim again!"

Professor Trelawney raised her enormous eyes to Hermione's face. Parvati whispered something to Lavender, and they both glared at Hermione too. Professor Trelawney stood up, surveying Hermione with unmistakable anger.

"I am sorry to say that from the moment you have arrived in this class my dear, it has been apparent that you do not have what the noble art of Divination requires. Indeed, I don't remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly mundane."

There was a moment's silence. Then --

"Fine!" said Hermione suddenly, getting up and cramming Unfogging the Future back into her bag. "Fine!" she repeated, swinging the bag over her shoulder and almost knocking Ron off his chair. "I give up! I'm leaving!"

And to the whole class's amazement, Hermione strode over to the trapdoor, kicked it open, and climbed down the ladder out of sight.

It took a few minutes for the class to settle down again. Professor Trelawney seemed to have forgotten all about the Grim. She turned abruptly from Harry and Ron's table, breathing rather heavily as she tugged her gauzy shawl more closely to her.

"Oooooo!" said Lavender suddenly, making everyone start. "Oooooo, Professor Trelawney, I've just remembered! You saw her leaving, didn't you? Didn't you, Professor? 'Around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever!' You said it ages ago, Professor!"

Professor Trelawney gave her a dewy smile.

"Yes, my dear, I did indeed know that Miss Granger would be leaving us. One hopes, however, that one might have mistaken the Signs.... The Inner Eye can be a burden, you know..."

Lavender and Parvati looked deeply impressed, and moved over so that Professor Trelawney could join their table instead.

"Some day Hermione's having, eh?" Ron muttered to Harry, looking awed.

"Yeah..."

Harry glanced into the crystal ball but saw nothing but swirling white mist. Had Professor Trelawney really seen the Grim again? Would he? The last thing he needed was another near-fatal accident, with the Quidditch final drawing ever nearer.

The Easter holidays were not exactly relaxing. The third years had never had so much homework. Neville Longbottom seemed close to a nervous collapse, and he wasn't the only one.

"Call this a holiday!" Seamus Finnigan roared at the common room one afternoon. "The exams are ages away, what're they playing at?"

But nobody had as much to do as Hermione. Even without Divination, she was taking more subjects than anybody else. She was usually last to leave the common room at night, first to arrive at the library the next morning; she had shadows like Lupin's under her eyes, and seemed constantly close to tears.

Ron had taken over responsibility for Buckbeak's appeal. When he wasn't doing his own work, he was poring over enormously thick volumes with names like *The Handbook of Hippogriff Psychology* and *Fowl or Foul? A Study of Hippogriff Brutality*. He was so absorbed, he even forgot to be horrible to Crookshanks.

Harry, meanwhile, had to fit in his homework around Quidditch practice every day, not to mention endless discussions of tactics with Wood. The Gryffindor-Slytherin match would take place on the first Saturday after the Easter holidays. Slytherin was leading the tournament by exactly two hundred points. This meant (as Wood constantly reminded his team) that they needed to win the match by more than that amount to win the Cup. It also meant that the burden of winning fell largely on Harry, because capturing the Snitch was worth one hundred and fifty points.

"So you must catch it only if we're more than fifty points up," Wood told Harry constantly. "Only if we're more than fifty points up, Harry, or we win the match but lose the Cup. You've got that, Haven't you? You must catch the Snitch only if we're --"

"I KNOW, OLIVER!" Harry yelled.

The whole of Gryffindor House was obsessed with the coming match. Gryffindor hadn't won the Quidditch Cup since the legendary Charlie Weasley (Ron's second oldest brother) had been seeker. But Harry doubted whether any of them, even Wood, wanted to win as much as he did. The enmity between Harry and Malfoy was at its highest point ever. Malfoy was still smarting about the mud-throwing incident in Hogsmeade and was even more furious that Harry had somehow wormed his way out of punishment. Harry hadn't forgotten Malfoy's attempt to sabotage him in the match against Ravenclaw, but it was the matter of Buckbeak that made him most determined to beat Malfoy in front of the entire school.

Never, in anyone's memory, had a match approached in such a highly charged atmosphere. By the time the holidays were over, tension between the two teams and their Houses was at the breaking point. A number of small scuffles broke out in the corridors, culminating in a nasty incident in which a Gryffindor fourth year and a Slytherin sixth year ended up in the hospital wing with leeks sprouting out of their ears.

Harry was having a particularly bad time of it. He couldn't walk to class without Slytherins sticking out their legs and trying to trip him up; Crabbe and Goyle kept popping up wherever he went, and slouching away looking disappointed when they saw him surrounded by people. Wood had given instructions that Harry should be accompanied everywhere he went, in case the Slytherins tried to put him out of action. The whole of Gryffindor House took up the challenge enthusiastically, so that it was impossible for Harry to get to classes on time because he was surrounded by a vast, chattering crowd. Harry was more concerned for his Firebolt's safety than his own. When he wasn't flying it, he locked it securely in his trunk and frequently dashed back up to Gryffindor Tower at break times to check that it was still there.

All usual pursuits were abandoned in the Gryffindor common room the night before the match. Even Hermione had Put down her books.

"I can't work, I can't concentrate," she said nervously.

There was a great deal of noise. Fred and George Weasley were dealing

with the pressure by being louder and more exuberant than ever. Oliver Wood was crouched over a model of a Quidditch field in the corner, prodding little figures across it with his wand and muttering to himself Angelina, Alicia, and Katie were laughing at Fred's and George's jokes. Harry was sitting with Ron and Hermione, removed from the center of things, trying not to think about the next day, because every time he did, he had the horrible sensation that something very large was fighting to get out of his stomach.

"You're going to be fine," Hermione told him, though she looked positively terrified.

"You've got a Firebolt!" said Ron.

"Yeah..." said Harry, his stomach writhing.

It came as a relief when Wood suddenly stood up and yelled, "Team! Bed!"

Harry slept badly. First he dreamed that he had overslept, and that Wood was yelling, "Where were you? We had to use Neville instead!" Then he dreamed that Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherin team arrived for the match riding dragons. He was flying at breakneck speed, trying to avoid a spurt of flames from Malfoy's steed's mouth, when he realized he had forgotten his Firebolt. He fell through the air and woke with a start.

It was a few seconds before Harry remembered that the match hadn't taken place yet, that he was safe in bed, and that the Slytherin team definitely wouldn't be allowed to play on dragons. He was feeling very thirsty. Quietly as he could, he got out of his four-poster and went to pour himself some water from the silver jug beneath the window.

The grounds were still and quiet. No breath of wind disturbed the treetops in the Forbidden Forest; the Whomping Willow was motionless and innocent-looking. It looked as though the conditions for the match would be perfect.

Harry set down his goblet and was about to turn back to his bed when something caught his eye. An animal of some kind was prowling across the silvery lawn.

Harry dashed to his bedside table, snatched up his glasses, and put them on, then hurried back to the window. It couldn't be the Grim -- not now -- not right before the match -

He peered out at the grounds again and, after a minute's frantic searching, spotted it. It was skirting the edge of the forest now... It wasn't the Grim at all ... it was a cat.... Harry clutched the window ledge in relief as he recognized the bottlebrush tail. It was only Crookshanks....

Or was it only Crookshanks? Harry squinted, pressing his nose flat against the glass. Crookshanks seemed to have come to a halt. Harry was sure he could see something else moving in the shadow of the trees too.

And just then, it emerged -- a gigantic, shaggy black dog, moving stealthily across the lawn, Crookshanks trotting at its side. Harry stared. What did this mean? If Crookshanks could see the dog as well, how could it be an omen of Harry's death?

"Ron!" Harry hissed. "Ron! Wake up!"

"Huh?"

I need you to tell me if you can see something!"

"S'all dark, Harry," Ron muttered thickly. "What're you or, about?"

"Down here --"

Harry looked quickly back out of the window.

Crookshanks and the dog had vanished. Harry climbed onto the windowsill to look right down into the shadows of the castle, but they weren't there. Where had they gone?

A loud snore told him Ron had fallen asleep again.

Harry and the rest of the Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall the next day to enormous applause. Harry couldn't help grinning broadly as he saw that both the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables were applauding them too. The Slytherin table hissed loudly as they passed. Harry noticed that Malfoy looked even paler than usual.

Wood spent the whole of breakfast urging his team to eat, while touching nothing himself. Then he hurried them off to the field before anyone else had finished, so they could get an idea of the conditions. As they left the Great Hall, everyone applauded again.

"Good luck, Harry!" called Cho. Harry felt himself blushing.

"Okay -- no wind to speak of -- sun's a bit bright, that could impair your vision, watch out for it -- ground's fairly hard, good, that'll give us a fast kickoff --"

Wood paced the field, staring around with the team behind him. Finally, they saw the front doors of the castle open in the distance and the rest of the school spilling onto the lawn.

"Locker rooms," said Wood tersely.

None of them spoke as they changed into their scarlet robes. Harry wondered if they were feeling like he was: as though he'd eaten something extremely wriggly for breakfast. In what seemed like no time at all, Wood was saying, "Okay, it's time, let's go --"

They walked out onto the field to a tidal wave of noise. Threequarters of the crowd was wearing scarlet rosettes, waving scarlet flags with the Gryffindor lion upon them, or brandishing banners with slogans like "GO GRYFFINDOR!" and "LIONS FOR THE CUK' Behind the Slytherin goal posts, however, two hundred people were wearing green; the silver serpent of Slytherin glittered on their flags, and Professor Snape sat in the very front row, wearing green like everyone else, and a very grim smile.

"And here are the Gryffindors!" yelled Lee Jordan, who was acting as commentator as usual. "Potter, Bell, Johnson, Spinnet, Weasley, Weasley, and Wood. Widely acknowledged as the best team Hogwarts has seen in a good few years --"

Lee's comments were drowned by a tide of "boos" from the Slytherin end.

"And here come the Slytherin team, led by Captain Flint. He's Made some changes in the lineup and seems to be going for size rather than skill --"

More boos from the Slytherin crowd. Harry, however, thought Lee had a point. Malfoy was easily the smallest person On the Slytherin team; the rest of them were enormous.

"Captains, shake hands!" said Madam Hooch.

Flint and Wood approached each other and grasped each other's hand very tightly; it looked as though each was trying to break the other's fingers.

"Mount your brooms!" said Madam Hooch. "Three... two... one..."

The sound of her whistle was lost in the roar from the crowd as fourteen brooms rose into the air. Harry felt his hair fly back off his forehead; his nerves left him in the thrill of the flight; he glanced around, saw Malfoy on his tail, and sped off in search of the Snitch.

"And it's Gryffindor in possession, Alicia Spinner of Gryffindor with the Quaffle, heading straight for the Slytherin goal posts, looking good, Alicia! Argh, no -- Quaffle intercepted by Warrington, Warrington of Slytherin tearing UP the field -- WHAM! -- nice Bludger work there by George Weasley, Warrington drops the Quaffle, it's caught by -- Johnson, Gryffindor back in possession, come on, Angelina -- nice swerve around Montague -- duck, Angelina, that's a Bludger!- SHE SCORES! TEN-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!"

Angelina punched the air as she soared around the end of the field; the sea of scarlet below was screaming its delight

"OUCH!"

Angelina was nearly thrown from her broom as Marcus Flint went smashing into her.

"Sorry!" said Flint as the crowd below booed. "Sorry, didn't see her!"

A moment later, Fred Weasley chucked his Beater's club at the back of Flint's head. Flint's nose smashed into the handle of his broom and began to bleed.

"That will do!" shrieked Madam Hooch, zooming between them. "Penalty shot to Gryffindor for an unprovoked attack on their Chaser! Penalty shot to Slytherin for deliberate damage to their Chaser!"

"Come off it, Miss!" howled Fred, but Madam Hooch blew her whistle and Alicia flew forward to take the penalty.

"Come on, Alicia!" yelled Lee into the silence that had descended on the crowd. "YES! SHE'S BEATEN THE KEEPER! TWENTY-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry turned the Firebolt sharply to watch Flint, still bleeding freely, fly forward to take the Slytherin penalty. Wood was hovering in front of the Gryffindor goal posts, his jaw clenched.

"'Course, Wood's a superb Keeper!" Lee Jordan told the crowd as Flint waited for Madam Hooch's whistle. "Superb! Very difficult to pass --

very difficult indeed -- YES! I DON'T BELIEVE IT! HE'S SAVED IT!"

Relieved, Harry zoomed away, gazing around for the Snitch, but still making sure he caught every word of Lee's commentary. It was essential that he hold Malfoy off the Snitch until Gryffindor was more than fifty points up --

"Gryffindor in possession, no, Slytherin in possession -- no!

Gryffindor back in possession and it's Katie Bell, Katie Bell for Gryffindor with the Quaffle, she's streaking up the field -- THAT WAS DELIBERATE!"

Montague, a Slytherin Chaser, had swerved in front of Katie, and instead of seizing the Quaffle had grabbed her head. Katie cart wheeled in the air, managed to stay on her broom, but dropped the Quaffle.

Madam Hooch's whistle rang out again as she soared over to Montague and began shouting at him. A minute later, Katie had put another penalty past the Slytherin Seeker.

"THIRTY-ZERO! TAKE THAT, YOU DIRTY, CHEATING --"

"Jordan, if you can't commentate in an unbiased way --"

"I'm telling it like it is, Professor!"

Harry felt a huge jolt of excitement. He had seen the Snitch it was shimmering at the foot of one of the Gryffindor goal posts -- but he mustn't catch it yet -- and if Malfoy saw it -

Faking a look of sudden concentration, Harry pulled his Firebolt around and sped off toward the Slytherin end -- it worked. Malfoy went haring after him, clearly thinking Harry had seen the Snitch there....

WHOOSH.

One of the Bludgers came streaking past Harry's right ear, hit by the gigantic Slytherin Beater, Derrick. Then again

WHOOSH.

The second Bludger grazed Harry's elbow. The other Beater, Bole, was closing in.

Harry had a fleeting glimpse of Bole and Derrick zooming toward him, clubs raised --

He turned the Firebolt upward at the last second, and Bole and Derrick collided with a sickening crunch.

"Ha haaa!" yelled Lee Jordan as the Slytherin Beaters lurched away from each other, clutching their heads. "Too bad, boys! You'll need to get up earlier than that to beat a Firebold And it's Gryffindor in possession again, as Johnson takes the Quaffle -- Flint alongside her -- poke him in the eye, Angelina! -- it was a joke, Professor, it was a joke -- oh no -- Flint in possession, Flint flying toward the Gryffindor goal posts, come on now, Wood, save --!"

But Flint had scored; there was an eruption of cheers from the Slytherin

end, and Lee swore so badly that Professor McGonagall tried to tug the magical megaphone away from him.

"Sorry, Professor, sorry! Woa happen again! So, Gryffindor in the lead, thirty points to ten, and Gryffindor in possession --"

it was turning into the dirtiest game Harry had ever played in. Enraged that Gryffindor had taken such an early lead, the Slytherins were rapidly resorting to any means to take the Quaffle. Bole hit Alicia with his club and tried to say he'd thought she was a Bludger. George Weasley elbowed Bole in the face in retaliation. Madam Hooch awarded both teams penalties, and Wood pulled off another spectacular save, making the score forty-ten to Gryffindor.

The Snitch had disappeared again. Malfoy was still keeping close to Harry as he soared over the match, looking around for it once Gryffindor was fifty points ahead -

Katie scored. Fifty-ten. Fred and George Weasley were swooping around her, clubs raised, in case any of the Slytherins were thinking of revenge. Bole and Derrick took advantage of Fred's and George's absence to aim both Bludgers at Wood; they caught him in the stomach, one after the other, and he rolled over in the air, clutching his broom, completely winded.

Madam Hooch was beside herself

"YOU DO NOT ATTACK THE KEEPER UNLESS THE QUAFFLE IS WITHIN THE SCORING AREA!" she shrieked at Bole and Derrick. "Gryffindor penalty!"

And Angelina scored. Sixty-ten. Moments later, Fred Weasley pelted a Bludger at Warrington, knocking the Quaffle Out of his hands; Alicia seized it and put it through the Slytherin goal -- seventy-ten.

The Gryffindor crowd below was screaming itself hoarse -- Gryffindor was sixty points in the lead, and if Harry caught the Snitch now, the Cup was theirs. Harry could almost feel hundreds of eyes following him as he soared around the field, high above the rest of the game, with Malfoy speeding along behind him.

And then he saw it. The Snitch was sparkling twenty feet above him.

Harry put on a huge burst of speed; the wind was roaring in his ears; he stretched out his hand, but suddenly, the Firebolt was slowing down --

Horrified, he looked around. Malfoy had thrown himself forward, grabbed hold of the Firebolt's tail, and was pulling it back.

"You --"

Harry was angry enough to hit Malfoy, but couldn't reach -- Malfoy was panting with the effort of holding onto the Firebolt, but his eyes were sparkling maliciously. He had achieved what he'd wanted to do -- the Snitch had disappeared again.

"Penalty! Penalty to Gryffindor! I've never seen such tactics." Madam Hooch screeched, shooting up to where Malfoy was sliding back onto his Nimbus Two Thousand and One.

"YOU CHEATING SCUM!" Lee Jordan was howling into the megaphone, dancing

out of Professor McGonagall's reach. "YOU FILTHY, CHEATING B --"

Pprofessor McGonagall didn't even bother to tell him off She was actually shaking her finger in Malfoys direction, her hat had fallen off, and she too was shouting furiously.

Alicia took Gryffindor's penalty, but she was so angry she missed by several feet. The Gryffindor team was losing concentration and the Slytherins, delighted by Malfoy's foul on Harry, were being spurred on to greater heights.

"Slytherin in possession, Slytherin heading for goal -- Montague scores --" Lee groaned. "Seventy- twenty to Gryffindor..."

Harry was now marking Malfoy so closely their knees kept hitting each other. Harry wasn't going to let Malfoy anywhere near the Snitch....

"Get out of it, Potter!" Malfoy yelled in frustration as he tried to turn and found Harry blocking him.

"Angelina Johnson gets the Quaffle for Gryffindor, come on, Angelina, COME ON!"

Harry looked around. Every single Slytherin player apart from Malfoy was streaking up the pitch toward Angelina, including the Slytherin Keeper -- they were all going to block her --

Harry wheeled the Firebolt around, bent so low he was lying flat along the handle, and kicked it forward. Like a bullet, he shot toward the Slytherins.

"AAAAAAARRRGH!"

They scattered as the Firebolt zoomed toward them; Angelina's Way was clear.

"SHE SCORES! SHE SCORES! Gryffindor leads by eighty Points to twenty!"

Harry, who had almost pelted headlong into the stands, skidded to a halt in midair, reversed, and zoomed back into the middle of the field.

And then he saw something to make his heart stand still. Malfoy was diving, a look of triumph on his face -- there, a few feet above the grass below, was a tiny, golden glimmer -

Harry urged the Firebolt downward, but Malfoy was miles ahead -

"Go! Go! Go!" Harry urged his broom. He was gaining on Malfay -- Harry flattened himself to the broom handle as Bole sent a Bludger at him -- he was at Malfoy's ankles -- he was level --

Harry threw himself forward, took both hands off his broom. He knocked Malfoy's arm out of the way and --

"YES!"

He pulled out of his dive, his hand in the air, and the stadium exploded. Harry soared above the crowd, an odd ringing in his ears. The tiny golden ball was held tight in his fist, beating its wings hopelessly against his fingers.

Then Wood was speeding toward him, half-blinded by tears; he seized Harry around the neck and sobbed unrestrainedly into his shoulder. Harry felt two large thumps as Fred and George hit them; then Angelina's, Alicia's, and Katie's voices, "We've won the Cup! We've won the Cup!" Tangled together in a many-armed hug, the Gryffindor team sank, yelling hoarsely, back to earth.

Wave upon wave of crimson supporters was pouring over the barriers onto the field. Hands were raining down on their backs. Harry had a confused impression of noise and bodies pressing in on him. Then he, and the rest of the team, were hoisted onto the shoulders of the crowd. Thrust into the light, he saw Hagrid, Plastered with crimson rosettes -- "Yeh beat 'em, Harry, yeh beat 'em!

"Wait till I tell Buckbeak!" There was Percy, jumping up and down like a maniac, all dignity forgotten. Professor McGonagall was sobbing harder even than Wood, wiping her eyes with an enormous Gryffindor flag; and there, fighting their way toward Harry, were Ron and Hermione. Words failed them. They simply beamed as Harry was borne toward the stands, where Dumbledore stood waiting with the enormous Quidditch Cup.

If only there had been a dementor around.... As a sobbing Wood passed Harry the Cup, as he lifted it into the air, Harry felt he could have produced the world's best Patronus.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PROFESSOR TRELAWNEY'S PREDICTION

Harry's euphoria at finally winning the Quidditch Cup lasted at least a week. Even the weather seemed to be celebrating; as June approached, the days became cloudless and sultry, and all anybody felt like doing was strolling onto the grounds and flopping down on the grass with several pints of iced pumpkin juice, perhaps playing a casual game of Gobstones or watching the giant squid propel itself dreamily across the surface of the lake.

But they couldn't. Exams were nearly upon them, and instead of lazing around outside, the students were forced to remain inside the castle, trying to bully their brains into concentrating while enticing wafts of summer air drifted in through the windows. Even Fred and George Weasley had been spotted working; they were about to take their O.W.L.s (Ordinary Wizarding Levels). Percy was getting ready to take his N.E.W.T.s (Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests), the highest qualification Hogwarts offered. As Percy hoped to enter the Ministry of Magic, he needed top grades. He was becoming increasingly edgy, and gave very severe punishments to anybody who disturbed the quiet of the common room in the evenings. In fact, the only person who seemed more anxious than Percy was Hermione.

Harry and Ron had given up asking her how she was managing to attend several classes at once, but they couldn't restrain themselves when they saw the exam schedule she had drawn up for herself. The first column read:

Monday

9 o'clock, Arithmancy

9 o'clock, Transfiguration

Lunch

1 o'clock, Charms

1 o'clock, Ancient Runes

"Hermione?" Ron said cautiously, because she was liable to explode when interrupted these days. "Er -- are you sure you've copied down these times right?"

"What?" snapped Hermione, picking up the exam schedule and examining it. "Yes, of course I have."

"Is there any point asking how you're going to sit for two exams at once?" said Harry.

"No," said Hermione shortly. "Have either of you seen my copy of Numerology and Gramatica?"

"Oh, yeah, I borrowed it for a bit of bedtime reading," said Ron, but very quietly. Hermione started shifting heaps of parchment Harry, Ron, and Hermione plenty of opportunity to speak to Hagrid.

"Beaky's gettin' a bit depressed," Hagrid told them, bending low on the pretense of checking that Harry's flobberworm was still alive. "Bin cooped up too long. But still... we'll know day after tomorrow -- one way or the other --"

They had Potions that afternoon, which was an unqualified disaster. Try as Harry might, he couldn't get his Confusing Concoction to thicken, and Snape, standing watch with an air of vindictive pleasure, scribbled something that looked suspiciously like a zero onto his notes before moving away.

Then came Astronomy at midnight, up on the tallest tower; History of Magic on Wednesday morning, in which Harry scribbled everything Florean Fortescue had ever told him about medieval witch-hunts, while wishing he could have had one of Fortescue's choco-nut sundaes with him in the stifling classroom. Wednesday afternoon meant Herbology, in the greenhouses under a baking-hot sun; then back to the common room once more, with sunburnt necks, thinking longingly of this time next day, when it would all be over.

Their second to last exam, on Thursday morning, was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Lupin had compiled the most unusual exam any of them had ever taken; a sort of obstacle course outside in the sun, where they had to wade across a deep paddling pool containing a grindylow, cross a series of potholes full of Red Caps, squish their way across a patch of marsh while ignoring misleading directions from a hinkypunk, then climb into an old trunk and battle with a new boggart.

"Excellent, Harry," Lupin muttered as Harry climbed out of the trunk, grinning. "Full marks."

Flushed with his success, Harry hung around to watch Ron and Hermione. Ron did very well until he reached the hinkypunk, which successfully confused him into sinking waist-high into the quagmire. Hermione did everything perfectly until she reached the trunk with the boggart in it.

After about a minute inside it, she burst out again, screaming.

"Hermione!" said Lupin, startled. "What's the matter?"

"P -- P -- Professor McGonagall!" Hermione gasped, pointing into the trunk. "Sh -- she said I'd failed everything!"

It took a little while to calm Hermione down. When at last she had regained a grip on herself, she, Harry, and Ron went back to the castle. Ron was still slightly inclined to laugh at Hermione's boggart, but an argument was averted by the sight that met them on the top of the steps.

Cornelius Fudge, sweating slightly in his pinstriped cloak, was standing there staring out at the grounds. He started at the sight of Harry.

"Hello there, Harry!" he said. "Just had an exam, I expect? Nearly finished?"

"Yes," said Harry. Hermione and Ron, not being on speaking terms with the Minister of Magic, hovered awkwardly in the background.

"Lovely day," said Fudge, casting an eye over the lake.

"Pity... pity..."

He sighed deeply and looked down at Harry.

"I'm here on an unpleasant mission, Harry. The Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures required a witness to the execution of a mad hippogriff. As I needed to visit Hogwarts to check on the Black situation, I was asked to step in."

"Does that mean the appeal's already happened?" Ron interrupted, stepping forward.

"No, no, it's scheduled for this afternoon," said Fudge, looking curiously at Ron.

"Then you might not have to witness an execution at A!" said Eon stoutly. "The hippogriff might get off!"

Before Fudge could answer, two wizards came through the castle doors behind him. One was so ancient he appeared to be withering before their very eyes; the other was tall and strapping, with a thin black mustache. Harry gathered that they were representatives of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, because the very old wizard squinted toward Hagrid's cabin and said in a feeble voice, "Dear, dear, I'm getting too old for this.... Two o'clock, isn't it, Fudge?"

The black-mustached man was fingering something in his belt; Harry looked and saw that he was running one broad thumb along the blade of a shining axe. Ron opened his mouth to say something, but Hermione nudged him hard in the ribs and jerked her head toward the entrance hall.

"Why'd you stop me?" said Ron angrily as they entered the Great Hall for lunch. "Did you see them? They've even got the axe ready! This isn't justice!"

"Ron, your dad works for the Ministry, you can't go saying things like that to his boss!" said Hermione, but she too looked very upset. "As

long as Hagrid keeps his head this time, and argue, hi case properly, they can't possibly execute Buckbeak...."

But Harry could tell Hermione didn't really believe what she was saying. All around them, people were talking excitedly as they ate their lunch, happily anticipating the end of the exams that afternoon, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione, lost in worry about Hagrid and Buckbeak, didn't join in.

Harry's and Ron's last exam was Divination; Hermione's, Muggle Studies. They walked up the marble staircase together; Hermione left them on the first floor and Harry and Ron proceeded all the way up to the seventh, where many of their class were sitting on the spiral staircase to Professor Trelawney's classroom, trying to cram in a bit of last-minute studying.

"She's seeing us all separately," Neville informed them as they went to sit down next to him. He had his copy of Unfogging the Future open on his lap at the pages devoted to crystal gazing. "Have either of you ever seen anything in a crystal ball?" he asked them unhappily.

"Nope," said Ron in an offhand voice. He kept checking his watch; Harry knew that he was counting down the time until Buckbeak's appeal started.

The line of people outside the classroom shortened very slowly. As each person climbed back down the silver ladder, the rest of the class hissed, "What did she ask? Was it okay?"

But they all refused to say.

"She says the crystal ball's told her that if I tell you, I'll have a horrible accident!" squeaked Neville as he clambered back down the ladder toward Harry and Ron, who had now reached the landing.

"That's convenient," snorted Ron. "You know, I'm starting to think Hermione was right about her" -- he jabbed his thumb toward the trapdoor overhead -- "she's a right old fraud."

"Yeah," said Harry, looking at his own watch. It-was now two o'clock. "Wish she'd hurry up..."

Parvati came back down the ladder glowing with pride.

"She says I've got all the makings of a true Seer," she informed Harry and Ron. "I saw loads of stuff... Well, good luck!"

She hurried off down the spiral staircase toward Lavender.

"Ronald Weasley," said the familiar, misty voice from over their heads. Ron grimaced at Harry and climbed the silver ladder out of sight. Harry was now the only person left to be tested. He settled himself on the floor with his back against the wall, listening to a fly buzzing in the sunny window, his mind across the grounds with Hagrid.

Finally, after about twenty minutes, Ron's large feet reappeared on the ladder.

"How'd it go?" Harry asked him, standing up.

"Rubbish," said Ron. "Couldn't see a thing, so I made some stuff up.

Don't think she was convinced, though...."

"Meet you in the common room," Harry muttered as Professor Trelawney's voice called, "Harry Potter!"

The tower room was hotter than ever before; the curtains were closed, the fire was alight, and the usual sickly scent made Harry cough as he stumbled through the clutter of chairs and table to where Professor Trelawney sat waiting for him before a large crystal ball.

"Good day, my dear," she said softly. "If you would kindly gaze into the Orb.... Take your time, now... then tell me what you see within it...."

Harry bent over the crystal ball and stared, stared as hard as he could, willing it to show him something other than swirling white fog, but nothing happened.

"Well?" Professor Trelawney prompted delicately. "What do you see?"

The heat was overpowering and his nostrils were stinging with the perfumed smoke wafting from the fire beside them. He thought of what Ron had just said, and decided to pretend.

"Er --" said Harry, "a dark shape... um..."

"What does it resemble?" whispered Professor Trelawney. "Think, now..."

Harry cast his mind around and it landed on Buckbeak.

"A hippogriff," he said firmly.

"Indeed!" whispered Professor Trelawney, scribbling keenly on the parchment perched upon her knees. "My boy, you may well be seeing the outcome of poor Hagrid's trouble with the Ministry of Magic! Look closer... Does the hippogriff appear to... have its head?"

"Yes," said Harry firmly.

"Are you sure?" Professor Trelawney urged him. "Are you quite sure, dear? You don't see it writhing on the ground, perhaps, and a shadowy figure raising an axe behind it?"

"No!" said Harry, starting to feel slightly sick.

"No blood? No weeping Hagrid?"

"No!" said Harry again, wanting more than ever to leave the room and the heat. "It looks fine, it's - - flying away..."

Professor Trelawney sighed.

"Well, dear, I think we'll leave it there.... A little disappointing... but I'm sure you did your best."

Relieved, Harry got up, picked up his bag and turned to go, but then a loud, harsh voice spoke behind him.

"IT WILL HAPPEN TONIGHT."

Harry wheeled around. Professor Trelawney had gone rigid in her

armchair; her eyes were unfocused and her mouth sagging.

"S -- sorry?" said Harry.

But Professor Trelawney didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes started to roll. Harry sat there in a panic. She looked as though she was about to have some sort of seizure. He hesitated, thinking of running to the hospital wing -- and then Professor Trelawney spoke again, in the same harsh voice, quite unlike her own:

"THE DARK LORD LIES ALONE AND FRIENDLESS, ABANDONED BY HIS FOLLOWERS. HIS SERVANT HAS BEEN CHAINED THESE TWELVE YEARS. TONIGHT, BEFORE MIDNIGHT... THE SERVANT WILL BREAK FREE AND SET OUT TO REJOIN HIS MASTER. THE DARK LORD WILL RISE AGAIN WITH HIS SERVANTS AID, GREATER AND MORE TERRIBLE THAN EVER HE WAS. TONIGHT... BEFORE MIDNIGHT... THE SERVANT... WILL SET OU... TO REJOIN... HIS MASTER....

Professor Trelawney's head fell forward onto her chest. She made a grunting sort of noise. Harry sat there, staring at her. Then, quite suddenly, Professor Trelawney's head snapped up again.

"I'm so sorry, dear boy," she said dreamily, "the heat of the day, you know... I drifted off for a moment...."

Harry sat there, staring at her.

"Is there anything wrong, my dear?"

"You -- you just told me that the -- the Dark Lord's going to rise again... that his servant's going to go back to him."

Professor Trelawney looked thoroughly startled.

"The Dark Lord? He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? My dear boy, that's hardly something to joke about.... Rise again, indeed --"

, 'But you just said it! You. said the Dark Lord --"

"I think you must have dozed off too, dear!" said Professor Trelawney. "I would certainly not presume to predict anything quite as far-fetched as that!"

Harry climbed back down the ladder and the spiral staircase, wondering... had he just heard Professor Trelawney make a real prediction? Or had that been her idea of an impressive end to the test?

Five minutes later he was dashing past the security trolls outside the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, Professor Trelawney's words still resounding in his head. People were striding past him in the opposite direction, laughing and joking, heading for the grounds and a bit of long-awaited freedom; by the time he had reached the portrait hole and entered the common room, it was almost deserted. Over in the corner, however, sat Ron and Hermione.

"Professor Trelawney," Harry panted, "just told me --"

But he stopped abruptly at the sight of their faces.

"Buckbeak lost," said Ron weakly. "Hagrid's just sent this."

Hagrid's note was dry this time, no tears had splattered it, yet his hand seemed to have shaken so much as he wrote that it was hardly legible.

Lost appeal. They're going to execute at sunset. Nothing you can do. Don't come down. I don't want you to see it.

Hagrid

"We've got to go," said Harry at once. "He can't just sit there on his own, waiting for the executioner!"

"Sunset, though," said Ron, who was staring out the window ill a glazed sort of way. "We'd never be allowed... 'specially you, Harry...."

Harry sank his head into his hands, thinking.

"If we only had the Invisibility Cloak...."

"Where is it?" said Hermione.

Harry told her about leaving it in the passageway under the one-eyed witch.

"... if Snape sees me anywhere near there again, I'm in serious trouble," he finished.

"That's true," said Hermione, getting to her feet. "If he sees you.... How do you open the witch's hump again?"

"You -- you tap it and say, 'Dissendium,'" said Harry. "But --"

Hermione didn't wait for the rest of his sentence; she strode across the room, pushed open the Fat Lady's portrait and vanished from sight.

"She hasn't gone to get it?" Ron said, staring after her.

She had. Hermione returned a quarter of an hour later with the silvery cloak folded carefully under her robes.

"Hermione, I don't know what's gotten, into you lately!" said Ron, astounded. "First you hit Malfoy, then you walk out on Professor Trelawney --"

Hermione looked rather flattered.

They went down to dinner with everybody else, but did not return to Gryffindor Tower afterward. Harry had the cloak hidden down the front of his robes; he had to keep his arms folded to hide the lump. They skulked in an empty chamber off the entrance hall, listening, until they were sure it was deserted. They heard a last pair of people hurrying across the hall and a door slamming. Hermione poked her head around the door.

"Okay," she whispered, "no one there -- cloak on --"

Walking very close together so that nobody would see them, they crossed the hall on tiptoe beneath the cloak, then walked down the stone front steps into the grounds. The sun was already sinking behind the Forbidden Forest, gilding the top branches of the trees.

They reached Hagrid's cabin and knocked. He was a minute in answering, and when he did, he looked all around for his visitor, pale-faced and trembling.

"It's us," Harry hissed. "We're wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off."

"Yeh shouldn've come!" Hagrid whispered, but he stood back, and they stepped inside. Hagrid shut the door quickly and Harry pulled off the cloak.

Hagrid was not crying, nor did he throw himself upon their necks. He looked like a man who did not know where he was or what to do. This helplessness was worse to watch than tears.

"Wan' some tea?" he said. His great hands were shaking as he reached for the kettle.

"Where's Buckbeak, Hagrid?" said Hermione hesitantly.

I -- I took him outside," said Hagrid, spilling milk all over the table as he filled up the jug. "He's tethered in me pumpkin patch. Thought he oughta see the trees an' -- an' smell fresh air -- before

Hagrid's hand trembled so violently that the milk jug slipped from his grasp and shattered all over the floor.

"I'll do it, Hagrid," said Hermione quickly, hurrying over and starting to clean up the mess.

"There's another one in the cupboard," Hagrid said, sitting down and wiping his forehead on his sleeve. Harry glanced at Ron, who looked back hopelessly.

"Isn't there anything anyone can do, Hagrid?" Harry asked fiercely, sitting down next to him. "Dumbledore --"

"He's tried," said Hagrid. "He's got no power ter overrule the Committee. He told 'em Buckbeak's all right, but they're scared.... Yeh know what Lucius Malfoy's like... threatened 'em, I expect... an' the executioner, Macnair, he's an old pal o' Malfoy's... but it'll be quick an' clean... an' I'll be beside him.... "

Hagrid swallowed. His eyes were darting all over the cabin as though looking for some shred of hope or comfort.

"Dumbledore's gonna come down while it -- while it happens. Wrote me this mornin'. Said he wants ter -- ter be with me. Great man, Dumbledore...."

Hermione, who had been rummaging in Hagrid's cupboard for another milk jug, let out a small, quickly stifled sob. She straightened up with the new jug in her hands, fighting back tears.

"We'll stay with you too, Hagrid," she began, but Hagrid shook his shaggy head.

"Yeh're ter go back up ter the castle. I told yeh, I don' wan' yeh watchin'. An' yeh shouldn't be down here anyway... If Fudge an' Dumbledore catch yeh out without permission, Harry, yeh'll be in big

trouble."

Silent tears were now streaming down Hermione's face, but she hid them from Hagrid, bustling around making tea. Then, as she picked up the milk bottle to pour some into the jug, she let out a shriek.

"Ron, I don't believe it -- it's Scabbers!"

Ron gaped at her.

"What are you talking about?"

Hermione carried the milk jug over to the table and turned it upside down. With a frantic squeak, and much scrambling to get back inside, Scabbers the rat came sliding out onto the table.

"Scabbers!" said Ron blankly. "Scabbers, what are you doing here?"

He grabbed the struggling rat and held him up to the light. Scabbers looked dreadful. He was thinner than ever, large tufts of hair had fallen out leaving wide bald patches, and he writhed in Ron's hands as though desperate to free himself

"It's okay, Scabbers!" said Ron. "No cats! There's nothing here to hurt you!"

Hagrid suddenly stood up, his eyes fixed on the window. His normally ruddy face had gone the color of parchment.

"They're comin'...."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione whipped around. A group of men was walking down the distant castle steps. In front was Albus Dumbledore, his silver beard gleaming in the dying sun. Next to him trotted Cornelius Fudge. Behind them came the feeble old Committee member and the executioner, Macnair.

"Yeh gotta go," said Hagrid. Every inch of him was trembling. "They mustn' find yeh here.... Go now..."

Ron stuffed Scabbers into his pocket and Hermione picked up the cloak. "I'll let yeh out the back way," said Hagrid.

They followed him to the door into his back garden. Harry felt strangely unreal, and even more so when he saw Buckbeak a few yards away, tethered to a tree behind Hagrid's Pumpkin patch. Buckbeak seemed to know something was happening. He turned his sharp head from side to side and pawed the ground nervously.

"It's okay, Beaky," said Hagrid softly. "It's okay..." He turned to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Go on," he said. "Get goin'."

But they didn't move.

"Hagrid, we can't --"

"We'll tell them what really happened --"

"They can't kill him --"

"Go!" said Hagrid fiercely. "It's bad enough without you lot in trouble an' all!"

They had no choice. As Hermione threw the cloak over Harry and Ron, they heard voices at the front of the cabin. Hagrid looked at the place where they had just vanished from sight.

"Go quick," he said hoarsely. "Don' listen...."

And he strode back into his cabin as someone knocked at the front door.

Slowly, in a kind of horrified trance, Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off silently around Hagrid's house. As they reached the other side, the front door closed with a sharp snap.

"Please, let's hurry," Hermione whispered. "I can't stand it, I can't bear it...."

They started up the sloping lawn toward the castle. The sun was sinking fast now; the sky had turned to a clear, purple-tinged grey, but to the west there was a ruby-red glow.

Ron stopped dead.

"Oh, please, Ron," Hermione began.

"It's Scabbers -- he won't -- stay put --"

Ron was bent over, trying to keep Scabbers in his pocket, but the rat was going berserk; squeaking madly, twisting and flailing, trying to sink his teeth into Ron's hand.

"Scabbers, it's me, you idiot, it's Ron," Ron hissed.

They heard a door open behind them and men's voices.

"Oh, Ron, please let's move, they're going to do it!" Hermione breathed.

"Okay -- Scabbers, stay put --"

They walked forward; Harry, like Hermione, was trying not to listen to the rumble of voices behind them. Ron stopped again.

"I can't hold him -- Scabbers, shut up, everyone'll hear us --"

The rat was squealing wildly, but not loudly enough to cover up the sounds drifting from Hagrid's garden. There was a jumble of indistinct male voices, a silence, and then, without warning, the unmistakable swish and thud of an axe.

Hermione swayed on the spot.

"They did it!" she whispered to Harry. "I d -- don't believe it -- they did it!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CAT, RAT, AND DOG

Harry's mind had gone blank with shock. The three of them stood

transfixed with horror under the Invisibility Cloak. The very last rays of the setting sun were casting a bloody light over the long-shaded grounds. Then, behind them, they heard a wild howling.

"Hagrid," Harry muttered. Without thinking about what he was doing, he made to turn back, but both Ron and Hermione seized his arms.

"We can't," said Ron, who was paper-white. "He'll be in worse trouble if they know we've been to see him...."

Hermione's breathing was shallow and uneven.

"How -- could -- they?" she choked. "How could they?"

"Come on," said Ron, whose teeth seemed to be chattering.

They set off back toward the castle, walking slowly to keep themselves hidden under the cloak. The light was fading fast now.

By the time they reached open ground, darkness was settling like a spell around them.

"Scabbers, keep still," Ron hissed, clamping his hand over his chest. The rat was wriggling madly. Ron came to a sudden halt, trying to force Scabbers deeper into his pocket. "What's the matter with you, You stupid rat? Stay still -- OUCH! He bit me!"

"Ron, be quiet!" Hermione whispered urgently. "Fudge'll be out here in a minute --"

"He won't -- stay -- put --"

Scabbers was plainly terrified. He was writhing with all his might, trying to break free of Ron's grip.

"What's the matter with him?"

But Harry had just seen -- stinking toward them, his body low to the ground, wide yellow eyes glinting eerily in the darkness -- Crookshanks. Whether he could see them or was following the sound of Scabbers's squeaks, Harry couldn't tell.

"Crookshanks!" Hermione moaned. "No, go away, Crookshanks! Go away!"

But the cat was getting nearer --

"Scabbers -- NO!"

Too late -- the rat had slipped between Ron's clutching fingers, hit the ground, and scampered away. In one bound, Crookshanks sprang after him, and before Harry or Hermione could stop him, Ron had thrown the Invisibility Cloak off himself and pelted away into the darkness.

"Ron!" Hermione moaned.

She and Harry looked at each other, then followed at a sprint; it ""as impossible to run full out under the cloak; they pulled it off and it streamed behind them like a banner as they hurtled after Ron; they could hear his feet thundering along ahead and his shouts at Crookshanks.

"Get away from him -- get away -- Scabbers, come here --"

There was a loud thud.

"Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat --"

Harry and Hermione almost fell over Ron; they skidded to a stop right in front of him. He was sprawled on the ground, but Scabbers was back in his pocket; he had both hands held tight over the quivering lump.

"Ron -- come on back under the cloak --" Hermione panted. "Dumbledore the Minister -- they'll be coming back out in a minute --"

But before they could cover themselves again, before they could even catch their breath, they heard the soft pounding of gigantic paws.... Something was bounding toward them, quiet as a shadow -- an enormous, pale-eyed, jet-black dog.

Harry reached for his wand, but too late -- the dog had made an enormous leap and the front paws hit him on the chest; he keeled over backward in a whirl of hair; he felt its hot breath, saw inch-long teeth -

But the force of its leap had carried it too far; it rolled off him. Dazed, feeling as though his ribs were broken, Harry tried to stand up; he could hear it growling as it skidded around for a new attack.

Ron was on his feet. As the dog sprang back toward them he pushed Harry aside; the dog's jaws fastened instead around Ron's outstretched arm. Harry lunged forward, he seized a handful of the brute's hair, but it was dragging Ron away as easily as though he were a rag doll --

Then, out of nowhere, something hit Harry so hard across the face he was knocked off his feet again. He heard Hermione shriek with pain and fall too.

Harry groped for his wand, blinking blood out of his eyes

"Lumos!" he whispered.

The wandlight showed him the trunk of a thick tree; they had chased Scabbers into the shadow of the Whomping Willow and its branches were creaking as though in a high wind, whipping backward and forward to stop them going nearer.

And there, at the base of the trunk, was the dog, dragging Ron backward into a large gap in the roots -- Ron was fighting furiously, but his head and torso were slipping out of sight --

"Ron!" Harry shouted, trying to follow, but a heavy branch whipped lethally through the air and he was forced backward again.

All they could see now was one of Ron's legs, which he had hooked around a root in an effort to stop the dog from pulling him farther underground -- but a horrible crack cut the air like a gunshot; Ron's leg had broken, and a moment later, his foot vanished from sight.

"Harry -- we've got to go for help --" Hermione gasped; she was bleeding too; the Willow had cut her across the shoulder.

"No! That thing's big enough to eat him; we haven't got time --"

"Harry -- we're never going to get through without help --"

Another branch whipped down at them, twigs clenched like knuckles.

"If that dog can get in, we can," Harry panted, darting here and there, trying to find a way through the vicious, swishing branches, but he couldn't get an inch nearer to the tree roots without being in range of the tree's blows.

"Oh, help, help," Hermione whispered frantically, dancing U._ certainly on the spot, "Please..."

Crookshanks darted forward. He slithered between the battering branches like a snake and placed his front paws upon a knot on the trunk.

Abruptly, as though the tree had been turned to marble, it stopped moving. Not a leaf twitched or shook.

"Crookshanks!" Hermione whispered uncertainly. She now grasped Harry's arm painfully hard. "How did he know --?"

"He's friends with that dog," said Harry grimly. "I've seen them together. Come on -- and keep your wand out --"

They covered the distance to the trunk in seconds, but before they had reached the gap in the roots, Crookshanks had slid into it with a flick of his bottlebrush tail. Harry went next; he crawled forward, headfirst, and slid down an earthy slope to the bottom of a very low tunnel. Crookshanks was a little way along, his eyes flashing in the light from Harry's wand. Seconds later, Hermione slithered down beside him.

"Where's Ron?" she whispered in a terrified voice.

"This way," said Harry, setting off, bent-backed, after Crookshanks.

"Where does this tunnel come out?" Hermione asked breathlessly from behind him.

"I don't know... It's marked on the Marauder's Map but Fred and George said no one's ever gotten into it.... It goes off the edge of the map, but it looked like it was heading for Hogsmeade..."

They moved as fast as they could, bent almost double; ahead of them, Crookshanks's tail bobbed in and out of view. On and on went the passage; it felt at least as long as the one to Honeydukes.... All Harry could think of was Ron and what the enormous dog might be doing to him.... He was drawing breath in sharp, painful gasps, running at a crouch....

And then the tunnel began to rise; moments later it twisted, and Crookshanks had gone. instead, Harry could see a patch of dim light through a small opening.

He and Hermione paused, gasping for breath, edging forward. Both raised their wands to see what lay beyond.

It was a room, a very disordered, dusty room. Paper was peeling from the walls; there were stains all over the floor; every piece of furniture was broken as though somebody had smashed it. The windows were all

boarded up.

Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked very frightened but nodded.

Harry pulled himself out of the hole, staring around. The room was deserted, but a door to their right stood open, leading to a shadowy hallway. Hermione suddenly grabbed Harry's arm again. Her wide eyes were traveling around the boarded windows.

"Harry," she whispered, "I think we're in the Shrieking Shack."

Harry looked around. His eyes fell on a wooden chair near them. Large chunks had been torn out of it; one of the legs had been ripped off entirely.

"Ghosts didn't do that," he said slowly.

At that moment, there was a creak overhead. Something had Moved upstairs. Both of them looked up at the ceiling. Hermione's grip on Harry's arm was so tight he was losing feeling in his fingers. He raised his eyebrows at her; she nodded again and let go.

Quietly as they could, they crept out into the hall and UP the crumbling staircase. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust except the floor, where a wide shiny stripe had been made by something being dragged upstairs.

They reached the dark landing.

"Nox," they whispered together, and the lights at the end of their wands went out. Only one door was open. As they crept toward it, they heard movement from behind it; a low moan, and then a deep, loud purring. They exchanged a last look, a last nod.

Wand held tightly before him, Harry kicked the door wide open.

On a magnificent four-poster bed with dusty hangings lay Crookshanks, purring loudly at the sight of them. On the floor beside him, clutching his leg, which stuck out at a strange angle, was Ron.

Harry and Hermione dashed across to him.

"Ron -- are you okay?"

"Where's the dog?"

"Not a dog," Ron moaned. His teeth were gritted with pain. "Harry, it's a trap --"

"What --"

"He's the dog... he's an Animagus."

Ron was staring over Harry's shoulder. Harry wheeled around. With a snap, the man in the shadows closed the door behind them.

A mass of filthy, matted hair hung to his elbows. If eyes hadn't been shining out of the deep, dark sockets, he might have been a corpse. The waxy skin was stretched so tightly over the bones of his face, it looked like a skull. His yellow teeth were bared in a grin. It was Sirius

Black.

"Expelliarmus!" he croaked, pointing Ron's wand at them.

Harry's and Hermione's wands shot out of their hands, high in the air, and Black caught them. Then he took a step closer. His eyes were fixed on Harry.

"I thought you'd come and help your friend," he said hoarsely.

His voice sounded as though he had long since lost the habit of using it. "Your father would have done the same for me. Brave of you) not to run for a teacher. I'm grateful... it will make everything much easier...."

The taunt about his father rang in Harry's ears as though Black had bellowed it. A boiling hate erupted in Harry's chest, leaving no place for fear. For the first time in his life, he wanted his wand back in his hand, not to defend himself, but to attack... to kill. Without knowing what he was doing, he started forward, but there was a sudden movement on either side of him and two pairs of hands grabbed him and held him back.... "No, Harry!" Hermione gasped in a petrified whisper; Ron, however, spoke to Black.

"If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us too!" he said fiercely, though the effort of standing upright was draining him of still more color, and he swayed slightly as he spoke.

Something flickered in Black's shadowed eyes.

"Lie down," he said quietly to Ron. "You will damage that leg even more."

"Did you hear me?" Ron said weakly, though he was clinging painfully to Harry to stay upright. "You'll have to kill all three of us!"

"There'll be only one murder here tonight," said Brack, and his grin widened.

"Why's that?" Harry spat, trying to wrench himself free of Ron, and Hermione. "Didn't care last time, did you? Didn't mind slaughtering all those Muggles to get at Pettigrew... What's the matter, gone soft in Azkaban?"

"Harry!" Hermione whimpered. "Be quiet!"

"HE KILLED MY MUM AND DAD!" Harry roared, and with a huge effort he broke free of Hermione's and Ron's restraint and lunged forward -

He had forgotten about magic -- he had forgotten that he was short and skinny and thirteen, whereas Black was a tall, full-grown man -- all Harry knew was that he wanted to hurt Black as badly as he could and that he didn't care how much he got hurt in return --

Perhaps it was the shock of Harry doing something so stupid, but Black didn't raise the wands in time -- one of Harry's hands fastened over his wasted wrist, forcing the wand tips away; the knuckles of Harry's other hand collided with the side of Black's head and they fell, backward, into the wall -

Hermione was screaming; Ron was yelling; there was a blinding flash as the wands in Black's hand sent a jet of sparks into the air that missed Harry's face by inches; Harry felt the shrunken arm under his fingers twisting madly, but he clung on, his other hand punching every part of Black it could find.

But Black's free hand had found Harry's throat

"No," he hissed, "I've waited too long --"

The fingers tightened, Harry choked, his glasses askew.

Then he saw Hermione's foot swing out of nowhere. Black let go of Harry with a grunt of pain; Ron had thrown himself on Black's wand hand and Harry heard a faint clatter --

He fought free of the tangle of bodies and saw his own wand rolling across the floor; he threw himself toward it but

"Argh!"

Crookshanks had joined the fray; both sets of front claws had sunk themselves deep into Harry's arm; Harry threw him off, but Crookshanks now darted toward Harry's wand --

"NO YOU DON'T!" roared Harry, and he aimed a kick at Crookshanks that made the cat leap aside, spitting; Harry snatched up his wand and turned -

"Get out of the way!" he shouted at Ron and Hermione.

They didn't need telling twice. Hermione, gasping for breath, her lip bleeding, scrambled aside, snatching up her and Ron's wands. Ron crawled to the four-poster and collapsed onto it, panting, his white face now tinged with green, both hands clutching his broken leg.

Black was sprawled at the bottom of the wall. His thin chest rose and fell rapidly as he watched Harry walking slowly nearer, his wand pointing straight at Black's heart.

"Going to kill me, Harry?" he whispered.

Harry stopped right above him, his wand still pointing at Black's chest, looking down at him. A livid bruise was rising around Black's left eye and his nose was bleeding.

"You killed my parents," said Harry, his voice shaking slightly, but his wand hand quite steady.

Black stared up at him out of those sunken eyes.

"I don't deny it," he said very quietly. "But if you knew the whole story."

"The whole story?" Harry repeated, a furious pounding in his ears. "You sold them to Voldemort. That's all I need to know."

"You've got to listen to me," Black said, and there was a note of urgency in his voice now. "You'll regret it if you don't.... You don't understand...."

"I understand a lot better than you think," said Harry, and his voice shook more than ever. "You never heard her, did you? My mum... trying to stop Voldemort killing me... and you did that... you did it...."

Before either of them could say another word, something ginger streaked past Harry; Crookshanks leapt onto Black's chest and settled himself there, right over Black's heart. Black blinked and looked down at the cat.

"Get off," he murmured, trying to push Crookshanks off him.

But Crookshanks sank his claws into Black's robes and wouldn't shift. He turned his ugly, squashed face to Harry and looked up at him with those great yellow eyes. To his right, Hermione gave a dry sob.

Harry stared down at Black and Crookshanks, his grip tightening on the wand. So what if he had to kill the cat too? It was in league with Black.... If it was prepared to die, trying to protect Black, that wasn't Harry's business.... If Black wanted to save it, that only proved he cared more for Crookshanks than for Harry's parents....

Harry raised the wand. Now was the moment to do it. Now was the moment to avenge his mother and father. He was going to kill Black. He had to kill Black. This was his chance....

The seconds lengthened. And still Harry stood frozen there, wand poised, Black staring up at him, Crookshanks on his chest. Ron's ragged breathing came from near the bed; Hermione was quite silent.

And then came a new sound -

Muffled footsteps were echoing up through the floor -- someone was moving downstairs.

"WE'RE UP HERE!" Hermione screamed suddenly. "WE'RE UP HERE -- SIRIUS BLACK - QUICK!"

Black made a startled movement that almost dislodged Crookshanks; Harry gripped his wand convulsively -- Do it now! said a voice in his head -- but the footsteps were thundering up the stairs and Harry still hadn't done it.

The door of the room burst open in a shower of red sparks and Harry wheeled around as Professor Lupin came hurtling into the room, his face bloodless, his wand raised and ready. His eyes flickered over Ron, lying on the floor, over Hermione, cowering next to the door, to Harry, standing there with his wand covering Black, and then to Black himself, crumpled and bleeding at Harry's feet.

"Expelliarmus!" Lupin shouted.

Harry's wand flew once more out of his hand; so did the two Hermione was holding. Lupin caught them all deftly, then moved into the room, staring at Black, who still had Crookshanks lying protectively across his chest.

Harry stood there, feeling suddenly empty. He hadn't done it. His nerve had failed him. Black was going to be handed back to the dementors.

Then Lupin spoke, in a very tense voice.

"Where is he, Sirius?"

Harry looked quickly at Lupin. He didn't understand what Lupin meant. Who was Lupin talking about? He turned to look at Black again.

Black's face was quite expressionless. For a few seconds, he didn't move at all. Then, very slowly, he raised his empty hand and pointed straight at Ron. Mystified, Harry glanced around at Ron, who looked bewildered.

"But then..." Lupin muttered, staring at Black so intently it seemed he was trying to read his mind, "... why hasn't he shown himself before now? Unless" -- Lupin's eyes suddenly widened, as though he was seeing something beyond Black, something none of the rest could see, "-- unless he was the one... unless you switched... without telling me?"

Very slowly, his sunken gaze never leaving Lupin's face, Black nodded.

"Professor," Harry interrupted loudly, "what's going on --?"

But he never finished the question, because what he saw made his voice die in his throat. Lupin was lowering his wand, gazing fixed at Black. The Professor walked to Black's side, seized his hand, pulled him to his feet so that Crookshanks fell to the floor, and embraced Black like a brother.

Harry felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach.

"DON'T BELIEVE IT!" Hermione screamed.

Lupin let go of Black and turned to her. She had raised herself off the floor and was pointing at Lupin, wild-eyed. "You -- you --"

"Hermione --"

"-- you and him!"

"Hermione, calm down --"

"I didn't tell anyone!" Hermione shrieked. "I've been covering up for you --"

"Hermione, listen to me, please'" Lupin shouted. "I can explain --"

Harry could feel himself shaking, not with fear, but with a fresh wave of fury.

"I trusted you," he shouted at Lupin, his voice wavering, out of control, "and all the time you've been his friend!"

"You're wrong," said Lupin. "I haven't been Sirius's friend, but I am now -- Let me explain...."

"NO!" Hermione screamed. "Harry, don't trust him, he's been helping Black get into the castle, he wants you dead too -- he's a werewolf!"

There was a ringing silence. Everyone's eyes were now on Lupin, who looked remarkably calm, though rather pale.

"Not at all up to your usual standard, Hermione," he said. "Only one out

of three, I'm afraid. I have not been helping Sirius get into the castle and I certainly don't want Harry dead. An odd shiver passed over his face. "But I won't deny that I am a werewolf."

Ron made a valiant effort to get up again but fell back with a whimper of pain. Lupin made toward him, looking concerned, but Ron gasped, "Get away from me, werewolf!"

Lupin stopped dead. Then, with an obvious effort, he turned to Hermione and said, "How long have you known?"

"Ages," Hermione whispered. "Since I did Professor Snape's essay..."

"He'll be delighted," said Lupin coolly. "He assigned that essay hoping someone would realize what my symptoms meant.... Did you check the lunar chart and realize that I was always ill at the full moon? Or did you realize that the boggart changed into the moon when it saw me?"

"Both," Hermione said quietly.

Lupin forced a laugh.

"You're the cleverest witch of your age I've ever met, Hermione."

"I'm not," Hermione whispered. "If I'd been a bit cleverer, I'd have told everyone what you are!"

"But they already know," said Lupin. "At least, the staff do."

"Dumbledore hired you when he knew you were a werewolf. Ron gasped. "Is he mad?"

"Some of the staff thought so," said Lupin. "He had to work very hard to convince certain teachers that I'm trustworthy --"

"AND HE WAS WRONG!" Harry yelled. "YOUVE BEEN HELPING HIM ALL THE TIME!" He was pointing at Black, who suddenly crossed to the four-poster bed and sank onto it, his face hidden in one shaking hand. Crookshanks leapt up beside him and stepped onto his lap, purring. Ron edged away from both of them, dragging his leg.

I have not been helping Sirius," said Lupin. "If you'll give me a chance, I'll explain. Look --"

He separated Harry's, Ron's and Hermione's wands and threw each back to its owner; Harry caught his, stunned.

There, said Lupin, sticking his own wand back into his belt "You're armed, we're not. Now will you listen?"

Harry didn't know what to think. Was it a trick?

"If you haven't been helping him," he said, with a furious glance at Black, "how did you know he was here?"

"The map," said Lupin. "The Marauder's Map. I was in my office examining it --"

"You know how to work it?" Harry said suspiciously.

"Of course I know how to work it," said Lupin, waving his hand impatiently. "I helped write it. I'm Moony -- that was my friends' nickname for me at school."

"You wrote --?"

"The important thing is, I was watching it carefully this evening, because I had an idea that you, Ron, and Hermione might try and sneak out of the castle to visit Hagrid before his hippogriff was executed. And I was right, wasn't I"

He had started to pace up and down, looking at them. Little patches of dust rose at his feet.

"You might have been wearing your father's old cloak, Harry--"

"How d'you know about the cloak?"

"The number of times I saw James disappearing under it....," said Lupin, waving an impatient hand again. "The point is, even if you're wearing an Invisibility Cloak, you still show up on the Marauder's Map. I watched you cross the grounds and enter Hagrid's hut. Twenty minutes later, you left Hagrid, and set off back toward the castle. But you were now accompanied by somebody else."

"What?" said Harry. "No, we weren't!"

I couldn't believe my eyes," said Lupin, still pacing, and ignoring Harry's interruption. "I thought the map must be malfunctioning. How could he be with you?" "No one was with us!" said Harry.

"And then I saw another dot, moving fast toward you, labeled Sirius Black.... I saw him collide with you; I watched as he pulled two of you into the Whomping Willow --"

"One of us!" Ron said angrily.

"No, Ron," said Lupin. "Two of you."

He had stopped his pacing, his eyes moving over Ron.

"Do you think I could have a look at the rat?" he said evenly.

"What?" said Ron. "What's Scabbers got to do with it?"

"Everything," said Lupin. "Could I see him, please?"

Ron hesitated, then put a hand inside his robes. Scabbers emerged, thrashing desperately; Ron had to seize his long bald tail to stop him escaping. Crookshanks stood up on Black's leg and made a soft hissing noise.

Lupin moved closer to Ron. He seemed to be holding his breath as he gazed intently at Scabbers.

"What?" Ron said again, holding Scabbers close to him, looking scared. "What's my rat got to do with anything?"

"That's not a rat," croaked Sirius Black suddenly.

"What d'you mean -- of course he's a rat --"

"No, he's not," said Lupin quietly. "He's a wizard."

"An Animagus," said Black, "by the name of Peter Pettigrew."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MOONY, WORMTAIL, PADDFOOT, AND PRONGS

It took a few seconds for the absurdity of this statement to sink in. Then Ron voiced what Harry was thinking.

"You're both mental."

"Ridiculous!" said Hermione faintly.

"Peter Pettigrew's dead!" said Harry. "He killed him twelve years ago!" He pointed at Black, whose face twitched convulsively.

"I meant to," he growled, his yellow teeth bared, "but little Peter got the better of me... not this time, though!"

And Crookshanks was thrown to the floor as Black lunged at Scabbers; Ron yelled with pain as Black's weight fell on his broken leg.

."Sirius, NO!" Lupin yelled, launching himself forwards and dragging Black away from Ron again, "WAIT! You can't do it just like that -- they need to understand -- we've got to explain --"

"We can explain afterwards!" snarled Black, trying to throw Lupin off. One hand was still clawing the air as it tried to reach Scabbers, who was squealing like a piglet, scratching Ron's face and neck as he tried to escape.

"They've -- got -- a -- right -- to -- know -- -everything!" Lupin panted, still trying to restrain Black. "Ron's kept him as a pet! There are parts of it even I don't understand, and Harry -- you owe Harry the truth, Sirius!"

Black stopped struggling, though his hollowed eyes were still fixed on Scabbers, who was clamped tightly under Ron's bitten, scratched, ad bleeding hands.

"All right, then," Black said, without taking his eyes off the rat.

"Tell them whatever you like. But make it quick, Remus. I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for..."

"You're nutters, both of you," said Ron shakily, looking round at Harry and Hermione for support. "I've had enough of this. I'm off."

He tried to heave himself up on his good leg, but Lupin raised his wand again, pointing it at Scabbers.

"You're going to hear me out, Ron," he said quietly. "Just keep a tight hold on Peter while you listen."

"HE'S NOT PETER, HE'S SCABBERS!" Ron yelled, trying to force the rat back into his front pocket, but Scabbers was fighting too hard; Ron swayed and

overbalanced, and Harry caught him and pushed him back down to the bed. Then, ignoring Black, Harry turned to Lupin.

"There were witnesses who saw Pettigrew die," he said. "A whole street full of them..."

"They didn't see what they thought they saw!" said Black savagely, still watching Scabbers struggling in Ron's hands.

"Everyone thought Sirius killed Peter," said Lupin, nodding. "I believed it myself -- until I saw the map tonight. Because the Marauder's map never lies... Peter's alive. Ron's holding him, Harry."

Harry looked down at Ron, and as their eyes met, they agreed, silently: Black and Lupin were both out of their minds. Their story made no sense whatsoever. How could Scabbers be Peter Pettigrew? Azkaban must have unhinged Black after all -- but why was Lupin playing along with him?

Then Hermione spoke, in a trembling, would-be calm sort of voice, as though trying to will Professor Lupin to talk sensibly.

"But Professor Lupin... Scabbers can't be Pettigrew... it just can't be true, you know it can't..."

"Why can't it be true?" Lupin said calmly, as though they were in class, and Hermione had simply spotted a problem in an experiment with grindylows.

"Because... because people would know if Peter Pettigrew had been an Animagus. We did Animagi in class with Professor McGonagall. And I looked them up when I did my homework -- the Ministry of Magic keeps tabs on witches and wizards who can become animals; there's a register showing what animal they become, and their markings and things... and I went and looked Professor McGonagall up on the register, and there have been only seven Animagi this century, and Pettigrew's name wasn't on the list."

Harry had barely had time to marvel inwardly at the effort Hermione put into her homework, when Lupin started to laugh.

"Light again, Hermione!" he said. "But the Ministry never knew that here used to be three unregistered Animagi running around Hogwarts."

"I you're going to tell them the story, get a move on, Remus," said Black, who was still watching Scabbers's every desperate move. "I've waited twelve years, I'm not going to wait much longer."

"All right... but you'll need to help me, Sirius," said Lupin, I only know how it began..."

Lupin broke off. There had been a loud creak behind him. The bedroom door had opened of its own accord. All five of them stared at it. Then Lupin strode toward it and looked out into the landing.

"No one there..."

"This place is haunted!" said Ron.

"It's not," said Lupin, still looking at the door in a puzzled way. "The Shrieking Shack was never haunted.... The screams and howls the

villagers used to hear were made by me."

He pushed his graying hair out of his eyes, thought for a moment then said, "That's where all of this starts -- with my becoming a werewolf, None of this could have happened if I hadn't been bitter... and if I hadn't been so foolhardy..."

He looked sober and tired. Ron started to interrupt, but Hermione, said, "Shh!" She was watching Lupin very intently.

"I as a very small boy when I received the bite. My parents tried everything, but in those days there was no cure. The potion that Professor Snape has been making for me is a very recent discovery. It makes me safe, you see. As long as I take it in the week, preceding the full moon, I keep my mind when I transform.... I'm able to curl up in my office, a harmless wolf, and wait for the moon to wane again.

"Before the Wolfsbane Potion was discovered, however, I became a fully fledged monster once a month. It seemed impossible that I would be able to come to Hogwarts. Other parents weren't likely to want their children exposed to me.

"But then Dumbledore became Headmaster, and he was sympathetic. He said that as long as we took certain precautions, there was no reason I shouldn't come to school...." Lupin sighed, and looked directly at Harry. "I told you, months ago, that the Whomping Willow was planted the year I came to Hogwarts. The truth is that it was planted because I came to Hogwarts. This house" -- Lupin looked miserably around the room, -- "the tunnel that leads to it -- they were built for my use. Once a month, I was smuggled out of the castle, into this place, to transform. The tree was placed at the tunnel mouth to stop anyone coming across me while I was dangerous."

Harry couldn't see where this story was going, but he was listening raptly all the same. The only sound apart from Lupin's voice was Scabbers's frightened squeaking.

"My transformations in those days were -- were terrible. It is very painful to turn into a werewolf. I was separated from humans to bite, so I bit and scratched myself instead. The villagers heard the noise and the screaming and thought they were hearing particularly violent spirits. Dumbledore encouraged the rumor.... Even now, when the house has been silent for years, the villagers don't dare approach it...."

"But apart from my transformations, I was happier than I had ever been in my life. For the first time ever, I had friends, three great friends. Sirius Black... Peter Pettigrew... and, of course, your father, Harry -- James Potter."

"Now, my three friends could hardly fail to notice that I disappeared once a month. I made up all sorts of stories. I told them my mother was ill, and that I had to go home to see her... I was terrified they would desert me the moment they found out what I was. But of course, they, like you, Hermione, worked out the truth...."

"And they didn't desert me at all. Instead, they did something for me that would make my transformations not only bearable, but the best times of my life. They became Animagi."

"My dad too?" said Harry, astounded.

"Yes, indeed," said Lupin. "It took them the best part of three years to work out how to do it. Your father and Sirius here were the cleverest students in the school, and lucky they were, because the Animagus transformation can go horribly wrong -- one reason the Ministry keeps a close watch on those attempting to do it. Peter needed all the help he could get from James and Sirius. Finally, in our fifth year, they managed it. They could each turn into a different animal at will."

"But how did that help you?" said Hermione, sounding puzzled.

"They couldn't keep me company as humans, so they kept me company as animals," said Lupin. "A werewolf is only a danger to people. They sneaked out of the castle every month under James's Invisibility Cloak. They transformed... Peter, as the smallest, could slip beneath the Willow's attacking branches and touch the knot that freezes it. They would then slip down the tunnel and join me. Under their influence, I became less dangerous. My body was still wolfish, but my mind seemed to become less so while I was with them."

"Hurry up, Remus," snarled Black, who was still watching Scabbers with a horrible sort of hunger on his face.

"I'm getting there, Sirius, I'm getting there... well, highly exciting possibilities were open to us now that we could all transform. Soon we were leaving the Shrieking Shack and roaming the school grounds and the village by night. Sirius and James transformed into such large animals, they were able to keep a werewolf in check. I doubt whether any Hogwarts students ever found out more about the Hogwarts grounds and Hogsmeade than we did.... And that's how we came to write the Marauder's Map, and sign it with our nicknames. Sirius is Padfoot. Peter is Wormtail. James was Prongs."

"What sort of animal --?" Harry began, but Hermione cut him off.

"That was still really dangerous! Running around in the dark with a werewolf! What if you'd given the others the slip, and bitten somebody?"

"A thought that still haunts me," said Lupin heavily. "And there were near misses, many of them. We laughed about them afterwards. We were young, thoughtless -- carried away with our own cleverness."

I sometimes felt guilty about betraying Dumbledore's trust, of course... he had admitted me to Hogwarts when no other headmaster would have done so, and he had no idea I was breaking the rules he had set down for my own and others' safety. He never knew I had led three fellow students into becoming Animagi illegally. But I always managed to forget my guilty feelings every time we sat down to plan our next month's adventure. And I haven't changed..."

Lupin's face had hardened, and there was self-disgust in his voice. "All this year, I have been battling with myself, wondering whether I should tell Dumbledore that Sirius was an Animagus. But I didn't do it. Why? Because I was too cowardly. It would have meant admitting that I'd betrayed his trust while I was at school, admitting that I'd led others along with me... and Dumbledore's trust has meant everything to me. He let me into Hogwarts as a boy, and he gave me a job when I have been shunned all my adult life, unable to find paid work because of what I am. And so I convinced myself that Sirius was getting into the school using dark arts he learned from Voldemort, that being an Animagus had

nothing to do with it... so, in a way, Snape's been right about me all along."

"Snape?" said Black harshly, taking his eyes off Scabbers; for the first time in minutes and looking up at Lupin. "What's Snape got to do with it?"

"He's here, Sirius," said Lupin heavily. "He's teaching here as well." He looked up at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"Professor Snape was at school with us. He fought very hard against my appointment to the Defense Against the Dark Arts job. He has been telling Dumbledore A year that I am not to be trusted. He has his reasons... you see, Sirius here played a trick on him which nearly killed him, a trick which involved me --"

Black made a derisive noise.

"It served him right," he sneered. "Sneaking around, trying to find out what we were up to... hoping he could get us expelled...."

"Severus was very interested in where I went every month." Lupin told Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "We were in the same year, you know, and we -- er -- didn't like each other very much. He especially disliked James. Jealous, I think, of James's talent on the Quidditch field... anyway Snape had seen me crossing the grounds with Madam Pomfrey one evening as she led me toward the Whomping Willow to transform. Sirius thought it would be -- er -- amusing, to tell Snape all he had to do was prod the knot on the tree trunk with a long stick, and he'd be able to get in after me. Well, of course, Snape tried it -- if he'd got as far as this house, he'd have met a fully grown werewolf -- but your father, who'd heard what Sirius had done, went after Snape and pulled him back, at great risk to his life... Snape glimpsed me, though, at the end of the tunnel. He was forbidden by Dumbledore to tell anybody, but from that time on he knew what I was...."

"So that's why Snape doesn't like you," said Harry slowly, "because he thought you were in on the joke?"

"That's right," sneered a cold voice from the wall behind Lupin.

Severus Snape was pulling off the Invisibility Cloak, his wand pointing, directly at Lupin.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SERVANT OF LORD VOLDEMORT

Hermione screamed. Black leapt to his feet. Harry felt as though he'd received a huge electric shock.

"I found this at the base of the Whomping Willow," said Snape, throwing the cloak aside, careful to keep this wand pointing directly at Lupin's chest. "Very useful, Potter, I thank you...."

Snape was slightly breathless, but his face was full of suppressed triumph. "You're wondering, perhaps, how I knew you were here?" he said, his eyes glittering. "I've just been to your office, Lupin. You forgot to take your potion tonight, so I took a gobletful along. And very lucky I did... lucky for me, I mean. Lying on your desk was a certain map. One

glance at it told me all I needed to know. I saw you running along this passageway and out of sight."

"Severus --" Lupin began, but Snape overrode him.

"I've told the headmaster again and again that you're helping your old friend Black into the castle, Lupin, and here's the proof. Not even I dreamed you would have the nerve to use this old place as your hideout --"

"Severus, you're making a mistake," said Lupin urgently. "You haven't heard everything -- I can explain -- Sirius is not here to kill Harry --"

"Two more for Azkaban tonight," said Snape, his eyes now gleaming fanatically. "I shall be interested to see how Dumbledore takes this.... He was quite convinced you were harmless, you know, Lupin... a tame werewolf --"

"You fool," said Lupin softly. "Is a schoolboy grudge worth putting an innocent man back inside Azkaban?"

BANG! Thin, snakelike cords burst from the end of Snape's wand and twisted themselves around Lupin's mouth, wrists, and ankles; he overbalanced and fell to the floor, unable to move. With a roar of rage, Black started toward Snape, but Snape pointed his wand straight between Black's eyes.

"Give me a reason," he whispered. "Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will."

Black stopped dead. It would have been impossible to say which face showed more hatred.

Harry stood there, paralyzed, not knowing what to do or whom to believe. He glanced around at Ron and Hermione. Ron looked just as confused as he did, still fighting to keep hold on the struggling Scabbers. Hermione, however, took an uncertain step toward Snape and said, in a very breathless voice, "Professor Snape -- it it wouldn't hurt to hear what they've got to say, w -- would it?"

"Miss Granger, you are already facing suspension from this school," Snape spat. "You, Potter, and Weasley are out-of-bounds, in the company of a convicted murderer and a werewolf. For once in your life, hold your tongue."

"But if -- if there was a mistake --"

"KEEP QUIET, YOU STUPID GIRL!" Snape shouted, looking suddenly quite deranged. "DON'T TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND!" A few sparks shot out of the end of his wand, which was still pointed at Black's face. Hermione fell silent.

"Vengeance is very sweet," Snape breathed at Black. "How I hoped I would be the one to catch you...."

"The joke's on you again, Severus," Black snarled. "As long as this boy brings his rat up to the castle" -- he jerked his head at Ron -- "I'll come quietly...."

"Up to the castle?" said Snape silkily. "I don't think we need to go that far. All I have to do is call the dementors once we get out of the Willow. They'll be very pleased to see you, Black... pleased enough to give you a little kiss, I daresay... I --"

What little color there was in Blacks face left it.

"You -you've got to hear me out," he croaked. "The rat -- look at the rat --"

But there was a mad glint in Snape's eyes that Harry had never seen before. He seemed beyond reason.

"Come on, all of you," he said. He clicked his fingers, and the ends of the cords that bound Lupin flew to his hands. "I'll drag the werewolf. Perhaps the dementors will have a kiss for him too --"

Before he knew what he was doing, Harry had crossed the room in three strides and blocked the door.

"Get out of the way, Potter, you're in enough trouble already," snarled Snape. "If I hadn't been here to save your skin --"

"Professor Lupin could have killed me about a hundred times this year," Harry said. "I've been alone with him loads of times, having defense lessons against the dementors. If he was helping Black, why didn't he just finish me off then?"

"Don't ask me to fathom the way a werewolf's mind works," hissed Snape. "Get out of the way, Potter."

"YOU'RE PATHETIC!" Harry yelled. "JUST BECAUSE THEY MADE A FOOL OF YOU AT SCHOOL YOU WON'T EVEN LISTEN --"

"SILENCE! I WILL NOT BE SPOKEN TO LIKE THAT!" Snape shrieked, looking madder than ever. "Like father, like son, Potter! I have just saved your neck; you should be thanking me on bended knee! You would have been well served if he'd killed you! You'd have died like your father, too arrogant to believe you might be mistaken in Black -- now get out of the way, or I will make you. GET OUT OF THE WAY, POTTER!"

Harry made up his mind in a split second. Before Snape could take even one step toward him, he had raised his wand.

"Expelliarmus!" he yelled -- except that his wasn't the only voice that shouted. There was a blast that made the door rattle on its hinges; Snape was lifted off his feet and slammed into the wall, then slid down it to the floor, a trickle of blood oozing from under his hair. He had been knocked out.

Harry looked around. Both Ron and Hermione had tried to disarm Snape at exactly the same moment. Snape's wand soared in a high arc and landed on the bed next to Crookshanks.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Black, looking at Harry.

"You should have left him to me...."

Harry avoided Black's eyes. He wasn't sure, even now, that he'd done the right thing.

"We attacked a teacher... We attacked a teacher..." Hermione whimpered, staring at the lifeless Snape with frightened eyes. "Oh, we're going to be in so much trouble --"

Lupin was struggling against his bonds. Black bent down quickly and untied him. Lupin straightened up, rubbing his arms where the ropes had cut into them.

"Thank you, Harry," he said.

"I'm still not saying I believe you," he told Lupin.

"Then it's time we offered you some proof," said Lupin. "You, boy -- give me Peter, please. Now."

Ron clutched Scabbers closer to his chest.

"Come off it," he said weakly. "Are you trying to say he broke out of Azkaban just to get his hands on Scabbers? I mean..." He looked up at Harry and Hermione for support, "Okay, say Pettigrew could turn into a rat -- there are millions of rats -- how's he supposed to know which one he's after if he was locked up in Azkaban?"

"You know, Sirius, that's a fair question," said Lupin, turning to Black and frowning slightly. "How did you find out where he was?"

Black put one of his clawlike hands inside his robes and took out a crumpled piece of paper, which he smoothed flat and held out to show the others.

It was the photograph of Ron and his family that had appeared in the Daily Prophet the previous summer, and there, on Ron's shoulder, was Scabbers.

"How did you get this?" Lupin asked Black, thunderstruck.

"Fudge," said Black. "When he came to inspect Azkaban last year, he gave me his paper. And there was Peter, on the front page on this boy's shoulder... I knew him at once... how many times had I seen him transform? And the caption said the boy would be going back to Hogwarts... to where Harry was..."

"My God," said Lupin softly, staring from Scabbers to the picture in the paper and back again. "His front paw..."

"What about it?" said Ron defiantly.

"He's got a toe missing," said Black.

"Of course," Lupin breathed. "So simple... so brilliant... he cut it off himself?"

"Just before he transformed," said Black. "When I cornered him, he yelled for the whole street to hear that I'd betrayed Lily and James. Then, before I could curse him, he blew apart the street with the wand behind his back, killed everyone within twenty feet of himself -- and sped down into the sewer with the other rats...."

"Didn't you ever hear, Ron?" said Lupin. "The biggest bit of Peter they

found was his finger."

"Look, Scabbers probably had a fight with another rat or something! He's been in my family for ages, right --"

"Twelve years, in fact," said Lupin. "Didn't you ever wonder why he was living so long?"

"We -- we've been taking good care of him!" said Ron.

"Not looking too good at the moment, though, is he?" said Lupin. "I'd guess he's been losing weight ever since he heard Sirius was on the loose again...."

"He's been scared of that mad cat!" said Ron, nodding toward Crookshanks, who was still purring on the bed.

But that wasn't right, Harry thought suddenly... Scabbers had been looking ill before he met Crookshanks... ever since Ron's return from Egypt... since the time when Black had escaped....

"This cat isn't mad," said Black hoarsely. He reached out a bony hand and stroked Crookshanks's fluffy head. "He's the most intelligent of his kind I've ever met. He recognized Peter for what he was right away. And when he met me, he knew I was no dog. It was a while before he trusted me.... Finally, I managed to communicate to him what I was after, and he's been helping me. ... "What do you mean?" breathed Hermione.

"He tried to bring Peter to me, but couldn't... so he stole the passwords into Gryffindor Tower for me.... As I understand it, he took them from a boy's bedside table...."

Harry's brain seemed to be sagging under the weight of what he was hearing. It was absurd... and yet...

"But Peter got wind of what was going on and ran for it." croaked Black. "This cat -- Crookshanks, did you call him? -- told me Peter had left blood on the sheets.... I supposed he bit himself... Well, faking his own death had worked once."

These words jolted Harry to his senses.

"And why did he fake his death?" he said furiously. "Because he knew you were about to kill him like you killed my parents!"

"No," said Lupin, "Harry--"

"And now you've come to finish him off!"

"Yes, I have," said Black, with an evil look at Scabbers.

"Then I should've let Snape take you!" Harry shouted.

"Harry," said Lupin hurriedly, "don't you see? All this time we've thought Sirius betrayed your parents, and Peter tracked him down -- but it was the other way around, don't you see? Peter betrayed your mother and father -- Sirius tracked Peter down --"

"THAT'S NOT TRUE!" Harry yelled. "HE WAS THEIR SECRET-KEEPER! HE SAID SO BEFORE YOU TURNED UP. HE SAID HE KILLED THEM!"

He was pointing at Black, who shook his head slowly; the sunken eyes were suddenly over bright.

"Harry... I as good as killed them," he croaked. "I persuaded Lily and James to change to Peter at the last moment, persuaded them to use him as Secret-Keeper instead of me.... I'm to blame, I know it.... The night they died, I'd arranged to check on Peter, make sure he was still safe, but when I arrived at his hiding place, he'd gone. Yet there was no sign of a struggle. It didn't feel right. I was scared. I set out for your parents' house straight away. And when I saw their house, destroyed, and their bodies... I realized what Peter must've done... what I'd done...."

His voice broke. He turned away.

"Enough of this," said Lupin, and there was a steely note in his voice Harry had never heard before. "There's one certain way to prove what really happened. Ron, give me that rat."

"What are you going to do with him if I give him to you?" Ron asked Lupin tensely.

"Force him to show himself," said Lupin. "If he really is a rat, it won't hurt him."

Ron hesitated. Then at long last, he held out Scabbers and Lupin took him. Scabbers began to squeak without stopping, twisting and turning, his tiny black eyes bulging in his head. "Ready, Sirius?" said Lupin.

Black had already retrieved Snape's wand from the bed. He approached Lupin and the struggling rat, and his wet eyes suddenly seemed to be burning in his face.

"Together?" he said quietly.

"I think so,,, said Lupin, holding Scabbers tightly in one hand and his wand in the other. "On the count of three. One -- two -- THREE!"

A flash of blue-white light erupted from both wands; for a moment, Scabbers was frozen in midair, his small gray form twisting madly -- Ron yelled -- the rat fell and hit the floor. There was another blinding flash of light and then --

It was like watching a speeded-up film of a growing tree. A head was shooting upward from the ground; limbs were sprouting; a moment later, a man was standing where Scabbers had been, cringing and wringing his hands. Crookshanks was spitting and snarling on the bed; the hair on his back was standing up.

He was a very short man, hardly taller than Harry and Hermione. His thin, colorless hair was unkempt and there was a large bald patch on top. He had the shrunken appearance of a plump man who has lost a lot of weight in a short time. His skin looked grubby, almost like Scabbers's fur, and something of the rat lingered around his pointed nose and his very small, watery eyes. He looked around at them all, his breathing fast and shallow. Harry saw his eyes dart to the door and back again.

"Well, hello, Peter," said Lupin pleasantly, as though rats frequently erupted into old school friends around him. "Long time, no see.

"S -- Sirius... R -- Remus..." Even Pettigrew's voice was squeaky. Again, his eyes darted toward the door. "My friends... my old friends..."

Black's wand arm rose, but Lupin seized him around the wrist, gave him a warning look, then turned again to Pettigrew, his voice light and casual.

"We've been having a little chat, Peter, about what happened the night Lily and James died. You might have missed the finer points while you were squeaking around down there on the bed --"

"Remus," gasped Pettigrew, and Harry could see beads of sweat breaking out over his pasty face, "you don't believe him, do you...? He tried to kill me, Remus...."

"So we've heard," said Lupin, more coldly. "I'd like to clear up one or two little matters with you, Peter, if you'll be so --"

"He's come to try and kill me again!" Pettigrew squeaked suddenly, pointing at Black, and Harry saw that he used his middle finger, because his index was missing. "He killed Lily and James and now he's going to kill me too.... You've got to help me, Remus...."

Black's face looked more skull-like than ever as he stared at Pettigrew with his fathomless eyes.

"No one's going to try and kill you until we've sorted a few things out," said Lupin.

"Sorted things out?" squealed Pettigrew, looking wildly about him once more, eyes taking in the boarded windows and, again, the only door. "I knew he'd come after me! I knew he'd be back for me! I've been waiting for this for twelve years!"

"You knew Sirius was going to break out of Azkaban?" said Lupin, his brow furrowed. "When nobody has ever done it before?"

"He's got dark powers the rest of us can only dream of!" Pettigrew shouted shrilly. "How else did he get out of there? I suppose He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named taught him a few tricks!"

Black started to laugh, a horrible, mirthless laugh that filled the whole room.

"Voldemort, teach me tricks?" he said.

Pettigrew flinched as though Black had brandished a whip at him.

"What, scared to hear your old master's name?" said Black. I don't blame you, Peter. His lot aren't very happy with you, are they?"

"Don't know what you mean, Sirius --" muttered Pettigrew, his breathing faster than ever. His whole face was shining with sweat now.

"You haven't been hiding from me for twelve years," said Black. "You've been hiding from Voldemort's old supporters. I heard things in Azkaban, Peter... They all think you're dead, or you'd have to answer to them.... I've heard them screaming all sorts of things in their sleep. Sounds like they think the double-crosser double-crossed them. Voldemort went

to the Potters' on your information... and Voldemort met his downfall there. And not all Voldemort's supporters ended up in Azkaban, did they? There are still plenty out here, biding their time, pretending they've seen the error of their ways.

If they ever got wind that you were still alive, Peter --"

"Don't know... what you're talking about....," said Pettigrew again, more shrilly than ever. He wiped his face on his sleeve and looked up at Lupin. "You don't believe this -- this madness, Remus --"

"I must admit, Peter, I have difficulty in understanding why an innocent man would want to spend twelve years as a rat," said Lupin evenly.

"Innocent, but scared!" squealed Pettigrew. "If Voldemort's supporters were after me, it was because I put one of their best men in Azkaban -- the spy, Sirius Black!"

Black's face contorted.

"How dare you," he growled, sounding suddenly like the bearsized dog he had been. I, a spy for Voldemort? When did I ever sneak around people who were stronger and more powerful than myself? But you, Peter -- I'll never understand why I didn't see you were the spy from the start. You always liked big friends who'd look after you, didn't you? It used to be us... me and Remus... and James....

Pettigrew wiped his face again; he was almost panting for breath.

"Me, a spy... must be out of your mind... never... don't know how you can say such a --"

"Lily and James only made you Secret-Keeper because I suggested it," Black hissed, so venomously that Pettigrew took a step backward. "I thought it was the perfect plan... a bluff... Voldemort would be sure to come after me, would never dream they'd use a weak, talentless thing like you.... It must have been the finest moment of your miserable life, telling Voldemort you could hand him the Potters."

Pettigrew was muttering distractedly; Harry caught words like "far-fetched" and "lunacy," but he couldn't help paying more attention to the ashen color of Pettigrew's face and the way his eyes continued to dart toward the windows and door.

"Professor Lupin?" said Hermione timidly. "Can -- can I say something?"

"Certainly, Hermione," said Lupin courteously.

"Well -- Scabbers -- I mean, this -- this man -- he's been sleeping in Harry's dormitory for three years. If he's working for You-Know-Who, how come he never tried to hurt Harry before now?"

"There!" said Pettigrew shrilly, pointing at Ron with his maimed hand. "Thank you! You see, Remus? I have never hurt a hair of Harry's head! Why should I?"

"I'll tell you why," said Black. "Because you never did anything for anyone unless you could see what was in it for you. Voldemort's been in hiding for fifteen years, they say he's half dead. You weren't about to commit murder right under Albus Dumbledore's nose, for a wreck of a

wizard who'd lost all of his power, were you? You'd want to be quite sure he was the biggest bully in the playground before you went back to him, wouldn't you? Why else did you find a wizard family to take you in? Keeping an ear out for news, weren't YOU, Peter? Just in case your old protector regained strength, and it was safe to rejoin him...."

Pettigrew opened his mouth and closed it several times. He seemed to have lost the ability to talk.

"Er -- Mr. Black -- Sirius?" said Hermione.

Black jumped at being addressed like this and stared at Hermione as though he had never seen anything quite like her.

"If you don't mind me asking, how -- how did you get out of Azkaban, if you didn't use Dark Magic?"

"Thank you!" gasped Pettigrew, nodding frantically at her. "Exactly! Precisely what I --"

But Lupin silenced him with a look. Black was frowning slightly at Hermione, but not as though he were annoyed with her. He seemed to be pondering his answer.

"I don't know how I did it," he said slowly. "I think the only reason I never lost my mind is that I knew I was innocent. That wasn't a happy thought, so the dementors couldn't suck it out of me... but it kept me sane and knowing who I am... helped me keep my powers... so when it all became ... too much... I could transform in my cell... become a dog. Dementors can't see, you know...." He swallowed. "They feel their way toward people by feeding off their emotions.... They could tell that my feelings were less -- less human, less complex when I was a dog... but they thought, of course, that I was losing my mind like everyone else in there, so it didn't trouble them. But I was weak, very weak, and I had no hope of driving them away from me without a wand...."

"But then I saw Peter in that picture... I realized he was at Hogwarts with Harry... perfectly positioned to act, if one hint reached his ears that the Dark Side was gathering strength again...."

Pettigrew was shaking his head, mouthing noiselessly, but staring all the while at Black as though hypnotized.

"... ready to strike at the moment he could be sure of allies... and to deliver the last Potter to them. if he gave them Harry, who'd dare say he'd betrayed Lord Voldemort? He'd be welcomed back with honors....

"So you see, I had to do something. I was the only one who knew Peter was still alive...."

Harry remembered what Mr. Weasley had told Mrs. Weasley. "The guards say he's been talking in his sleep... always the same words... 'He's at Hogwarts.'"

"It was as if someone had lit a fire In my head, and the dementors couldn't destroy it.... It wasn't a happy feeling... it was an obsession... but it gave me strength, it cleared my mind. So, one night when they opened my door to bring food, I slipped past them as a dog.... It's so much harder for them to sense animal emotions that they were confused.... I was thin, very thin... thin enough to slip through the

bars.... I swam as a dog back to the mainland.... I journeyed north and slipped into the Hogwarts grounds as a dog. I've been living in the forest ever since, except when I came to watch the Quidditch, of course. You fly as well as your father did, Harry...."

He looked at Harry, who did not look away.

"Believe me," croaked Black. "Believe me, Harry. I never betrayed James and Lily. I would have died before I betrayed them."

And at long last, Harry believed him. Throat too tight to speak, he nodded.

"No!"

Pettigrew had fallen to his knees as though Harry's nod had been his own death sentence. He shuffled forward on his knees, groveling, his hands clasped in front of him as though praying.

"Sirius -- it's me... it's Peter... your friend... you wouldn't --"

Black kicked out and Pettigrew recoiled.

"There's enough filth on my robes without you touching them," said Black.

"Remus!" Pettigrew squeaked, turning to Lupin instead, writhing imploringly in front of him. "You don't believe this wouldn't Sirius have told you they'd changed the plan?"

"Not if he thought I was the spy, Peter," said Lupin. "I assume that's why you didn't tell me, Sirius?" he said casually over Pettigrews head.

"Forgive me, Remus," said Black.

"Not at all, Padfoot, old friend," said Lupin, who was now rolling up his sleeves. "And will you, in turn, forgive me for believing you were the spy?"

"Of course," said Black, and the ghost of a grin flitted across his gaunt face. He, too, began rolling up his sleeves. "Shall we kill him together?"

"Yes, I think so," said Lupin grimly.

"You wouldn't... you won't....," gasped Pettigrew. And he scrambled around to Ron.

"Ron... haven't I been a good friend... a good pet? You won't let them kill me, Ron, will you... you're on my side, aren't you.

But Ron was staring at Pettigrew with the utmost revulsion.

"I let you sleep in my bed!" he said.

"Kind boy... kind master..." Pettigrew crawled toward Ron "You won't let them do it.... I was your rat.... I was a good pet...."

"If you made a better rat than a human, it's not much to boast about, Peter," said Black harshly. Ron, going still paler with pain, wrenched

his broken leg out of Pettigrew's reach. Pettigrew turned on his knees, staggered forward, and seized the hem of Hermione's robes.

"Sweet girl... clever girl... you -- you won't let them.... Help me...."

Hermione pulled her robes out of Pettigrew's clutching hands and backed away against the wall, looking horrified.

Pettigrew knelt, trembling uncontrollably, and-turned his head slowly toward Harry.

"Harry... Harry... you look just like your father... just like him...."

"HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO HARRY?" roared Black. "HOW DARE YOU FACE HIM? HOW DARE YOU TALK ABOUT JAMES IN FRONT OF HIM?"

"Harry," whispered Pettigrew, shuffling toward him, hands outstretched. "Harry, James wouldn't have wanted me killed.... James would have understood, Harry... he would have shown me mercy..."

Both Black and Lupin strode forward, seized Pettigrew's shoulders, and threw him backward onto the floor. He sat there, twitching with terror, staring up at them.

"You sold Lily and James to Voldemort," said Black, who was shaking too. "Do you deny it?"

Pettigrew burst into tears. It was horrible to watch, like an oversized, balding baby, cowering on the floor.

"Sirius, Sirius, what could I have done? The Dark Lord... you have no idea... he has weapons you can't imagine.... I was scared, Sirius, I was never brave like you and Remus and James. I never meant it to happen.... He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named forced me --"

"DON'T LIE!" bellowed Black. "YOU'D BEEN PASSING INFORMATION TO HIM FOR A YEAR BEFORE LILY AND JAMES DIED! YOU WERE HIS SPY!"

"He -- he was taking over everywhere!" gasped Pettigrew. "Wh -- what was there to be gained by refusing him?"

"What was there to be gained by fighting the most evil wizard who has ever existed?" said Black, with a terrible fury in his face. "Only innocent lives, Peter!"

"You don't understand!" whined Pettigrew. "He would have killed me, Sirius!"

"THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED!" roared Black. "DIED RATHER THAN BETRAY YOUR FRIENDS, AS WE WOULD HAVE DONE FOR YOU!"

Black and Lupin stood shoulder to shoulder, wands raised.

"You should have realized," said Lupin quietly, "if Voldemort didn't kill you, we would. Good-bye, Peter."

Hermione covered her face with her hands and turned to the wall.

"NO!" Harry yelled. He ran forward, placing himself in front Pettigrew, facing the wands. "You can't kill him," he said breathlessly. "You

can't."

Black and Lupin both looked staggered.

"Harry, this piece of vermin is the reason you have no parents," Black snarled. "This cringing bit of filth would have seen you die too, without turning a hair. You heard him. His own stinking skin meant more to him than your whole family."

"I know," Harry panted. "We'll take him up to the castle. We'll hand him over to the dementors.... He can go to Azkaban... but don't kill him."

"Harry!" gasped Pettigrew, and he flung his arms around Harry's knees. "You -- thank you -- it's more than I deserve -- thank you --"

"Get off me," Harry spat, throwing Pettigrew's hands off him in disgust. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it because -- I don't reckon my dad would've wanted them to become killers -- just for you."

No one moved or made a sound except Pettigrew, whose breath was coming in wheezes as he clutched his chest. Black and Lupin were looking at each other. Then, with one movement, they lowered their wands.

"You're the only person who has the right to decide, Harry," said Black. "But think... think what he did...."

"He can go to Azkaban," Harry repeated. "If anyone deserves that place, he does...."

Pettigrew was still wheezing behind him.

"Very well," said Lupin. "Stand aside, Harry."

Harry hesitated.

"I'm going to tie him up," said Lupin. "That's all, I swear."

Harry stepped out of the way. Thin cords shot from Lupin's wand this time, and next moment, Pettigrew was wriggling on the floor, bound and gagged.

"But if you transform, Peter," growled Black, his own wand pointing at Pettigrew too, "we will kill you. You agree, Harry?"

Harry looked down at the pitiful figure on the floor and nodded so that Pettigrew could see him.

"Right," said Lupin, suddenly businesslike. "Ron, I can't mend bones nearly as well as Madam Pomfrey, so I think it's best if we just strap your leg up until we can get you to the hospital wing."

He hurried over to Ron, bent down, tapped Ron's leg with his wand, and muttered, "Ferula." Bandages spun up Ron's leg, strapping it tightly to a splint. Lupin helped him to his feet; Ron put his weight gingerly on the leg and didn't wince.

"That's better," he said. "Thanks."

"What about Professor Snape?" said Hermione in a small voice, looking down at Snape's prone figure.

"There's nothing seriously wrong with him," said Lupin, bending over Snape and checking his pulse. "You were just a little -- overenthusiastic. Still out cold. Er -- perhaps it will be best if we don't revive him until we're safety back in the castle. We can take him like this...."

He muttered, "Mobilicorpus." As though invisible strings were tied to Snape's wrists, neck, and knees, he was pulled into a standing position, head still lolling unpleasantly, like a grotesque puppet. He hung a few inches above the ground, his limp feet dangling. Lupin picked up the Invisibility Cloak and tucked it safely into his pocket.

"And two of us should be chained to this," said Black, nudging Pettigrew with his toe. "Just to make sure."

"I'll do it," said Lupin.

"And me," said Ron savagely, limping forward.

Black conjured heavy manacles from thin air; soon Pettigrew was upright again, left arm chained to Lupin's right, right arm to Ron's left. Ron's face was set. He seemed to have taken Scabbers's true identity as a personal insult. Crookshanks leapt lightly off the bed and led the way out of the room, his bottlebrush tail held jauntily high.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE DEMENTOR'S KISS

Harry had never been part of a stranger group. Crookshanks led the way down the stairs; Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron went next, looking like entrants in a six-legged race. Next came Professor Snape, drifting creepily along, his toes hitting each stair as they descended, held up by his own wand, which was being pointed at him by Sirius. Harry and Hermione brought up the rear.

Getting back into the tunnel was difficult. Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron had to turn sideways to manage it; Lupin still had Pettigrew covered with his wand. Harry could see them edging awkwardly along the tunnel in single file. Crookshanks was still in the lead. Harry went right after Black, who was still making Snape drift along ahead of them; he kept bumping his lolling head on the low ceiling. Harry had the impression Black was making no effort to prevent this.

"You know what this means?" Black said abruptly to Harry as they made their slow progress along the tunnel. "Turning Pettigrew in?"

"You're free," said Harry.

"Yes....," said Black. "But I'm also -- I don't know if anyone ever told you -- I'm your godfather."

"Yeah, I knew that," said Harry.

"Well... your parents appointed me your guardian," said Black stiffly. "If anything happened to them..."

Harry waited. Did Black mean what he thought he meant?

"I'll understand, of course, if you want to stay with your aunt and uncle," said Black. "But... well... think about it. Once my name's cleared... if you wanted a... a different home..."

Some sort of explosion took place in the pit of Harry's stomach.

"What -- live with you?" he said, accidentally cracking his head on a bit of rock protruding from the ceiling. "Leave the Dursleys?"

"Of course, I thought you wouldn't want to," said Black quickly. "I understand, I just thought I'd --"

"Are you insane?" said Harry, his voice easily as croaky as Black's.

"Of course I want to leave the Dursleys! Have you got a house? When can I move in?"

Black turned right around to look at him; Snape's head was scraping the ceiling but Black didn't seem to care.

"You want to?" he said. "You mean it?"

"Yeah, I mean it!" said Harry.

Black's gaunt face broke into the first true smile Harry had seen upon it. The difference it made was startling, as though a person ten years younger were shining through the starved mask; for a moment, he was recognizable as the man who had laughed at Harry's parents' wedding.

They did not speak again until they had reached the end of the tunnel. Crookshanks darted up first; he had evidently pressed his paw to the knot on the trunk, because Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron clambered upward without any sound of savaging branches.

Black saw Snape up through the hole, then stood back for Harry and Hermione to pass. At last, all of them were out.

The grounds were very dark now; the only light came from the distant windows of the castle. Without a word, they set off. Pettigrew was still wheezing and occasionally whimpering. Harry's mind was buzzing. He was going to leave the Dursleys. He was going to live with Sirius Black, his parents' best friend.... He felt dazed.... What would happen when he told the Dursleys he was going to live with the convict they'd seen on television... !

"One wrong move, Peter," said Lupin threateningly ahead. His wand was still pointed sideways at Pettigrew's chest.

Silently they tramped through the grounds, the castle lights growing slowly larger. Snape was still drifting weirdly ahead of Black, his chin bumping on his chest. And then -

A cloud shifted. There were suddenly dim shadows on the ground. Their party was bathed in moonlight.

Snape collided with Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron, who had stopped abruptly. Black froze. He flung out one arm to make Harry and Hermione stop.

Harry could see Lupin's silhouette. He had gone rigid. Then his limbs began to shake.

"Oh, my --" Hermione gasped. "He didn't take his potion tonight! He's not safe!"

"Run," Black whispered. "Run. Now."

But Harry couldn't run. Ron was chained to Pettigrew and Lupin. He leapt forward but Black caught him around the chest and threw him back.

"Leave it to me -- RUN!"

There was a terrible snarling noise. Lupin's head was lengthening. So was his body. His shoulders were hunching. Hair was sprouting visibly on his face and hands, which were curling into clawed paws. Crookshanks's hair was on end again; he was backing away --

As the werewolf reared, snapping its long jaws, Sirius disappeared from Harry's side. He had transformed. The enormous, bearlike dog bounded forward. As the werewolf wrenched itself free of the manacle binding it, the dog seized it about the neck and pulled it backward, away from Ron and Pettigrew. They were locked, jaw to jaw, claws ripping at each other.

Harry stood, transfixed by the sight, too intent upon the battle to notice anything else. It was Hermione's scream that alerted him --

Pettigrew had dived for Lupin's dropped wand. Ron, unsteady on his bandaged leg, fell. There was a bang, a burst of light -- and Ron lay motionless on the ground. Another bang -- Crookshanks flew into the air and back to the earth in a heap.

"Expelliarmus." Harry yelled, pointing his own wand at Pettigrew; Lupin's wand flew high into the air and out of sight. "Stay where you are!" Harry shouted, running forward.

Too late. Pettigrew had transformed. Harry saw his bald tail whip through the manacle on Ron's outstretched arm and heard a scurrying through the grass.

There was a howl and a rumbling growl; Harry turned to see the werewolf taking flight; it was galloping into the forest --

"Sirius, he's gone, Pettigrew transformed!" Harry yelled.

Black was bleeding; there were gashes across his muzzle and back, but at Harry's words he scrambled up again, and in an instant, the sound of his paws faded to silence as he pounded away across the grounds.

Harry and Hermione dashed over to Ron.

"What did he do to him?" Hermione whispered. Ron's eyes were only half-closed, his mouth hung open; he was definitely alive, they could hear him breathing, but he didn't seem to recognize them.

"I don't know...."

Harry looked desperately around. Black and Lupin both gone... they had no one but Snape for company, still hanging, unconscious, in midair.

"We'd better get them up to the castle and tell someone," said Harry, pushing his hair out of his eyes, trying to think straight. "Come --"

But then, from beyond the range of their vision, they heard a yelping, a whining: a dog in pain....

"Sirius," Harry muttered, staring into the darkness.

He had a moment's indecision, but there was nothing they could do for Ron at the moment, and by the sound of it, Black was in trouble --

Harry set off at a run, Hermione right behind him. The yelping seemed to be coming from the ground near the edge of the lake. They pelted toward it, and Harry, running flat out, felt the cold without realizing what it must mean -

The yelping stopped abruptly. As they reached the lakeshore, they saw why -- Sirius had turned back into a man. He was crouched on all fours, his hands over his head.

'Nooo,' he moaned. 'Nooo... please....'

And then Harry saw them. Dementors, at least a hundred of them, gliding in a black mass around the lake toward them. He spun around, the familiar, icy cold penetrating his insides, fog starting to obscure his vision; more were appearing out of the darkness on every side; they were encircling them....

"Herrnione, think of something happy!" Harry yelled, raising his wand, blinking furiously to try and clear his vision, shaking his head to rid it of the faint screaming that had started inside it --

I'm going to live with my godfather. I'm leaving the Dursleys.

He forced himself to think of Black, and only Black, and began to chant: "Expecto patronum! Expecto patronum!"

Black gave a shudder, rolled over, and lay motionless on the ground, pale as death.

He'll be all right. I'm going to go and live with him.

"Expecto patronum! Hermione, help me! Expecto patronum!"

"Expecto --" Hermione whispered, "expecto -- expecto --"

But she couldn't do it. The dementors were closing in, barely ten feet from them. They formed a solid wall around Harry and Hermione, and were getting closer....

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry yelled, trying to blot the screaming from his ears. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

A thin wisp of silver escaped his wand and hovered like mist before him. At the same moment, Harry felt Hermione collapse next to him. He was alone... completely alone....

"Expecto -- expecto patronum --"

Harry felt his knees hit the cold grass. Fog was clouding his eyes. With a huge effort, he fought to remember -- Sirius was innocent -- innocent -- We'll be okay -- I'm going to live with him --

"Ex ecto patronum!" he gasped.

By the feeble light of his formless Patronus, He saw a dementor halt, very close to him. It couldn't walk through the cloud of silver mist Harry had conjured. A dead, slimy hand slid out from under the cloak. It made a gesture as though to sweep the Patronus aside.

"No -- no --" Harry gasped. "He's innocent... expecto expecto patronum --"

He could feel them watching him, hear their rattling breath like an evil wind around him. The nearest dementor seemed to be considering him. Then it raised both its rotting hands -- and lowered its hood.

Where there should have been eyes, there was only thin, gray scabbed skin, stretched blankly over empty sockets. But there was a mouth... a gaping, shapeless hole, sucking the air with the sound of a death rattle.

A paralyzing terror filled Harry so that he couldn't move or speak. His Patronus flickered and died.

White fog was blinding him. He had to fight... expecto patronum ... he couldn't see... and in the distance, he heard the familiar screaming... expecto patronum... he groped in the mist for Sirius, and found his arm... they weren't going to take him....

But a pair of strong, clammy hands suddenly attached themselves around Harry's neck. They were forcing his face upward.... He could feel its breath.... It was going to get rid of him first.... He could feel its putrid breath.... His mother was screaming in his ears.... She was going to be the last thing he ever heard --

And then, through the fog that was drowning him, he thought he saw a silvery light growing brighter and brighter... He felt himself fall forward onto the grass.... Facedown, too weak to move, sick and shaking, Harry opened his eyes. The dementor must have released him. The blinding light was illuminating the grass around him.... The screaming had stopped, the cold was ebbing away...

Something was driving the dementors back.... It was circling around him and Black and Hermione.... They were leaving....

The air was warm again....

With every ounce of strength he could muster, Harry raised his head a few inches and saw an animal amid the light, galloping away across the lake.... Eyes blurred with sweat, Harry tried to make out what it was.... It was as bright as a unicorn.... Fighting to stay conscious, Harry watched it canter to a halt as it reached the opposite shore. For a moment, Harry saw, by its brightness, somebody welcoming it back... raising his hand to pat it... someone who looked strangely familiar ... but it couldn't be...

Harry didn't understand. He couldn't think anymore. He felt the last of his strength leave him, and his head hit the ground as he fainted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HERMIONE'S SECRET

Shocking business... shocking... miracle none of them died... never heard the like... by thunder, it was lucky you were there, Snape...."

"Thank you, Minister."

"Order of Merlin, Second Class, I'd say. First Class, if I can wangle it!"

"Thank you very much indeed, Minister."

"Nasty cut you've got there.... Black's work, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, it was Potter, Weasley, and Granger, Minister...."

"No!"

"Black had bewitched them, I saw it immediately. A Confundus Charm, to judge by their behavior. They seemed to think there was a possibility he was innocent. They weren't responsible for their actions. On the other hand, their interference might have permitted Black to escape.... They obviously thought they were going to catch Black single-handed. They've got away with a great deal before now... I'm afraid it's given them a rather high opinion of themselves... and of course Potter has always been allowed an extraordinary amount of license by the headmaster --"

"Ah, well, Snape... Harry Potter, you know... we've all got a bit of a blind spot where he's concerned."

"And yet -- is it good for him to be given so much special treatment? Personally, I try and treat him like any other student. And any other student would be suspended -- at the very least -- for leading his friends into such danger. Consider, Minister -- against all school rules -- after all the precautions put in place for his protection -- out-of-bounds, at night, consorting with a werewolf and a murderer -- and I have reason to believe he has been visiting Hogsmeade illegally too --"

"Well, well... we shall see, Snape, we shall see.... The boy has undoubtedly been foolish...."

Harry lay listening with his eyes tight shut. He felt very groggy. The words he was hearing seemed to be traveling very slowly from his ears to his brain, so that it was difficult to understand.... His limbs felt like lead; his eyelids too heavy to lift.... He wanted to lie here, on this comfortable bed, forever....

"What amazes me most is the behavior of the dementors... you've really no idea what made them retreat, Snape?"

"No, Minister... by the time I had come 'round they were heading back to their positions at the entrances...."

"Extraordinary. And yet Black, and Harry, and the girl --"

"All unconscious by the time I reached them. I bound and gagged Black, naturally, conjured stretchers, and brought them all straight back to the castle."

There was a pause. Harry's brain seemed to be moving a little faster, and as it did, a gnawing sensation grew in the pit of his stomach....

He opened his eyes.

Everything was slightly blurred. Somebody had removed his glasses. He was lying in the dark hospital wing. At the very end of the ward, he could make out Madam Pomfrey with her back to him, bending over a bed. Harry squinted. Ron's red hair was visible beneath Madam Pomfrey's arm.

Harry moved his head over on the pillow. In the bed to his right lay Hermione. Moonlight was falling across her bed. Her eyes were open too. She looked petrified, and when she saw that Harry was awake, pressed a finger to her lips, then pointed to the hospital wing door. It was ajar, and the voices of Cornelius Fudge and Snape were coming through it from the corridor outside.

Madam Pomfrey now came walking briskly up the dark ward to Harry's bed. He turned to look at her. She was carrying the largest block of chocolate he had ever seen in his life. It looked like a small boulder.

"Ah, you're awake!" she said briskly. She placed the chocolate on Harry's bedside table and began breaking it apart with a small hammer.

"How's Ron?" said Harry and Hermione together.

"He'll live, said Madam Pomfrey grimly. "As for you two you'll be staying here until I'm satisfied you're -- Potter, what do you think you're doing?"

Harry was sitting up, putting his glasses back on, and picking up his wand.

"I need to see the headmaster," he said.

"Potter," said Madam Pomfrey soothingly, "it's all right. They've got Black. He's locked away upstairs. The dementors will be performing the kiss any moment now --"

"WHAT?"

Harry jumped up out of bed; Hermione had done the same. But his shout had been heard in the corridor outside; next second, Cornelius Fudge and Snape had entered the ward.

"Harry, Harry, what's this?" said Fudge, looking agitated. "You should be in bed -- has he had any chocolate?" he asked Madam Pomfrey anxiously.

"Minister, listen!" Harry said. "Sirius Black's innocent! Peter Pettigrew faked his own death! We saw him tonight! You can't let the dementors do that thing to Sirius, he's --"

But Fudge was shaking his head with a small smile on his face.

"Harry, Harry, you're very confused, you've been through a dreadful ordeal, lie back down, now, we've got everything under control...."

"YOU HAVEN'T!" Harry yelled. "YOUVE GOT THE WRONG MAN!"

"Minister, listen, please," Hermione said; she had hurried to Harry's side and was gazing imploringly into Fudge's face. "I saw him too. It was Ron's rat, he's an Animagus, Pettigrew, I mean, and --"

"You see, Minister?" said Snape. "Confounded, both of them.... Black's done a very good job on them...." "WE'RE NOT CONFUNDED!" Harry roared.

"Minister! Professor!" said Madam Pomfrey angrily. "I must insist that you leave. Potter is my patient, and he should not be distressed!"

"I'm not distressed, I'm trying to tell them what happened!" Harry said furiously. "If they'd just listen --"

But Madam Pomfrey suddenly stuffed a large chunk of chocolate into Harry's mouth; he choked, and she seized the opportunity to force him back onto the bed.

"Now, please, Minister, these children need care. Please leave

The door opened again. It was Dumbledore. Harry swallowed his mouthful of chocolate with great difficulty and got up again.

"Professor Dumbledore, Sirius Black --"

"For heaven's sake!" said Madam Pomfrey hysterically. "Is this a hospital wing or not? Headmaster, I must insist --"

"My apologies, Poppy, but I need a word with Mr. Potter and Miss Granger," said Dumbledore calmly. "I have just been talking to Sirius Black --"

"I suppose he's told you the same fairy tale he's planted in Potter's mind?" spat Snape. "Something about a rat, and Pettigrew being alive --"

"That, indeed, is Black's story," said Dumbledore, surveying Snape closely through his half-moon spectacles.

"And does my evidence count for nothing?" snarled Snape. "Peter Pettigrew was not in the Shrieking Shack, nor did I see any sign of him on the grounds."

"That was because you were knocked out, Professor!" said Hermione earnestly. "You didn't arrive in time to hear

"Miss Granger, HOLD YOUR TONGUE!"

"Now, Snape," said Fudge, startled, "the young lady is disturbed in her mind, we must make allowances --"

"I would like to speak to Harry and Hermione alone," said Dumbledore abruptly. "Cornelius, Severus, Poppy -- please leave us."

"Headmaster!" sputtered Madam Pomfrey. "They need treatment, they need rest --"

"This cannot wait," said Dumbledore. "I must insist."

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips and strode away into her office at the end of the ward, slamming the door behind her. Fudge consulted the large gold pocket watch dangling from his waistcoat.

"The dementors should have arrived by now," he said. "I'll go and meet them. Dumbledore, I'll see you upstairs."

He crossed to the door and held it open for Snape, but Snape hadn't moved.

"You surely don't believe a word of Black's story?" Snape whispered, his eyes fixed on Dumbledore's face.

"I wish to speak to Harry and Hermione alone," Dumbledore repeated.

Snape took a step toward Dumbledore.

"Sirius Black showed he was capable of murder at the age of sixteen," he breathed. "You haven't forgotten that, Headmaster? You haven't forgotten that he once tried to kill me?"

"My memory is as good as it ever was, Severus," said Dumbledore quietly.

Snape turned on his heel and marched through the door Fudge was still holding. It closed behind them, and Dumbledore turned to Harry and Hermione. They both burst into speech at the same time.

"Professor, Black's telling the truth -- we saw Pettigrew --- he escaped when Professor Lupin turned into a werewolf ---"

--- he's a rat ---"

--- Pettigrew's front paw, I mean, finger, he cut it off ---"

--- Pettigrew attacked Ron, it wasn't Sirius ---"

But Dumbledore held up his hand to stem the flood of explanations.

"It is your turn to listen, and I beg you will not interrupt me, because there is very little time," he said quietly. "There is not a shred of proof to support Black's story, except your word -- and the word of two thirteen-year-old wizards will not convince anybody. A street full of eyewitnesses swore they saw Sirius murder Pettigrew. I myself gave evidence to the Ministry that Sirius had been the Potters' Secret-Keeper."

"Professor Lupin can tell you ---" Harry said, unable to stop himself

"Professor Lupin is currently deep in the forest, unable to tell anyone anything. By the time he is human again, it will be too late, Sirius will be worse than dead. I might add that werewolves are so mistrusted by most of our kind that his support will count for very little -- and the fact that he and Sirius are old friends ---"

"But ---"

"Listen to me, Harry. It is too late, you understand me? You must see that Professor Snape's version of events is far more convincing than yours."

"He hates Sirius," Hermione said desperately. "All because of some stupid trick Sirius played on him ---"

"Sirius has not acted like an innocent man. The attack on the Fat Lady -- entering Gryffindor Tower with a knife -- without Pettigrew, alive or dead, we have no chance of overturning Sirius's sentence."

"But you believe us."

"Yes, I do," said Dumbledore quietly. "But I have no power to make other men see the truth, or to overrule the Minister of Magic...."

Harry stared up into the grave face and felt as though the ground beneath him were falling sharply away. He had grown used to the idea that Dumbledore could solve anything. He had expected Dumbledore to pull some amazing solution out of the air. But no ... their last hope was gone.

"What we need," said Dumbledore slowly, and his light blue eyes moved from Harry to Hermione, "is more time."

"But --" Hermione began. And then her eyes became very round. "OH!"

"Now, pay attention," said Dumbledore, speaking very low, and very clearly. "Sirius is locked in Professor Flitwick's office on the seventh floor. Thirteenth window from the right of the West Tower. If all goes well, you will be able to save more than one innocent life tonight. But remember this, both of you: you must not be seen. Miss Granger, you know the law -- you know what is at stake.... You -- must -- not -- be -- seen."

Harry didn't have a clue what was going on. Dumbledore had turned on his heel and looked back as he reached the door.

"I am going to lock you in. It is --" he consulted his watch, "five minutes to midnight. Miss Granger, three turns should do it. Good luck."

"Good luck?" Harry repeated as the door closed behind Dumbledore. "Three turns? What's he talking about? What are we supposed to do?"

But Hermione was fumbling with the neck of her robes, pulling from beneath them a very long, very fine gold chain.

"Harry, come here," she said urgently. "Quick!"

Harry moved toward her, completely bewildered. She was holding the chain out. He saw a tiny, sparkling hourglass hanging from it.

"Here --"

She had thrown the chain around his neck too.

"Ready?" she said breathlessly.

"What are we doing?" Harry said, completely lost.

Hermione turned the hourglass over three times.

The dark ward dissolved. Harry had the sensation that he was flying very fast, backward. A blur of colors and shapes rushed past him, his ears were pounding, he tried to yell but couldn't hear his own voice --

And then he felt solid ground beneath his feet, and everything came into

focus again --

He was standing next to Hermione in the deserted entrance hall and a stream of golden sunlight was falling across the paved floor from the open front doors. He looked wildly around at Hermione, the chain of the hourglass cutting into his neck.

"Hermione, what --?"

"In here!" Hermione seized Harry's arm and dragged him across the hall to the door of a broom closet; she opened it, pushed him inside among the buckets and mops, then slammed the door behind them.

"What -- how -- Hermione, what happened?"

"We've gone back in time," Hermione whispered, lifting the chain off Harry's neck in the darkness. "Three hours back..."

Harry found his own leg and gave it a very hard pinch. It hurt a lot, which seemed to rule out the possibility that he was having a very bizarre dream.

"But --"

"Shh! Listen! Someone's coming! I think -- I think it might be us!" Hermione had her ear pressed against the cupboard door.

"Footsteps across the hall... yes, I think it's us going down to Hagrid's!"

"Are you telling me," Harry whispered, "that we're here in this cupboard and we're out there too?"

"Yes," said Hermione, her ear still glued to the cupboard door. "I'm sure it's us. It doesn't sound like more than three people... and we're walking slowly because we're under the Invisibility Cloak -- "

She broke off, still listening intently.

"We've gone down the front steps...."

Hermione sat down on an upturned bucket, looking desperately anxious, but Harry wanted a few questions answered.

"Where did you get that hourglass thing?"

"It's called a Time-Turner," Hermione whispered, "and I got it from Professor McGonagall on our first day back. I've been using it all year to get to all my lessons. Professor McGonagall made me swear I wouldn't tell anyone. She had to write all sorts of letters to the Ministry of Magic so I could have one. She had to tell them that I was a model student, and that I'd never, ever use it for anything except my studies.... I've been turning it back so I could do hours over again, that's how I've been doing several lessons at once, see? But..."

"Harry, I don't understand what Dumbledore wants us to do. Why did he tell us to go back three hours? How's that going to help Sirius?"

Harry stared at her shadowy face.

"There must be something that happened around now he wants us to change," he said slowly. "What happened? We were walking down to Hagrid's three hours ago...."

"This is three hours ago, and we are walking down to Hagrid's," said Hermione. "We just heard ourselves leaving...."

Harry frowned; he felt as though he were screwing up his whole brain in concentration.

"Dumbledore just said -- just said we could save more than one innocent life...." And then it hit him. "Hermione, we're going to save Buckbeak!"

"But -- how will that help Sirius?"

"Dumbledore said -- he just told us where the window is -- the window of Flitwick's office! Where they've got Sirius locked up! We've got to fly Buckbeak up to the window and rescue Sirius! Sirius can escape on Buckbeak -- they can escape together!"

From what Harry could see of Hermione's face, she looked terrified.

"If we manage that without being seen, it'll be a miracle!"

"Well, we've got to try, haven't we?" said Harry. He stood up and pressed his ear against the door. "Doesn't sound like anyone's there.... Come on, let's go."

Harry pushed open the closet door. The entrance hall was deserted. As quietly and quickly as they could, they darted out of the closet and down the stone steps. The shadows were already lengthening, the tops of the trees in the Forbidden Forest gilded once more with gold.

"If anyone's looking out of the window --" Hermione squeaked, looking up at the castle behind them.

"We'll run for it," said Harry determinedly. "Straight into the forest, all right? We'll have to hide behind a tree or something and keep a lookout --"

"Okay, but we'll go around by the greenhouses!" said Hermione breathlessly. "We need to keep out of sight of Hagrid's front door, or we'll see us! We must be nearly at Hagrid's by now!"

Still working out what she meant, Harry set off at a sprint, Hermione behind him. They tore across the vegetable gardens to the greenhouses, paused for a moment behind them, then set off again, fast as they could, skirting around the Whomping Willow, tearing toward the shelter of the forest....

Safe in the shadows of the trees, Harry turned around; seconds later, Hermione arrived beside him, panting.

"Right," she gasped. "We need to sneak over to Hagrid's.... Keep out of sight, Harry...."

They made their way silently through the trees, keeping to the very edge of the forest. Then, as they glimpsed the front of Hagrid's house, they heard a knock upon his door. They moved quickly behind a wide oak trunk and peered out from either side. Hagrid had appeared in his doorway,

shaking and white, looking around to see who had knocked. And Harry heard his own voice.

"It's us. We're wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off."

"Yeh shouldn've come!" Hagrid whispered. He stood back, then shut the door quickly.

"This is the weirdest thing we've ever done," Harry said fervently.

"Let's move along a bit," Hermione whispered. "We need to get nearer to Buckbeak!"

They crept through the trees until they saw the nervous hippogriff, tethered to the fence around Hagrid's pumpkin patch.

"Now?" Harry whispered.

"No!" said Hermione. "If we steal him now, those Committee people will think Hagrid set him free! We've got to wait until they've seen he's tied outside!"

"That's going to give us about sixty seconds," said Harry. This was starting to seem impossible.

At that moment, there was a crash of breaking china from inside Hagrid's cabin.

"That's Hagrid breaking the milk jug," Hermione whispered. "I'm going to find Scabbers in a moment --"

Sure enough, a few minutes later, they heard Hermione's shriek of surprise.

"Hermione," said Harry suddenly, "what if we -- we just run in there and grab Pettigrew --"

"No!" said Hermione in a terrified whisper. "Don't you understand? We're breaking one of the most important wizarding laws! Nobody's supposed to change time, nobody! You heard Dumbledore, if we're seen --"

"We'd only be seen by ourselves and Hagrid!"

"Harry, what do you think you'd do if you saw yourself bursting into Hagrid's house?" said Hermione.

"I'd -- I'd think I'd gone mad," said Harry, "or I'd think there was some Dark Magic going on --"

"Exactly! You wouldn't understand, you might even attack yourself! Don't you see? Professor McGonagall told me what awful things have happened when wizards have meddled with time.... Loads of them ended up killing their past or future selves by mistake!"

"Okay!" said Harry. "It was just an idea, I just thought

But Hermione nudged him and pointed toward the castle. Harry moved his head a few inches to get a clear view of the distant front doors. Dumbledore, Fudge, the old Committee member, and Macnair the executioner

were coming down the steps.

"We're about to come out!" Hermione breathed.

And sure enough, moments later, Hagrid's back door opened, and Harry saw himself, Ron, and Hermione walking out of it with Hagrid. It was, without a doubt, the strangest sensation of his life, standing behind the tree, and watching himself in the pumpkin patch.

"It's Okay, Beaky, it's okay..." Hagrid said to Buckbeak. Then he turned to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Go on. Get goin'."

"Hagrid, we can't --"

"We'll tell them what really happened

"They can't kill him --"

"Go! It's bad enough without you lot in trouble an' all!"

Harry watched the Hermione in the pumpkin patch throw the Invisibility Cloak over him and Ron.

"Go quick. Don' listen...."

There was a knock on Hagrid's front door. The execution party had arrived. Hagrid turned, around and headed back into his cabin, leaving the back door ajar. Harry watched the grass flatten in patches all around the cabin and heard three pairs of feet retreating. He, Ron, and Hermione had gone... but the Harry and Hermione hidden in the trees could now hear what was happening inside the cabin through the back door.

"Where is the beast?" came the cold voice of Macnair.

"Out -- outside," Hagrid croaked.

Harry pulled his head out of sight as Macnair's face appeared at Hagrid's window, staring out at Buckbeak. Then they heard Fudge.

"We -- er -- have to read you the official notice of execution, Hagrid. I'll make it quick. And then you and Macnair need to sign it. Macnair, You're supposed to listen too, that's procedure --"

Macnair's face vanished from the window. It was now or never.

"Wait here," Harry whispered to Hermione. "I'll do it."

As Fudge's voice started again, Harry darted out from behind his tree, vaulted the fence into the pumpkin patch, and approached Buckbeak.

"It is the decision of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures that the hippogriff Buckbeak, hereafter called the condemned, shall he executed on the sixth of June at sundown --"

Careful not to blink, Harry stared up into Buckbeak's fierce orange eyes once more and bowed. Buckbeak sank to his scaly knees and then stood up again. Harry began to fumble with the knot of rope tying Buckbeak to the fence.

"... sentenced to execution by beheading, to be carried out by the Committee's appointed executioner, Walden Macnair..."

"Come on, Buckbeak," Harry murmured, "come on, we're going to help you. Quietly... quietly..."

"... as witnessed below. Hagrid, you sign here..."

Harry threw all his weight onto the rope, but Buckbeak had dug in his front feet.

"Well, let's get this over with," said the reedy voice of the Committee member from inside Hagrid's cabin. "Hagrid, perhaps it will be better if you stay inside --"

"No, I -- I wan' ter be with him.... I don' wan' him ter be alone --"

Footsteps echoed from within the cabin.

"Buckbeak, move!" Harry hissed.

Harry tugged harder on the rope around Buckbeak's neck. The hippogriff began to walk, rustling its wings irritably. They were still ten feet away from the forest, in plain view of Hagrid's back door. "One moment, please, Macnair," came Dumbledore's voice. "You need to sign too." The footsteps stopped. Harry heaved on the rope. Buckbeak snapped his beak and walked a little faster.

Hermione's white face was sticking out from behind a tree.

"Harry, hurry!" she mouthed.

Harry could still hear Dumbledore's voice talking from within the cabin. He gave the rope another wrench. Buckbeak broke into a grudging trot. They had reached the trees....

"Quick! Quick!" Hermione moaned, darting out from behind her tree, seizing the rope too and adding her weight to make Buckbeak move faster. Harry looked over his shoulder; they were now blocked from sight; they couldn't see Hagrid's garden at all.

"Stop!" he whispered to Hermione. "They might hear us

Hagrid's back door had opened with a bang. Harry, Hermione, and Buckbeak stood quite still; even the hippogriff seemed to be listening intently.

Silence... then --

"Where is it?" said the reedy voice of the Committee member. "Where is the beast?"

"It was tied here!" said the executioner furiously. I saw it! just here!"

"How extraordinary," said Dumbledore. There was a note of amusement in his voice.

"Beaky!" said Hagrid huskily.

There was a swishing noise, and the thud of an axe. The executioner

seemed to have swung it into the fence in anger. And then came the howling, and this time they could hear Hagrid's words through his sobs.

"Gone! Gone! Bless his little beak, he's gone! Musta pulled himself free! Beaky, yeh clever boy!"

Buckbeak started to strain against the rope, trying to get back to Hagrid. Harry and Hermione tightened their grip and dug their heels into the forest floor to stop him.

"Someone untied him!" the executioner was snarling. "We should search the grounds, the forest."

"Macnair, if Buckbeak has indeed been stolen, do you really think the thief will have led him away on foot?" said Dumbledore, still sounding amused. "Search the skies, if you will.... Hagrid, I could do with a cup of tea. Or a large brandy."

"O' -- o' course, Professor," said Hagrid, who sounded weak with happiness. "Come in, come in...."

Harry and Hermione listened closely. They heard footsteps, the soft cursing of the executioner, the snap of the door, and then silence once more.

"Now what?" whispered Harry, looking around.

"We'll have to hide in here," said Hermione, who looked very shaken. "We need to wait until they've gone back to the castle. Then we wait until it's safe to fly Buckbeak up to Sirius's window. He won't be there for another couple of hours.... Oh, this is going to be difficult...."

She looked nervously over her shoulder into the depths of the forest. The sun was setting now.

"We're going to have to move," said Harry, thinking hard. "We've got to be able to see the Whomping Willow, or we won't know what's going on."

"Okay," said Hermione, getting a firmer grip on Buckbeak's rope. "But we've got to keep out of sight, Harry, remember...."

They moved around the edge of the forest, darkness falling thickly around them, until they were hidden behind a clump of trees through which they could make out the Willow.

"There's Ron!" said Harry suddenly.

A dark figure was sprinting across the lawn and its shout echoed through the still night air.

"Get away from him -- get away -- Scabbers, come here --"

And then they saw two more figures materialize out of nowhere. Harry watched himself and Hermione chasing after Ron. Then he saw Ron dive.

"Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat --"

"There's Sirius!" said Harry. The great shape of the dog had bounded out from the roots of the Willow. They saw him bowl Harry over, then seize Ron....

"Looks even worse from here, doesn't it?" said Harry, watching the dog pulling Ron into the roots. "Ouch -- look, I just got walloped by the tree -- and so did you -- this is weird--"

The Whomping Willow was creaking and lashing out with its lower branches; they could see themselves darting here and there, trying to reach the trunk. And then the tree froze.

"That was Crookshanks pressing the knot," said Hermione.

"And there we go..." Harry muttered. "We're in."

The moment they disappeared, the tree began to move again. Seconds later, they heard footsteps quite close by. Dumbledore, Macnair, Fudge, and the old Committee member were making their way up to the castle.

"Right after we'd gone down into the passage!" said Hermione. "If only Dumbledore had come with us..."

"Macnair and Fudge would've come too," said Harry bitterly. "I bet you anything Fudge would've told Macnair to murder Sirius on the spot...."

They watched the four men climb the castle steps and disappear from view. For a few minutes the scene was deserted. Then --

"Here comes Lupin!" said Harry as they saw another figure sprinting down the stone steps and hating toward the Willow. Harry looked up at the sky. Clouds were obscuring the moon completely.

They watched Lupin seize a broken branch from the ground and prod the knot on the trunk. The tree stopped fighting, and Lupin, too, disappeared into the gap in its roots.

"If he'd only grabbed the cloak," said Harry. "It's just lying there...."

He turned to Hermione.

"If I just dashed out now and grabbed it, Snape'd never be able to get it and --"

"Harry, we mustn't be seen!"

"How can you stand this?" he asked Hermione fiercely. "Just standing here and watching it happen?" He hesitated. "I'm going to grab the cloak!"

"Harry, no!"

Hermione seized the back of Harry's robes not a moment too soon. just then, they heard a burst of song. It was Hagrid, making his way up to the castle, singing at the top of his voice, and weaving slightly as he walked. A large bottle was swinging from his hands.

"See?" Hermione whispered. "See what would have happened? We've got to keep out of sight! No, Buckbeak!"

The hippogriff was making frantic attempts to get to Hagrid again; Harry seized his rope too, straining to hold Buckbeak back. They watched

Hagrid meander tipsily up to the castle. He was gone. Buckbeak stopped fighting to get away. His head drooped sadly.

Barely two minutes later, the castle doors flew open yet again, and Snape came charging out of them, running toward the Willow.

Harry's fists clenched as they watched Snape skid to a halt next to the tree, looking around. He grabbed the cloak and held it up.

"Get your filthy hands off it," Harry snarled under his breath. "Shh!"

Snape seized the branch Lupin had used to freeze the tree, prodded the knot, and vanished from view as he put on the cloak.

"So that's it," said Hermione quietly. "We're all down there... and now we've just got to wait until we come back up again...."

She took the end of Buckbeak's rope and tied it securely around the nearest tree, then sat down on the dry ground, arms around her knees.

"Harry, there's something I don't understand.... Why didn't the dementors get Sirius? I remember them coming, and then I think I passed out... there were so many of them...."

Harry sat down too. He explained what he'd seen; how, as the nearest dementor had lowered its mouth to Harry's, a large silver something had come galloping across the lake and forced the dementors to retreat.

Hermione's mouth was slightly open by the time Harry had finished.

"But what was it?"

"There's only one thing it could have been, to make the dementors go," said Harry. "A real Patronus. A powerful one."

"But who conjured it?"

Harry didn't say anything. He was thinking back to the person he'd seen on the other bank of the lake. He knew who he thought it had been... but how could it have been?

"Didn't you see what they looked like?" said Hermione eagerly. "Was it one of the teachers?"

"No," said Harry. "He wasn't a teacher."

"But it must have been a really powerful wizard, to drive all those dementors away... If the Patronus was shining so brightly, didn't it light him up? Couldn't you see --?"

"Yeah, I saw him," said Harry slowly. "But... maybe I imagined it.... I wasn't thinking straight.... I passed out right afterward...."

"Who did you think it was?"

I think --" Harry swallowed, knowing how strange this was going to sound. I think it was my dad."

Harry glanced up at Hermione and saw that her mouth was fully open now. She was gazing at him with a mixture of alarm and pity.

"Harry, your dad's -- well -- dead," she said quietly.

"I know that," said Harry quickly.

"You think you saw his ghost?"

"I don't know... no... he looked solid...."

"But then --"

"Maybe I was seeing things," said Harry. "But... from what I could see... it looked like him.... I've got photos of him...."

Hermione was still looking at him as though worried about his sanity.

I know it sounds crazy," said Harry flatly. He turned to look at Buckbeak, who was digging his beak into the ground, apparently searching for worms. But he wasn't really watching Buckbeak.

He was thinking about his father and about his father's three oldest friends... Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs.... Had all four of them been out on the grounds tonight? Wormtail had reappeared this evening when everyone had thought he was dead.... Was it so impossible his father had done the same? Had he been seeing things across the lake? The figure had been too far away to see distinctly... yet he had felt sure, for a moment, before he'd lost consciousness....

The leaves overhead rustled faintly in the breeze. The moon drifted in and out of sight behind the shifting clouds. Hermione sat with her face turned toward the Willow, waiting.

And then, at last, after over an hour...

"Here we come!" Hermione whispered.

She and Harry got to their feet. Buckbeak raised his head. They saw Lupin, Ron, and Pettigrew clambering awkwardly out of the hole in the roots. Then came Hermione... then the unconscious Snape, drifting weirdly upward. Next came Harry and Black. They all began to walk toward the castle.

Harry's heart was starting to beat very fast. He glanced up at the sky. Any moment now, that cloud was going to move aside and show the moon....

"Harry," Hermione muttered as though she knew exactly what he was thinking, "we've got to stay put. We mustn't be seen. There's nothing we can do...."

"So we're just going to let Pettigrew escape all over again.. said Harry quietly.

"How do you expect to find a rat in the dark?" snapped Hermione. "There's nothing we can do! We came back to help Sirius; we're not supposed to be doing anything else!"

"All right!"

The moon slid out from behind its cloud. They saw the tiny figures across the grounds stop. Then they saw movement --

"There goes Lupin," Hermione whispered. "He's transforming

"Hermione!" said Harry suddenly. "We've got to move!"

"We mustn't, I keep telling you --"

"Not to interfere! Lupin's going to run into the forest, right at us!"

Hermione gasped.

"Quick!" she moaned, dashing to untie Buckbeak. "Quick! Where are we going to go? Where are we going to hide? The dementors will be coming any moment --"

"Back to Hagrid's!" Harry said. "It's empty now -- come on!"

They ran as fast as they could, Buckbeak cantering along behind them. They could hear the werewolf howling behind them....

The cabin was in sight; Harry skidded to the door, wrenched it open, and Hermione and Buckbeak flashed past him; Harry threw himself in after them and bolted the door. Fang the boarhound barked loudly.

"Shh, Fang, it's us!" said Hermione, hurrying over and scratching his ears to quieten him. "That was really close!" she said to Harry.

"Yeah..."

Harry was looking out of the window. It was much harder to see what was going on from here. Buckbeak seemed very happy to find himself back inside Hagrid's house. He lay down in front of the fire, folded his wings contentedly, and seemed ready for a good nap.

"I think I'd better go outside again, you know," said Harry slowly. "I can't see what's going on -- we won't know when it's time --"

Hermione looked up. Her expression was suspicious.

"I'm not going to try and interfere," said Harry quickly. "But if we don't see what's going on, how're we going to know when it's time to rescue Sirius?"

"Well... okay, then... I'll wait here with Buckbeak... but Harry, be careful -- there's a werewolf out there -- and the dementors

Harry stepped outside again and edged around the cabin. He could hear yelping in the distance. That meant the dementors were closing in on Sirius.... He and Hermione would be running to him any moment....

Harry stared out toward the lake, his heart doing a kind of drumroll in his chest.... Whoever had sent that Patronus would be appearing at any moment....

For a fraction of a second he stood, irresolute, in front of Hagrid's door. You must not be seen. But he didn't want to be seen. He wanted to do the seeing.... He had to know...

And there were the dementors. They were emerging out of the darkness from every direction, gliding around the edges of the lake.... They were

moving away from where Harry stood, to the opposite bank.... He wouldn't have to get near them....

Harry began to run. He had no thought in his head except his father... If it was him... if it really was him... he had to know, had to find out....

The lake was coming nearer and nearer, but there was no sign of anybody. On the opposite bank, he could see tiny glimmers of silver -- his own attempts at a Patronus --

There was a bush at the very edge of the water. Harry threw himself behind it, peering desperately through the leaves. On the opposite bank, the glimmers of silver were suddenly extinguished. A terrified excitement shot through him -- any moment now --

"Come on!" he muttered, staring about. "Where are you? Dad, come on --"

But no one came. Harry raised his head to look at the circle of dementors across the lake. One of them was lowering its hood. It was time for the rescuer to appear -- but no one was coming to help this time --

And then it hit him -- he understood. He hadn't seen his father -- he had seen himself --

Harry flung himself out from behind the bush and pulled out his wand.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM! "he yelled.

And out of the end of his wand burst, not a shapeless cloud of mist, but a blinding, dazzling, silver animal. He screwed up his eyes, trying to see what it was. It looked like a horse. It was galloping silently away from him, across the black surface of the lake. He saw it lower its head and charge at the swarming dementors.... Now it was galloping around and around the black shapes on the ground, and the dementors were falling back, scattering, retreating into the darkness.... They were gone.

The Patronus turned. It was cantering back toward Harry across the still surface of the water. It wasn't a horse. It wasn't a unicorn, either. It was a stag. It was shining brightly as the moon above ... it was coming back to him....

It stopped on the bank. Its hooves made no mark on the soft ground as it stared at Harry with its large, silver eyes. Slowly, it bowed its antlered head. And Harry realized... "Prongs, "he whispered.

But as his trembling fingertips stretched toward the creature, it vanished.

Harry stood there, hand still outstretched. Then, with a great leap of his heart, he heard hooves behind him -he whirled around and saw Hermione dashing toward him, dragging Buckbeak behind her.

"What did you do?" she said fiercely. "You said you were only going to keep a lookout!"

"I just saved all our lives...," said Harry. "Get behind here -- behind this bush -- I'll explain."

Hermione listened to what had just happened with her mouth open yet again.

"Did anyone see you?"

"Yes, haven't you been listening? I saw me but I thought I was my dad! It's okay!"

"Harry, I can't believe it.... You conjured up a Patronus that drove away all those dementors! That's very, very advanced magic. I knew I could do it this time," said Harry, "because I'd already done it.... Does that make sense?"

"I don't know -- Harry, look at Snape!"

Together they peered around the bush at the other bank. Snape had regained consciousness. He was conjuring stretchers and lifting the limp forms of Harry, Hermione, and Black onto them. A fourth stretcher, no doubt bearing Ron, was already floating at his side. Then, wand held out in front of him, he moved them away toward the castle.

"Right, it's nearly time," said Hermione tensely, looking at her watch. "We've got about forty-five minutes until Dumbledore locks the door to the hospital wing. We've got to rescue Sirius and get back into the ward before anybody realizes we're missing.... 11

They waited, watching the moving clouds reflected in the lake, while the bush next to them whispered in the breeze. Buckbeak, bored, was ferreting for worms again.

"D' you reckon he's up there yet?" said Harry, checking his watch. He looked up at the castle and began counting the windows to the right of the West Tower.

"Look!" Hermione whispered. "\Who's that? Someone's coming back out of the castle!"

Harry stared through the darkness. The man was hurrying across the grounds, toward one of the entrances. Something shiny glinted in his belt.

"Macnair!" said Harry. "The executioner! He's gone to get the dementors! This is it, Hermione --"

Hermione put her hands on Buckbeak's back and Harry gave her a leg up. Then he placed his foot on one of the lower branches of the bush and climbed up in front of her. He pulled Buckbeak's rope back over his neck and tied it to the other side of his collar like reins.

"Ready?" he whispered to Hermione. "YotM better hold on to me --

He nudged Buckbeak's sides with his heels.

Buckbeak soared straight into the dark air. Harry gripped his flanks with his knees, feeling the great wings rising powerfully beneath them. Hermione was holding Harry very tight around the waist; he could hear her muttering, "Oh, no -- I don't like this oh, I really don't like this --"

Harry urged Buckbeak forward. They were gliding quietly toward the upper

floors of the castle.... Harry pulled hard on the left-hand side of the rope, and Buckbeak turned. Harry was trying to count the windows flashing past --

"Whoa!" he said, pulling backward as hard as he could.

Buckbeak slowed down and they found themselves at a stop, unless you counted the fact that they kept rising up and down several feet as the hippogriff beat his wings to remain airborne.

"He's there!" Harry said, spotting Sirius as they rose up beside the window. He reached out, and as Buckbeak's wings fell, was able to tap sharply on the glass.

Black looked up. Harry saw his jaw drop. He leapt from his chair, hurried to the window and tried to open it, but it was locked.

"Stand back!" Hermione called to him, and she took out her wand, still gripping the back of Harry's robes with her left hand.

"Alohomora!"

The window sprang open.

"How -- how --?" said Black weakly, staring at the hippogriff

"Get on -- there's not much time," said Harry, gripping Buckbeak firmly on either side of his sleek neck to hold him steady. "You've got to get out of here -the dementors are coming -- Macnair's gone to get them."

Black placed a hand on either side of the window frame and heaved his head and shoulders out of it. It was very lucky he was so thin. In seconds, he had managed to fling one leg over Buckbeak's back and pull himself onto the hippogriff behind Hermione.

"Okay, Buckbeak, up!" said Harry, shaking the rope. "Up to the tower -- come on.

The hippogriff gave one sweep of its mighty wings and they were soaring upward again, high as the top of the West Tower. Buckbeak landed with a clatter on the battlements, and Harry and Hermione slid off him at once.

"Sirius, you'd better go, quick," Harry panted. "They'll reach Flitwick's office any moment, they'll find out you're gone."

Buckbeak pawed the ground, tossing his sharp head.

"What happened to the other boy? Ron?" croaked Sirius.

"He's going to be okay. He's still out of it, but Madam Pomfrey says she'll be able to make him better. Quick -- go --"

But Black was still staring down at Harry.

"How can I ever thank --"

"GO!" Harry and Hermione shouted together.

Black wheeled Buckbeak around, facing the open sky.

"We'll see each other again," he said. "You are -- truly your father's son, Harry...."

He squeezed Buckbeak's sides with his heels. Harry and Hermione jumped back as the enormous wings rose once more.... The hippogriff took off into the air.... He and his rider became smaller and smaller as Harry gazed after them... then a cloud drifted across the moon.... They were gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

OWL POST AGAIN

Harry!"

Hermione was tugging at his sleeve, staring at her watch. "We've got exactly ten minutes to get back down to the hospital wing without anybody seeing us -- before Dumbledore locks the door --"

"Okay," said Harry, wrenching his gaze from the sky, "let's go...."

They slipped through the doorway behind them and down a tightly spiraling stone staircase. As they reached the bottom of it, they heard voices. They flattened themselves against the wall and listened. It sounded like Fudge and Snape. They were walking quickly along the corridor at the foot of the staircase.

"... only hope Dumbledore's not going to make difficulties," Snape was saying. "The Kiss will be performed immediately?"

"As soon as Macnair returns with the dementors. This whole Black affair has been highly embarrassing. I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to informing the Daily Prophet that we've got him at last.... I daresay they'll want to interview you, Snape... and once young Harry's back in his right mind, I expect he'll want to tell the Prophet exactly how you saved him...."

Harry clenched his teeth. He caught a glimpse of Snape's smirk as he and Fudge passed Harry and Hermione's hiding place. Their footsteps died away. Harry and Hermione waited a few moments to make sure they'd really gone, then started to run in the opposite direction. Down one staircase, then another, along a new ,corridor -- then they heard a cackling ahead.

"Peeves!" Harry muttered, grabbing Hermione's wrist. "In here!"

They tore into a deserted classroom to their left just in time. Peeves seemed to be bouncing along the corridor in boisterous good spirits, laughing his head off.

"Oh, he's horrible," whispered Hermione, her ear to the door. "I bet he's all excited because the dementors are going to finish off Sirius...." She checked her watch. "Three minutes, Harry!"

They waited until Peeves's gloating voice had faded into the distance, then slid back out of the room and broke into a run again.

"Hermione -- what'll happen -- if we don't get back inside before Dumbledore locks the door?" Harry panted.

I don't want to think about it!" Hermione moaned, checking her watch

again. "One minute!"

They had reached the end of the corridor with the hospital wing entrance. "Okay -- I can hear Dumbledore," said Hermione tensely. "Come on, Harry!"

They crept along the corridor. The door opened. Dumbledore's back appeared.

"I am going to lock you in," they heard him saying. "it is five minutes to midnight. Miss Granger, three turns should do it. Good luck."

Dumbledore backed out of the room, closed the door, and took out his wand to magically lock it. Panicking, Harry and Hermione ran forward. Dumbledore looked up, and a wide smile appeared under the long silver mustache. "Well?" he said quietly.

"We did it!" said Harry breathlessly. "Sirius has gone, on Buckbeak...."

Dumbledore beamed at them.

"Well done. I think --" He listened intently for any sound within the hospital wing. "Yes, I think you've gone too -- get inside -- I'll lock you in --"

Harry and Hermione slipped back inside the dormitory. It was empty except for Ron, who was still lying motionless in the end bed. As the lock clicked behind them, Harry and Hermione crept back to their own beds, Hermione tucking the Time-Turner back under her robes. A moment later, Madam Pomfrey came striding back out of her office.

"Did I hear the headmaster leaving? Am I allowed to look after my patients now?"

She was in a very bad mood. Harry and Hermione thought it best to accept their chocolate quietly. Madam Pomfrey stood over them, making sure they ate it. But Harry could hardly swallow. He and Hermione were waiting, listening, their nerves jangling.... And then, as they both took a fourth piece of chocolate from Madam Pomfrey, they heard a distant roar of fury echoing from somewhere above them....

"What was that?" said Madam Pomfrey in alarm.

Now they could hear angry voices, growing louder and louder. Madam Pomfrey was staring at the door.

"Really -- they'll wake everybody up! What do they think they're doing?"

Harry was trying to hear what the voices were saying. They were drawing nearer --

"He must have Disapparated, Severus. We should have left somebody in the room with him. When this gets out --"

"HE DIDN'T DISAPPARATE!" Snape roared, now very close at hand. "YOU CAN'T APPARATE OR DISAPPARATE INSIDE THIS CASTLE! THIS -- HAS -- SOMETHING -- TO -- DO -- WITH -- POTTER!"

"Severus -- be reasonable -- Harry has been locked up --"

BAM.

The door of the hospital wing burst open.

Fudge, Snape, and Dumbledore came striding into the ward. Dumbledore alone looked calm. Indeed, he looked as though he was quite enjoying himself. Fudge appeared angry. But Snape was beside himself.

"OUT WITH IT, POTTER!" he bellowed. "WHAT DID YOU DO?"

"Professor Snape!" shrieked Madam Pomfrey. "Control yourself!"

"See here, Snape, be reasonable," said Fudge. "This door's been locked, we just saw --"

"THEY HELPED HIM ESCAPE, I KNOW IT!" Snape howled, pointing at Harry and Hermione. His face was twisted; spit was flying from his mouth.

"Calm down, man!" Fudge barked. "You're talking nonsense!"

"YOU DON'T KNOW POTTER!" shrieked Snape. "HE DID IT, I KNOW HE DID IT --"

"That will do, Severus," said Dumbledore quietly. "Think about what you are saying. This door has been locked since I left the ward ten minutes ago. Madam Pomfrey, have these students left their beds?"

"Of course not!" said Madam Pomfrey, bristling. "I would have heard them!"

"Well, there you have it, Severus," said Dumbledore calmly. "Unless you are suggesting that Harry and Hermione are able to be in two places at once, I'm afraid I don't see any point in troubling them further."

Snape stood there, seething, staring from Fudge, who looked thoroughly shocked at his behavior, to Dumbledore, whose eyes were twinkling behind his glasses. Snape whirled about, robes swishing behind him, and stormed out of the ward.

"Fellow seems quite unbalanced," said Fudge, staring after him. "I'd watch out for him if I were you, Dumbledore."

"Oh, he's not unbalanced," said Dumbledore quietly. "He's just suffered a severe disappointment."

"He's not the only one!" puffed Fudge. "The Daily Prophet's going to have a field day! We had Black cornered and he slipped through our fingers yet again! All it needs now is for the story of that hippogriff's escape to get out, and I'll be a laughingstock! Well... I'd better go and notify the Ministry.....

"And the dementors?" said Dumbledore. "They'll be removed from the school, I trust?"

"Oh yes, they'll have to go," said Fudge, running his fingers

distractedly through his hair. "Never dreamed they'd attempt to administer the Kiss on an innocent boy... Completely out of control... no, I'll have them packed off back to Azkaban tonight.... Perhaps we should think about dragons at the school entrance...."

"Hagrid would like that," said Dumbledore, smiling at Harry and Hermione. As he and Fudge left the dormitory, Madam Pomfrey hurried to the door and locked it again. Muttering angrily to herself, she headed back to her office.

There was a low moan from the other end of the ward. Ron had woken up. They could see him sitting up, rubbing his head, looking around.

"What -- what happened?" he groaned. "Harry? Why are we in here? Where's Sirius? Where's Lupin? What's going on?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other.

"You explain," said Harry, helping himself to some more chocolate.

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the hospital wing at noon the next day, it was to find an almost deserted castle. The sweltering, heat and the end of the exams meant that everyone was taking full advantage of another Hogsmeade visit. Neither Ron nor Hermione felt like going, however, so they and Harry wandered onto the grounds, still talking about the extraordinary events of the previous night and wondering where Sirius and Buckbeak were now. Sitting near the lake, watching the giant squid waving its tentacles lazily above the water, Harry lost the thread of the conversation as he looked across to the opposite bank. The stag had galloped toward him from there just last night....

A shadow fell across them and they looked 'tip to see a very bleary-eyed Hagrid, mopping his sweaty face with one of his tablecloth-sized handkerchiefs and beaming down at them.

"Know I shouldn't feel happy, after wha' happened las' night," he said. "I mean, Black escapin' again, an, everythin' -- but guess what?"

"What?" they said, pretending to look curious.

"Beaky! He escaped! He's free! Bin celebratin' all night!"

"That's wonderful!" said Hermione, giving Ron a reproving look because he looked as though he was close to laughing.

"Yeah... can't've tied him up properly," said Hagrid, gazing happily out over the grounds. "I was worried this mornin', mind... thought he mighta met Professor Lupin on the grounds, but Lupin says he never ate anythin' las' night...."

"What?" said Harry quickly.

"Blimey, haven' yeh heard?" said Hagrid, his smile fading a little. He lowered his voice, even though there was nobody in sight. "Er -- Snape told all the Slytherins this mornin'.... Thought everyone'd know by now... Professor Lupin's a werewolf, see. An' he was loose on the grounds las' night.... He's packin' now, o' course."

"He's packing?" said Harry, alarmed. "Why?"

"Leavin', isn' he?" said Hagrid, looking surprised that Harry had to ask. "Resigned firs' thing this mornin'. Says he can't risk it happenin again.

Harry scrambled to his feet.

"I'm going to see him," he said to Ron and Hermione.

"But if he's resigned --"

-- doesn't sound like there's anything we can do --"

"I don't care. I still want to see him. I'll meet you back here."

Lupin's office door was open. He had already packed most of his things. The grindylow's empty tank stood next to his battered old suitcase, which was open and nearly full. Lupin was bending over something on his desk and looked up only when Harry knocked on the door.

"I saw you coming," said Lupin, smiling. He pointed to the parchment he had been poring over. It was the Marauder's Map.

"I just saw Hagrid," said Harry. "And he said you'd resigned. It's not true, is it?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Lupin. He started opening his desk drawers and taking out the contents.

"Why?" said Harry. "The Ministry of Magic don't think you were helping Sirius, do they?"

Lupin crossed to the door and closed it behind Harry.

"No. Professor Dumbledore managed to convince Fudge that I was trying to save your lives." He sighed. "That was the final straw for Severus. I think the loss of the Order of Merlin hit him hard. So he -- er -- accidentally let slip that I am a werewolf this morning at breakfast."

"You're not leaving just because of that!" said Harry.

Lupin smiled wryly.

"This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents.... They will not want a werewolf teaching their children, Harry. And after last night, I see their point. I could have bitten any of you.... That must never happen again."

"You're the best Defense Against the Dark Arts- teacher we've ever had!" said Harry. "Don't go!"

Lupin shook his head and didn't speak. He carried on emptying his drawers. Then, while Harry was trying to think of a good argument to make him stay, Lupin said, "From what the headmaster told me this morning, you saved a lot of lives last night, Harry. If I'm proud of anything I've done this year, it's how much you've learned.... Tell me about your Patronus."

"How d'you know about that?" said Harry, distracted.

"What else could have driven the dementors back?"

Harry told Lupin what had happened. When he'd finished, Lupin was smiling again.

"Yes, your father was always a stag when he transformed," he said. "You guessed right... that's why we called him Prongs."

Lupin threw his last few books into his case, closed the desk drawers, and turned to look at Harry.

"Here -- I brought this from the Shrieking Shack last night," he said, handing Harry back the Invisibility Cloak. "And..." He hesitated, then held out the Marauder's Map too. "I am no longer your teacher, so I don't feel guilty about giving you back this as well. It's no use to me, and I daresay you, Ron, and Hermione will find uses for it."

Harry took the map and grinned.

"You told me Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs would've wanted to lure me out of school... you said they'd have thought it was funny."

"And so we would have," said Lupin, now reaching down to close his case. "I have no hesitation in saying that James would have been highly disappointed if his son had never found any of the secret passages out of the castle."

There was a knock on the door. Harry hastily stuffed the Marauder's Map and the Invisibility Cloak into his pocket.

It was Professor Dumbledore. He didn't look surprised to see Harry there.

"Your carriage is at the gates, Remus," he said.

"Thank You, Headmaster."

Lupin picked up his old suitcase and the empty grindylow tank.

"Well -- good-bye, Harry," he said, smiling. "It has been a real pleasure teaching you. I feel sure we'll meet again sometime. Headmaster, there is no need to see me to the gates, I can manage...."

Harry had the impression that Lupin wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

"Good-bye, then, Remus," said Dumbledore soberly. Lupin shifted the grindylow tank slightly so that he and Dumbledore could shake hands. Then, with a final nod to Harry and a swift smile, Lupin left the office.

Harry sat down in his vacated chair, staring glumly at the floor. He heard the door close and looked up. Dumbledore was still there.

"Why so miserable, Harry?" he said quietly. "You should be very proud of yourself after last night."

"It didn't make any difference," said Harry bitterly. "Pettigrew got away."

"Didn't make any difference?" said Dumbledore quietly, "It made all the difference in the world, Harry. You helped uncover the truth. You saved an innocent man from a terrible fate."

Terrible. Something stirred in Harry's memory. Greater and more terrible

than ever before... Professor Trelawney's prediction!

"Professor Dumbledore -- yesterday, when I was having my Divination exam, Professor Trelawney went very -- very strange."

"Indeed?" said Dumbledore. "Er -- stranger than usual, you mean?"

"Yes... her voice went all deep and her eyes rolled and she said ... she said Voldemort's servant was going to set out to return to him before midnight.... She said the servant would help him come back to power." Harry stared up at Dumbledore. "And then she sort of became normal again, and she couldn't remember anything she'd said. Was it -- was she making a real prediction?"

Dumbledore looked mildly impressed.

"Do you know, Harry, I think she might have been." he said thoughtfully. "Who'd have thought it? That brings her total of real predictions up to two. I should offer her a pay raise...."

"But --" Harry looked at him, aghast. How could Dumbledore take this so calmly?

"But -- I stopped Sirius and Professor Lupin from killing Pettigrew! That makes it my fault if Voldemort comes back!"

"It does not," said Dumbledore quietly. "Hasn't your experience with the Time-Turner taught you anything, Harry? The consequences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting the future is a very difficult business indeed.... Professor Trelawney, bless her, is living proof of that.... You did a very noble thing, in saving Pettigrew's life."

"But if he helps Voldemort back to power

"Pettigrew owes his life to you. You have sent Voldemort a deputy who is in your debt.... When one wizard saves another wizard's life, it creates a certain bond between them... and I'm much mistaken if Voldemort wants his servant in the debt of Harry Potter."

"I don't want a connection with Pettigrew!" said Harry. "He betrayed my parents!"

"This is magic at its deepest, its most impenetrable, Harry. But trust me... the time may come when you will be very glad you saved Pettigrew's life."

Harry couldn't imagine when that would be. Dumbledore looked as though he knew what Harry was thinking.

"I knew your father very well, both at Hogwarts and later, Harry," he said gently. "He would have saved Pettigrew too, I am sure of it."

Harry looked up at him. Dumbledore wouldn't laugh -- he could tell Dumbledore...

"I thought it was my dad who'd conjured my Patronus. I mean, when I saw myself across the lake ... I thought I was seeing him." "An easy mistake to make," said Dumbledore softly. "I expect you'll tire of hearing it, but you do look extraordinarily like James. Except for the eyes... you

have your mother's eyes.

Harry shook his head.

"It was stupid, thinking it was him," he muttered. "I mean, I knew he was dead."

"You think the dead we loved ever truly leave us? You think that we don't recall them more clearly than ever in times of great trouble? Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him. How else could you produce that particular Patronus? Prongs rode again last night."

It took a moment for Harry to realize what Dumblefore had said.

Last night Sirius told me all about how they became Animagi," said Dumbledore, smiling. "An extraordinary achievement -- not least, keeping it quiet from me. And then I remembered the most unusual form your Patronus took, when it charged Mr. Malfoy down at your Quidditch match against Ravenclaw. You know, Harry, in a way, you did see your father last night.... You found him inside yourself."

And Dumbledore left the office, leaving Harry to his very confused thoughts.

Nobody at Hogwarts now knew the truth of what had happened the night that Sirius, Buckbeak, and Pettigrew had vanished except Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Professor Dumbledore. As the end of term approached, Harry heard many different theories about what had really happened, but none of them came close to the truth.

Malfoy was furious about Buckbeak. He was convinced that Hagrid had found a way of smuggling the hippogriff to safety, and seemed outraged that he and his father had been outwitted by a gamekeeper. Percy Weasley, meanwhile, had much to say on the subject of Sirius's escape.

"If I manage to get into the Ministry, I'll have a lot of proposals to make about Magical Law Enforcement!" he told the only person who would listen -- his girlfriend, Penelope.

Though the weather was perfect, though the atmosphere was so

cheerful, though he knew they had achieved the near impossible in helping Sirius to freedom, Harry had never approached the end of a school year in worse spirits.

He certainly wasn't the only one who was sorry to see Professor Lupin go. The whole of Harry's Defense Against the Dark Arts class was miserable about his resignation.

"Wonder what they'll give us next year?" said Seamus Finnigan gloomily.

"Maybe a vampire," suggested Dean Thomas hopefully.

It wasn't only Professor Lupin's departure that was weighing on Harry's mind. He couldn't help thinking a lot about Professor Trelawney's prediction. He kept wondering where Pettigrew was now, whether he had sought sanctuary with Voldemort yet. But the thing that was lowering Harry's spirits most of all was the prospect of returning to the Dursleys. For maybe half an hour, a glorious half hour, he had believed

he would be living with Sirius from now on... his parents' best friend.... It would have been the next best thing to having his own father back. And while no news of Sirius was definitely good news, because it meant he had successfully gone into hiding, Harry couldn't help feeling miserable when he thought of the home he might have had, and the fact that it was now impossible.

The exam results came out on the last day of term. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had passed every subject. Harry was amazed that he had got through Potions. He had a shrewd suspicion that Dumbledore might have stepped in to stop Snape failing him on purpose. Snape's behavior toward Harry over the past week had been quite alarming. Harry wouldn't have thought it possible that Snape's dislike for him could increase, but it certainly had. A muscle twitched unpleasantly at the corner of Snape's thin mouth every time he looked at Harry, and he was constantly flexing his fingers, as though itching to place them around Harry's throat.

Percy had got his top-grade N.E.W.T.s; Fred and George had scraped a handful of O.W.L.s each. Gryffindor House, meanwhile, largely thanks to their spectacular performance in the Quidditch Cup, had won the House championship for the third year running. This meant that the end of term feast took place amid decorations of scarlet and gold, and that the Gryffindor table was the noisiest of the lot, as everybody celebrated. Even Harry managed to forget about the journey back to the Dursleys the next day as he ate, drank, talked, and laughed with the rest.

As the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station the next morning, Hermione gave Harry and Ron some surprising news.

"I went to see Professor McGonagall this morning, just before breakfast. I've decided to drop Muggle Studies."

"But you passed your exam with three hundred and twenty percent!" said Ron.

"I know," sighed Hermione, "but I can't stand another year like this one. That Time-Turner, it was driving me mad. I've handed it in. Without Muggle Studies and Divination, I'll be able to have a normal schedule again."

I still can't believe you didn't tell us about it," said Ron grumpily. "We're supposed to be your friends."

"I promised I wouldn't tell anyone," said Hermione severely. She looked around at Harry, who was watching Hogwarts disappear from view behind a mountain. Two whole months before he'd see it again....

"Oh, cheer up, Harry!" said Hermione sadly.

"I'm okay," said Harry quickly. "Just thinking about the holidays."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about them too," said Ron. "Harry, you've got to come and stay with us. I'll fix it up with Mum and Dad, then I'll call you. I know how to use a fellytone now --"

"A telephone, Ron," said Hermione. "Honestly, you should take Muggle Studies next year...."

Ron *ignored her.

"It's the Quidditch World Cup this summer! How about it, Harry? Come and stay, and we'll go and see it! Dad can usually get tickets from work."

This proposal had the effect of cheering Harry up a great deal.

"Yeah... I bet the Dursleys'd be pleased to let me come... especially after what I did to Aunt Marge...."

Feeling considerably more cheerful, Harry joined Ron and Hermione in several games of Exploding Snap, and when the witch with the tea cart arrived, he bought himself a very large lunch, though nothing with chocolate in it.

But it was late in the afternoon before the thing that made him truly happy turned up....

"Harry," said Hermione suddenly, peering over his shoulder. "What's that thing outside your window?"

Harry turned to look outside. Something very small and gray was bobbing in and out of sight beyond the glass. He stood up for a better look and saw that it was a tiny owl, carrying a letter that was much too big for it. The owl was so small, in fact, that it kept tumbling over in the air, buffeted this way and that in the train's slipstream. Harry quickly pulled down the window, stretched out his arm, and caught it. It felt like a very fluffy Snitch. He brought it carefully inside. The owl dropped its letter onto Harry's seat and began zooming around their compartment, apparently very pleased with itself for accomplishing its task. Hedwig clicked her beak with a sort of dignified disapproval. Crookshanks sat up in his seat, following the owl with his great yellow eyes. Ron, noticing this, snatched the owl safely out of harm's way.

Harry picked up the letter. It was addressed to him. He ripped open the letter, and shouted, "It's from Sirius!"

"What?" said Ron and Hermione excitedly. "Read it aloud!"

Dear Harry,

I hope this finds you before you reach your aunt and uncle. I don't know whether they're used to owl post.

Buckbeak and I are in hiding. I won't tell you where, in case this owl falls into the wrong hands. I have some doubt about his reliability, but he is the best I could find, and he did seem eager for the job.

I believe the dementors are still searching for me, but they haven't a hope of finding me here. I am planning to allow some Muggles to glimpse me soon, a long way from Hogwarts, so that the security on the castle will be lifted.

There is something I never got around to telling you during our brief meeting. It was I who sent you the Firebolt --

"Ha!" said Hermione triumphantly. "See! I told you it was from him!"

"Yes, but he hadn't jinxed it, had he?" said Ron. "Ouch!" The tiny owl, now hooting happily in his hand, had nibbled one of his fingers in what it seemed to think was an affectionate way.

Crookshanks took the order to the Owl Office for me. I used your name but told them to take the gold from my own Gringotts vault. Please consider it as thirteen birthdays' worth of presents from your godfather.

I would also like to apologize for the fright I think I gave you that night last year when you left your uncle's house. I had only hoped to get a glimpse of you before starting my journey north, but I think the sight of me alarmed you.

I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at Hogwarts more enjoyable.

If ever you need me, send word. Your owl will find me.

I'll write again soon.

Sirius

Harry looked eagerly inside the envelope. There was another piece of parchment in there. He read it through quickly and felt suddenly as warm and contented as though he'd swallowed a bottle of hot butterbeer in one gulp.

I, Sirius Black, Harry Potter's godfather, hereby give him permission to visit Hogsmeade on weekends.

"That'll be good enough for Dumbledore!" said Harry happily. He looked back at Sirius's letter. "Hang on, there's a RS...."

I thought your friend Ron might like to keep this owl, as it's my fault he no longer has a rat.

Ron's eyes widened. The minute owl was still hooting excitedly. "Keep him?" he said uncertainly. He looked closely at the owl for a moment; then, to Harry's and Hermione's great surprise, he held him out for Crookshanks to sniff.

"What do you reckon?" Ron asked the cat. "Definitely an owl?"

Crookshanks purred.

"That's good enough for me," said Ron happily. "He's mine."

Harry read and reread the letter from Sirius all the way back into King's Cross station. It was still clutched tightly in his hand as he, Ron, and Hermione stepped back through the barrier of platform nine and three-quarters. Harry spotted Uncle Vernon at once. He was standing a good distance from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, eyeing them suspiciously, and when Mrs. Weasley hugged Harry in greeting, his worst suspicions about them seemed confirmed.

"I'll call about the World Cup!" Ron yelled after Harry as Harry bid him and Hermione good-bye, then wheeled the trolley bearing his trunk and Hedwig's cage toward Uncle Vernon, who greeted him in his usual fashion.

"What's that?" he snarled, staring at the envelope Harry was still clutching in his hand. "If it's another form for me to sign, you've got another ---"

"It's not," said Harry cheerfully. "It's a letter from my godfather."

"Godfather?" sputtered Uncle Vernon. "You haven't got a godfather!"

"Yes, I have," said Harry brightly. "He was my mum and dad's best friend. He's a convicted murderer, but he's broken out of wizard prison and he's on the run. He likes to keep in touch with me, though... keep up with my news... check if I'm happy..."

And, grinning broadly at the look of horror on Uncle Vernon's face, Harry set off toward the station exit, Hedwig rattling along in front of him, for what looked like a much better summer than the last.

THE END

Harry Potter
and the Goblet of Fire
by
J.K. Rowling

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To Peter Rowling.
In Memory of Mr. Ridley.
And to Susan Sladden.
Who Helped Harry
Out of His Cupboard.

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HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE

CHAPTER ONE - THE RIDDLE HOUSE

The villagers of Little Hangleton still called it "the Riddle House," even though it had been many years since the Riddle family had lived there. It stood on a hill overlooking the village, some of its windows boarded, tiles missing from its roof, and ivy spreading unchecked over its face. Once a fine-looking manor, and easily the largest and grandest building for miles around, the Riddle House was now damp, derelict, and unoccupied.

The Little Hangletons all agreed that the old house was "creepy." Half a century ago, something strange and horrible had happened there, something that the older inhabitants of the village still liked to discuss when topics for gossip were scarce. The story had been picked over so many times, and had been embroidered in so many places, that nobody was quite sure what the truth was anymore. Every version of the tale, however, started in the same place: Fifty years before, at daybreak on a fine summer's morning when the Riddle House had still been well kept and impressive, a maid had entered the drawing room to find all three Riddles dead.

The maid had run screaming down the hill into the village and roused as many people as she could.

"Lying there with their eyes wide open! Cold as ice! Still in their dinner things!"

The police were summoned, and the whole of Little Hangleton had seethed with shocked curiosity and ill-disguised excitement. Nobody wasted their breath pretending to feel very sad about the Riddles, for they had been most unpopular. Elderly Mr. and Mrs. Riddle had been rich, snobbish, and rude, and their grown-up son, Tom, had been, if anything, worse. All the villagers cared about was the identity of their murderer -- for plainly, three apparently healthy people did not all drop dead of natural causes on the same night.

The Hanged Man, the village pub, did a roaring trade that night; the whole village seemed to have turned out to discuss the murders. They were rewarded for leaving their firesides when the Riddles' cook arrived dramatically in their midst and announced to the suddenly silent pub that a man called Frank Bryce had just been arrested.

"Frank!" cried several people. "Never!"

Frank Bryce was the Riddles' gardener. He lived alone in a run-down cottage on the grounds of the Riddle House. Frank had come back from the war with a very stiff leg and a great dislike of crowds and loud noises, and had been working for the Riddles ever since.

There was a rush to buy the cook drinks and hear more details.

"Always thought he was odd," she told the eagerly listening villagers, after her fourth sherry. "Unfriendly, like. I'm sure if I've offered him a cuppa once, I've offered it a hundred times. Never wanted to mix, he didn't."

"Ah, now," said a woman at the bar, "he had a hard war, Frank. He likes the quiet life. That's no reason to --"

"Who else had a key to the back door, then?" barked the cook. "There's been a spare key hanging in the gardener's cottage far back as I can remember! Nobody forced the door last night! No broken windows! All Frank had to do was creep up to the big house while we was all sleeping..."

The villagers exchanged dark looks.

"I always thought that he had a nasty look about him, right enough," grunted a man at the bar.

"War turned him funny, if you ask me," said the landlord.

"Told you I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of Frank, didn't I, Dot?" said an excited woman in the corner.

"Horrible temper," said Dot, nodding fervently. "I remember, when he was a kid..."

By the following morning, hardly anyone in Little Hangleton doubted that Frank Bryce had killed the Riddles.

But over in the neighboring town of Great Hangleton, in the dark and dingy police station, Frank was stubbornly repeating, again and again, that he was innocent, and that the only person he had seen near the house on the day of the Riddles' deaths had been a teenage boy, a stranger, dark-haired and pale. Nobody else in the village had seen any such boy, and the police were quite sure Frank had invented him.

Then, just when things were looking very serious for Frank, the report on the Riddles' bodies came back and changed everything.

The police had never read an odder report. A team of doctors had examined the bodies and had concluded that none of the Riddles had been poisoned, stabbed, shot, strangled, suffocated, or (as far as they could tell) harmed at all. In fact (the report continued, in a tone of unmistakable bewilderment), the Riddles all appeared to be in perfect health -- apart from the fact that they were all dead. The doctors did note (as though determined to find something wrong with the bodies) that each of the Riddles had a look of terror upon his or her face -- but as the frustrated police said, whoever heard of three people being frightened to death?

As there was no proof that the Riddles had been murdered at all, the police were forced to let Frank go. The Riddles were buried in the Little Hangleton churchyard, and their graves remained objects of curiosity for a while. To everyone's surprise, and amid a cloud of suspicion, Frank Bryce returned to his cottage on the grounds of the Riddle House.

"'S far as I'm concerned, he killed them, and I don't care what the police say," said Dot in the Hanged Man. "And if he had any decency, he'd leave here, knowing as how we knows he did it."

But Frank did not leave. He stayed to tend the garden for the next family who lived in the Riddle House, and then the next -- for neither family stayed long. Perhaps it was partly because of Frank that the new owners said there was a nasty feeling about the place, which, in the absence of inhabitants, started to fall into disrepair.

The wealthy man who owned the Riddle House these days neither lived there nor put it to any use; they said in the village that he kept it for "tax reasons," though nobody was very clear what these might be. The wealthy owner continued to pay Frank to do the gardening, however. Frank was nearing his seventy-seventh birthday now, very deaf, his bad leg stiffer than ever, but could be seen pottering around the flower beds in fine weather, even though the weeds were starting to creep up on him, try as he might to suppress them.

Weeds were not the only things Frank had to contend with either. Boys from the village made a habit of throwing stones through the windows

of the Riddle House. They rode their bicycles over the lawns Frank worked so hard to keep smooth. Once or twice, they broke into the old house for a dare. They knew that old Frank's devotion to the house and the grounds amounted almost to an obsession, and it amused them to see him limping across the garden, brandishing his stick and yelling croakily at them. Frank, for his part, believed the boys tormented him because they, like their parents and grandparents, thought him a murderer. So when Frank awoke one night in August and saw something very odd up at the old house, he merely assumed that the boys had gone one step further in their attempts to punish him.

It was Frank's bad leg that woke him; it was paining him worse than ever in his old age. He got up and limped downstairs into the kitchen with the idea of refilling his hot-water bottle to ease the stiffness in his knee. Standing at the sink, filling the kettle, he looked up at the Riddle House and saw lights glimmering in its upper windows. Frank knew at once what was going on. The boys had broken into the house again, and judging by the flickering quality of the light, they had started a fire.

Frank had no telephone, in any case, he had deeply mistrusted the police ever since they had taken him in for questioning about the Riddles' deaths. He put down the kettle at once, hurried back upstairs as fast as his bad leg would allow, and was soon back in his kitchen, fully dressed and removing a rusty old key from its hook by the door. He picked up his walking stick, which was propped against the wall, and set off into the night.

The front door of the Riddle House bore no sign of being forced, nor did any of the windows. Frank limped around to the back of the house until he reached a door almost completely hidden by ivy, took out the old key, put it into the lock, and opened the door noiselessly.

He let himself into the cavernous kitchen. Frank had not entered it for many years; nevertheless, although it was very dark, he remembered where the door into the hall was, and he groped his way towards it, his nostrils full of the smell of decay, ears pricked for any sound of footsteps or voices from overhead. He reached the hall, which was a little lighter owing to the large mullioned windows on either side of the front door, and started to climb the stairs, blessing the dust that lay thick upon the stone, because it muffled the sound of his feet and stick.

On the landing, Frank turned right, and saw at once where the intruders were: At the every end of the passage a door stood ajar, and a flickering light shone through the gap, casting a long sliver of gold across the black floor. Frank edged closer and closer, he was able to see a narrow slice of the room beyond.

The fire, he now saw, had been lit in the grate. This surprised him. Then he stopped moving and listened intently, for a man's voice spoke within the room; it sounded timid and fearful.

"There is a little more in the bottle, My Lord, if you are still hungry."

"Later," said a second voice. This too belonged to a man -- but it was strangely high-pitched, and cold as a sudden blast of icy wind. Something about that voice made the sparse hairs on the back of Frank's neck stand up. "Move me closer to the fire, Wormtail."

Frank turned his right ear toward the door, the better to hear. There came the clink of a bottle being put down upon some hard surface, and then the dull scraping noise of a heavy chair being dragged across the floor. Frank caught a glimpse of a small man, his back to the door, pushing the chair into place. He was wearing a long black cloak, and there was a bald patch at the back of his head. Then he went out of sight again.

"Where is Nagini?" said the cold voice.

"I -- I don't know, My Lord," said the first voice nervously. "She set out to explore the house, I think..."

"You will milk her before we retire, Wormtail," said the second voice. "I will need feeding in the night. The journey has tired me greatly."

Brow furrowed, Frank inclined his good ear still closer to the door, listening very hard. There was a pause, and then the man called Wormtail spoke again.

"My Lord, may I ask how long we are going to stay here?"

"A week," said the cold voice. "Perhapse longer. The place is moderately comfortable, and the plan cannot proceed yet. It would be foolish to act before the Quidditch World Cup is over."

Frank inserted a gnarled finger into his ear and rotated it. Owing, no doubt, to a buildup of earwax, he had heard the word "Quidditch," which was not a word at all.

"The -- the Quidditch World Cup, My Lord?" said Wormtail. (Frank dug his finger still more vigorously into his ear.) "Forgive me, but -- I do not understand -- why should we wait until the World Cup is over?"

"Because, fool, at this very moment wizards are pouring into the country from all over the world, and every meddler from the Ministry of Magic will be on duty, on the watch for signs of ususal activity, checking and double-checking identities. They will be obsessed with security, lest the Muggles notice anything. So we wait."

Frank stopped trying to clear out his ear. He had distinctly heard the words "Ministry of Magic," "wizards," and "Muggles." Plainly, each of these expressions meant something secret, and Frank could think of only two sorts of people who would speak in code: spies and criminals. Frank tightened his hold on his walking stick once more, and listened more closely still.

"Your Lordship is still determined, then?" Wormtail said quietly.

"Certainly I am determined, Wormtail." There was a note of menace in the cold voice now.

A slight pause followed -- and the Wormtail spoke, the words tumbling from him in a rush, as though he was forcing himself to say this before he lost his nerve.

"It could be done without Harry Potter, My Lord."

Another pause, more protracted, and then --

"Without Harry Potter?" breathed the second voice softly. "I see..."

"My Lord, I do not say this out of concern for the boy!" said Wormtail, his voice rising squeakily. "The boy is nothing to me, nothing at all! It is merely that if we were to use another witch or wizard -- any wizard -- the thing could be done so much more quickly! If you allowed me to leave you for a short while -- you know that I can disguise myself most effectively -- I could be back here in as little as two days with a suitable person --"

"I could use another wizard," said the cold voice softly, "that is true..."

"My Lord, it makes sense," said Wormtail, sounding thoroughly relieved now. "Laying hands on Harry Potter would be so difficult, he is so well protected --"

"And so you volunteer to go and fetch me a substitute? I wonder...perhaps the task of nursing me has become wearisome for you, Wormtail? Could this suggestion of abandoning the plan be nothing more than an attempt to desert me?"

"My Lord! I -- I have no wish to leave you, none at all --"

"Do not lie to me!" hissed the second voice. "I can always tell, Wormtail! You are regretting that you ever returned to me. I revolt you. I see you flinch when you look at me, feel you shudder when you touch me..."

"No! My devotion to Your Lordship --"

"Your devotion is nothing more than cowardice. You would not be here if you had anywhere else to go. How am I to survive without you, when I need feeding every few hours? Who is to milk Nagini?"

"But you seem so much stronger, My Lord --"

"Liar," breathed the second voice. "I am no stronger, and a few days alone would be enough to rob me of the little health I have regained under your clumsy care. Silence!"

Wormtail, who had been sputtering incoherently, fell silent at once. For a few seconds, Frank could hear nothing but the fire crackling. The second man spoke once more, in a whisper that was almost a hiss.

"I have my reasons for using the boy, as I have already explained to you, and I will use no other. I have waited thirteen years. A few more months will make no difference. As for the protection surrounding the boy, I believe my plan will be effective. All that is needed is a little courage from you, Wormtail -- courage you will find, unless you wish to feel the full extent of Lord Voldermort's wrath --"

"My Lord, I must speak!" said Wormtail, panic in his voice now. "All through our journey I have gone over the plan in my head -- My Lord, Bertha Jorkin's disappearance will not go unnoticed for long, and if we proceed, if I murder --"

"If?" whispered the second voice. "If? If you follow the plan, Wormtail, the Ministry need never know that anyone else has died. You will do it quietly and without fuss; I only wish that i could do it myself, but in my present condition...Come, Wormtail, one more death and our path to Harry Potter is clear. I am not asking you to do it alone. By that time, my faithful serant will have rejoined us --"

"I am a faithful servant," said Wormtail, the merest trace of sullenness in his voice.

"Wormtail, I need somebody with brains, somebody whose loyalty has never wavered, and you, unfortunately, fulfill neither requirement."

"I found you," said Wormtail, and there was definitely a sulky edge to his voice now. "I was the one who found you. I brought you Bertha Jorkins."

"That is true," said the second man, sounding amused. "A stroke of brilliance I would not have thought possible from you, Wormtail -- though, if truth be told, you were not aware how useful she would be when you caught her, were you?"

"I -- I thought she might be useful, My Lord --"

"Liar," said the second voice again, the cruel amusement more pronounced than ever. "However, I do not deny that her information was invaluable. Without it, I could never have formed our plan, and for that, you will have your reward, Wormtail. I will allow you to perform an essential task for me, one that many of my followers would give their right hands to perform..."

"R-really, My Lord? What -- ?" Wormtail sounded terrified again.

"Ah, Wormtail, you don't want me to spoil the surprise? Your part will come at the very end...but I promise you, you will have the honor of being just as useful as Bertha Jorkins."

"You...you..." Wormtail's voice suddenly sounded hoarse, as though his mouth had gone very dry. "You...are going...to kill me too?"

"Wormtail, Wormtail," said the cold voice silkily, "why would I kill you? I killed Bertha because I had to. She was fit for nothing after my questioning, quite useless. In any case, awkward questions would have been asked if she had gone back to the Ministry with the news that she had met you on her holidays. Wizards who are supposed to be dead would do well not to run into Ministry of Magic witches at wayside inns..."

Wormtail muttered something so quietly that Frank could not hear it, but it made the second man laugh -- an entirely mirthless laugh, cold as his speech.

"We could have modified her memory? But Memory Charms can be broken by a powerful wizard, as I proved when I questioned her. It would be an insult to her memory not to use the information I extracted from her, Wormtail."

Out in the corridor, Frank suddenly became aware that the hand gripping his walking stick was slippery with sweat. The man with the cold voice had killed a woman. He was talking about it without any kind of remorse -- with amusement. He was dangerous -- a madman. And he was planning more murders -- this boy, Harry Potter, whoever he was -- was in danger --

Frank knew what he must do. Now, if ever, was the time to go to the police. He would creep out of the house and head straight for the telephone box in the village...but the cold voice was speaking again, and Frank remained where he was, frozen to the spot, listening with all his might.

"One more murder...my faithful servant at Hogwarts...Harry Potter is as good as mine, Wormtail. It is decided. There will be no more argument. But quiet...I think I hear Nagini..."

And the second man's voice changed. He started making noises such as Frank had never heard before; he was hissing and spitting without drawing breath. Frank thought he must be having some sort of fit or seizure.

And then Frank heard movement behind him in the dark passageway. He turned to look, and found himself paralyzed with fright.

Something was slithering toward him along the dark corridor floor, and as it drew nearer to the sliver of firelight, he realized with a thrill of terror that it was a gigantic snake, at least twelve feet long. Horrified, transfixed, Frank stared as its undulating body cut a wide, curving track through the thick dust on the floor, coming closer and closer -- What was he to do? The only means of escape was into the room where the two men sat plotting murder, yet if he stayed where he was the snake would surely kill him --

But before he had made his decision, the snake was level with him, and then, incredibly, miraculously, it was passing; it was following the spitting, hissing noises made by the cold voice beyond the door, and in seconds, the tip of its diamond-patterned tail had vanished through the gap.

There was sweat on Frank's forehead now, and the hand on the walking stick was trembling. Inside the room, the cold voice was continuing to hiss, and Frank was visited by a strange idea, an impossible idea...This man could talk to snakes.

Frank didn't understand what was going on. He wanted more than anything to be back in his bed with his hot-water bottle. The problem was that his legs didn't seem to want to move. As he stood there shaking and trying to master himself, the cold voice switched abruptly to English again.

"Nagini has interesting news, Wormtail," it said.

"In-indeed, My Lord?" said Wormtail.

"Indeed, yes," said the voice, "According to Nagini, there is an old Muggle standing right outside this room, listening to every word we say."

Frank didn't have a chance to hide himself. There were footsteps and then the door of the room was flung wide open.

A short, balding man with graying hair, a pointed nose, and small, watery eyes stood before Frank, a mixture of fear and alarm in his face.

"Invite him inside, Wormtail. Where are your manners?"

The cold voice was coming from the ancient armchair before the fire, but Frank couldn't see the speaker. The snake, on the other hand, was curled up on the rotting hearth rug, like some horrible travesty of a pet dog.

Wormtail beckoned Frank into the room. Though still deeply shaken, Frank took a firmer grip on his walking stick and limped over the threshold.

The fire was the only source of light in the room; it cast long, spidery shadows upon the walls. Frank stared at the back of the armchair; the man inside it seemed to be even smaller than his servant, for Frank couldn't even see the back of his head.

"You heard everything, Muggle?" said the cold voice.

"What's that you're calling me?" said Frank defiantly, for now that he was inside the room, now that the time had come for some sort of action, he felt braver; it had always been so in the war.

"I am calling you a Muggle," said the voice coolly. "It means that you are not a wizard."

"I don't know what you mean by wizard," said Frank, his voice growing steadier. "All I know is I've heard enough to interest the police tonight, I have. You've done murder and you're planning more! And I'll tell youthis too," he added, on a sudden inspiration, "my wife knows I'm up here, and if I don't come back --"

"You have no wife," said te cold voice, very quietly. "Nobody knows you are here. You told nobody that you were coming. Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, Muggle, for he knows...he always knows..."

"Is that right?" said Frank roughly. "Lord, is it? Well, I don't think much of your manners, My Lord. Turn 'round and face me like a man, why don't you?"

"But I am not a man, Muggle," said the cold voice, barely audible now over the crackling of the flames. "I am much, much more than a man. However...why not? I will face you...Wormtail, come turn my chair around."

The servant gave a whimper.

"You heard me, Wormtail."

Slowly, with his face screwed up, as though he would rather have done anything than approach his master and the hearth rug where the snake lay, the small man walked forward and began to turn the chair. The snake lifted its ugly triangular head and hissed slightly as the legs of the chair snagged on its rug.

And then the chair was facing Frank, and he saw what was sitting in it. His walking stick fell to the floor with a clatter. He opened his mouth and let out a scream. He was screaming so loudly that he never heard the words the thing in the chair spoke as it raised a wand. There was a flash of green light, a rushing sound, and Frank Bryce crumpled. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Two hundred miles away, the boy called Harry Potter woke with a start.

CHAPTER TWO - THE SCAR

Harry lay flat on his back, breathing hard as though he had been running. He had awoken from a vivid dream with his hands pressed over his face. The old scar on his forehead, which was shaped like a bolt of lightning, was burning beneath his fingers as though someone had just pressed a white-hot wire to his skin.

He sat up, one hand still on his scar, the other hand reaching out in the darkness for his glasses, which were on the bedside table. He put them on and his bedroom came into clearer focus, lit by a faint, misty orange light that was filtering through the curtains from the street lamp outside the window.

Harry ran his fingers over the scar again. It was still painful. He turned on the lamp beside him, scrambled out of bed, crossed the room, opened his wardrobe, and peered into the mirror on the inside of the door. A skinny boy of fourteen looked back at him, his bright green eyes puzzled under his untidy black hair. He examined the lightning-bolt scar of his reflection more closely. It looked normal, but it was still stinging.

Harry tried to recall what he had been dreaming about before he had awoken. It had seemed so real...There had been two people he knew and one he didn't ...He concentrated hard, frowning, trying to remember...

The dim picture of a darkened room came to him...There had been a snake on a hearth rug...a small man called Peter, nicknamed Wormtail...and a cold, high voice...the voice of Lord Voldemort. Harry felt as though an ice cube had slipped down into his stomach at the very thought...

He closed his eyes tightly and tried to remember what Voldemort had looked like, but it was impossible...All Harry knew was that at the moment when Voldemort's chair had swung around, and he, Harry, had seen what was sitting in it, he had felt a spasm of horror, which had awoken him...or had that been the pain in his scar?

And who had the old man been? For there had definitely been an old man; Harry had watched him fall to the ground. It was all becoming confused. Harry put his face into his hands, blocking out his bedroom, trying to hold on to the picture of that dimly lit room, but it was like trying to keep water in his cupped hands; the details were now trickling away as fast as he tried to hold on to them...Voldemort and Wormtail had been talking about someone they had killed, though Harry could not remember the name...and they had been plotting to kill someone else...him!

Harry took his face out of his hands, opened his eyes, and stared around his bedroom as though expecting to see something unusual there. As it happened, there was an extraordinary number of unusual things in this room. A large wooden trunk stood open at the foot of his bed, revealing a cauldron, broomstick, black robes, and assorted spellbooks. Rolls of parchment littered that part of his desk that was not taken up by the large, empty cage in which his snowy owl, Hedwig, usually perched. On the floor beside his bed a book lay open; Harry had been reading it before he fell asleep last night. The pictures in this book were all moving. Men in bright orange robes were zooming in and out of sight on broomsticks, throwing a red ball to one another.

Harry walked over to the book, picked it up, and watched on of the wizards score a spectacular goal by putting the ball through a fifty-foot-high hoop. Then he snapped the book shut. Even Quidditch -- in Harry's opinion, the best sport in the world -- couldn't distract him at the moment. He placed Flying with the Cannons on his bedside table, crossed to the window, and drew back the curtains to survey the street below.

Privet Drive looked exactly as a respectable suburban street would be expected to look in the early hours of Saturday morning. All the curtains were closed. As far as Harry could see through the darkness, there wasn't a living creature in sight, not even a cat.

And yet...and yet...Harry went restlessly back to the bed and sat down on it, running a finger over his scar again. It wasn't the pain that bothered him; Harry was no stranger to pain and injury. He had lost all the bones from his right arm once and had them painfully regrown in a night. The same arm had been pierced by a venomous foot-long fang not long afterward. Only last year Harry had fallen fifty feet from an airborn broomstick. He was used to bizarre accidents and injuries; they were unavoidable if you attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and had a knack for attracting a lot of trouble.

No, the thing that was bothering Harry was the last time his scar had hurt him, it had been because Voldemort had been close by...But Voldemort couldn't be here, now...The idea of Voldemort lurking in Privet Drive was absurd, impossible...

Harry listened closely to the silence around him. Was he half expecting to hear the creak of a stair or the swish of a cloak? And then he jumped slightly as he heard his cousin Dudley give a tremendous grunting snore from the next room.

Harry shook himself mentally; he was being stupid. There was no one in the house with him except Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley, and they were plainly still asleep, their dreams untroubled and painless.

Asleep was the way Harry liked the Dursleys best; it wasn't as though they were ever any help to him awake. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley were Harry's only living relatives. They were Muggles who hated and despised magic in any form, which meant that Harry was about as welcome in their house as dry rot. They had explained away Harry's long absences at Hogwarts over the last three years by telling everyone that he went to St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys. They knew perfectly well that, as an underage wizard, Harry wasn't allowed to use magic outside Hogwarts, but they were still apt to blame him for anything that went wrong about the house. Harry had never been able to confide in them or tell them anything about his life in the wizarding world. The very idea of going to them when they awoke, and telling them about his scar hurting him, and about his worries about Voldemort, was laughable.

And yet it was because of Voldemort that Harry had come to live with the Dursleys in the first place. If it hadn't been for Voldemort, Harry would not have had the lightning scar on his forehead. If it hadn't been for Voldemort, Harry would still have had parents...

Harry had been a year old the night that Voldemort -- the most powerful Dark wizard for a century, a wizard who had been gaining power steadily for eleven years -- arrived at his house and killed his father and mother. Voldemort had then turned his wand on Harry; he had performed the curse that had disposed of many full-grown witches and wizards in his steady rise to power -- and, incredibly, it had not worked. Instead of killing the small boy, the curse had rebounded upon Voldemort. Harry had survived with nothing but a lightning-shaped cut on his forehead, and Voldemort had been reduced to something barely alive. His powers gone, his life almost extinguished, Voldemort had fled; the terror in which the secret community of witches and wizards had lived for so long had lifted, Voldemort's followers had disbanded, and Harry Potter had become famous.

It had been enough of a shock for Harry to discover, on his eleventh birthday, that he was a wizard; it had been even more disconcerting to find out that everyone in the hidden wizarding world knew his name. Harry had arrived at Hogwarts to find that heads turned and whispers followed him wherever he went. But he was used to it now: At the end of this summer, he would be starting his fourth year at Hogwarts, and Harry was already counting the days until he would be back at the castle again.

But there was still a fortnight to go before he went back to school. He looked hopelessly around his room again, and his eye paused on the birthday cards his two best friends had sent him at the end of July. What would they say if Harry wrote to them and told them about his scar hurting?

At once, Hermione Granger's voice seemed to fill his head, shrill and panicky.

"Your scar hurt? Harry, that's really serious.... Write to Professor Dumbledore! And I'll go and check Common Magical Ailments and

Afflictions.... Maybe there's something in there about curse scars. . . ."

Yes, that would be Hermione's advice: Go straight to the headmaster of Hogwarts, and in the meantime, consult a book. Harry stared out of the window at the inky blue-black sky. He doubted very much whether a book could help him now. As far as he knew, he was the only living person to have survived a curse like Voldemort's; it was highly unlikely, therefore, that he would find his symptoms listed in Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions. As for informing the headmaster, Harry had no idea where Dumbledore went during the summer holidays. He amused himself for a moment, picturing Dumbledore, with his long silver beard, full length wizard's robes, and pointed hat, stretched out on a beach somewhere, rubbing suntan lotion onto his long crooked nose. Wherever Dumbledore was, though, Harry was sure that Hedwig would be able to find him; Harry's owl had never yet failed to deliver a letter to anyone, even without an address. But what would he write?

Dear Professor Dumbledore, Sorry to bother you, but my scar hurt this morning. Yours sincerely, Harry Potter.

Even inside his head the words sounded stupid.

And so he tried to imagine his other best friend, Ron Weasley's, reaction, and in a moment, Ron's red hair and long-nosed, freckled face seemed to swim before Harry, wearing a bemused expression.

"Your scar hurt? But ... but You-Know-Who can't be near you now, can he? I mean ... you'd know, wouldn't you? He'd be trying to do you in again, wouldn't be? I dunno, Harry, maybe curse scars always twinge a bit... I'll ask Dad. . . ."

Mr. Weasley was a fully qualified wizard who worked in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, but he didn't have any particular expertise in the matter of curses, as far as Harry knew. In any case, Harry didn't like the idea of the whole Weasley family knowing that he, Harry, was getting jumpy about a few moments' pain. Mrs. Weasley would fuss worse than Hermione, and Fred and George, Ron's sixteen-year-old twin brothers, might think Harry was losing his nerve. The Weasleys were Harry's favorite family in the world; he was hoping that they might invite him to stay any time now (Ron had mentioned something about the Quidditch World Cup), and he somehow didn't want his visit punctuated with anxious inquiries about his scar.

Harry kneaded his forehead with his knuckles. What he really wanted (and it felt almost shameful to admit it to himself) was someone like - someone like a parent: an adult wizard whose advice he could ask without feeling stupid, someone who cared about him, who had had experience with Dark Magic....

And then the solution came to him. It was so simple, and so obvious, that he couldn't believe it had taken so long - Sirius.

Harry leapt up from the bed, hurried across the room, and sat down at his desk; he pulled a piece of parchment toward him, loaded his eagle-feather quill with ink, wrote Dear Sirius, then paused, wondering how best to phrase his problem, still marveling at the fact that he hadn't thought of Sirius straight away. But then, perhaps it wasn't so surprising - after all, he had only found out that Sirius was his godfather two months ago.

There was a simple reason for Sirius's complete absence from Harry's life until then - Sirius had been in Azkaban, the terrifying wizard jail guarded by creatures called dementors, sightless, soul-sucking fiends who had come to search for Sirius at Hogwarts when he had escaped. Yet Sirius had been innocent - the murders for which he had been convicted had been committed by Wormtail, Voldemort's supporter, whom nearly everybody now believed dead. Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew otherwise, however; they had come face-to-face with Wormtail only the previous year, though only Professor Dumbledore had believed their story.

For one glorious hour, Harry had believed that he was leaving the Dursleys at last, because Sirius had offered him a home once his name had been cleared. But the chance had been snatched away from him - Wormtail had escaped before they could take him to the Ministry of Magic, and Sirius had had to flee for his life. Harry had helped him escape on the back of a hippogriff called Buckbeak, and since then, Sirius had been on the run. The home Harry might have had if Wormtail had not escaped had been haunting him all summer. It had been doubly hard to return to the Dursleys knowing that he had so nearly escaped them forever.

Nevertheless, Sirius had been of some help to Harry, even if he couldn't be with him. It was due to Sirius that Harry now had all his school things in his bedroom with him. The Dursleys had never allowed this before; their general wish of keeping Harry as miserable as possible, coupled with their fear of his powers, had led them to lock his school trunk in the cupboard under the stairs every summer prior to this. But their attitude had changed since they had found out that Harry had a dangerous murderer for a godfather - for Harry had conveniently forgotten to tell them that Sirius was innocent.

Harry had received two letters from Sirius since he had been back at Privet Drive. Both had been delivered, not by owls (as was usual with wizards), but by large, brightly colored tropical birds. Hedwig had not approved of these flashy intruders; she had been most reluctant to allow them to drink from her water tray before flying off again. Harry, on the other hand, had liked them; they put him in mind of palm trees and white sand, and he hoped that, wherever Sirius was (Sirius never said, in case the letters were intercepted), he was enjoying himself. Somehow, Harry found it hard to imaging dementors surviving for long in bright sunlight, perhaps that was why Sirius had gone South. Sirius's letters, which were now hidden beneath the highly useful loose floorboards under Harry's bed, sounded chearful, and in both of them he had reminded Harry to call on him if ever Harry needed to. Well, he needed to right now, all right...

Harry's lamp seemed to grow dimmer as the cold gray light that precedes sunrise slowly crept into the room. Finally, when the sun had risen, when his bedroom walls had turned gold, and when sounds of movement could be heard from Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's room, Harry cleared his desk of crumpled pieces of parchment and reread his finished letter.

Dear Sirius,

Thanks for your last letter. That bird was enormous; it could hardly get through my window. Things are the same as usual here. Dudley's diet isn't going too well. My aunt found him smuggling doughnuts into his room yesterday. They told him they'd have to cut his pocket money if he keeps doing it, so he got really angry and chucked his PlayStation out of the window. That's a sort of computer thing you can play games on. Bit stupid really, now he hasn't even got Mega-Mutilation Part Three to take his mind off things.

I'm okay, mainly because the Dursleys are terrified you might turn up and turn them all into bats if I ask you to.

A weird thing happened this morning, though. My scar hurt again. Last time that happened it was because Voldemort was at Hogwarts. But I don't reckon he can be anywhere near me now, can he? Do you know if curse scars sometimes hurt years afterward?

I'll send this with Hedwig when she gets back; she's off hunting at the moment. Say hello to Buckbeak for me. Harry

Yes, thought Harry, that looked all right. There was no point putting in the dream; he didn't want it to look as though he was too worried. He folded up the parchment and laid it aside on his desk, ready for when

Hedwig returned. Then he got to his feet, stretched, and opened his wardrobe once more. Without glancing at his reflection he started to get dressed before going down to breakfast.

CHAPTER THREE - THE INVITATION

By the time Harry arrived in the kitchen, the three Dursleys were already seated around the table. None of them looked up as he entered or sat down. Uncle Vernon's large red face was hidden behind the morning's Daily Mail, and Aunt Petunia was cutting a grapefruit into quarters, her lips pursed over her horselike teeth.

Dudley looked furious and sulky, and somehow seemed to be taking up even more space than usual. This was saying something, as he always took up an entire side of the square table by himself. When Aunt Petunia put a quarter of unsweetened grapefruit onto Dudley's plate with a tremulous "There you are, Diddy darling," Dudley glowered at her. His life had taken a most unpleasant turn since he had come home for the summer with his end-of-year report.

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had managed to find excuses for his bad marks as usual: Aunt Petunia always insisted that Dudley was a very gifted boy whose teachers didn't understand him, while Uncle Vernon maintained that "he didn't want some swotty little nancy boy for a son anyway." They also skated over the accusations of bullying in the report - "He's a boisterous little boy, but he wouldn't hurt a fly!" Aunt Petunia had said tearfully.

However, at the bottom of the report there were a few well-chosen comments from the school nurse that not even Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia could explain away. No matter how much Aunt Petunia wailed that Dudley was big-boned, and that his poundage was really puppy fat, and that he was a growing boy who needed plenty of food, the fact remained that the school outfitters didn't stock knickerbockers big enough for him anymore. The school nurse had seen what Aunt Petunia's eyes - so sharp when it came to spotting fingerprints on her gleaming walls, and in observing the comings and goings of the neighbors - simply refused to see: that far from needing extra nourishment, Dudley had reached roughly the size and weight of a young killer whale.

So - after many tantrums, after arguments that shook Harry's bedroom floor, and many tears from Aunt Petunia - the new regime had begun. The diet sheet that had been sent by the Smeltings school nurse had been taped to the fridge, which had been emptied of all Dudley's favorite things - fizzy drinks and cakes, chocolate bars and burgers and filled instead with fruit and vegetables and the sorts of things that Uncle Vernon called "rabbit food." To make Dudley feel better about it all, Aunt Petunia had insisted that the whole family follow the diet too. She now passed a grapefruit quarter to Harry. He noticed that it was a lot smaller than Dudley's. Aunt Petunia seemed to feet that the best way to keep up Dudley's morale was to make sure that he did, at least, get more to eat than Harry.

But Aunt Petunia didn't know what was hidden under the loose floorboard upstairs. She had no idea that Harry was not following the diet at all. The moment he had got wind of the fact that he was expected to survive the summer on carrot sticks, Harry had sent Hedwig to his friends with pleas for help, and they had risen to the occasion magnificently. Hedwig had returned from Hermione's house with a large box stuffed full of sugar-free snacks. (Hermione's parents were dentists.) Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, had obliged with a sack full of his own homemade rock cakes. (Harry hadn't touched these; he had had too much experience of Hagrid's cooking.) Mrs. Weasley, however, had sent the family owl, Errol, with an enormous fruitcake and assorted meat pies. Poor Errol, who was elderly and feeble, had needed a full five days to recover from

the journey. And then on Harry's birthday (which the Dursleys had completely ignored) he had received four superb birthday cakes, one each from Ron, Hermione, Hagrid, and Sirius. Harry still had two of them left, and so, looking forward to a real breakfast when he got back upstairs, he ate his grapefruit without complaint.

Uncle Vernon laid aside his paper with a deep sniff of disapproval and looked down at his own grapefruit quarter.

"Is this it?" he said grumpily to Aunt Petunia.

Aunt Petunia gave him a severe look, and then nodded pointedly at Dudley, who had already finished his own grapefruit quarter and was eyeing Harry's with a very sour look in his piggy little eyes.

Uncle Vernon gave a great sigh, which ruffled his large, bushy mustache, and picked up his spoon.

The doorbell rang. Uncle Vernon heaved himself out of his chair and set off down the hall. Quick as a flash, while his mother was occupied with the kettle, Dudley stole the rest of Uncle Vernon's grapefruit.

Harry heard talking at the door, and someone laughing, and Uncle Vernon answering curtly. Then the front door closed, and the sound of ripping paper came from the hall.

Aunt Petunia set the teapot down on the table and looked curiously around to see where Uncle Vernon had got to. She didn't have to wait long to find out; after about a minute, he was back. He looked livid.

"You," he barked at Harry. "In the living room. Now."

Bewildered, wondering what on earth he was supposed to have done this time, Harry got up and followed Uncle Vernon out of the kitchen and into the next room. Uncle Vernon closed the door sharply behind both of them.

"So," he said, marching over to the fireplace and turning to face Harry as though he were about to pronounce him under arrest. "So."

Harry would have dearly loved to have said, "So what?" but he didn't feel that Uncle Vernon's temper should be tested this early in the morning, especially when it was already under severe strain from lack of food. He therefore settled for looking politely puzzled.

"This just arrived," said Uncle Vernon. He brandished a piece of purple writing paper at Harry. "A letter. About you."

Harry's confusion increased. Who would be writing to Uncle Vernon about him? Who did he know who sent letters by the postman?

Uncle Vernon glared at Harry, then looked down at the letter and began to read aloud:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Dursley,

We have never been introduced, but I am sure you have heard a great deal from Harry about my son Ron.

As Harry might have told you, the final of the Quidditch World Cup takes place this Monday night, and my husband, Arthur, has just managed to get prime tickets through his connections at the Department of Magical Games and Sports.

I do hope you will allow us to take Harry to the match, as this really is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity; Britain hasn't hosted the cup for thirty years, and tickets are extremely hard to come by. We would of course be glad to have Harry stay for the remainder of the summer holidays, and to see him safely onto the train back to school.

It would be best for Harry to send us your answer as quickly as possible in the normal way, because the Muggle postman has never delivered to our house, and I am not sure he even knows where it is.

Hoping to see Harry soon,

Yours sincerely,

Molly Weasley

P.S. I do hope we've put enough stamps on.

Uncle Vernon finished reading, put his hand back into his breast pocket, and drew out something else.

"Look at this," he growled.

He held up the envelope in which Mrs. Weasley's letter had come, and Harry had to fight down a laugh. Every bit of it was covered in stamps except for a square inch on the front, into which Mrs. Weasley had squeezed the Dursleys' address in minute writing.

"She did put enough stamps on, then," said Harry, trying to sound as though Mrs. Weasley's was a mistake anyone could make. His uncle's eyes flashed.

"The postman noticed," he said through gritted teeth. "Very interested to know where this letter came from, he was. That's why he rang the doorbell. Seemed to think it was funny."

Harry didn't say anything. Other people might not understand why Uncle Vernon was making a fuss about too many stamps, but Harry had lived with the Dursleys too long not to know how touchy they were about anything even slightly out of the ordinary. Their worst fear was that someone would find out that they were connected (however distantly) with people like Mrs. Weasley.

Uncle Vernon was still glaring at Harry, who tried to keep his expression neutral. If he didn't do or say anything stupid, he might just be in for the treat of a lifetime. He waited for Uncle Vernon to say something, but he merely continued to glare. Harry decided to break the silence.

"So - can I go then?" he asked.

A slight spasm crossed Uncle Vernon's large purple face. The mustache bristled. Harry thought he knew what was going on behind the mustache: a furious battle as two of Uncle Vernon's most fundamental instincts came into conflict. Allowing Harry to go would make Harry happy, something Uncle Vernon had struggled against for thirteen years. On the other hand, allowing Harry to disappear to the Weasleys' for the rest of the summer would get rid of him two weeks earlier than anyone could have hoped, and Uncle Vernon hated having Harry in the house. To give himself thinking time, it seemed, he looked down at Mrs. Weasley's letter again.

"Who is this woman?" he said, staring at the signature with distaste.

"You've seen her," said Harry. "She's my friend Ron's mother, she was meeting him off the Hog - off the school train at the end of last term." He had almost said "Hogwarts Express," and that was a sure way to get his uncle's temper up. Nobody ever mentioned the name of Harry's school aloud in the Dursley household.

Uncle Vernon screwed up his enormous face as though trying to remember something very unpleasant.

"Dumpy sort of woman?" he growled finally. "Load of children with red hair?"

Harry frowned. He thought it was a bit rich of Uncle Vernon to call anyone "dumpy," when his own son, Dudley, had finally achieved what he'd been threatening to do since the age of three, and become wider than he was tall.

Uncle Vernon was perusing the letter again.

"Quidditch," he muttered under his breath. "Quidditch - what is this rubbish?"

Harry felt a second stab of annoyance.

"It's a sport," he said shortly. "Played on broom- "

"All right, all right!" said Uncle Vernon loudly. Harry saw, with some satisfaction, that his uncle looked vaguely panicky. Apparently his nerves couldn't stand the sound of the word "broomsticks" in his living room. He took refuge in perusing the letter again. Harry saw his lips form the words "send us your answer ... in the normal way." He scowled.

"What does she mean, 'the normal way'?" he spat.

"Normal for us," said Harry, and before his uncle could stop him, he added, "you know, owl post. That's what's normal for wizards."

Uncle Vernon looked as outraged as if Harry had just uttered a disgusting swearword. Shaking with anger, he shot a nervous look through the window, as though expecting to see some of the neighbors with their ears pressed against the glass.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to mention that unnaturalness under my roof?" he hissed, his face now a rich plum color. "You stand there, in the clothes Petunia and I have put on your ungrateful back -" "Only after Dudley finished with them," said Harry coldly, and indeed, he was dressed in a sweatshirt so large for him that he had had to roll back the sleeves five times so as to be able to use his hands, and which fell past the knees of his extremely baggy jeans.

"I will not be spoken to like that!" said Uncle Vernon, trembling with rage.

But Harry wasn't going to stand for this. Gone were the days when he had been forced to take every single one of the Dursleys' stupid rules. He wasn't following Dudley's diet, and he wasn't going to let Uncle Vernon stop him from going to the Quidditch World Cup, not if he could help it. Harry took a deep, steady breath and then said, "Okay, I can't see the World Cup. Can I go now, then? Only I've got a letter to Sirius I want to finish. You know - my godfather."

He had done it, he had said the magic words. Now he watched the purple recede blotchily from Uncle Vernon's face, making it look like badly mixed black currant ice cream.

"You're - you're writing to him, are you?" said Uncle Vernon, in a would-be calm voice - but Harry had seen the pupils of his tiny eyes contract with sudden fear.

"Well - yeah," said Harry, casually. "It's been a while since he heard from me, and, you know, if he doesn't he might start thinking something's wrong."

He stopped there to enjoy the effect of these words. He could almost see the cogs working under Uncle Vernon's thick, dark, neatly parted hair. If he tried to stop Harry writing to Sirius, Sirius would think Harry was being mistreated. If he told Harry he couldn't go to the Quidditch World Cup, Harry would write and tell Sirius, who would know Harry was being mistreated. There was only one thing for Uncle Vernon to do. Harry could see the conclusion forming in his uncle's mind as though the great mustached face were transparent. Harry tried not to smile, to keep his own face as blank as possible. And then -

"Well, all right then. You can go to this ruddy ... this stupid ... this World Cup thing. You write and tell these - these Weasleys they're to pick you up, mind. I haven't got time to go dropping you off all over the country. And you can spend the rest of the summer there. And you can tell your - your godfather ... tell him ... tell him you're going."

"Okay then," said Harry brightly.

He turned and walked toward the living room door, fighting the urge to jump into the air and whoop. He was going ... he was going to the Weasleys', he was going to watch the Quidditch World Cup!

Outside in the hall he nearly ran into Dudley, who had been lurking behind the door, clearly hoping to overhear Harry being told off. He looked shocked to see the broad grin on Harry's face.

"That was an excellent breakfast, wasn't it?" said Harry. "I feel really full, don't you?"

Laughing at the astonished look on Dudley's face, Harry took the stairs three at a time, and hurled himself back into his bedroom.

The first thing he saw was that Hedwig was back. She was sitting in her cage, staring at Harry with her enormous amber eyes, and clicking her beak in the way that meant she was annoyed about something. Exactly what was annoying her became apparent almost at once.

"OUCH!" said Harry as what appeared to be a small, gray, feathery tennis ball collided with the side of his head. Harry massaged the spot

furiously, looking up to see what had hit him, and saw a minute owl, small enough to fit into the palm of his hand, whizzing excitedly around the room like a loose firework. Harry then realized that the owl had dropped a letter at his feet. Harry bent down, recognized Ron's handwriting, then tore open the envelope. Inside was a hastily scribbled note.

Harry - DAD GOT THE TICKETS - Ireland versus Bulgaria, Monday night. Mum's writing to the Muggles to ask you to stay. They might already have the letter, I don't know how fast Muggle post is. Thought I'd send this with Pig anyway.

Harry stared at the word "Pig," then looked up at the tiny owl now zooming around the light fixture on the ceiling. He had never seen anything that looked less like a pig. Maybe he couldn't read Ron's writing. He went back to the letter:

We're coming for you whether the Muggles like it or not, you can't miss the World Cup, only Mum and Dad reckon it's better if we pretend to ask their permission first. If they say yes, send Pig back with your answer pronto, and we'll come and get you at five o'clock on Sunday. If they say no, send Pig back pronto and we'll come and get you at five o'clock on Sunday anyway.

Hermione's arriving this afternoon. Percy's started work - the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Don't mention anything about Abroad while you're here unless you want the pants bored off you. See you soon - Ron

"Calm down!" Harry said as the small owl flew low over his head, twittering madly with what Harry could only assume was pride at having delivered the letter to the right person. "Come here, I need you to take my answer back!"

The owl fluttered down on top of Hedwig's cage. Hedwig looked coldly up at it, as though daring it to try and come any closer.

Harry seized his eagle-feather quill once more, grabbed a fresh piece of parchment, and wrote:

Ron, it's all okay, the Muggles say I can come. See you five o'clock tomorrow. Can't wait. Harry

He folded this note up very small, and with immense difficulty, tied it to the tiny owl's leg as it hopped on the spot with excitement. The moment the note was secure, the owl was off again; it zoomed out of the window and out of sight.

Harry turned to Hedwig.

"Feeling up to a long journey?" he asked her.

Hedwig hooted in a dignified sort of a way.

"Can you take this to Sirius for me?" he said, picking up his letter.

"Hang on ... I just want to finish it."

He unfolded the parchment and hastily added a postscript.

If you want to contact me, I'll be at my friend Ron Weasley's for the rest of the summer. His dad's got us tickets for the Quidditch World Cup!

The letter finished, he tied it to Hedwig's leg; she kept unusually still, as though determined to show him how a real post owl should behave.

"I'll be at Ron's when you get back, all right?" Harry told her. She nipped his finger affectionately, then, with a soft swooshing noise, spread her enormous wings and soared out of the open window.

Harry watched her out of sight, then crawled under his bed, wrenched up the loose floorboard, and pulled out a large chunk of birthday cake. He sat there on the floor eating it, savoring the happiness that was flooding through him. He had cake, and Dudley had nothing but grapefruit; it was a bright summer's day, he would be leaving Privet Drive tomorrow, his scar felt perfectly normal again, and he was going to watch the Quidditch World Cup. It was hard, just now, to feel worried about anything - even Lord Voldemort.

CHAPTER FOUR - BACK TO THE BURROW

By twelve o'clock the next day, Harry's school trunk was packed with his school things and all his most prized possessions - the Invisibility Cloak he had inherited from his father, the broomstick he had gotten from Sirius, the enchanted map of Hogwarts he had been given by Fred and George Weasley last year. He had emptied his hiding place under the loose floorboard of all food, double-checked every nook and cranny of his bedroom for forgotten spellbooks or quills, and taken down the chart on the wall counting down the days to September the first, on which he liked to cross off the days remaining until his return to Hogwarts.

The atmosphere inside number four, Privet Drive was extremely tense. The imminent arrival at their house of an assortment of wizards was making the Dursleys uptight and irritable. Uncle Vernon had looked downright alarmed when Harry informed him that the Weasleys would be arriving at five o'clock the very next day.

"I hope you told them to dress properly, these people," he snarled at once. "I've seen the sort of stuff your lot wear. They'd better have the decency to put on normal clothes, that's all."

Harry felt a slight sense of foreboding. He had rarely seen Mr. or Mrs. Weasley wearing anything that the Dursleys would call "normal." Their children might don Muggle clothing during the holidays, but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley usually wore long robes in varying states of shabbiness. Harry wasn't bothered about what the neighbors would think, but he was anxious about how rude the Dursleys might be to the Weasleys if they turned up looking like their worst idea of wizards.

Uncle Vernon had put on his best suit. To some people, this might have looked like a gesture of welcome, but Harry knew it was because Uncle Vernon wanted to look impressive and intimidating. Dudley, on the other hand, looked somehow diminished. This was not because the diet was at last taking effect, but due to fright. Dudley had emerged from his last encounter with a fully grown wizard with a curly pig's tail poking out of the seat of his trousers, and Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had had to pay for its removal at a private hospital in London. It wasn't altogether surprising, therefore, that Dudley kept running his hand nervously over his backside, and walking sideways from room to room, so as not to present the same target to the enemy.

Lunch was an almost silent meal. Dudley didn't even protest at the food (cottage cheese and grated celery). Aunt Petunia wasn't, eating anything at all. Her arms were folded, her lips were pursed, and she seemed to be chewing her tongue, as though biting back the furious diatribe she longed to throw at Harry.

"They'll be driving, of course?" Uncle Vernon barked across the table.
"Er," said Harry.

He hadn't thought of that. How were the Weasleys going to pick him up? They didn't have a car anymore; the old Ford Anglia they had once owned was currently running wild in the Forbidden Forest at Hogwarts. But Mr. Weasley had borrowed a Ministry of Magic car last year; possibly he would do the same today?

"I think so," said Harry.

Uncle Vernon snorted into his mustache. Normally, Uncle Vernon would have asked what car Mr. Weasley drove; he tended to judge other men by how big and expensive their cars were. But Harry doubted whether Uncle Vernon would have taken to Mr. Weasley even if he drove a Ferrari. Harry spent most of the afternoon in his bedroom; he couldn't stand watching Aunt Petunia peer out through the net curtains every few seconds, as though there had been a warning about an escaped rhinoceros. Finally, at a quarter to five, Harry went back downstairs and into the living room.

Aunt Petunia was compulsively straightening cushions. Uncle Vernon was pretending to read the paper, but his tiny eyes were not moving, and Harry was sure he was really listening with all his might for the sound of an approaching car. Dudley was crammed into an armchair, his porky hands beneath him, clamped firmly around his bottom. Harry couldn't take the tension; he left the room and went and sat on the stairs in the hall, his eyes on his watch and his heart pumping fast from excitement and nerves.

But five o'clock came and then went. Uncle Vernon, perspiring slightly in his suit, opened the front door, peered up and down the street, then withdrew his head quickly.

"They're late!" he snarled at Harry.

I know," said Harry. "Maybe - er - the traffic's bad, or something." Ten past five ... then a quarter past five ... Harry was starting to feel anxious himself now. At half past, he heard Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia conversing in terse mutters in the living room.

"No consideration at all."

"We might've had an engagement."

"Maybe they think they'll get invited to dinner if they're late."

"Well, they most certainly won't be," said Uncle Vernon, and Harry heard him stand up and start pacing the living room. "They'll take the boy and go, there'll be no hanging around. That's if they're coming at all.

Probably mistaken the day. I daresay their kind don't set much store by punctuality. Either that or they drive some tin-pot car that's broken d-AAAAAAARRRRRGH!"

Harry jumped up. From the other side of the living room door came the sounds of the three Dursleys scrambling, panic-stricken, across the room. Next moment Dudley came flying into the hall, looking terrified.

"What happened?" said Harry. "What's the matter?"

But Dudley didn't seem able to speak. Hands still clamped over his buttocks, he waddled as fast as he could into the kitchen. Harry hurried into the living room.

Loud bangings and scrapings were coming from behind the Dursleys' boarded-up fireplace, which had a fake coal fire plugged in front of it.

"What is it?" gasped Aunt Petunia, who had backed into the wall and was staring, terrified, toward the fire. "What is it, Vernon?"

But they were left in doubt barely a second longer. Voices could be heard from inside the blocked fireplace.

"Ouch! Fred, no - go back, go back, there's been some kind of mistake - tell George not to - OUCH! George, no, there's no room, go back quickly and tell Ron -"

"Maybe Harry can hear us, Dad - maybe he'll be able to let us out -"

There was a loud hammering of fists on the boards behind the electric fire.

"Harry? Harry, can you hear us?"

The Dursleys rounded on Harry like a pair of angry wolverines.

"What is this?" growled Uncle Vernon. "What's going on?"

"They - they've tried to get here by Floo powder," said Harry, fighting a mad desire to laugh. "They can travel by fire - only you've blocked the fireplace - hang on -"

He approached the fireplace and called through the boards.

"Mr. Weasley? Can you hear me?"

The hammering stopped. Somebody inside the chimney piece said, "Shh!"

"Mr. Weasley, it's Harry ... the fireplace has been blocked up. You won't be able to get through there."

"Damn!" said Mr. Weasley's voice. "What on earth did they want to block up the fireplace for?"

"They've got an electric fire," Harry explained.

"Really?" said Mr. Weasley's voice excitedly. "Eclectic, you say? With a plug? Gracious, I must see that.... Let's think ... ouch, Ron!" Ron's voice now joined the others'.

"What are we doing here? Has something gone wrong?"

"Oh no, Ron," came Fred's voice, very sarcastically. "No, this is exactly where we wanted to end up."

"Yeah, we're having the time of our lives here," said George, whose voice sounded muffled, as though he was squashed against the wall.

"Boys, boys. . . ." said Mr. Weasley vaguely. "I'm trying to think what to do.... Yes ... only way. . . Stand back, Harry."

Harry retreated to the sofa. Uncle Vernon, however, moved forward.

"Wait a moment!" he bellowed at the fire. "What exactly are you going to -"

BANG.

The electric fire shot across the room as the boarded-up fireplace burst outward, expelling Mr. Weasley, Fred, George, and Ron in a cloud of rubble and loose chippings. Aunt Petunia shrieked and fell backward over the coffee table; Uncle Vernon caught her before she hit the floor, and gaped, speechless, at the Weasleys, all of whom had bright red hair, including Fred and George, who were identical to the last freckle.

"That's better," panted Mr. Weasley, brushing dust from his long green robes and straightening his glasses. "Ah - you must be Harry's aunt and uncle!"

Tall, thin, and balding, he moved toward Uncle Vernon, his hand outstretched, but Uncle Vernon backed away several paces, dragging Aunt Petunia. Words utterly failed Uncle Vernon. His best suit was covered in white dust, which had settled in his hair and mustache and made him look as though he had just aged thirty years.

"Er - yes - sorry about that," said Mr. Weasley, lowering his hand and looking over his shoulder at the blasted fireplace. "It's all my fault. It just didn't occur to me that we wouldn't be able to get out at the other end. I had your fireplace connected to the Floo Network, you see - just for an afternoon, you know, so we could get Harry. Muggle fireplaces aren't supposed to be connected, strictly speaking - but I've got a useful contact at the Floo Regulation Panel and he fixed it for me. I can put it right in a jiffy, though, don't worry. I'll light a fire to send the boys back, and then I can repair your fireplace before I Disapparate."

Harry was ready to bet that the Dursleys hadn't understood a single word of this. They were still gaping at Mr. Weasley, thunderstruck. Aunt Petunia staggered upright again and hid behind Uncle Vernon.

"Hello, Harry!" said Mr. Weasley brightly. "Got your trunk ready?"

"It's upstairs," said Harry, grinning back.

"We'll get it," said Fred at once. Winking at Harry, he and George left the room. They knew where Harry's bedroom was, having once rescued him from it in the dead of night. Harry suspected that Fred and George were hoping for a glimpse of Dudley; they had heard a lot about him from Harry.

"Well," said Mr. Weasley, swinging his arms slightly, while he tried to find words to break the very nasty silence. "Very - erm - very nice place you've got here."

As the usually spotless living room was now covered in dust and bits of brick, this remark didn't go down too well with the Dursleys. Uncle

Vernon's face purpled once more, and Aunt Petunia started chewing her tongue again. However, they seemed too scared to actually say anything. Mr. Weasley was looking around. He loved everything to do with Muggles. Harry could see him itching to go and examine the television and the video recorder.

"They run off eckeltricity, do they?" he said knowledgeably. "Ah yes, I can see the plugs. I collect plugs," he added to Uncle Vernon. "And batteries. Got a very large collection of batteries. My wife thinks I'm mad, but there you are."

Uncle Vernon clearly thought Mr. Weasley was mad too. He moved ever so slightly to the right, screening Aunt Petunia from view, as though he thought Mr. Weasley might suddenly run at them and attack.

Dudley suddenly reappeared in the room. Harry could hear the clunk of his trunk on the stairs, and knew that the sounds had scared Dudley out of the kitchen. Dudley edged along the wall, gazing at Mr. Weasley with terrified eyes, and attempted to conceal himself behind his mother and father. Unfortunately, Uncle Vernon's bulk, while sufficient to hide bony Aunt Petunia, was nowhere near enough to conceal Dudley.

"Ah, this is your cousin, is it, Harry?" said Mr. Weasley, taking another brave stab at making conversation.

"Yep," said Harry, "that's Dudley."

He and Ron exchanged glances and then quickly looked away from each other; the temptation to burst out laughing was almost overwhelming. Dudley was still clutching his bottom as though afraid it might fall off. Mr. Weasley, however, seemed genuinely concerned at Dudley's peculiar behavior. Indeed, from the tone of his voice when he next spoke, Harry was quite sure that Mr. Weasley thought Dudley was quite as mad as the Dursleys thought he was, except that Mr. Weasley felt sympathy rather than fear.

"Having a good holiday, Dudley?" he said kindly.

Dudley whimpered. Harry saw his hands tighten still harder over his massive backside.

Fred and George came back into the room carrying Harry's school trunk. They glanced around as they entered and spotted Dudley. Their faces cracked into identical evil grins.

"Ah, right," said Mr. Weasley. "Better get cracking then."

He pushed up the sleeves of his robes and took out his wand. Harry saw the Dursleys draw back against the wall as one.

"Incendio!" said Mr. Weasley, pointing his wand at the hole in the wall behind him.

Flames rose at once in the fireplace, crackling merrily as though they had been burning for hours. Mr. Weasley took a small drawstring bag from his pocket, untied it, took a pinch of the powder inside, and threw it onto the flames, which turned emerald green and roared higher than ever.

"Off you go then, Fred," said Mr. Weasley.

"Coming," said Fred. "Oh no - hang on -"

A bag of sweets had spilled out of Fred's pocket and the contents were now rolling in every direction - big, fat toffees in brightly colored wrappers.

Fred scrambled around, cramming them back into his pocket, then gave the Dursleys a cheery wave, stepped forward, and walked right into the fire, saying "the Burrow!" Aunt Petunia gave a little shuddering gasp. There was a whooshing sound, and Fred vanished.

"Right then, George," said Mr. Weasley, "you and the trunk."

Harry helped George carry the trunk forward into the flames and turn it onto its end so that he could hold it better. Then, with a second whoosh, George had cried "the Burrow!" and vanished too.

"Ron, you next," said Mr. Weasley.

"See you," said Ron brightly to the Dursleys. He grinned broadly at Harry, then stepped into the fire, shouted "the Burrow!" and disappeared.

Now Harry and Mr. Weasley alone remained.

"Well . . . 'bye then," Harry said to the Dursleys.

They didn't say anything at all. Harry moved toward the fire, but just as he reached the edge of the hearth, Mr. Weasley put out a hand and held him back. He was looking at the Dursleys in amazement.

"Harry said good-bye to you," he said. "Didn't you hear him?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry muttered to Mr. Weasley. "Honestly, I don't care."

Mr. Weasley did not remove his hand from Harry's shoulder.

"You aren't going to see your nephew till next summer," he said to Uncle Vernon in mild indignation. "Surely you're going to say good-bye?"

Uncle Vernon's face worked furiously. The idea of being taught consideration by a man who had just blasted away half his living room wall seemed to be causing him intense suffering. But Mr. Weasley's wand was still in his hand, and Uncle Vernon's tiny eyes darted to it once, before he said, very resentfully, "Good-bye, then."

"See you," said Harry, putting one foot forward into the green flames, which felt pleasantly like warm breath. At that moment, however, a horrible gagging sound erupted behind him, and Aunt Petunia started to scream.

Harry wheeled around. Dudley was no longer standing behind his parents. He was kneeling beside the coffee table, and he was gagging and sputtering on a foot-long, purple, slimy thing that was protruding from his mouth. One bewildered second later, Harry realized that the foot-long thing was Dudley's tongue - and that a brightly colored toffee wrapper lay on the floor before him.

Aunt Petunia hurled herself onto the ground beside Dudley, seized the end of his swollen tongue, and attempted to wrench it out of his mouth; unsurprisingly, Dudley yelled and sputtered worse than ever, trying to fight her off. Uncle Vernon was bellowing and waving his arms around, and Mr. Weasley had to shout to make himself heard.

"Not to worry, I can sort him out!" he yelled, advancing on Dudley with his wand outstretched, but Aunt Petunia screamed worse than ever and threw herself on top of Dudley, shielding him from Mr. Weasley.

"No, really!" said Mr. Weasley desperately. "It's a simple process it was the toffee - my son Fred - real practical joker - but it's only an Engorgement Charm - at least, I think it is - please, I can correct it -" But far from being reassured, the Dursleys became more panic-stricken; Aunt Petunia was sobbing hysterically, tugging Dudley's tongue as though determined to rip it out; Dudley appeared to be suffocating under the combined pressure of his mother and his tongue; and Uncle Vernon, who had lost control completely, seized a china figure from on top of the sideboard and threw it very hard at Mr. Weasley, who ducked, causing the ornament to shatter in the blasted fireplace.

"Now really!" said Mr. Weasley angrily, brandishing his wand. "I'm trying to help!"

Bellowing like a wounded hippo, Uncle Vernon snatched up another ornament.

"Harry, go! Just go!" Mr. Weasley shouted, his wand on Uncle Vernon.

"I'll sort this out!"

Harry didn't want to miss the fun, but Uncle Vernon's second ornament narrowly missed his left ear, and on balance he thought it best to leave the situation to Mr. Weasley. He stepped into the fire, looking over his shoulder as he said "the Burrow!" His last fleeting glimpse of the living room was of Mr. Weasley blasting a third ornament out of Uncle Vernon's hand with his wand, Aunt Petunia screaming and lying on top of Dudley, and Dudley's tongue lolling around like a great slimy python. But next moment Harry had begun to spin very fast, and the Dursleys' living room was whipped out of sight in a rush of emerald-green flames.

CHAPTER FIVE - WEASLEYS' WIZARD WHEEZES

Harry spun faster and faster, elbows tucked tightly to his sides, blurred fireplaces flashing past him, until he started to feel sick and closed his eyes. Then, when at last he felt himself slowing down, he threw out his hands and came to a halt in time to prevent himself from falling face forward out of the Weasleys' kitchen fire.

"Did he eat it?" said Fred excitedly, holding out a hand to pull Harry to his feet

"Yeah," said Harry, straightening up. "What was it?"

"Ton-Tongue Toffee," said Fred brightly. "George and I invented them, and we've been looking for someone to test them on all summer. . . ." The tiny kitchen exploded with laughter; Harry looked around and saw that Ron and George were sitting at the scrubbed wooden table with two red-haired people Harry had never seen before, though he knew immediately who they must be: Bill and Charlie, the two eldest Weasley brothers.

"How're you doing, Harry?" said the nearer of the two, grinning at him and holding out a large hand, which Harry shook, feeling calluses and blisters under his fingers. This had to be Charlie, who worked with dragons in Romania. Charlie was built like the twins, shorter and stockier than Percy and Ron, who were both long and lanky. He had a broad, good-natured face, which was weather-beaten and so freckly that he looked almost tanned; his arms were muscular, and one of them had a large, shiny burn on it.

Bill got to his feet, smiling, and also shook Harry's hand. Bill came as something of a surprise. Harry knew that he worked for the wizarding bank, Gringotts, and that Bill had been Head Boy at Hogwarts; Harry had always imagined Bill to be an older version of Percy: fussy about rule-breaking and fond of bossing everyone around. However, Bill was - there was no other word for it - cool. He was tall, with long hair that he had tied back in a ponytail. He was wearing an earring with what looked like a fang dangling from it. Bill's clothes would not have looked out of place at a rock concert, except that Harry recognized his boots to be made, not of leather, but of dragon hide.

Before any of them could say anything else, there was a faint popping noise, and Mr. Weasley appeared out of thin air at George's shoulder. He was looking angrier than Harry had ever seen him.

"That wasn't funny Fred!" he shouted. "What on earth did you give that Muggle boy?"

"I didn't give him anything," said Fred, with another evil grin. I just dropped it.... It was his fault he went and ate it, I never told him to."

"You dropped it on purpose!" roared Mr. Weasley. "You knew he'd eat it, you knew he was on a diet -"

"How big did his tongue get?" George asked eagerly.

"It was four feet long before his parents would let me shrink it!"

Harry and the Weasleys roared with laughter again.

"It isn't funny!" Mr. Weasley shouted. "That sort of behavior seriously undermines wizard-Muggle relations! I spend half my life campaigning against the mistreatment of Muggles, and my own sons

"We didn't give it to him because he's a Muggle!" said Fred indignantly.

"No, we gave it to him because he's a great bullying git," said George.

"Isn't he, Harry?"

"Yeah, he is, Mr. Weasley," said Harry earnestly.

"That's not the point!" raged Mr. Weasley. "You wait until I tell your mother -"

"Tell me what?" said a voice behind them.

Mrs. Weasley had just entered the kitchen. She was a short, plump woman with a very kind face, though her eyes were presently narrowed with suspicion.

"Oh hello, Harry, dear," she said, spotting him and smiling. Then her eyes snapped back to her husband. "Tell me what, Arthur?"

Mr. Weasley hesitated. Harry could tell that, however angry he was with Fred and George, he hadn't really intended to tell Mrs. Weasley what had happened. There was a silence, while Mr. Weasley eyed his wife nervously. Then two girls appeared in the kitchen doorway behind Mrs. Weasley. One, with very bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth, was Harry's and Ron's friend, Hermione Granger. The other, who was small and red-haired, was Ron's younger sister, Ginny. Both of them smiled at Harry, who grinned back, which made Ginny go scarlet - she had been very taken with Harry ever since his first visit to the Burrow.

"Tell me what, Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley repeated, in a dangerous sort of voice.

"It's nothing, Molly," mumbled Mr. Weasley, "Fred and George just - but I've had words with them -"

"What have they done this time?" said Mrs. Weasley. "If it's got anything to do with Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes -"

"Why don't you show Harry where he's sleeping, Ron?" said Hermione from the doorway.

"He knows where he's sleeping," said Ron, "in my room, he slept there last -"

"We can all go," said Hermione pointedly.

"Oh," said Ron, cottoning on. "Right."

"Yeah, we'll come too," said George.

"You stay where you are!" snarled Mrs. Weasley.

Harry and Ron edged out of the kitchen, and they, Hermione, and Ginny set off along the narrow hallway and up the rickety staircase that zigzagged through the house to the upper stories.

"What are Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes?" Harry asked as they climbed.

Ron and Ginny both laughed, although Hermione didn't.

"Mum found this stack of order forms when she was cleaning Fred and George's room," said Ron quietly. "Great long price lists for stuff they've invented. Joke stuff, you know. Fake wands and trick sweets, loads of stuff. It was brilliant, I never knew they'd been inventing all that . . ."

"We've been hearing explosions out of their room for ages, but we never thought they were actually making things," said Ginny. "We thought they just liked the noise."

"Only, most of the stuff - well, all of it, really - was a bit dangerous," said Ron, "and, you know, they were planning to sell it at Hogwarts to make some money, and Mum went mad at them. Told them they weren't allowed to make any more of it, and burned all the order forms.... She's furious at them anyway. They didn't get as many O.W.L.s as she expected."

O.W.L.s were Ordinary Wizarding Levels, the examinations Hogwarts students took at the age of fifteen.

"And then there was this big row," Ginny said, "because Mum wants them to go into the Ministry of Magic like Dad, and they told her all they want to do is open a joke shop."

Just then a door on the second landing opened, and a face poked out wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a very annoyed expression.

"Hi, Percy," said Harry.

"Oh hello, Harry," said Percy. "I was wondering who was making all the noise. I'm trying to work in here, you know I've got a report to finish for the office - and it's rather difficult to concentrate when people keep thundering up and down the stairs."

"We're not thundering," said Ron irritably. "We're walking. Sorry if we've disturbed the top-secret workings of the Ministry of Magic."

"What are you working on?" said Harry.

"A report for the Department of International Magical Cooperation," said Percy smugly. "We're trying to standardize cauldron thickness. Some of these foreign imports are just a shade too thin - leakages have been increasing at a rate of almost three percent a year -"

"That'll change the world, that report will," said Ron. "Front page of the Daily Prophet, I expect, cauldron leaks."

Percy went slightly pink.

"You might sneer, Ron," he said heatedly, "but unless some sort of international law is imposed we might well find the market flooded with flimsy, shallow-bottomed products that seriously endanger -"

"Yeah, yeah, all right," said Ron, and he started off upstairs again.

Percy slammed his bedroom door shut. As Harry, Hermione, and Ginny followed Ron up three more flights of stairs, shouts from the kitchen below echoed up to them. It sounded as though Mr. Weasley had told Mrs. Weasley about the toffees.

The room at the top of the house where Ron slept looked much as it had the last time that Harry had come to stay: the same posters of Ron's favorite Quidditch team, the Chudley Cannons, were whirling and waving on the walls and sloping ceiling, and the fish tank on the windowsill, which had previously held frog spawn, now contained one extremely large frog. Ron's old rat, Scabbers, was here no more, but instead there was the tiny gray owl that had delivered Ron's letter to Harry in Privet Drive. It was hopping up and down in a small cage and twittering madly.

"Shut up, Pig," said Ron, edging his way between two of the four beds that had been squeezed into the room. "Fred and George are in here with us, because Bill and Charlie are in their room," he told Harry. "Percy gets to keep his room all to himself because he's got to work."

"Er - why are you calling that owl Pig?" Harry asked Ron.

"Because he's being stupid," said Ginny, "Its proper name is Pigwidgeon."

"Yeah, and that's not a stupid name at all," said Ron sarcastically.

"Ginny named him," he explained to Harry. "She reckons it's sweet. And I tried to change it, but it was too late, he won't answer to anything else. So now he's Pig. I've got to keep him up here because he annoys Errol and Hermes. He annoys me too, come to that."

Pigwidgeon zoomed happily around his cage, hooting shrilly. Harry knew Ron too well to take him seriously. He had moaned continually about his old rat, Scabbers, but had been most upset when Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, appeared to have eaten him.

"Where's Crookshanks?" Harry asked Hermione now.

"Out in the garden, I expect," she said. "He likes chasing gnomes. He's never seen any before."

"Percy's enjoying work, then?" said Harry, sitting down on one of the beds and watching the Chudley Cannons zooming in and out of the posters on the ceiling.

"Enjoying it?" said Ron darkly. "I don't reckon he'd come home if Dad didn't make him. He's obsessed. Just don't get him onto the subject of his boss. According to Mr. Crouch ... as I was saying to Mr. Crouch ... Mr. Crouch is of the opinion ... Mr. Crouch was telling me ... They'll be announcing their engagement any day now."

"Have you had a good summer, Harry?" said Hermione. "Did you get our food parcels and everything?"

"Yeah, thanks a lot," said Harry. "They saved my life, those cakes."

"And have you heard from -?" Ron began, but at a look from Hermione he fell silent. Harry knew Ron had been about to ask about Sirius. Ron and Hermione had been so deeply involved in helping Sirius escape from the Ministry of Magic that they were almost as concerned about Harry's godfather as he was. However, discussing him in front of Ginny was a bad idea. Nobody but themselves and Professor Dumbledore knew about how Sirius had escaped, or believed in his innocence.

"I think they've stopped arguing," said Hermione, to cover the awkward moment, because Ginny was looking curiously from Ron to Harry. "Shall we go down and help your mum with dinner?"

"Yeah, all right," said Ron. The four of them left Ron's room and went back downstairs to find Mrs. Weasley alone in the kitchen, looking extremely bad-tempered.

"We're eating out in the garden," she said when they came in. "There's just not room for eleven people in here. Could you take the plates outside, girls? Bill and Charlie are setting up the tables. Knives and forks, please, you two," she said to Ron and Harry, pointing her wand a little more vigorously than she had intended at a pile of potatoes in the sink, which shot out of their skins so fast that they ricocheted off the walls and ceiling.

"Oh for heaven's sake," she snapped, now directing her wand at a dustpan, which hopped off the sideboard and started skating across the floor, scooping up the potatoes. "Those two!" she burst out savagely, now pulling pots and pans out of a cupboard, and Harry knew she meant Fred and George. I don't know what's going to happen to them, I really don't. No ambition, unless you count making as much trouble as they possibly can...."

Mrs. Weasley slammed a large copper saucepan down on the kitchen table and began to wave her wand around inside it. A creamy sauce poured from the wand tip as she stirred.

"It's not as though they haven't got brains, she continued irritably, taking the saucepan over to the stove and lighting it with a further poke of her wand, "but they're wasting them, and unless they pull themselves together soon, they'll be in real trouble. I've had more owls from Hogwarts about them than the rest put together. If they carry on the way they're going, they'll end up in front of the Improper Use of Magic Office."

Mrs. Weasley jabbed her wand at the cutlery drawer, which shot open. Harry and Ron both jumped out of the way as several knives soared out of it, flew across the kitchen, and began chopping the potatoes, which had just been tipped back into the sink by the dustpan.

"I don't know where we went wrong with them," said Mrs. Weasley, putting down her wand and starting to pull out still more saucepans. "It's been the same for years, one thing after another, and they won't listen to - OH NOT AGAIN!"

She had picked up her wand from the table, and it had emitted a loud squeak and turned into a giant rubber mouse.

"One of their fake wands again!" she shouted. "How many times have I told them not to leave them lying around?"

She grabbed her real wand and turned around to find that the sauce on the stove was smoking.

"C'mon," Ron said hurriedly to Harry, seizing a handful of cutlery from the open drawer, "let's go and help Bill and Charlie."

They left Mrs. Weasley and headed out the back door into the yard. They had only gone a few paces when Hermione's bandy-legged ginger cat, Crookshanks, came pelting out of the garden, bottle-brush tail held high in the air, chasing what looked like a muddy potato on legs. Harry recognized it instantly as a gnome. Barely ten inches high, its horny little feet pattered very fast as it sprinted across the yard and dived headlong into one of the Wellington boots that lay scattered around the door. Harry could hear the gnome giggling madly as Crookshanks inserted a paw into the boot, trying to reach it. Meanwhile, a very loud crashing noise was coming from the other side of the house. The source of the commotion was revealed as they entered the garden, and saw that Bill and Charlie both had their wands out, and were making two battered old tables fly high above the lawn, smashing into each other, each attempting to knock the other's out of the air. Fred and George were cheering, Ginny

was laughing, and Hermione was hovering near the hedge, apparently torn between amusement and anxiety.

Bill's table caught Charlie's with a huge bang and knocked one of its legs off. There was a clatter from overhead, and they all looked up to see Percy's head poking out of a window on the second floor.

"Will you keep it down?!" he bellowed.

"Sorry, Perce," said Bill, grinning. "How're the cauldron bottoms coming on?"

"Very badly," said Percy peevishly, and he slammed the window shut.

Chuckling, Bill and Charlie directed the tables safely onto the grass, end to end, and then, with a flick of his wand, Bill reattached the table leg and conjured tablecloths from nowhere.

By seven o'clock, the two tables were groaning under dishes and dishes of Mrs. Weasley's excellent cooking, and the nine Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione were settling themselves down to eat beneath a clear, deep-blue sky. To somebody who had been living on meals of increasingly stale cake all summer, this was paradise, and at first, Harry listened rather than talked as he helped himself to chicken and ham pie, boiled potatoes, and salad.

At the far end of the table, Percy was telling his father all about his report on cauldron bottoms.

"I've told Mr. Crouch that I'll have it ready by Tuesday," Percy was saying pompously. "That's a bit sooner than he expected it, but I like to keep on top of things. I think he'll be grateful I've done it in good time, I mean, its extremely busy in our department just now, what with all the arrangements for the World Cup. We're just not getting the support we need from the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Ludo Bagman -"

"I like Ludo," said Mr. Weasley mildly. "He was the one who got us such good tickets for the Cup. I did him a bit of a favor: His brother, Otto, got into a spot of trouble - a lawnmower with unnatural powers - I smoothed the whole thing over."

"Oh Bagman's likable enough, of course," said Percy dismissively, "but how he ever got to be Head of Department ... when I compare him to Mr. Crouch! I can't see Mr. Crouch losing a member of our department and not trying to find out what's happened to them. You realize Bertha Jorkins has been missing for over a month now? Went on holiday to Albania and never came back?"

"Yes, I was asking Ludo about that," said Mr. Weasley, frowning. "He says Bertha's gotten lost plenty of times before now - though must say, if it was someone in my department, I'd be worried. . . ."

"Oh Bertha's hopeless, all right," said Percy. "I hear she's been shunted from department to department for years, much more trouble than she's worth ... but all the same, Bagman ought to be trying to find her. Mr. Crouch has been taking a personal interest, she worked in our department at one time, you know, and I think Mr. Crouch was quite fond of her - but Bagman just keeps laughing and saying she probably misread the map and ended up in Australia instead of Albania. However" - Percy heaved an impressive sigh and took a deep swig of elderflower wine - "we've got quite enough on our plates at the Department of International Magical Cooperation without trying to find members of other departments too. As you know, we've got another big event to organize right after the World Cup."

Percy cleared his throat significantly and looked down toward the end of the table where Harry, Ron, and Hermione were sitting. "You know the one I'm talking about, Father." He raised his voice slightly. "The top-secret one."

Ron rolled his eyes and muttered to Harry and Hermione, "He's been trying to get us to ask what that event is ever since he started work. Probably an exhibition of thick-bottomed cauldrons."

In the middle of the table, Mrs. Weasley was arguing with Bill about his earring, which seemed to be a recent acquisition.

". . . with a horrible great fang on it. Really, Bill, what do they say at the bank?"

"Mum,.no one at the bank gives a damn how I dress as long as I bring home plenty of treasure," said Bill patiently.

"And your hair's getting silly, dear," said Mrs. Weasley, fingering her wand lovingly." I wish you'd let me give it a trim. . . ."

"I like it," said Ginny, who was sitting beside Bill. "You're so old-fashioned, Mum. Anyway, it's nowhere near as long as Professor Dumbledore's...."

Next to Mrs. Weasley, Fred, George, and Charlie were all talking spiritedly about the World Cup.

"It's got to be Ireland," said Charlie thickly, through a mouthful of potato. "They flattened Peru in the semifinals."

"Bulgaria has got Viktor Krum, though," said Fred.

"Krum's one decent player, Ireland has got seven," said Charlie shortly.

"I wish England had got through. That was embarrassing, that was."

"What happened?" said Harry eagerly, regretting more than ever his isolation from the wizarding world when he was stuck on Privet Drive.

"Went down to Transylvania, three hundred and ninety to ten," said Charlie gloomily. "Shocking performance. And Wales lost to Uganda, and Scotland was slaughtered by Luxembourg."

Harry had been on the Gryffindor House Quidditch team ever since his first year at Hogwarts and owned one of the best racing brooms in the world, a Firebolt. Flying came more naturally to Harry than anything else in the magical world, and he played in the position of Seeker on the Gryffindor House team.

Mr. Weasley conjured up candles to light the darkening garden before they had their homemade strawberry ice cream, and by the time they had finished, moths were fluttering low over the table, and the warm air was perfumed with the smells of grass and honeysuckle. Harry was feeling extremely well fed and at peace with the world as he watched several gnomes sprinting through the rosebushes, laughing madly and closely pursued by Crookshanks.

Ron looked carefully up the table to check that the rest of the family were all busy talking, then he said very quietly to Harry, "So - have you heard from Sirius lately?"

Hermione looked around, listening closely.

"Yeah," said Harry softly, "twice. He sounds okay. I wrote to him yesterday. He might write back while I'm here."

He suddenly remembered the reason he had written to Sirius, and for a moment was on the verge of telling Ron and Hermione about his scar hurting again, and about the dream that had awoken him . . . but he really didn't want to worry them just now, not when he himself was feeling so happy and peaceful.

"Look at the time," Mrs. Weasley said suddenly, checking her wristwatch. "You really should be in bed, the whole lot of you you'll be up at the crack of dawn to get to the Cup. Harry, if you leave your school list out, I'll get your things for you tomorrow in Diagon Alley. I'm getting everyone else's. There might not be time after the World Cup, the match went on for five days last time."

"Wow - hope it does this time!" said Harry enthusiastically.

"Well, I certainly don't," said Percy sanctimoniously. "I shudder to think what the state of my in-tray would be if I was away from work for five days."

"Yeah, someone might slip dragon dung in it again, eh, Perce?" said Fred.

"That was a sample of fertilizer from Norway!" said Percy, going very red in the face. "It was nothing personal!"

"It was," Fred whispered to Harry as they got up from the table. "We sent it."

CHAPTER SIX - THE PORTKEY

Harry felt as though he had barely lain down to sleep in Ron's room when he was being shaken awake by Mrs. Weasley.

"Time to go, Harry, dear," she whispered, moving away to wake Ron. Harry felt around for his glasses, put them on, and sat up. It was still dark outside. Ron muttered indistinctly as his mother roused him. At the foot of Harry's mattress he saw two large, disheveled shapes emerging from tangles of blankets.

"'S' time already?" said Fred groggily.

They dressed in silence, too sleepy to talk, then, yawning and stretching, the four of them headed downstairs into the kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley was stirring the contents of a large pot on the stove, while Mr. Weasley was sitting at the table, checking a sheaf of large parchment tickets. He looked up as the boys entered and spread his arms so that they could see his clothes more clearly. He was wearing what appeared to be a golfing sweater and a very old pair of jeans, slightly too big for him and held up with a thick leather belt.

"What d'you think?" he asked anxiously. "We're supposed to go incognito - do I look like a Muggle, Harry?"

"Yeah," said Harry, smiling, "very good."

"Where're Bill and Charlie and Per-Per-Percy?" said George, failing to stifle a huge yawn.

"Well, they're Apparating, aren't they?" said Mrs. Weasley, heaving the large pot over to the table and starting to ladle porridge into bowls.

"So they can have a bit of a lie-in."

Harry knew that Apparating meant disappearing from one place and reappearing almost instantly in another, but had never known any Hogwarts student to do it, and understood that it was very difficult.

"So they're still in bed?" said Fred grumpily, pulling his bowl of porridge toward him. "Why can't we Apparate too?"

"Because you're not of age and you haven't passed your test," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "And where have those girls got to?"

She bustled out of the kitchen and they heard her climbing the stairs.

"You have to pass a test to Apparate?" Harry asked.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Weasley, tucking the tickets safely into the back pocket of his jeans. "The Department of Magical Transportation had to fine a couple of people the other day for Apparating without a license. It's not easy, Apparition, and when it's not done properly it can lead to nasty complications. This pair I'm talking about went and splinched themselves."

Everyone around the table except Harry winced.

"Er - splinched?" said Harry.

"They left half of themselves behind," said Mr. Weasley, now spooning large amounts of treacle onto his porridge. "So, of course, they were stuck. Couldn't move either way. Had to wait for the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad to sort them out. Meant a fair old bit of paperwork, I can tell you, what with the Muggles who spotted the body parts they'd left behind....."

Harry had a sudden vision of a pair of legs and an eyeball lying abandoned on the pavement of Privet Drive.

"Were they okay?" he asked, startled.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Weasley matter-of-factly. "But they got a heavy fine, and I don't think they'll be trying it again in a hurry. You don't mess around with Apparition. There are plenty of adult wizards who don't bother with it. Prefer brooms - slower, but safer."

"But Bill and Charlie and Percy can all do it?"

"Charlie had to take the test twice," said Fred, grinning. "He failed the first time. Apparated five miles south of where he meant to, right on top of some poor old dear doing her shopping, remember?"

"Yes, well, he passed the second time," said Mrs. Weasley, marching back into the kitchen amid hearty sniggers.

"Percy only passed two weeks ago," said George. "He's been Apparating downstairs every morning since, just to prove he can."

There were footsteps down the passageway and Hermione and Ginny came into the kitchen, both looking pale and drowsy.

"Why do we have to be up so early?" Ginny said, rubbing her eyes and sitting down at the table.

"We've got a bit of a walk," said Mr. Weasley.

"Walk?" said Harry. "What, are we walking to the World Cup?"

"No, no, that's miles away," said Mr. Weasley, smiling. "We only need to walk a short way. It's just that it's very difficult for a large number of wizards to congregate without attracting Muggle attention. We have to be very careful about how we travel at the best of times, and on a huge occasion like the Quidditch World Cup..."

"George!" said Mrs. Weasley sharply, and they all jumped.

"What?" said George, in an innocent tone that deceived nobody.

"What is that in your pocket?"

"Nothing!"

"Don't you lie to me!"

Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at George's pocket and said, "Accio!" Several small, brightly colored objects zoomed out of George's pocket; he made a grab for them but missed, and they sped right into Mrs. Weasley's outstretched hand.

"We told you to destroy them!" said Mrs. Weasley furiously, holding up what were unmistakably more Ton-Tongue Toffees. "We told you to get rid of the lot! Empty your pockets, go on, both of you!"

It was an unpleasant scene; the twins had evidently been trying to smuggle as many toffees out of the house as possible, and it was only by using her Summoning Charm that Mrs. Weasley managed to find them all.

"Accio! Accio! Accio!" she shouted, and toffees zoomed from all sorts of unlikely places, including the lining of George's jacket and the turn-ups of Fred's jeans.

"We spent six months developing those!" Fred shouted at his mother as she threw the toffees away.

"Oh a fine way to spend six months!" she shrieked. "No wonder you didn't get more O.W.L.s!"

All in all, the atmosphere was not very friendly as they took their departure. Mrs. Weasley was still glowering as she kissed Mr. Weasley on the cheek, though not nearly as much as the twins, who had each hoisted their rucksacks onto their backs and walked out without a word to her.

"Well, have a lovely time," said Mrs. Weasley, "and behave yourselves," she called after the twins' retreating backs, but they did not look back or answer. "I'll send Bill, Charlie, and Percy along around midday,"

Mrs. Weasley said to Mr. Weasley, as he, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny set off across the dark yard after Fred and George.

It was chilly and the moon was still out. Only a dull, greenish tinge along the horizon to their right showed that daybreak was drawing closer. Harry, having been thinking about thousands of wizards speeding toward the Quidditch World Cup, sped up to walk with Mr. Weasley.

"So how does everyone get there without all the Muggles noticing?" he asked.

"It's been a massive organizational problem," sighed Mr. Weasley. "The trouble is, about a hundred thousand wizards turn up at the World Cup, and of course, we just haven't got a magical site big enough to accommodate them all. There are places Muggles can't penetrate, but imagine trying to pack a hundred thousand wizards into Diagon Alley or

platform nine and three-quarters. So we had to find a nice deserted moor, and set up as many anti-Muggle precautions as possible. The whole Ministry's been working on it for months. First, of course, we have to stagger the arrivals. People with cheaper tickets have to arrive two weeks beforehand. A limited number use Muggle transport, but we can't have too many clogging up their buses and trains - remember, wizards are coming from all over the world. Some Apparate, of course, but we have to set up safe points for them to appear, well away from Muggles. I believe there's a handy wood they're using as the Apparition point. For those who don't want to Apparate, or can't, we use Portkeys. They're objects that are used to transport wizards from one spot to another at a prearranged time. You can do large groups at a time if you need to. There have been two hundred Portkeys placed at strategic points around Britain, and the nearest one to us is up at the top of Stoatshead Hill, so that's where we're headed."

Mr. Weasley pointed ahead of them, where a large black mass rose beyond the village of Ottery St. Catchpole.

"What sort of objects are Portkeys?" said Harry curiously.

"Well, they can be anything," said Mr. Weasley. "Unobtrusive things, obviously, so Muggles don't go picking them up and playing with them ... stuff they'll just think is litter...."

They trudged down the dark, dank lane toward the village, the silence broken only by their footsteps. The sky lightened very slowly as they made their way through the village, its inky blackness diluting to deepest blue. Harry's hands and feet were freezing. Mr. Weasley kept checking his watch.

They didn't have breath to spare for talking as they began to climb Stoatshead Hill, stumbling occasionally in hidden rabbit holes, slipping on thick black tuffs of grass. Each breath Harry took was sharp in his chest and his legs were starting to seize up when, at last, his feet found level ground.

"Whew," panted Mr. Weasley, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his sweater. "Well, we've made good time - we've got ten minutes."

Hermione came over the crest of the hill last, clutching a stitch in her side.

"Now we just need the Portkey," said Mr. Weasley, replacing his glasses and squinting around at the ground. "It won't be big.... Come on..."

They spread out, searching. They had only been at it for a couple of minutes, however, when a shout rent the still air.

"Over here, Arthur! Over here, son, we've got it."

Two tall figures were silhouetted against the starry sky on the other side of the hilltop.

"Amos!" said Mr. Weasley, smiling as he strode over to the man who had shouted. The rest of them followed.

Mr. Weasley was shaking hands with a ruddy-faced wizard with a scrubby brown beard, who was holding a moldy-looking old boot in his other hand.

"This is Amos Diggory, everyone," said Mr. Weasley. "He works for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. And I think you know his son, Cedric?"

Cedric Diggory was an extremely handsome boy of around seventeen. He was Captain and Seeker of the Hufflepuff House Quidditch team at Hogwarts.

"Hi," said Cedric, looking around at them all.

Everybody said hi back except Fred and George, who merely nodded. They had never quite forgiven Cedric for beating their team, Gryffindor, in the first Quidditch match of the previous year.

"Long walk, Arthur?" Cedric's father asked. "Not too bad," said Mr. Weasley. "We live just on the other side of the village there. You?"

"Had to get up at two, didn't we, Ced? I tell you, I'll be glad when he's got his Apparition test. Still ... not complaining ... Quidditch World Cup, wouldn't miss it for a sackful of Galleons - and the tickets

cost about that. Mind you, looks like I got off easy. . . ." Amos Diggory peered good-naturedly around at the three Weasley boys, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny. "All these yours, Arthur?"

"Oh no, only the redheads," said Mr. Weasley, pointing out his children. "This is Hermione, friend of Ron's - and Harry, another friend -"

"Merlin's beard," said Amos Diggory, his eyes widening. "Harry? Harry Potter?"

"Er - yeah," said Harry.

Harry was used to people looking curiously at him when they met him, used to the way their eyes moved at once to the lightning scar on his forehead, but it always made him feel uncomfortable.

"Ced's talked about you, of course," said Amos Diggory. "Told us all about playing against you last year... I said to him, I said - Ced, that'll be something to tell your grandchildren, that will.... You beat Harry Potter!"

Harry couldn't think of any reply to this, so he remained silent. Fred and George were both scowling again. Cedric looked slightly embarrassed.

"Harry fell off his broom, Dad," he muttered. "I told you ... it was an accident...."

"Yes, but you didn't fall off, did you?" roared Amos genially, slapping his son on his back. "Always modest, our Ced, always the gentleman ... but the best man won, I'm sure Harry'd say the same, wouldn't you, eh? One falls off his broom, one stays on, you don't need to be a genius to tell which one's the better flier!"

"Must be nearly time," said Mr. Weasley quickly, pulling out his watch again. "Do you know whether we're waiting for any more, Amos?"

"No, the Lovegoods have been there for a week already and the Fawcetts couldn't get tickets," said Mr. Diggory. "There aren't any more of us in this area, are there?"

"Not that I know of," said Mr. Weasley. "Yes, it's a minute off ... We'd better get ready...."

He looked around at Harry and Hermione.

"You just need to touch the Portkey, that's all, a finger will do -"

With difficulty, owing to their bulky backpacks, the nine of them crowded around the old boot held out by Amos Diggory.

They all stood there, in a tight circle, as a chill breeze swept over the hilltop. Nobody spoke. It suddenly occurred to Harry how odd this would look if a Muggle were to walk up here now ... nine people, two of them grown men, clutching this manky old boot in the semidarkness, waiting.... "Three. . ." muttered Mr. Weasley, one eye still on his watch, two. . . one. . ."

It happened immediately: Harry felt as though a hook just behind his navel had been suddenly jerked irresistibly forward. His feet left the ground; he could feel Ron and Hermione on either side of him, their shoulders banging into his; they were all speeding forward in a howl of wind and swirling color; his forefinger was stuck to the boot as though it was pulling him magnetically onward and then -

His feet slammed into the ground; Ron staggered into him and he fell over; the Portkey hit the ground near his head with a heavy thud.

Harry looked up. Mr. Weasley, Mr. Diggory, and Cedric were still standing, though looking very windswept; everybody else was on the ground.

"Seven past five from Stoatshead Hill," said a voice.

CHAPTER SEVEN - BAGMAN AND CROUCH

Harry disentangled himself from Ron and got to his feet. They had arrived on what appeared to be a deserted stretch of misty moor. In front of them was a pair of tired and grumpy-looking wizards, one of whom was holding a large gold watch, the other a thick roll of parchment and a

quill. Both were dressed as Muggles, though very inexpertly: The man with the watch wore a tweed suit with thigh-length galoshes; his colleague, a kilt and a poncho.

"Morning, Basil," said Mr. Weasley, picking up the boot and handing it to the kilted wizard, who threw it into a large box of used Portkeys beside him; Harry could see an old newspaper, an empty drinks can, and a punctured football.

"Hello there, Arthur," said Basil wearily. "Not on duty, eh? It's all right for some.... We've been here all night.... You'd better get out of the way, we've got a big party coming in from the Black Forest at five fifteen. Hang on, I'll find your campsite.... Weasley ... Weasley...." He consulted his parchment list. "About a quarter of a mile's walk over there, first field you come to. Site manager's called Mr. Roberts. Diggory ... second field ... ask for Mr. Payne."

"Thanks, Basil," said Mr. Weasley, and he beckoned everyone to follow him.

They set off across the deserted moor, unable to make out much through the mist. After about twenty minutes, a small stone cottage next to a gate swam into view. Beyond it, Harry could just make out the ghostly shapes of hundreds and hundreds of tents, rising up the gentle slope of a large field toward a dark wood on the horizon. They said good-bye to the Diggorys and approached the cottage door.

A man was standing in the doorway, looking out at the tents. Harry knew at a glance that this was the only real Muggle for several acres. When he heard their footsteps, he turned his head to look at them.

"Morning!" said Mr. Weasley brightly.

"Morning," said the Muggle.

"Would you be Mr. Roberts?"

"Aye, I would," said Mr. Roberts. "And who're you?"

"Weasley - two tents, booked a couple of days ago?"

"Aye," said Mr. Roberts, consulting a list tacked to the door. "You've got a space up by the wood there. Just the one night?"

"That's it," said Mr. Weasley.

"You'll be paying now, then?" said Mr. Roberts.

"Ah - right - certainly -" said Mr. Weasley. He retreated a short distance from the cottage and beckoned Harry toward him. "Help me, Harry," he muttered, pulling a roll of Muggle money from his pocket and starting to peel the notes apart. "This one's a - a - a ten? Ah yes, I see the little number on it now... So this is a five?"

"A twenty," Harry corrected him in an undertone, uncomfortably aware of Mr. Roberts trying to catch every word.

"Ah yes, so it is.... I don't know, these little bits of paper..."

"You foreign?" said Mr. Roberts as Mr. Weasley returned with the correct notes.

"Foreign?" repeated Mr. Weasley, puzzled.

"You're not the first one who's had trouble with money," said Mr. Roberts, scrutinizing Mr. Weasley closely. "I had two try and pay me with great gold coins the size of hubcaps ten minutes ago."

"Did you really?" said Mr. Weasley nervously.

Mr. Roberts rummaged around in a tin for some change.

"Never been this crowded," he said suddenly, looking out over the misty field again. "Hundreds of pre-bookings. People usually just turn up...."

"Is that right?" said Mr. Weasley, his hand held out for his change, but Mr. Roberts didn't give it to him.

"Aye," he said thoughtfully. "People from all over. Loads of foreigners. And not just foreigners. Weirdos, you know? There's a bloke walking 'round in a kilt and a poncho."

"Shouldn't he?" said Mr. Weasley anxiously

"It's like some sort of... I dunno ... like some sort of rally," said Mr. Roberts. "They all seem to know each other. Like a big party."

At that moment, a wizard in plus-fours appeared out of thin air next to Mr. Roberts's front door.

"Oblivate!" he said sharply, pointing his wand at Mr. Roberts.

Instantly, Mr. Roberts's eyes slid out of focus, his brows unknitted, and a look of dreamy unconcern fell over his face. Harry recognized the symptoms of one who had just had his memory modified.

"A map of the campsite for you," Mr. Roberts said placidly to Mr. Weasley. "And your change."

"Thanks very much," said Mr. Weasley.

The wizard in plus-fours accompanied them toward the gate to the campsite. He looked exhausted: His chin was blue with stubble and there were deep purple shadows under his eyes. Once out of earshot of Mr. Roberts, he muttered to Mr. Weasley, "Been having a lot of trouble with him. Needs a Memory Charm ten times a day to keep him happy. And Ludo Bagman's not helping. Trotting around talking about Bludgers and Quaffles at the top of his voice, not a worry about anti-Muggle security Blimey, I'll be glad when this is over. See you later, Arthur."

He Disapparated.

"I thought Mr. Bagman was Head of Magical Games and Sports," said Ginny, looking surprised. "He should know better than to talk about Bludgers near Muggles, shouldn't he?"

"He should," said Mr. Weasley, smiling, and leading them through the gates into the campsite, "but Ludo's always been a bit ... well . . . lax about security. You couldn't wish for a more enthusiastic head of the sports department though. He played Quidditch for England himself, you know. And he was the best Beater the Wimbourne Wasps ever had."

They trudged up the misty field between long rows of tents. Most looked almost ordinary; their owners had clearly tried to make them as Muggle-like as possible, but had slipped up by adding chimneys, or bellpulls, or weather vanes. However, here and there was a tent so obviously magical that Harry could hardly be surprised that Mr. Roberts was getting suspicious. Halfway up the field stood an extravagant confection of striped silk like a miniature palace, with several live peacocks tethered at the entrance. A little farther on they passed a tent that had three floors and several turrets; and a short way beyond that was a tent that had a front garden attached, complete with birdbath, sundial, and fountain.

"Always the same," said Mr. Weasley, smiling. "We can't resist showing off when we get together. Ah, here we are, look, this is us."

They had reached the very edge of the wood at the top of the field, and here was an empty space, with a small sign hammered into the ground that read WEEZLY.

"Couldn't have a better spot!" said Mr. Weasley happily. "The field is just on the other side of the wood there, we're as close as we could be." He hoisted his backpack from his shoulders. "Right," he said excitedly, "no magic allowed, strictly speaking, not when we're out in these numbers on Muggle land. We'll be putting these tents up by hand! Shouldn't be too difficult.... Muggles do it all the time.... Here, Harry, where do you reckon we should start?"

Harry had never been camping in his life; the Dursleys had never taken him on any kind of holiday, preferring to leave him with Mrs. Figg, an old neighbor. However, he and Hermione worked out where most of the poles and pegs should go, and though Mr. Weasley was more of a hindrance than a help, because he got thoroughly overexcited when it came to using the mallet, they finally managed to erect a pair of shabby two-man tents. All of them stood back to admire their handiwork. Nobody looking at these tents would guess they belonged to wizards, Harry thought, but the trouble was that once Bill, Charlie, and Percy arrived, they would be a party of ten. Hermione seemed to have spotted this problem too; she gave

Harry a quizzical look as Mr. Weasley dropped to his hands and knees and entered the first tent.

"We'll be a bit cramped," he called, "but I think we'll all squeeze in. Come and have a look."

Harry bent down, ducked under the tent flap, and felt his jaw drop. He had walked into what looked like an old-fashioned, three room flat, complete with bathroom and kitchen. Oddly enough, it was furnished in exactly the same sort of style as Mrs. Figg's house: There were crocheted covers on the mismatched chairs and a strong smell of cats.

"Well, it's not for long," said Mr. Weasley, mopping his bald patch with a handkerchief and peering in at the four bunk beds that stood in the bedroom. I borrowed this from Perkins at the office. Doesn't camp much anymore, poor fellow, he's got lumbago."

He picked up the dusty kettle and peered inside it. "We'll need water....

"There's a tap marked on this map the Muggle gave us," said Ron, who had followed Harry inside the tent and seemed completely unimpressed by its extraordinary inner proportions. "It's on the other side of the field."

"Well, why don't you, Harry, and Hermione go and get us some water then" - Mr. Weasley handed over the kettle and a couple of saucepans - "and the rest of us will get some wood for a fire?"

"But we've got an oven," said Ron. "Why can't we just -"

"Ron, anti-Muggle security!" said Mr. Weasley, his face shining with anticipation. "When real Muggles camp, they cook on fires outdoors. I've seen them at it!"

After a quick tour of the girls' tent, which was slightly smaller than the boys', though without the smell of cats, Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off across the campsite with the kettle and saucepans.

Now, with the sun newly risen and the mist lifting, they could see the city of tents that stretched in every direction. They made their way slowly through the rows, staring eagerly around. It was only just dawning on Harry how many witches and wizards there must be in the world; he had never really thought much about those in other countries.

Their fellow campers were starting to wake up. First to stir were the families with small children; Harry had never seen witches and wizards this young before. A tiny boy no older than two was crouched outside a large pyramid-shaped tent, holding a wand and poking happily at a slug in the grass, which was swelling slowly to the size of a salami. As they drew level with him, his mother came hurrying out of the tent.

"How many times, Kevin? You don't - touch - Daddy's - wand - yecchh! " She had trodden on the giant slug, which burst. Her scolding carried after them on the still air, mingling with the little boy's yells - "You bust slug! You bust slug!"

A short way farther on, they saw two little witches, barely older than Kevin, who were riding toy broomsticks that rose only high enough for the girls' toes to skim the dewy grass. A Ministry wizard had already spotted them; as he hurried past Harry, Ron, and Hermione he muttered distractedly, "In broad daylight! Parents having a lie-in, I suppose -" Here and there adult wizards and witches were emerging from their tents and starting to cook breakfast. Some, with furtive looks around them, conjured fires with their wands; others were striking matches with dubious looks on their faces, as though sure this couldn't work. Three African wizards sat in serious conversation, all of them wearing long white robes and roasting what looked like a rabbit on a bright purple fire, while a group of middle-aged American witches sat gossiping happily beneath a spangled banner stretched between their tents that read: THE SALEM WITCHES' INSTITUTE. Harry caught snatches of conversation in strange languages from the inside of tents they passed, and though he couldn't understand a word, the tone of every single voice was excited.

"Er - is it my eyes, or has everything gone green?" said Ron.

It wasn't just Ron's eyes. They had walked into a patch of tents that were all covered with a thick growth of shamrocks, so that it looked as though small, oddly shaped hillocks had sprouted out of the earth. Grinning faces could be seen under those that had their flaps open. Then, from behind them, they heard their names.

"Harry! Ron! Hermione!"

It was Seamus Finnigan, their fellow Gryffindor fourth year. He was sitting in front of his own shamrock-covered tent, with a sandy-haired woman who had to be his mother, and his best friend, Dean Thomas, also of Gryffindor.

"Like the decorations?" said Seamus, grinning. "The Ministry's not too happy."

"Ah, why shouldn't we show our colors?" said Mrs. Finnigan. "You should see what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over their tents. You'll be supporting Ireland, of course?" she added, eyeing Harry, Ron, and Hermione beadily. When they had assured her that they were indeed supporting Ireland, they set off again, though, as Ron said, "Like we'd say anything else surrounded by that lot." I wonder what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over their tents?" said Hermione.

"Let's go and have a look," said Harry, pointing to a large patch of tents upfield, where the Bulgarian flag - white, green, and red - was fluttering in the breeze.

The tents here had not been bedecked with plant life, but each and every one of them had the same poster attached to it, a poster of a very surly face with heavy black eyebrows. The picture was, of course, moving, but all it did was blink and scowl.

"Krum," said Ron quietly.

"What?" said Hermione.

"Krum!" said Ron. "Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker!"

"He looks really grumpy," said Hermione, looking around at the many Krums blinking and scowling at them.

"Really grumpy?" Ron raised his eyes to the heavens. "Who cares what he looks like? He's unbelievable. He's really young too. Only just eighteen or something. He's a genius, you wait until tonight, you'll see."

There was already a small queue for the tap in the corner of the field. Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined it, right behind a pair of men who were having a heated argument. One of them was a very old wizard who was wearing a long flowery nightgown. The other was clearly a Ministry wizard; he was holding out a pair of pinstriped trousers and almost crying with exasperation.

"Just put them on, Archie, there's a good chap. You can't walk around like that, the Muggle at the gate's already getting suspicious - I bought this in a Muggle shop," said the old wizard stubbornly.

"Muggles wear them."

"Muggle women wear them, Archie, not the men, they wear these," said the Ministry wizard, and he brandished the pinstriped trousers.

"I'm not putting them on," said old Archie in indignation. "I like a healthy breeze 'round my privates, thanks."

Hermione was overcome with such a strong fit of the giggles at this point that she had to duck out of the queue and only returned when Archie had collected his water and moved away.

Walking more slowly now, because of the weight of the water, they made their way back through the campsite. Here and there, they saw more familiar faces: other Hogwarts students with their families. Oliver Wood, the old captain of Harry's House Quidditch team, who had just left Hogwarts, dragged Harry over to his parents' tent to introduce him, and told him excitedly that he had just been signed to the Puddlemere United reserve team. Next they were hailed by Ernie Macmillan, a Hufflepuff fourth year, and a little farther on they saw Cho Chang, a very pretty

girl who played Seeker on the Ravenclaw team. She waved and smiled at Harry, who slopped quite a lot of water down his front as he waved back. More to stop Ron from smirking than anything, Harry hurriedly pointed out a large group of teenagers whom he had never seen before.

"Who d'you reckon they are?" he said. "They don't go to Hogwarts, do they?"

"'Spect they go to some foreign school," said Ron. "I know there are others. Never met anyone who went to one, though. Bill had a penfriend at a school in Brazil ... this was years and years ago ... and he wanted to go on an exchange trip but Mum and Dad couldn't afford it. His penfriend got all offended when he said he wasn't going and sent him a cursed hat. It made his ears shrivel up."

Harry laughed but didn't voice the amazement he felt at hearing about other wizarding schools. He supposed, now that he saw representatives of so many nationalities in the campsite, that he had been stupid never to realize that Hogwarts couldn't be the only one. He glanced at Hermione, who looked utterly unsurprised by the information. No doubt she had run across the news about other wizarding schools in some book or other.

"You've been ages," said George when they finally got back to the Weasleys' tents.

"Met a few people," said Ron, setting the water down. "You've not got that fire started yet?"

"Dad's having fun with the matches," said Fred.

Mr. Weasley was having no success at all in lighting the fire, but it wasn't for lack of trying. Splintered matches littered the ground around him, but he looked as though he was having the time of his life.

"Oops!" he said as he managed to light a match and promptly dropped it in surprise.

"Come here, Mr. Weasley," said Hermione kindly, taking the box from him, and showing him how to do it properly.

At last they got the fire lit, though it was at least another hour before it was hot enough to cook anything. There was plenty to watch while they waited, however. Their tent seemed to be pitched right alongside a kind of thoroughfare to the field, and Ministry members kept hurrying up and down it, greeting Mr. Weasley cordially as they passed. Mr. Weasley kept up a running commentary, mainly for Harry's and Hermione's benefit; his own children knew too much about the Ministry to be greatly interested. "That was Cuthbert Mockridge, Head of the Goblin Liaison Office.... Here comes Gilbert Wimble; he's with the Committee on Experimental Charms; he's had those horns for a while now... Hello, Arnie ... Arnold Peasegood, he's an Obliviator - member of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, you know... and that's Bode and Croaker ... they're Unspeakables...."

"They're what?"

"From the Department of Mysteries, top secret, no idea what they get up to...."

At last, the fire was ready, and they had just started cooking eggs and sausages when Bill, Charlie, and Percy came strolling out of the woods toward them.

"Just Apparated, Dad," said Percy loudly. "Ah, excellent, lunch!"

They were halfway through their plates of eggs and sausages when Mr. Weasley jumped to his feet, waving and grinning at a man who was striding toward them. "Aha!" he said. "The man of the moment! Ludo!"

Ludo Bagman was easily the most noticeable person Harry had seen so far, even including old Archie in his flowered nightdress. He was wearing long Quidditch robes in thick horizontal stripes of bright yellow and black. An enormous picture of a wasp was splashed across his chest. He had the look of a powerfully built man gone slightly to seed; the robes were stretched tightly across a large belly he surely had not had in the days when he had played Quidditch for England. His nose was squashed

(probably broken by a stray Bludger, Harry thought), but his round blue eyes, short blond hair, and rosy complexion made him look like a very overgrown schoolboy.

"Ahoy there!" Bagman called happily. He was walking as though he had springs attached to the balls of his feet and was plainly in a state of wild excitement.

"Arthur, old man," he puffed as he reached the campfire, "what a day, eh? What a day! Could we have asked for more perfect weather? A cloudless night coming ... and hardly a hiccup in the arrangements.... Not much for me to do!"

Behind him, a group of haggard-looking Ministry wizards rushed past, pointing at the distant evidence of some sort of a magical fire that was sending violet sparks twenty feet into the air.

Percy hurried forward with his hand outstretched. Apparently his disapproval of the way Ludo Bagman ran his department did not prevent him from wanting to make a good impression.

"Ah - yes," said Mr. Weasley, grinning, "this is my son Percy. He's just started at the Ministry - and this is Fred - no, George, sorry - that's Fred - Bill, Charlie, Ron - my daughter, Ginny and Ron's friends, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter."

Bagman did the smallest of double takes when he heard Harry's name, and his eyes performed the familiar flick upward to the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Everyone," Mr. Weasley continued, "this is Ludo Bagman, you know who he is, it's thanks to him we've got such good tickets -"

Bagman beamed and waved his hand as if to say it had been nothing.

"Fancy a flutter on the match, Arthur?" he said eagerly, jingling what seemed to be a large amount of gold in the pockets of his yellow-and-black robes. "I've already got Roddy Pontner betting me Bulgaria will score first - I offered him nice odds, considering Ireland's front three are the strongest I've seen in years - and little Agatha Timms has put up half shares in her eel farm on a weeklong match."

"Oh ... go on then," said Mr. Weasley. "Let's see ... a Galleon on Ireland to win?"

"A Galleon?" Ludo Bagman looked slightly disappointed, but recovered himself. "Very well, very well ... any other takers?"

"They're a bit young to be gambling," said Mr. Weasley. "Molly wouldn't like -"

"We'll bet thirty-seven Galleons, fifteen Sickles, three Knuts," said Fred as he and George quickly pooled all their money, "that Ireland wins - but Viktor Krum gets the Snitch. Oh and we'll throw in a fake wand."

"You don't want to go showing Mr. Bagman rubbish like that," Percy hissed, but Bagman didn't seem to think the wand was rubbish at all; on the contrary, his boyish face shone with excitement as he took it from Fred, and when the wand gave a loud squawk and turned into a rubber chicken, Bagman roared with laughter.

"Excellent! I haven't seen one that convincing in years! I'd pay five Galleons for that!"

Percy froze in an attitude of stunned disapproval.

"Boys," said Mr. Weasley under his breath, "I don't want you betting.... That's all your savings Your mother -"

"Don't be a spoilsport, Arthur!" boomed Ludo Bagman, rattling his pockets excitedly. "They're old enough to know what they want! You reckon Ireland will win but Krum'll get the Snitch? Not a chance, boys, not a chance.... I'll give you excellent odds on that one We'll add five Galleons for the funny wand, then, shall we...."

Mr. Weasley looked on helplessly as Ludo Bagman whipped out a notebook and quill and began jotting down the twins' names.

"Cheers," said George, taking the slip of parchment Bagman handed him and tucking it away into the front of his robes. Bagman turned most cheerfully back to Mr. Weasley.

"Couldn't do me a brew, I suppose? I'm keeping an eye out for Barty Crouch. My Bulgarian opposite number's making difficulties, and I can't understand a word he's saying. Barty'll be able to sort it out. He speaks about a hundred and fifty languages."

"Mr. Crouch?" said Percy, suddenly abandoning his look of poker-stiff disapproval and positively writhing with excitement. "He speaks over two hundred! Mermish and Gobbledegook and Troll. . ."

"Anyone can speak Troll," said Fred dismissively. "All you have to do is point and grunt."

Percy threw Fred an extremely nasty look and stoked the fire vigorously to bring the kettle back to the boil.

"Any news of Bertha Jorkins yet, Ludo?" Mr. Weasley asked as Bagman settled himself down on the grass beside them all.

"Not a dicky bird," said Bagman comfortably. "But she'll turn up. Poor old Bertha ... memory like a leaky cauldron and no sense of direction. Lost, you take my word for it. She'll wander back into the office sometime in October, thinking it's still July."

"You don't think it might be time to send someone to look for her?" Mr. Weasley suggested tentatively as Percy handed Bagman his tea.

"Barty Crouch keeps saying that," said Bagman, his round eyes widening innocently, "but we really can't spare anyone at the moment. Oh - talk of the devil! Barty!"

A wizard had just Apparated at their fireside, and he could not have made more of a contrast with Ludo Bagman, sprawled on the grass in his old Wasp robes. Barty Crouch was a stiff, upright, elderly man, dressed in an impeccably crisp suit and tie. The parting in his short gray hair was almost unnaturally straight, and his narrow toothbrush mustache looked as though he trimmed it using a slide rule. His shoes were very highly polished. Harry could see at once why Percy idolized him. Percy was a great believer in rigidly following rules, and Mr. Crouch had complied with the rule about Muggle dressing so thoroughly that he could have passed for a bank manager; Harry doubted even Uncle Vernon would have spotted him for what he really was.

"Pull up a bit of grass, Barry," said Ludo brightly, patting the ground beside him.

"No thank you, Ludo," said Crouch, and there was a bite of impatience in his voice. "I've been looking for you everywhere. The Bulgarians are insisting we add another twelve seats to the Top Box."

"Oh is that what they're after?" said Bagman. I thought the chap was asking to borrow a pair of tweezers. Bit of a strong accent."

"Mr. Crouch!" said Percy breathlessly, sunk into a kind of halfbow that made him look like a hunchback. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Oh," said Mr. Crouch, looking over at Percy in mild surprise. "Yes - thank you, Weatherby."

Fred and George choked into their own cups. Percy, very pink around the ears, busied himself with the kettle.

"Oh and I've been wanting a word with you too, Arthur," said Mr. Crouch, his sharp eyes falling upon Mr. Weasley. "Ali Bashir's on the warpath. He wants a word with you about your embargo on flying carpets."

Mr. Weasley heaved a deep sigh.

"I sent him an owl about that just last week. If I've told him once I've told him a hundred times: Carpets are defined as a Muggle Artifact by the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects, but will he listen?"

"I doubt it," said Mr. Crouch, accepting a cup from Percy. "He's desperate to export here."

"Well, they'll never replace brooms in Britain, will they?" said Bagman.

"Ali thinks there's a niche in the market for a family vehicle, said Mr. Crouch. "I remember my grandfather had an Axminster that could seat twelve - but that was before carpets were banned, of course."

He spoke as though he wanted to leave nobody in any doubt that all his ancestors had abided strictly by the law.

"So, been keeping busy, Barty?" said Bagman breezily.

"Fairly," said Mr. Crouch dryly. "Organizing Portkeys across five continents is no mean feat, Ludo."

"I expect you'll both be glad when this is over?" said Mr. Weasley. Ludo Bagman looked shocked.

"Glad! Don't know when I've had more fun.... Still, it's not as though we haven't got anything to look forward to, eh, Barty? Eh? Plenty left to organize, eh?"

Mr. Crouch raised his eyebrows at Bagman.

"We agreed not to make the announcement until all the details -"

"Oh details!" said Bagman, waving the word away like a cloud of midges. "They've signed, haven't they? They've agreed, haven't they? I bet you anything these kids'll know soon enough anyway. I mean, it's happening at Hogwarts -"

"Ludo, we need to meet the Bulgarians, you know," said Mr. Crouch sharply, cutting Bagman's remarks short. "Thank you for the tea, Weatherby."

He pushed his undrunk tea back at Percy and waited for Ludo to rise; Bagman struggled to his feet, swigging down the last of his tea, the gold in his pockets chinking merrily.

"See you all later!" he said. "You'll be up in the Top Box with me - I'm commentating!" He waved, Barty Crouch nodded curtly, and both of them Disapparated.

"What's happening at Hogwarts, Dad?" said Fred at once. "What were they talking about?"

"You'll find out soon enough," said Mr. Weasley, smiling.

"It's classified information, until such time as the Ministry decides to release it," said Percy stiffly. "Mr. Crouch was quite right not to disclose it."

"Oh shut up, Weatherby," said Fred.

A sense of excitement rose like a palpable cloud over the campsite as the afternoon wore on. By dusk, the still summer air itself seemed to be quivering with anticipation, and as darkness spread like a curtain over the thousands of waiting wizards, the last vestiges of pretence disappeared: the Ministry seemed to have bowed to the inevitable and stopped fighting the signs of blatant magic now breaking out everywhere. Salesmen were Apparating every few feet, carrying trays and pushing carts full of extraordinary merchandise. There were luminous rosettes - green for Ireland, red for Bulgaria - which were squealing the names of the players, pointed green hats bedecked with dancing shamrocks, Bulgarian scarves adorned with lions that really roared, flags from both countries that played their national anthems as they were waved; there were tiny models of Firebolts that really flew, and collectible figures of famous players, which strolled across the palm of your hand, preening themselves.

"Been saving my pocket money all summer for this," Ron told Harry as they and Hermione strolled through the salesmen, buying souvenirs. Though Ron purchased a dancing shamrock hat and a large green rosette, he also bought a small figure of Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker. The miniature Krum walked backward and forward over Ron's hand, scowling up at the green rosette above him.

"Wow, look at these!" said Harry, hurrying over to a cart piled high with what looked like brass binoculars, except that they were covered with all sorts of weird knobs and dials.

"Omnioculars," said the saleswizard eagerly. "You can replay action ... slow everything down ... and they flash up a play-by- play breakdown if you need it. Bargain - ten Galleons each."

"Wish I hadn't bought this now," said Ron, gesturing at his dancing shamrock hat and gazing longingly at the Omnioculars.

"Three pairs," said Harry firmly to the wizard.

"No - don't bother," said Ron, going red. He was always touchy about the fact that Harry, who had inherited a small fortune from his parents, had much more money than he did.

"You won't be getting anything for Christmas," Harry told him, thrusting Omnioculars into his and Hermione's hands. "For about ten years, mind."

"Fair enough," said Ron, grinning.

"Oooh, thanks, Harry," said Hermione. "And I'll get us some programs, look -"

Their money bags considerably lighter, they went back to the tents. Bill, Charlie, and Ginny were all sporting green rosettes too, and Mr. Weasley was carrying an Irish flag. Fred and George had no souvenirs as they had given Bagman all their gold.

And then a deep, booming gong sounded somewhere beyond the woods, and at once, green and red lanterns blazed into life in the trees, lighting a path to the field.

"It's time!" said Mr. Weasley, looking as excited as any of them. "Come on, let's go!"

CHAPTER EIGHT - THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP

Clutching their purchases, Mr. Weasley in the lead, they all hurried into the wood, following the lantern-lit trail. They could hear the sounds of thousands of people moving around them, shouts and laughter, snatches of singing. The atmosphere of feverish excitement was highly infectious; Harry couldn't stop grinning. They walked through the wood for twenty minutes, talking and joking loudly, until at last they emerged on the other side and found themselves in the shadow of a gigantic stadium. Though Harry could see only a fraction of the immense gold walls surrounding the field, he could tell that ten cathedrals would fit comfortably inside it.

"Seats a hundred thousand," said Mr. Weasley, spotting the awestruck look on Harry's face. "Ministry task force of five hundred have been working on it all year. Muggle Repelling Charms on every inch of it. Every time Muggles have got anywhere near here all year, they've suddenly remembered urgent appointments and had to dash away again ... bless them," he added fondly, leading the way toward the nearest entrance, which was already surrounded by a swarm of shouting witches and wizards.

"Prime seats!" said the Ministry witch at the entrance when she checked their tickets. "Top Box! Straight upstairs, Arthur, and as high as you can go."

The stairs into the stadium were carpeted in rich purple. They clambered upward with the rest of the crowd, which slowly filtered away through doors into the stands to their left and right. Mr. Weasley's party kept climbing, and at last they reached the top of the staircase and found themselves in a small box, set at the highest point of the stadium and situated exactly halfway between the golden goal posts. About twenty purple-and-gilt chairs stood in two rows here, and Harry, filing into the front seats with the Weasleys, looked down upon a scene the likes of which he could never have imagined.

A hundred thousand witches and wizards were taking their places in the seats, which rose in levels around the long oval field. Everything was suffused with a mysterious golden light, which seemed to come from the stadium itself. The field looked smooth as velvet from their lofty position. At either end of the field stood three goal hoops, fifty feet

high; right opposite them, almost at Harry's eye level, was a gigantic blackboard. Gold writing kept dashing across it as though an invisible giant's hand were scrawling upon the blackboard and then wiping it off again; watching it, Harry saw that it was flashing advertisements across the field.

The Bluebottle: A Broom for All the Family - safe, reliable, and with Built-in Anti-Burgler Buzzer ... Mrs. Shower's All Purpose Magical Mess Remover: No Pain, No Stain! ... Gladraggs Wizardwear - London, Paris, Hogsmeade...

Harry tore his eyes away from the sign and looked over his shoulder to see who else was sharing the box with them. So far it was empty, except for a tiny creature sitting in the second from last seat at the end of the row behind them. The creature, whose legs were so short they stuck out in front of it on the chair, was wearing a tea towel draped like a toga, and it had its face hidden in its hands. Yet those long, batlike ears were oddly familiar....

"Dobby?" said Harry incredulously.

The tiny creature looked up and stretched its fingers, revealing enormous brown eyes and a nose the exact size and shape of a large tomato. It wasn't Dobby - it was, however, unmistakably a house-elf, as Harry's friend Dobby had been. Harry had set Dobby free from his old owners, the Malfoy family.

"Did sir just call me Dobby?" squeaked the elf curiously from between its fingers. Its voice was higher even than Dobby's had been, a teeny, quivering squeak of a voice, and Harry suspected though it was very hard to tell with a house-elf - that this one might just be female. Ron and Hermione spun around in their seats to look. Though they had heard a lot about Dobby from Harry, they had never actually met him. Even Mr. Weasley looked around in interest.

"Sorry," Harry told the elf, "I just thought you were someone I knew." "But I knows Dobby too, sir!" squeaked the elf. She was shielding her face, as though blinded by light, though the Top Box was not brightly lit. "My name is Winky, sir - and you, sir -" Her dark brown eyes widened to the size of side plates as they rested upon Harry's scar. "You is surely Harry Potter!"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry.

"But Dobby talks of you all the time, sir!" he said, lowering her hands very slightly and looking awestruck.

"How is he?" said Harry. "How's freedom suiting him?"

"Ah, sir," said Winky, shaking her head, "ah sir, meaning no disrespect, sir, but I is not sure you did Dobby a favor, sir, when you is setting him free."

"Why?" said Harry, taken aback. "What's wrong with him?"

"Freedom is going to Dobby's head, sir," said Winky sadly. "Ideas above his station, sir. Can't get another position, sir."

"Why not?" said Harry.

Winky lowered her voice by a half-octave and whispered, "He is wanting paying for his work, sir."

"Paying?" said Harry blankly. "Well - why shouldn't he be paid?"

Winky looked quite horrified at the idea and closed her fingers slightly so that her face was half-hidden again.

"House-elves is not paid, sir!" she said in a muffled squeak. "No, no, no. I says to Dobby, I says, go find yourself a nice family and settle down, Dobby. He is getting up to all sorts of high jinks, sir, what is unbecoming to a house-elf. You goes racketing around like this, Dobby, I says, and next thing I hear you's up in front of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, like some common goblin."

"Well, it's about time he had a bit of fun," said Harry.

"House-elves is not supposed to have fun, Harry Potter," said Winky firmly, from behind her hands. "House-elves does what they is told. I is not liking heights at all, Harry Potter" - she glanced toward the edge of the box and gulped - "but my master sends me to the Top Box and I comes, sir."

"Why's he sent you up here, if he knows you don't like heights?" said Harry, frowning.

"Master - master wants me to save him a seat, Harry Potter. He is very busy," said Winky, tilting her head toward the empty space beside her.

"Winky is wishing she is back in master's tent, Harry Potter, but Winky does what she is told. Winky is a good house-elf."

She gave the edge of the box another frightened look and hid her eyes completely again. Harry turned back to the others.

"So that's a house-elf?" Ron muttered. "Weird things, aren't they?"

"Dobby was weirder," said Harry fervently.

Ron pulled out his Omnioculars and started testing them, staring down into the crowd on the other side of the stadium.

"Wild!" he said, twiddling the replay knob on the side. I can make that old bloke down there pick his nose again ... and again ... and again. . ."

Hermione, meanwhile, was skimming eagerly through her velvetcovered, tasseled program.

"'A display from the team mascots will precede the match,'" she read aloud.

"Oh that's always worth watching," said Mr. Weasley. "National teams bring creatures from their native land, you know, to put on a bit of a show."

The box filled gradually around them over the next half hour. Mr. Weasley kept shaking hands with people who were obviously very important wizards. Percy jumped to his feet so often that he looked as though he were trying to sit on a hedgehog. When Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself, arrived, Percy bowed so low that his glasses fell off and shattered. Highly embarrassed, he repaired them with his wand and thereafter remained in his seat, throwing jealous looks at Harry, whom Cornelius Fudge had greeted like an old friend. They had met before, and Fudge shook Harry's hand in a fatherly fashion, asked how he was, and introduced him to the wizards on either side of him.

"Harry Potter, you know," he told the Bulgarian minister loudly, who was wearing splendid robes of black velvet trimmed with gold and didn't seem to understand a word of English. "Harry Potter ... oh come on now, you know who he is ... the boy who survived You-Know-Who ... you do know who he is -"

The Bulgarian wizard suddenly spotted Harry's scar and started gabbling loudly and excitedly, pointing at it.

"Knew we'd get there in the end," said Fudge wearily to Harry. "I'm no great shakes at languages; I need Barty Crouch for this sort of thing. Ah, I see his house-elf's saving him a seat.... Good job too, these Bulgarian blighters have been trying to cadge all the best places ... ah, and here's Lucius!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned quickly. Edging along the second row to three still-empty seats right behind Mr. Weasley were none other than Dobby the house-elf's former owners: Lucius Malfoy; his son, Draco; and a woman Harry supposed must be Draco's mother.

Harry and Draco Malfoy had been enemies ever since their very first journey to Hogwarts. A pale boy with a pointed face and white-blond hair, Draco greatly resembled his father. His mother was blonde too; tall and slim, she would have been nice-looking if she hadn't been wearing a look that suggested there was a nasty smell under her nose.

"Ah, Fudge," said Mr. Malfoy, holding out his hand as he reached the Minister of Magic. "How are you? I don't think you've met my wife, Narcissa? Or our son, Draco?"

"How do you do, how do you do?" said Fudge, smiling and bowing to Mrs. Malfoy. "And allow me to introduce you to Mr. Oblansk - Obalonsk - Mr. - well, he's the Bulgarian Minister of Magic, and he can't understand a word I'm saying anyway, so never mind. And let's see who else - you know Arthur Weasley, I daresay?"

It was a tense moment. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy looked at each other and Harry vividly recalled the last time they had come face-to-face: It had been in Flourish and Blotts' bookshop, and they had had a fight. Mr. Malfoy's cold gray eyes swept over Mr. Weasley, and then up and down the row.

"Good lord, Arthur," he said softly. "What did you have to sell to get seats in the Top Box? Surely your house wouldn't have fetched this much?"

Fudge, who wasn't listening, said, "Lucius has just given a very generous contribution to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, Arthur. He's here as my guest."

"How - how nice," said Mr. Weasley, with a very strained smile.

Mr. Malfoy's eyes had returned to Hermione, who went slightly pink, but stared determinedly back at him. Harry knew exactly what was making Mr. Malfoy's lip curl like that. The Malfoys prided themselves on being purebloods; in other words, they considered anyone of Muggle descent, like Hermione, second-class. However, under the gaze of the Minister of Magic, Mr. Malfoy didn't dare say anything. He nodded sneeringly to Mr. Weasley and continued down the line to his seats. Draco shot Harry, Ron, and Hermione one contemptuous look, then settled himself between his mother and father.

"Slimy gits," Ron muttered as he, Harry, and Hermione turned to face the field again. Next moment, Ludo Bagman charged into the box.

"Everyone ready?" he said, his round face gleaming like a great, excited Edam. "Minister - ready to go?"

"Ready when you are, Ludo," said Fudge comfortably.

Ludo whipped out his wand, directed it at his own throat, and said "Sonorus!" and then spoke over the roar of sound that was now filling the packed stadium; his voice echoed over them, booming into every corner of the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen. . . welcome! Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!"

The spectators screamed and clapped. Thousands of flags waved, adding their discordant national anthems to the racket. The huge blackboard opposite them was wiped clear of its last message (Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans - A Risk With Every Mouthful!) and now showed BULGARIA: 0, IRELAND: 0.

"And now, without further ado, allow me to introduce. . . the Bulgarian National Team Mascots!"

The right-hand side of the stands, which was a solid block of scarlet, roared its approval.

"I wonder what they've brought," said Mr. Weasley, leaning forward in his seat. "Aaah!" He suddenly whipped off his glasses and polished them hurriedly on his robes. "Veela!"

"What are veel -?"

But a hundred veela were now gliding out onto the field, and Harry's question was answered for him. Veela were women. . . the most beautiful women Harry had ever seen. . . except that they weren't - they couldn't be - human. This puzzled Harry for a moment while he tried to guess what exactly they could be; what could make their skin shine moon-bright like that, or their white-gold hair fan out behind them without wind. . . but

then the music started, and Harry stopped worrying about them not being human - in fact, he stopped worrying about anything at all.

The veela had started to dance, and Harry's mind had gone completely and blissfully blank. All that mattered in the world was that he kept watching the veela, because if they stopped dancing, terrible things would happen.

And as the veela danced faster and faster, wild, half-formed thoughts started chasing through Harry's dazed mind. He wanted to do something very impressive, right now. Jumping from the box into the stadium seemed a good idea. . . but would it be good enough?

"Harry, what are you doing?" said Hermione's voice from a long way off. The music stopped. Harry blinked. He was standing up, and one of his legs was resting on the wall of the box. Next to him, Ron was frozen in an attitude that looked as though he were about to dive from a springboard.

Angry yells were filling the stadium. The crowd didn't want the veela to go. Harry was with them; he would, of course, be supporting Bulgaria, and he wondered vaguely why he had a large green shamrock pinned to his chest. Ron, meanwhile, was absentmindedly shredding the shamrocks on his hat. Mr. Weasley, smiling slightly, leaned over to Ron and tugged the hat out of his hands.

"You'll be wanting that," he said, "once Ireland have had their say."

"Huh?" said Ron, staring openmouthed at the veela, who had now lined up along one side of the field.

Hermione made a loud tutting noise. She reached up and pulled Harry back into his seat. "Honestly!" she said.

"And now," roared Ludo Bagman's voice, "kindly put your wands in the air. . . for the Irish National Team Mascots!"

Next moment, what seemed to be a great green-and-gold comet came zooming into the stadium. It did one circuit of the stadium, then split into two smaller comets, each hurtling toward the goal posts. A rainbow arced suddenly across the field, connecting the two balls of light. The crowd oooohed and aaaahed, as though at a fireworks display. Now the rainbow faded and the balls of light reunited and merged; they had formed a great shimmering shamrock, which rose up into the sky and began to soar over the stands. Something like golden rain seemed to be falling from it - "Excellent!" yelled Ron as the shamrock soared over them, and heavy gold coins rained from it, bouncing off their heads and seats. Squinting up at the shamrock, Harry realized that it was actually comprised of thousands of tiny little bearded men with red vests, each carrying a minute lamp of gold or green.

"Leprechauns!" said Mr. Weasley over the tumultuous applause of the crowd, many of whom were still fighting and rummaging around under their chairs to retrieve the gold.

"There you go," Ron yelled happily, stuffing a fistful of gold coins into Harry's hand, "for the Omnioculars! Now you've got to buy me a Christmas present, ha!"

The great shamrock dissolved, the leprechauns drifted down onto the field on the opposite side from the veela, and settled themselves cross-legged to watch the match.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, kindly welcome - the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team! I give you - Dimitrov!"

A scarlet-clad figure on a broomstick, moving so fast it was blurred, shot out onto the field from an entrance far below, to wild applause from the Bulgarian supporters.

"Ivanova!"

A second scarlet-robed player zoomed out.

"Zograf! Levski! Vulchanov! Volkov! Aaaaaaaand - Krum!"

"That's him, that's him!" yelled Ron, following Krum with his Omnioculars. Harry quickly focused his own.

Viktor Krum was thin, dark, and sallow-skinned, with a large curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He looked like an overgrown bird of prey. It was hard to believe he was only eighteen.

"And now, please greet - the Irish National Quidditch Team!" yelled Bagman. "Presenting - Connolly! Ryan! Troy! Mullet! Moran! Quigley! Aaaaaand - Lynch!"

Seven green blurs swept onto the field; Harry spun a small dial on the side of his Omnioculars and slowed the players down enough to read the word "Firebolt" on each of their brooms and see their names, embroidered in silver, upon their backs.

"And here, all the way from Egypt, our referee, acclaimed Chairwizard of the International Association of Quidditch, Hassan Mostafa!"

A small and skinny wizard, completely bald but with a mustache to rival Uncle Vernon's, wearing robes of pure gold to match the stadium, strode out onto the field. A silver whistle was protruding from under the mustache, and he was carrying a large wooden crate under one arm, his broomstick under the other. Harry spun the speed dial on his Omnioculars back to normal, watching closely as Mostafa mounted his broomstick and kicked the crate open - four balls burst into the air: the scarlet Quaffle, the two black Bludgers, and (Harry saw it for the briefest moment, before it sped out of sight) the minuscule, winged Golden Snitch. With a sharp blast on his whistle, Mostafa shot into the air after the balls.

"Theeeeeeee're OFF!" screamed Bagman. "And it's Mullet! Troy! Moran! Dimitrov! Back to Mullet! Troy! Levski! Moran!"

It was Quidditch as Harry had never seen it played before. He was pressing his Omnioculars so hard to his glasses that they were cutting into the bridge of his nose. The speed of the players was incredible - the Chasers were throwing the Quaffle to one another so fast that Bagman only had time to say their names. Harry spun the slow dial on the right of his Omnioculars again, pressed the play-by-play button on the top, and he was immediately watching in slow motion, while glittering purple lettering flashed across the lenses and the noise of the crowd pounded against his eardrums.

HAWKSHEAD ATTACKING FORMATION, he read as he watched the three Irish Chasers zoom closely together, Troy in the center, slightly ahead of Mullet and Moran, bearing down upon the Bulgarians. PORSKOFF PLOY flashed up next, as Troy made as though to dart upward with the Quaffle, drawing away the Bulgarian Chaser Ivanova and dropping the Quaffle to Moran. One of the Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov, swung hard at a passing Bludger with his small club, knocking it into Moran's path; Moran ducked to avoid the Bludger and dropped the Quaffle; and Levski, soaring beneath, caught it - "TROY SCORES!" roared Bagman, and the stadium shuddered with a roar of applause and cheers. "Ten zero to Ireland!"

"What?" Harry yelled, looking wildly around through his Omnioculars.

"But Levski's got the Quaffle!"

"Harry, if you're not going to watch at normal speed, you're going to miss things!" shouted Hermione, who was dancing up and down, waving her arms in the air while Troy did a lap of honor around the field. Harry looked quickly over the top of his Omnioculars and saw that the leprechauns watching from the sidelines had all risen into the air again and formed the great, glittering shamrock. Across the field, the veela were watching them sulkily.

Furious with himself, Harry spun his speed dial back to normal as play resumed.

Harry knew enough about Quidditch to see that the Irish Chasers were superb. They worked as a seamless team, their movements so well coordinated that they appeared to be reading one another's minds as they positioned themselves, and the rosette on Harry's chest kept squeaking their names: "Troy - Mullet - Mo ran!" And within ten minutes, Ireland

had scored twice more, bringing their lead to thirty-zero and causing a thunderous tide of roars and applause from the green-clad supporters. The match became still faster, but more brutal. Volkov and Vulchanov, the Bulgarian Beaters, were whacking the Bludgers as fiercely as possible at the Irish Chasers, and were starting to prevent them from using some of their best moves; twice they were forced to scatter, and then, finally, Ivanova managed to break through their ranks; dodge the Keeper, Ryan; and score Bulgaria's first goal.

"Fingers in your ears!" bellowed Mr. Weasley as the veela started to dance in celebration. Harry screwed up his eyes too; he wanted to keep his mind on the game. After a few seconds, he chanced a glance at the field. The veela had stopped dancing, and Bulgaria was again in possession of the Quaffle.

"Dimitrov! Levski! Dimitrov! Ivanova - oh I say!" roared Bagman. One hundred thousand wizards gasped as the two Seekers, Krum and Lynch, plummeted through the center of the Chasers, so fast that it looked as though they had just jumped from airplanes without parachutes. Harry followed their descent through his Omnioculars, squinting to see where the Snitch was -

"They're going to crash!" screamed Hermione next to Harry. She was half right - at the very last second, Viktor Krum pulled out of the dive and spiraled off. Lynch, however, hit the ground with a dull thud that could be heard throughout the stadium. A huge groan rose from the Irish seats.

"Fool!" moaned Mr. Weasley. "Krum was feinting!"

"It's time-out!" yelled Bagman's voice, "as trained mediwizards hurry onto the field to examine Aidan Lynch!"

"He'll be okay, he only got ploughed!" Charlie said reassuringly to Ginny, who was hanging over the side of the box, looking horror-struck.

"Which is what Krum was after, of course... ."

Harry hastily pressed the replay and play-by-play buttons on his Omnioculars, twiddled the speed dial, and put them back up to his eyes. He watched as Krum and Lynch dived again in slow motion. WRONSKI DEFENSIVE FEINT - DANGEROUS SEEKER DIVERSION read the shining purple lettering across his lenses. He saw Krum's face contorted with concentration as he pulled out of the dive just in time, while Lynch was flattened, and he understood - Krum hadn't seen the Snitch at all, he was just making Lynch copy him. Harry had never seen anyone fly like that; Krum hardly looked as though he was using a broomstick at all; he moved so easily through the air that he looked unsupported and weightless. Harry turned his Omnioculars back to normal and focused them on Krum. He was now circling high above Lynch, who was being revived by mediwizards with cups of potion. Harry, focusing still more closely upon Krum's face, saw his dark eyes darting all over the ground a hundred feet below. He was using the time while Lynch was revived to look for the Snitch without interference.

Lynch got to his feet at last, to loud cheers from the green-clad supporters, mounted his Firebolt, and kicked back off into the air. His revival seemed to give Ireland new heart. When Mostafa blew his whistle again, the Chasers moved into action with a skill unrivaled by anything Harry had seen so far.

After fifteen more fast and furious minutes, Ireland had pulled ahead by ten more goals. They were now leading by one hundred and thirty points to ten, and the game was starting to get dirtier.

As Mullet shot toward the goal posts yet again, clutching the Quaffle tightly under her arm, the Bulgarian Keeper, Zografs, flew out to meet her. Whatever happened was over so quickly Harry didn't catch it, but a scream of rage from the Irish crowd, and Mostafa's long, shrill whistle blast, told him it had been a foul.

"And Mostafa takes the Bulgarian Keeper to task for cobbing -- excessive use of elbows!" Bagman informed the roaring spectators. "And - yes, it's a penalty to Ireland!"

The leprechauns, who had risen angrily into the air like a swarm of glittering hornets when Mullet had been fouled, now darted together to form the words "HA, HA, HA!" The veela on the other side of the field leapt to their feet, tossed their hair angrily, and started to dance again.

As one, the Weasley boys and Harry stuffed their fingers into their ears, but Hermione, who hadn't bothered, was soon tugging on Harry's arm. He turned to look at her, and she pulled his fingers impatiently out of his ears.

"Look at the referee!" she said, giggling.

Harry looked down at the field. Hassan Mostafa had landed right in front of the dancing veela, and was acting very oddly indeed. He was flexing his muscles and smoothing his mustache excitedly.

"Now, we can't have that!" said Ludo Bagman, though he sounded highly amused. "Somebody slap the referee!"

A mediwizard came tearing across the field, his fingers stuffed into his own ears, and kicked Mostafa hard in the shins. Mostafa seemed to come to himself; Harry, watching through the Omnioculars again, saw that he looked exceptionally embarrassed and had started shouting at the veela, who had stopped dancing and were looking mutinous.

"And unless I'm much mistaken, Mostafa is actually attempting to send off the Bulgarian team mascots!" said Bagman's voice. "Now there's something we haven't seen before. . . . Oh this could turn nasty. . . .

It did: The Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov and Vulchanov, landed on either side of Mostafa and began arguing furiously with him, gesticulating toward the leprechauns, who had now gleefully formed the words "HEE, HEE, HEE." Mostafa was not impressed by the Bulgarians' arguments, however; he was jabbing his finger into the air, clearly telling them to get flying again, and when they refused, he gave two short blasts on his whistle.

"Two penalties for Ireland!" shouted Bagman, and the Bulgarian crowd howled with anger. "And Volkov and Vulchanov had better get back on those brooms. . . yes. . . there they go. . . and Troy takes the Quaffle.

Play now reached a level of ferocity beyond anything they had yet seen. The Beaters on both sides were acting without mercy: Volkov and Vulchanov in particular seemed not to care whether their clubs made contact with Bludger or human as they swung them violently through the air. Dimitrov shot straight at Moran, who had the Quaffle, nearly knocking her off her broom.

"Foul!" roared the Irish supporters as one, all standing up in a great wave of green.

"Foul!" echoed Ludo Bagman's magically magnified voice. "Dimitrov skins Moran - deliberately flying to collide there - and it's got to be another penalty - yes, there's the whistle!"

The leprechauns had risen into the air again, and this time, they formed a giant hand, which was making a very rude sign indeed at the veela across the field. At this, the veela lost control. Instead of dancing, they launched themselves across the field and began throwing what seemed to be handfuls of fire at the leprechauns. Watching through his Omnioculars, Harry saw that they didn't look remotely beautiful now. On the contrary, their faces were elongating into sharp, cruel-beaked bird heads, and long, scaly wings were bursting from their shoulders - "And that, boys," yelled Mr. Weasley over the tumult of the crowd below, "is why you should never go for looks alone!"

Ministry wizards were flooding onto the field to separate the veela and the leprechauns, but with little success; meanwhile, the pitched battle

below was nothing to the one taking place above. Harry turned this way and that, staring through his Omnioculars, as the Quaffie changed hands with the speed of a bullet.

"Levski - Dimitrov - Moran - Troy - Mullet - Ivanova - Moran again - Moran - MORAN SCORES!"

But the cheers of the Irish supporters were barely heard over the shrieks of the veela, the blasts now issuing from the Ministry members' wands, and the furious roars of the Bulgarians. The game recommenced immediately; now Levski had the Quaffle, now Dimitrov -

The Irish Beater Quigley swung heavily at a passing Bludger, and hit it as hard as possible toward Krum, who did not duck quickly enough. It hit him full in the face.

There was a deafening groan from the crowd; Krum's nose looked broken, there was blood everywhere, but Hassan Mostafa didn't blow his whistle. He had become distracted, and Harry couldn't blame him; one of the veela had thrown a handful of fire and set his broom tail alight.

Harry wanted someone to realize that Krum was injured; even though he was supporting Ireland, Krum was the most exciting player on the field. Ron obviously felt the same.

"Time-out! Ah, come on, he can't play like that, look at him -"

"Look at Lynch!" Harry yelled.

For the Irish Seeker had suddenly gone into a dive, and Harry was quite sure that this was no Wronski Feint; this was the real thing...

"He's seen the Snitch!" Harry shouted. "He's seen it! Look at him go!" Half the crowd seemed to have realized what was happening; the Irish supporters rose in another great wave of green, screaming their Seeker on. . . but Krum was on his tail. How he could see where he was going, Harry had no idea; there were flecks of blood flying through the air behind him, but he was drawing level with Lynch now as the pair of them hurtled toward the ground again -

"They're going to crash!" shrieked Hermione.

"They're not!" roared Ron.

"Lynch is!" yelled Harry.

And he was right - for the second time, Lynch hit the ground with tremendous force and was immediately stampeded by a horde of angry veela.

"The Snitch, where's the Snitch?" bellowed Charlie, along the row.

"He's got it - Krum's got it - it's all over!" shouted Harry.

Krum, his red robes shining with blood from his nose, was rising gently into the air, his fist held high, a glint of gold in his hand.

The scoreboard was flashing BULGARIA: 160, IRELAND: 170 across the crowd, who didn't seem to have realized what had happened. Then, slowly, as though a great jumbo jet were revving up, the rumbling from the Ireland supporters grew louder and louder and erupted into screams of delight.

"IRELAND WINS!" Bagman shouted, who like the Irish, seemed to be taken aback by the sudden end of the match.

"KRUM GETS THE SNITCH - BUT IRELAND WINS -- good lord, I don't think any of us were expecting that!"

"What did he catch the Snitch for?" Ron bellowed, even as he jumped up and down, applauding with his hands over his head. "He ended it when Ireland were a hundred and sixty points ahead, the idiot!"

"He knew they were never going to catch up!" Harry shouted back over all the noise, also applauding loudly. "The Irish Chasers were too good. . . . He wanted to end it on his terms, that's all. . . .

"He was very brave, wasn't he?" Hermione said, leaning forward to watch Krum land as a swarm of mediwizards blasted a path through the battling leprechauns and veela to get to him. "He looks a terrible mess. . . ."

Harry put his Omnioculars to his eyes again. It was hard to see what was happening below, because leprechauns were zooming delightedly all over the field, but he could just make out Krum, surrounded by mediwizards.

He looked surlier than ever and refused to let them mop him up. His team

members were around him, shaking their heads and looking dejected; a short way away, the Irish players were dancing gleefully in a shower of gold descending from their mascots. Flags were waving all over the stadium, the Irish national anthem blared from all sides; the veela were shrinking back into their usual, beautiful selves now, though looking dispirited and forlorn.

"Vell, ve fought bravely," said a gloomy voice behind Harry. He looked around; it was the Bulgarian Minister of Magic.

"You can speak English!" said Fudge, sounding outraged. "And you've been letting me mime everything all day!"

"Veil, it vos very funny," said the Bulgarian minister, shrugging. "And as the Irish team performs a lap of honor, flanked by their mascots, the Quidditch World Cup itself is brought into the Top Box!" roared Bagman.

Harry's eyes were suddenly dazzled by a blinding white light, as the Top Box was magically illuminated so that everyone in the stands could see the inside. Squinting toward the entrance, he saw two panting wizards carrying a vast golden cup into the box, which they handed to Cornelius Fudge, who was still looking very disgruntled that he'd been using sign language all day for nothing.

"Let's have a really loud hand for the gallant losers - Bulgaria!" Bagman shouted.

And up the stairs into the box came the seven defeated Bulgarian players. The crowd below was applauding appreciatively; Harry could see thousands and thousands of Omniocular lenses flashing and winking in their direction.

One by one, the Bulgarians filed between the rows of seats in the box, and Bagman called out the name of each as they shook hands with their own minister and then with Fudge. Krum, who was last in line, looked a real mess. Two black eyes were blooming spectacularly on his bloody face. He was still holding the Snitch. Harry noticed that he seemed much less coordinated on the ground. He was slightly duck-footed and distinctly round-shouldered. But when Krum's name was announced, the whole stadium gave him a resounding, earsplitting roar.

And then came the Irish team. Aidan Lynch was being supported by Moran and Connolly; the second crash seemed to have dazed him and his eyes looked strangely unfocused. But he grinned happily as Troy and Quigley lifted the Cup into the air and the crowd below thundered its approval. Harry's hands were numb with clapping.

At last, when the Irish team had left the box to perform another lap of honor on their brooms (Aidan Lynch on the back of Confolly's, clutching hard around his waist and still grinning in a bemused sort of way), Bagman pointed his wand at his throat and muttered, "Quietus."

"They'll be talking about this one for years," he said hoarsely, "a really unexpected twist, that. . . . shame it couldn't have lasted longer. . . . Ah yes. . . . yes, I owe you. . . how much?"

For Fred and George had just scrambled over the backs of their seats and were standing in front of Ludo Bagman with broad grins on their faces, their hands outstretched.

CHAPTER NINE - THE DARK MARK

Don't tell your mother you've been gambling," Mr. Weasley implored Fred and George as they all made their way slowly down the purple-carpeted stairs.

"Don't worry, Dad," said Fred gleefully, "we've got big plans for this money. We don't want it confiscated."

Mr. Weasley looked for a moment as though he was going to ask what these big plans were, but seemed to decide, upon reflection, that he didn't want to know.

They were soon caught up in the crowds now flooding out of the stadium and back to their campsites. Raucous singing was borne toward them on the night air as they retraced their steps along the lantern-lit path, and leprechauns kept shooting over their heads, cackling and waving their lanterns. When they finally reached the tents, nobody felt like sleeping at all, and given the level of noise around them, Mr. Weasley agreed that they could all have one last cup of cocoa together before turning in. They were soon arguing enjoyably about the match; Mr. Weasley got drawn into a disagreement about cobbing with Charlie, and it was only when Ginny fell asleep right at the tiny table and spilled hot chocolate all over the floor that Mr. Weasley called a halt to the verbal replays and insisted that everyone go to bed. Hermione and Ginny went into the next tent, and Harry and the rest of the Weasleys changed into pajamas and clambered into their bunks. From the other side of the campsite they could still hear much singing and the odd echoing bang. "Oh I am glad I'm not on duty," muttered Mr. Weasley sleepily. "I wouldn't fancy having to go and tell the Irish they've got to stop celebrating."

Harry, who was on a top bunk above Ron, lay staring up at the canvas ceiling of the tent, watching the glow of an occasional leprechaun lantern flying overhead, and picturing again some of Krum's more spectacular moves. He was itching to get back on his own Firebolt and try out the Wronski Feint. . . . Somehow Oliver Wood had never managed to convey with all his wriggling diagrams what that move was supposed to look like. . . . Harry saw himself in robes that had his name on the back, and imagined the sensation of hearing a hundred-thousand-strong crowd roar, as Ludo Bagman's voice echoed throughout the stadium, "I give you. . . Potter!"

Harry never knew whether or not he had actually dropped off to sleep - his fantasies of flying like Krum might well have slipped into actual dreams - all he knew was that, quite suddenly, Mr. Weasley was shouting. "Get up! Ron - Harry - come on now, get up, this is urgent!"

Harry sat up quickly and the top of his head hit canvas.

"S' matter?" he said.

Dimly, he could tell that something was wrong. The noises in the campsite had changed. The singing had stopped. He could hear screams, and the sound of people running. He slipped down from the bunk and reached for his clothes, but Mr. Weasley, who had pulled on his jeans over his own pajamas, said, "No time, Harry - just grab a jacket and get outside - quickly!"

Harry did as he was told and hurried out of the tent, Ron at his heels. By the light of the few fires that were still burning, he could see people running away into the woods, fleeing something that was moving across the field toward them, something that was emitting odd flashes of light and noises like gunfire. Loud jeering, roars of laughter, and drunken yells were drifting toward them; then came a burst of strong green light, which illuminated the scene.

A crowd of wizards, tightly packed and moving together with wands pointing straight upward, was marching slowly across the field. Harry squinted at them. . . . They didn't seem to have faces. . . . Then he realized that their heads were hooded and their faces masked. High above them, floating along in midair, four struggling figures were being contorted into grotesque shapes. It was as though the masked wizards on the ground were puppeteers, and the people above them were marionettes operated by invisible strings that rose from the wands into the air. Two of the figures were very small.

More wizards were joining the marching group, laughing and pointing up at the floating bodies. Tents crumpled and fell as the marching crowd swelled. Once or twice Harry saw one of the marchers blast a tent out of his way with his wand. Several caught fire. The screaming grew louder.

The floating people were suddenly illuminated as they passed over a burning tent and Harry recognized one of them: Mr. Roberts, the campsite manager. The other three looked as though they might be his wife and children. One of the marchers below flipped Mrs. Roberts upside down with his wand; her nightdress fell down to reveal voluminous drawers and she struggled to cover herself up as the crowd below her screeched and hooted with glee.

"That's sick," Ron muttered, watching the smallest Muggle child, who had begun to spin like a top, sixty feet above the ground, his head flopping limply from side to side. "That is really sick. . . ."

Hermione and Ginny came hurrying toward them, pulling coats over their nightdresses, with Mr. Weasley right behind them. At the same moment, Bill, Charlie, and Percy emerged from the boys' tent, fully dressed, with their sleeves rolled up and their wands out.

"We're going to help the Ministry!" Mr. Weasley shouted over all the noise, rolling up his own sleeves. "You lot - get into the woods, and stick together. I'll come and fetch you when we've sorted this out!"

Bill, Charlie, and Percy were already sprinting away toward the oncoming marchers; Mr. Weasley tore after them. Ministry wizards were dashing from every direction toward the source of the trouble. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was coming ever closer.

"C'mon," said Fred, grabbing Ginny's hand and starting to pull her toward the wood. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and George followed. They all looked back as they reached the trees. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was larger than ever; they could see the Ministry wizards trying to get through it to the hooded wizards in the center, but they were having great difficulty. It looked as though they were scared to perform any spell that might make the Roberts family fall.

The colored lanterns that had lit the path to the stadium had been extinguished. Dark figures were blundering through the trees; children were crying; anxious shouts and panicked voices were reverberating around them in the cold night air. Harry felt himself being pushed hither and thither by people whose faces he could not see. Then he heard Ron yell with pain.

"What happened?" said Hermione anxiously, stopping so abruptly that Harry walked into her. "Ron, where are you? Oh this is stupid - lumos!" She illuminated her wand and directed its narrow beam across the path. Ron was lying sprawled on the ground.

"Tripped over a tree root," he said angrily, getting to his feet again.

"Well, with feet that size, hard not to," said a drawling voice from behind them.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned sharply. Draco Malfoy was standing alone nearby, leaning against a tree, looking utterly relaxed. His arms folded, he seemed to have been watching the scene at the campsite through a gap in the trees.

Ron told Malfoy to do something that Harry knew he would never have dared say in front of Mrs. Weasley.

"Language, Weasley," said Malfoy, his pale eyes glittering. "Hadn't you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn't like her spotted, would you?"

He nodded at Hermione, and at the same moment, a blast like a bomb sounded from the campsite, and a flash of green light momentarily lit the trees around them.

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Hermione defiantly. "Granger, they're after Muggles," said Malfoy. "D'you want to be showing off your knickers in midair? Because if you do, hang around. . . they're moving this way, and it would give us all a laugh."

"Hermione's a witch," Harry snarled.

"Have it your own way, Potter," said Malfoy, grinning maliciously. "If you think they can't spot a Mudblood, stay where you are."

"You watch your mouth!" shouted Ron. Everybody present knew that "Mudblood" was a very offensive term for a witch or wizard of Muggle parentage.

"Never mind, Ron," said Hermione quickly, seizing Ron's arm to restrain him as he took a step toward Malfoy.

There came a bang from the other side of the trees that was louder than anything they had heard. Several people nearby screamed. Malfoy chuckled softly.

"Scare easily, don't they?" he said lazily. "I suppose your daddy told you all to hide? What's he up to - trying to rescue the Muggles?"

"Where're your parents?" said Harry, his temper rising. "Out there wearing masks, are they?"

Malfoy turned his face to Harry, still smiling.

"Well. . . if they were, I wouldn't be likely to tell you, would I, Potter?"

"Oh come on," said Hermione, with a disgusted look at Malfoy, "let's go and find the others."

"Keep that big bushy head down, Granger," sneered Malfoy.

"Come on," Hermione repeated, and she pulled Harry and Ron up the path again.

"I'll bet you anything his dad is one of that masked lot!" said Ron hotly.

"Well, with any luck, the Ministry will catch him!" said Hermione fervently. "Oh I can't believe this. Where have the others got to?" Fred, George, and Ginny were nowhere to be seen, though the path was packed with plenty of other people, all looking nervously over their shoulders toward the commotion back at the campsite. A huddle of teenagers in pajamas was arguing vociferously a little way along the path. When they saw Harry, Ron, and Hermione, a girl with thick curly hair turned and said quickly, "Où est Madame Maxime? Nous l'avons perdue -"

"Er - what?" said Ron.

"Oh. . ." The girl who had spoken turned her back on him, and as they walked on they distinctly heard her say, "Ogwarts."

"Beauxbatons," muttered Hermione.

"Sorry?" said Harry.

"They must go to Beauxbatons," said Hermione. "You know... Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. . . I read about it in An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe."

"Oh. . . yeah. . . right," said Harry.

"Fred and George can't have gone that far," said Ron, pulling out his wand, lighting it like Hermione's, and squinting up the path. Harry dug in the pockets of his jacket for his own wand - but it wasn't there. The only thing he could find was his Omnioculars.

"Ah, no, I don't believe it. . . I've lost my wand!"

"You're kidding!"

Ron and Hermione raised their wands high enough to spread the narrow beams of light farther on the ground; Harry looked all around him, but his wand was nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe it's back in the tent," said Ron.

"Maybe it fell out of your pocket when we were running?" Hermione suggested anxiously.

"Yeah," said Harry, "maybe. . .

He usually kept his wand with him at all times in the wizarding world, and finding himself without it in the midst of a scene like this made him feel very vulnerable.

A rustling noise nearby made all three of them jump. Winky the house-elf was fighting her way out of a clump of bushes nearby. She was moving in a most peculiar fashion, apparently with great difficulty; it was as though someone invisible were trying to hold her back.

"There is bad wizards about!" she squeaked distractedly as she leaned forward and labored to keep running. "People high - high in the air! Winky is getting out of the way!"

And she disappeared into the trees on the other side of the path, panting and squeaking as she fought the force that was restraining her.

"What's up with her?" said Ron, looking curiously after Winky. "Why can't she run properly?"

"Bet she didn't ask permission to hide," said Harry. He was thinking of Dobby: Every time he had tried to do something the Malfoys wouldn't like, the house-elf had been forced to start beating himself up.

"You know, house-elves get a very raw deal!" said Hermione indignantly. "It's slavery, that's what it is! That Mr. Crouch made her go up to the top of the stadium, and she was terrified, and he's got her bewitched so she can't even run when they start trampling tents! Why doesn't anyone do something about it?"

"Well, the elves are happy, aren't they?" Ron said. "You heard old Winky back at the match... 'House-elves is not supposed to have fun'. . . that's what she likes, being bossed around. . . ."

"It's people like you, Ron," Hermione began hotly, "who prop up rotten and unjust systems, just because they're too lazy to -"

Another loud bang echoed from the edge of the wood.

"Let's just keep moving, shall we?" said Ron, and Harry saw him glance edgily at Hermione. Perhaps there was truth in what Malfoy had said; perhaps Hermione was in more danger than they were. They set off again, Harry still searching his pockets, even though he knew his wand wasn't there.

They followed the dark path deeper into the wood, still keeping an eye out for Fred, George, and Ginny. They passed a group of goblins who were cackling over a sack of gold that they had undoubtedly won betting on the match, and who seemed quite unperturbed by the trouble at the campsite. Farther still along the path, they walked into a patch of silvery light, and when they looked through the trees, they saw three tall and beautiful veela standing in a clearing, surrounded by a gaggle of young wizards, all of whom were talking very loudly.

"I pull down about a hundred sacks of Galleons a year!" one of them shouted. "I'm a dragon killer for the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures."

"No, you're not!" yelled his friend. "You're a dishwasher at the Leaky Cauldron. . . . but I'm a vampire hunter, I've killed about ninety so far -"

A third young wizard, whose pimples were visible even by the dim, silvery light of the veela, now cut in, "I'm about to become the youngest ever Minister of Magic, I am."

Harry snorted with laughter. He recognized the pimply wizard: His name was Stan Shunpike, and he was in fact a conductor on the triple-decker Knight Bus. He turned to tell Ron this, but Ron's face had gone oddly slack, and next second Ron was yelling, "Did I tell you I've invented a broomstick that'll reach Jupiter?"

"Honestly!" said Hermione, and she and Harry grabbed Ron firmly by the arms, wheeled him around, and marched him away. By the time the sounds of the veela and their admirers had faded completely, they were in the very heart of the wood. They seemed to be alone now; everything was much quieter.

Harry looked around. "I reckon we can just wait here, you know. We'll hear anyone coming a mile off."

The words were hardly out of his mouth, when Ludo Bagman emerged from behind a tree right ahead of them.

Even by the feeble light of the two wands, Harry could see that a great change had come over Bagman. He no longer looked buoyant and rosy-faced; there was no more spring in his step. He looked very white and strained.

"Who's that?" he said, blinking down at them, trying to make out their faces. "What are you doing in here, all alone?"

They looked at one another, surprised.

"Well - there's a sort of riot going on," said Ron.
Bagman stared at him.

"What?"

"At the campsite. . . some people have got hold of a family of Muggles. .

Bagman swore loudly.

"Damn them!" he said, looking quite distracted, and without another word, he Disapparated with a small pop!

"Not exactly on top of things, Mr. Bagman, is he?" said Hermione, frowning.

"He was a great Beater, though," said Ron, leading the way off the path into a small clearing, and sitting down on a patch of dry grass at the foot of a tree. "The Wimbourne Wasps won the league three times in a row while he was with them."

He took his small figure of Krum out of his pocket, set it down on the ground, and watched it walk around. Like the real Krum, the model was slightly duck-footed and round-shouldered, much less impressive on his splayed feet than on his broomstick. Harry was listening for noise from the campsite. Everything seemed much quieter; perhaps the riot was over.

"I hope the others are okay," said Hermione after a while.

"They'll be fine," said Ron.

"Imagine if your dad catches Lucius Malfoy," said Harry, sitting down next to Ron and watching the small figure of Krum slouching over the fallen leaves. "He's always said he'd like to get something on him."

"That'd wipe the smirk off old Draco's face, all right," said Ron.

"Those poor Muggles, though," said Hermione nervously. "What if they can't get them down?"

"They will," said Ron reassuringly. "They'll find a way."

"Mad, though, to do something like that when the whole Ministry of Magic's out here tonight!" said Hermione. "I mean, how do they expect to get away with it? Do you think they've been drinking, or are they just -"

But she broke off abruptly and looked over her shoulder. Harry and Ron looked quickly around too. It sounded as though someone was staggering toward their clearing. They waited, listening to the sounds of the uneven steps behind the dark trees. But the footsteps came to a sudden halt.

"Hello?" called Harry.

There was silence. Harry got to his feet and peered around the tree. It was too dark to see very far, but he could sense somebody standing just beyond the range of his vision.

"Who's there?" he said.

And then, without warning, the silence was rent by a voice unlike any they had heard in the wood; and it uttered, not a panicked shout, but what sounded like a spell.

"MORSMORDRE!"

And something vast, green, and glittering erupted from the patch of darkness Harry's eyes had been struggling to penetrate; it flew up over the treetops and into the sky.

"What the - ?" gasped Ron as he sprang to his feet again, staring up at the thing that had appeared.

For a split second, Harry thought it was another leprechaun formation. Then he realized that it was a colossal skull, comprised of what looked like emerald stars, with a serpent protruding from its mouth like a tongue. As they watched, it rose higher and higher, blazing in a haze of greenish smoke, etched against the black sky like a new constellation.

Suddenly, the wood all around them erupted with screams. Harry didn't understand why, but the only possible cause was the sudden appearance of the skull, which had now risen high enough to illuminate the entire wood like some grisly neon sign. He scanned the darkness for the person who had conjured the skull, but he couldn't see anyone.

"Who's there?" he called again.

"Harry, come on, move!" Hermione had seized the collar of his jacket and was tugging him backward.

"What's the matter?" Harry said, startled to see her face so white and terrified.

"It's the Dark Mark, Harry!" Hermione moaned, pulling him as hard as she could. "You-Know-Who's sign!"

"Voldemort's - "Harry, come on!"

Harry turned - Ron was hurriedly scooping up his miniature Krum - the three of them started across the clearing - but before they had taken a few hurried steps, a series of popping noises announced the arrival of twenty wizards, appearing from thin air, surrounding them.

Harry whirled around, and in an instant, he registered one fact: Each of these wizards had his wand out, and every wand was pointing right at himself, Ron, and Hermione.

Without pausing to think, he yelled, "DUCK!"

He seized the other two and pulled them down onto the ground.

"STUPEFY!" roared twenty voices - there was a blinding series of flashes and Harry felt the hair on his head ripple as though a powerful wind had swept the clearing. Raising his head a fraction of an inch he saw jets of fiery red light flying over them from the wizards' wands, crossing one another, bouncing off tree trunks, rebounding into the darkness--

"Stop!" yelled a voice he recognized. "STOP! That's my son!"

Harry's hair stopped blowing about. He raised his head a little higher. The wizard in front of him had lowered his wand. He rolled over and saw Mr. Weasley striding toward them, looking terrified.

"Ron - Harry" - his voice sounded shaky - "Hermione - are you all right?"

"Out of the way, Arthur," said a cold, curt voice.

It was Mr. Crouch. He and the other Ministry wizards were closing in on them. Harry got to his feet to face them. Mr. Crouch's face was taut with rage.

"Which of you did it?" he snapped, his sharp eyes darting between them.

"Which of you conjured the Dark Mark?"

"We didn't do that!" said Harry, gesturing up at the skull.

"We didn't do anything!" said Ron, who was rubbing his elbow and looking indignantly at his father. "What did you want to attack us for?"

"Do not lie, sir!" shouted Mr. Crouch. His wand was still pointing directly at Ron, and his eyes were popping - he looked slightly mad. "You have been discovered at the scene of the crime!"

"Barty," whispered a witch in a long woolen dressing gown, "they're kids, Barty, they'd never have been able to

"Where did the Mark come from, you three?" said Mr. Weasley quickly.

"Over there," said Hermione shakily, pointing at the place where they had heard the voice. "There was someone behind the trees. . . they shouted words - an incantation -"

"Oh, stood over there, did they?" said Mr. Crouch, turning his popping eyes on Hermione now, disbelief etched all over his face. "Said an incantation, did they? You seem very well informed about how that Mark is summoned, missy -"

But none of the Ministry wizards apart from Mr. Crouch seemed to think it remotely likely that Harry, Ron, or Hermione had conjured the skull; on the contrary, at Hermione's words, they had all raised their wands again and were pointing in the direction she had indicated, squinting through the dark trees.

"We're too late," said the witch in the woolen dressing gown, shaking her head. "They'll have Disapparated."

"I don't think so," said a wizard with a scrubby brown beard. It was Amos Diggory, Cedric's father. "Our Stunners went right through those trees. . . . There's a good chance we got them. . . .

"Amos, be careful!" said a few of the wizards warningly as Mr. Diggory squared his shoulders, raised his wand, marched across the clearing, and disappeared into the darkness. Hermione watched him vanish with her hands over her mouth.

A few seconds later, they heard Mr. Diggory shout.

"Yes! We got them! There's someone here! Unconscious! It's - but - blimey. . . .

"You've got someone?" shouted Mr. Crouch, sounding highly disbelieving.

"Who? Who is it?"

They heard snapping twigs, the rustling of leaves, and then crunching footsteps as Mr. Diggory reemerged from behind the trees. He was carrying a tiny, limp figure in his arms. Harry recognized the tea towel at once. It was Winky.

Mr. Crouch did not move or speak as Mr. Diggory deposited his elf on the ground at his feet. The other Ministry wizards were all staring at Mr. Crouch. For a few seconds Crouch remained transfixed, his eyes blazing in his white face as he stared down at Winky. Then he appeared to come to life again.

"This - cannot - be," he said jerkily. "No -"

He moved quickly around Mr. Diggory and strode off toward the place where he had found Winky.

"No point, Mr. Crouch," Mr. Diggory called after him. "There's no one else there."

But Mr. Crouch did not seem prepared to take his word for it. They could hear him moving around and the rustling of leaves as he pushed the bushes aside, searching.

"Bit embarrassing," Mr. Diggory said grimly, looking down at Winky's unconscious form. "Barty Crouch's house-elf. . . . I mean to say..."

"Come off it, Amos," said Mr. Weasley quietly, "you don't seriously think it was the elf? The Dark Mark's a wizard's sign. It requires a wand."

"Yeah," said Mr. Diggory, "and she had a wand."

"What?" said Mr. Weasley.

"Here, look." Mr. Diggory held up a wand and showed it to Mr. Weasley.

"Had it in her hand. So that's clause three of the Code of Wand Use broken, for a start. No non-human creature is permitted to carry or use a wand."

Just then there was another pop, and Ludo Bagman Apparated right next to Mr. Weasley. Looking breathless and disorientated, he spun on the spot, goggling upward at the emerald-green skull.

"The Dark Mark!" he panted, almost trampling Winky as he turned inquiringly to his colleagues. "Who did it? Did you get them? Barry! What's going on?"

Mr. Crouch had returned empty-handed. His face was still ghostly white, and his hands and his toothbrush mustache were both twitching.

"Where have you been, Barty?" said Bagman. "Why weren't you at the match? Your elf was saving you a seat too - gulping gargoyles!" Bagman had just noticed Winky lying at his feet. "What happened to her?"

"I have been busy, Ludo," said Mr. Crouch, still talking in the same jerky fashion, barely moving his lips. "And my elf has been stunned."

"Stunned? By you lot, you mean? But why - ?"

Comprehension dawned suddenly on Bagman's round, shiny face; he looked up at the skull, down at Winky, and then at Mr. Crouch.

"No!" he said. "Winky? Conjure the Dark Mark? She wouldn't know how! She'd need a wand, for a start!"

"And she had one," said Mr. Diggory. "I found her holding one, Ludo. If it's all right with you, Mr. Crouch, I think we should hear what she's got to say for herself."

Crouch gave no sign that he had heard Mr. Diggory, but Mr. Diggory seemed to take his silence for assent. He raised his own wand, pointed it at Winky, and said, "Ennervate!"

Winky stirred feebly. Her great brown eyes opened and she blinked several times in a bemused sort of way. Watched by the silent wizards, she raised herself shakily into a sitting position.

She caught sight of Mr. Diggory's feet, and slowly, tremulously, raised her eyes to stare up into his face; then, more slowly still, she looked up into the sky. Harry could see the floating skull reflected twice in her enormous, glassy eyes. She gave a gasp, looked wildly around the crowded clearing, and burst into terrified sobs.

"Elf!" said Mr. Diggory sternly. "Do you know who I am? I'm a member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures!"

Winky began to rock backward and forward on the ground, her breath coming in sharp bursts. Harry was reminded forcibly of Dobby in his moments of terrified disobedience.

"As you see, elf, the Dark Mark was conjured here a short while ago," said Mr. Diggory. "And you were discovered moments later, right beneath it! An explanation, if you please!"

"I - I - I is not doing it, sir!" Winky gasped. "I is not knowing how, sir!"

"You were found with a wand in your hand!" barked Mr. Diggory, brandishing it in front of her. And as the wand caught the green light that was filling the clearing from the skull above, Harry recognized it "Hey - that's mine!" he said

Everyone in the clearing looked at him.

"Excuse me?" said Mr. Diggory, incredulously.

"That's my wand!" said Harry. "I dropped it!"

"You dropped it?" repeated Mr. Diggory in disbelief. "Is this a confession? You threw it aside after you conjured the Mark?"

"Amos, think who you're talking to!" said Mr. Weasley, very angrily.

"Is Harry Potter likely to conjure the Dark Mark?"

"Er - of course not," mumbled Mr. Diggory. "Sorry. . . carried away. .

"I didn't drop it there, anyway," said Harry, jerking his thumb toward the trees beneath the skull. "I missed it right after we got into the wood."

"So," said Mr. Diggory, his eyes hardening as he turned to look at Winky again, cowering at his feet. "You found this wand, eh, elf? And you picked it up and thought you'd have some fun with it, did you?"

"I is not doing magic with it, sir!" squealed Winky, tears streaming down the sides of her squashed and bulbous nose. "I is. . . I is. . . I is just picking it up, sir! i is not making the Dark Mark, sir, i is not knowing how!"

"It wasn't her!" said Hermione. She looked very nervous, speaking up in front of all these Ministry wizards, yet determined all the same.

"Winky's got a squeaky little voice, and the voice we heard doing the incantation was much deeper!" She looked around at Harry and Ron, appealing for their support. "It didn't sound anything like Winky, did it?"

"No," said Harry, shaking his head. "It definitely didn't sound like an elf."

"Yeah, it was a human voice," said Ron.

"Well, we'll soon see," growled Mr. Diggory, looking unimpressed.

"There's a simple way of discovering the last spell a wand performed, elf, did you know that?"

Winky trembled and shook her head frantically, her ears flapping, as Mr. Diggory raised his own wand again and placed it tip to tip with Harry's.

"Prior Incantato!" roared Mr. Diggory.

Harry heard Hermione gasp, horrified, as a gigantic serpent-tongued skull erupted from the point where the two wands met, but it was a mere shadow of the green skull high above them; it looked as though it were made of thick gray smoke: the ghost of a spell.

"Deletrius!" Mr. Diggory shouted, and the smoky skull vanished in a wisp of smoke.

"So," said Mr. Diggory with a kind of savage triumph, looking down upon Winky, who was still shaking convulsively.

"I is not doing it!" she squealed, her eyes rolling in terror. "I is not, I is not, I is not knowing how! I is a good elf, I isn't using wands, I isn't knowing how!"

"You've been caught red-handed, elf!" Mr. Diggory roared. "Caught with the guilty wand in your hand!"

"Amos," said Mr. Weasley loudly, "think about it. . . precious few wizards know how to do that spell. . . . Where would she have learned it?"

"Perhaps Amos is suggesting," said Mr. Crouch, cold anger in every syllable, "that I routinely teach my servants to conjure the Dark Mark?" There was a deeply unpleasant silence. Amos Diggory looked horrified.

"Mr. Crouch... not. . . not at all.

"You have now come very close to accusing the two people in this clearing who are least likely to conjure that Mark!" barked Mr. Crouch. "Harry Potter - and myself. I suppose you are familiar with the boy's story, Amos?"

"Of course - everyone knows -" muttered Mr. Diggory, looking highly discomfited.

"And I trust you remember the many proofs I have given, over a long career, that I despise and detest the Dark Arts and those who practice them?" Mr. Crouch shouted, his eyes bulging again.

"Mr. Crouch, I - I never suggested you had anything to do with it!" Amos Diggory muttered again, now reddening behind his scrubby brown beard.

"If you accuse my elf, you accuse me, Diggory!" shouted Mr. Crouch.

"Where else would she have learned to conjure it?"

"She - she might've picked it up anywhere -"

"Precisely, Amos," said Mr. Weasley. "She might have picked it up anywhere. . . . Winky?" he said kindly, turning to the elf, but she flinched as though he too was shouting at her. "Where exactly did you find Harry's wand?"

Winky was twisting the hem of her tea towel so violently that it was fraying beneath her fingers.

"I - I is finding it. . . finding it there, sir. . . ." she whispered, "there. . . in the trees, sir.

"You see, Amos?" said Mr. Weasley. "Whoever conjured the Mark could have Disapparated right after they'd done it, leaving Harry's wand behind. A clever thing to do, not using their own wand, which could have betrayed them. And Winky here had the misfortune to come across the wand moments later and pick it up."

"But then, she'd have been only a few feet away from the real culprit!" said Mr. Diggory impatiently. "Elf? Did you see anyone?"

Winky began to tremble worse than ever. Her giant eyes flickered from Mr. Diggory, to Ludo Bagman, and onto Mr. Crouch. Then she gulped and said, "I is seeing no one, sir. . . no one. . .

"Amos," said Mr. Crouch curtly, "I am fully aware that, in the ordinary course of events, you would want to take Winky into your department for questioning. I ask you, however, to allow me to deal with her."

Mr. Diggory looked as though he didn't think much of this suggestion at all, but it was clear to Harry that Mr. Crouch was such an important member of the Ministry that he did not dare refuse him.

"You may rest assured that she will be punished," Mr. Crouch added coldly.

"M-m-master. . ." Winky stammered, looking up at Mr. Crouch, her eyes brimming with tears. "M-m-master, p-p-please. . ."

Mr. Crouch stared back, his face somehow sharpened, each line upon it more deeply etched. There was no pity in his gaze.

"Winky has behaved tonight in a manner I would not have believed possible," he said slowly. "I told her to remain in the tent. I told her to stay there while I went to sort out the trouble. And I find that she disobeyed me. This means clothes."

"No!" shrieked Winky, prostrating herself at Mr. Crouch's feet. "No, master! Not clothes, not clothes!"

Harry knew that the only way to turn a house-elf free was to present it with proper garments. It was pitiful to see the way Winky clutched at her tea towel as she sobbed over Mr. Crouch's feet.

"But she was frightened!" Hermione burst out angrily, glaring at Mr. Crouch. "Your elf's scared of heights, and those wizards in masks were levitating people! You can't blame her for wanting to get out of their way!"

Mr. Crouch took a step backward, freeing himself from contact with the elf, whom he was surveying as though she were something filthy and rotten that was contaminating his over-shined shoes.

"I have no use for a house-elf who disobeys me," he said coldly, looking over at Hermione. "I have no use for a servant who forgets what is due to her master, and to her master's reputation."

Winky was crying so hard that her sobs echoed around the clearing. There was a very nasty silence, which was ended by Mr. Weasley, who said quietly, "Well, I think I'll take my lot back to the tent, if nobody's got any objections. Amos, that wand's told us all it can - if Harry could have it back, please -"

Mr. Diggory handed Harry his wand and Harry pocketed it.

"Come on, you three," Mr. Weasley said quietly. But Hermione didn't seem to want to move; her eyes were still upon the sobbing elf. "Hermione!"

Mr. Weasley said, more urgently. She turned and followed Harry and Ron out of the clearing and off through the trees.

"What's going to happen to Winky?" said Hermione, the moment they had left the clearing.

"I don't know," said Mr. Weasley.

"The way they were treating her!" said Hermione furiously. "Mr. Diggory, calling her 'elf' all the time. . . and Mr. Crouch! He knows she didn't do it and he's still going to sack her! He didn't care how frightened she'd been, or how upset she was - it was like she wasn't even human!"

"Well, she's not," said Ron.

Hermione rounded on him.

"That doesn't mean she hasn't got feelings, Ron. It's disgusting the way -"

"Hermione, I agree with you," said Mr. Weasley quickly, beckoning her on, "but now is not the time to discuss elf rights. I want to get back to the tent as fast as we can. What happened to the others?"

"We lost them in the dark," said Ron. "Dad, why was everyone so uptight about that skull thing?"

"I'll explain everything back at the tent," said Mr. Weasley tensely. But when they reached the edge of the wood, their progress was impeded. A large crowd of frightened-looking witches and wizards was congregated there, and when they saw Mr. Weasley coming toward them, many of them surged forward.

"What's going on in there?"

"Who conjured it?"

"Arthur - it's not - Him?"

"Of course it's not Him," said Mr. Weasley impatiently. "We don't know who it was; it looks like they Disapparated. Now excuse me, please, I want to get to bed."

He led Harry, Ron, and Hermione through the crowd and back into the campsite. All was quiet now; there was no sign of the masked wizards, though several ruined tents were still smoking.

Charlie's head was poking out of the boys' tent.

"Dad, what's going on?" he called through the dark. "Fred, George, and Ginny got back okay, but the others -"

"I've got them here," said Mr. Weasley, bending down and entering the tent. Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered after him.

Bill was sitting at the small kitchen table, holding a bedsheets to his arm, which was bleeding profusely. Charlie had a large rip in his shirt, and Percy was sporting a bloody nose. Fred, George, and Ginny looked unhurt, though shaken.

"Did you get them, Dad?" said Bill sharply. "The person who conjured the Mark?"

"No," said Mr. Weasley. "We found Barry Crouch's elf holding Harry's wand, but we're none the wiser about who actually conjured the Mark."

"What?" said Bill, Charlie, and Percy together. "Harry's wand?" said Fred.

"Mr. Crouch's elf" said Percy, sounding thunderstruck.

With some assistance from Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Mr. Weasley explained what had happened in the woods. When they had finished their story, Percy swelled indignantly.

"Well, Mr. Crouch is quite right to get rid of an elf like that!" he said. "Running away when he'd expressly told her not to. . . embarrassing him in front of the whole Ministry. . . how would that have looked, if she'd been brought up in front of the Department for the Regulation and Control -"

"She didn't do anything - she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time!" Hermione snapped at Percy, who looked very taken aback. Hermione had always got on fairly well with Percy - better, indeed, than any of the others.

"Hermione, a wizard in Mr. Crouch's position can't afford a house-elf who's going to run amok with a wand!" said Percy pompously, recovering himself.

"She didn't run amok!" shouted Hermione. "She just picked it up off the ground!"

"Look, can someone just explain what that skull thing was?" said Ron impatiently. "It wasn't hurting anyone. . . . Why's it such a big deal?"

"I told you, it's You-Know-Who's symbol, Ron," said Hermione, before anyone else could answer. "I read about it in The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts."

"And it hasn't been seen for thirteen years," said Mr. Weasley quietly.

"Of course people panicked. . . it was almost like seeing You-Know-Who back again."

"I don't get it," said Ron, frowning. "I mean. . . it's still only a shape in the sky. . . .

"Ron, You-Know-Who and his followers sent the Dark Mark into the air whenever they killed," said Mr. Weasley. "The terror it inspired. . . you have no idea, you're too young. Just picture coming home and finding the Dark Mark hovering over your house, and knowing what you're about to find inside. . . ." Mr. Weasley winced. "Everyone's worst fear. . . the very worst..

There was silence for a moment. Then Bill, removing the sheet from his arm to check on his cut, said, "Well, it didn't help us tonight, whoever conjured it. It scared the Death Eaters away the moment they saw it. They all Disapparated before we'd got near enough to unmask any of them.

We caught the Robertses before they hit the ground, though. They're having their memories modified right now."

"Death Eaters?" said Harry. "What are Death Eaters?"

"It's what You-Know-Who's supporters called themselves," said Bill. "I think we saw what's left of them tonight - the ones who managed to keep themselves out of Azkaban, anyway."

"We can't prove it was them, Bill," said Mr. Weasley. "Though it probably was," he added hopelessly.

"Yeah, I bet it was!" said Ron suddenly . "Dad, we met Draco Malfoy in the woods, and he as good as told us his dad was one of those nutters in masks! And we all know the Malfoys were right in with You-Know-Who!"

"But what were Voldemort's supporters -" Harry began. Everybody flinched - like most of the wizarding world, the Weasleys always avoided saying Voldemort's name. "Sorry," said Harry quickly. "What were You-Know-Who's supporters up to, levitating Muggles? I mean, what was the point?"

"The point?" said Mr. Weasley with a hollow laugh. "Harry, that's their idea of fun. Half the Muggle killings back when You-Know-Who was in power were done for fun. I suppose they had a few drinks tonight and couldn't resist reminding us all that lots of them are still at large. A nice little reunion for them," he finished disgustedly.

"But if they were the Death Eaters, why did they Disapparate when they saw the Dark Mark?" said Ron. "They'd have been pleased to see it, wouldn't they?"

"Use your brains, Ron," said Bill. "If they really were Death Eaters, they worked very hard to keep out of Azkaban when You-Know-Who lost power, and told all sorts of lies about him forcing them to kill and torture people. I bet they'd be even more frightened than the rest of us to see him come back. They denied they'd ever been involved with him when he lost his powers, and went back to their daily lives. . . . I don't reckon he'd be over-pleased with them, do you?"

"So. . . whoever conjured the Dark Mark. . ." said Hermione slowly, "were they doing it to show support for the Death Eaters, or to scare them away?"

"Your guess is as good as ours, Hermione," said Mr. Weasley. "But I'll tell you this. . . it was only the Death Eaters who ever knew how to conjure it. I'd be very surprised if the person who did it hadn't been a Death Eater once, even if they're not now. . Listen, it's very late, and if your mother hears what's happened she'll be worried sick. We'll get a few more hours sleep and then try and get an early Portkey out of here." Harry got back into his bunk with his head buzzing. He knew he ought to feel exhausted: It was nearly three in the morning, but he felt wide-awake - wide-awake, and worried.

Three days ago - it felt like much longer, but it had only been three days - he had awoken with his scar burning. And tonight, for the first time in thirteen years, Lord Voldemort's mark had appeared in the sky. What did these things mean?

He thought of the letter he had written to Sirius before leaving Privet Drive. Would Sirius have gotten it yet? When would he reply? Harry lay looking up at the canvas, but no flying fantasies came to him now to ease him to sleep, and it was a long time after Charlie's snores filled the tent that Harry finally dozed off.

CHAPTER TEN - MAYHEM AT THE MINISTRY

Mr. Weasley woke them after only a few hours sleep. He used magic to pack up the tents, and they left the campsite as quickly as possible, passing Mr. Roberts at the door of his cottage. Mr. Roberts had a strange, dazed look about him, and he waved them off with a vague "Merry Christmas."

"He'll be all right," said Mr. Weasley quietly as they marched off onto the moor. "Sometimes, when a person's memory's modified, it makes him a bit disorientated for a while...and that was a big thing they had to make him forget."

They heard urgent voices as they approached the spot where the Portkeys lay, and when they reached it, they found a great number of witches and wizards gathered around Basil, the keeper of the Portkeys, all clamoring to get away from the campsite as quickly as possible. Mr. Weasley had a hurried discussion with Basil; they joined the queue, and were able to take an old rubber tire back to Stoatshead Hill before the sun had really risen. They walked back through Ottery St. Catchpole and up the damp lane toward the Burrow in the dawn light, talking very little because they were so exhausted, and thinking longingly of their breakfast. As they rounded the corner and the Burrow came into view, a cry echoed along the lane.

"Oh thank goodness, thank goodness!"

Mrs. Weasley, who had evidently been waiting for them in the front yard, came running toward them, still wearing her bedroom slippers, her face pale and strained, a rolled-up copy of the Daily Prophet clutched in her hand.

"Arthur - I've been so worried - so worried!"

She flung her arms around Mr. Weasley's neck, and the Daily Prophet fell out of her limp hand onto the ground. Looking down, Harry saw the headline: SCENES OF TERROR AT THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP, complete with a twinkling black-and-white photograph of the Dark Mark over the treetops. "You're all right," Mrs. Weasley muttered distractedly, releasing Mr. Weasley and staring around at them all with red eyes, "you're alive. . . . Oh boys. . .

And to everybody's surprise, she seized Fred and George and pulled them both into such a tight hug that their heads banged together.

"Ouch! Mum - you're strangling us -"

"I shouted at you before you left!" Mrs. Weasley said, starting to sob. "It's all I've been thinking about! What if You-Know-Who had got you, and the last thing I ever said to you was that you didn't get enough OW.L.s? Oh Fred. . . George. . ."

"Come on, now, Molly, we're all perfectly okay," said Mr. Weasley soothingly, prising her off the twins and leading her back toward the house. "Bill," he added in an undertone, "pick up that paper, I want to see what it says. . ."

When they were all crammed into the tiny kitchen, and Hermione had made Mrs. Weasley a cup of very strong tea, into which Mr. Weasley insisted on pouring a shot of Ogdens Old Firewhiskey, Bill handed his father the newspaper. Mr. Weasley scanned the front page while Percy looked over his shoulder.

"I knew it," said Mr. Weasley heavily. "Ministry blunders. . . culprits not apprehended. . . lax security. . . Dark wizards running unchecked... national disgrace. . . Who wrote this? Ah. . . of course. . . Rita Skeeter."

"That woman's got it in for the Ministry of Magic!" said Percy furiously. "Last week she was saying we're wasting our time quibbling about cauldron thickness, when we should be stamping out vampires! As if it wasn't specifically stated in paragraph twelve of the Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans --"

"Do us a favor, Perce," said Bill, yawning, "and shut up."

"I'm mentioned," said Mr. Weasley, his eyes widening behind his glasses as he reached the bottom of the Daily Prophet article.

"Where?" spluttered Mrs. Weasley, choking on her tea and whiskey. "If I'd seen that, I'd have known you were alive!"

"Not by name," said Mr. Weasley. "Listen to this: 'If the terrified wizards and witches who waited breathlessly for news at the edge of the

wood expected reassurance from the Ministry of Magic, they were sadly disappointed. A Ministry official emerged some time after the appearance of the Dark Mark alleging that nobody had been hurt, but refusing to give any more information. Whether this statement will be enough to quash the rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods an hour later, remains to be seen.' Oh really," said Mr. Weasley in exasperation, handing the paper to Percy. "Nobody was hurt. What was I supposed to say? Rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods. . . well, there certainly will be rumors now she's printed that."

He heaved a deep sigh. "Molly, I'm going to have to go into the office; this is going to take some smoothing over."

"I'll come with you, Father," said Percy importantly. "Mr. Crouch will need all hands on deck. And I can give him my cauldron report in person." He bustled out of the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley looked most upset. "Arthur, you're supposed to be on holiday! This hasn't got anything to do with your office; surely they can handle this without you?"

"I've got to go, Molly," said Mr. Weasley. "I've made things worse. I'll just change into my robes and I'll be off. . . ."

"Mrs. Weasley," said Harry suddenly, unable to contain himself, "Hedwig hasn't arrived with a letter for me, has she?"

"Hedwig, dear?" said Mrs. Weasley distractedly. "No. . . no, there hasn't been any post at all."

Ron and Hermione looked curiously at Harry. With a meaningful look at both of them he said, "All right if I go and dump my stuff in your room, Ron?"

"Yeah. . . think I will too," said Ron at once. "Hermione?"

"Yes," she said quickly, and the three of them marched out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

"What's up, Harry?" said Ron, the moment they had closed the door of the attic room behind them.

"There's something I haven't told you," Harry said. "On Saturday morning, I woke up with my scar hurting again."

Ron's and Hermione's reactions were almost exactly as Harry had imagined them back in his bedroom on Privet Drive. Hermione gasped and started making suggestions at once, mentioning a number of reference books, and everybody from Albus Dumbledore to Madam Pomfrey, the Hogwarts nurse. Ron simply looked dumbstruck.

"But - he wasn't there, was he? You-Know-Who? I mean - last time your scar kept hurting, he was at Hogwarts, wasn't he?"

"I'm sure he wasn't on Privet Drive," said Harry. "But I was dreaming about him. . . him and Peter - you know, Wormtail. I can't remember all of it now, but they were plotting to kill...someone."

He had teetered for a moment on the verge of saying "me," but couldn't bring himself to make Hermione look any more horrified than she already did.

"It was only a dream," said Ron bracingly. "Just a nightmare."

"Yeah, but was it, though?" said Harry, turning to look out of the window at the brightening sky. "It's weird, isn't it? . . . My scar hurts, and three days later the Death Eaters are on the march, and Voldemort's sign's up in the sky again."

"Don't - say - his - name!" Ron hissed through gritted teeth.

"And remember what Professor Trelawney said?" Harry went on, ignoring Ron. "At the end of last year?"

Professor Trelawney was their Divination teacher at Hogwarts. Hermione's terrified look vanished as she let out a derisive snort.

"Oh Harry, you aren't going to pay attention to anything that old fraud says?"

"You weren't there," said Harry. "You didn't hear her. This time was different. I told you, she went into a trance - a real one. And she said the Dark Lord would rise again. . . greater and more terrible than ever

before. . . and he'd manage it because his servant was going to go back to him. . . and that night Wormtail escaped."

There was a silence in which Ron fidgeted absentmindedly with a hole in his Chudley Cannons bedspread.

"Why were you asking if Hedwig had come, Harry?" Hermione asked. "Are you expecting a letter?"

"I told Sirius about my scar," said Harry, shrugging. "I'm waiting for his answer."

"Good thinking!" said Ron, his expression clearing. "I bet Sirius'll know what to do!"

"I hoped he'd get back to me quickly," said Harry.

"But we don't know where Sirius is. . . he could be in Africa or somewhere, couldn't he?" said Hermione reasonably. "Hedwig's not going to manage that journey in a few days."

"Yeah, I know," said Harry, but there was a leaden feeling in his stomach as he looked out of the window at the Hedwig-free sky.

"Come and have a game of Quidditch in the orchard, Harry" said Ron. "Come on - three on three, Bill and Charlie and Fred and George will play. . . You can try out the Wronski Feint. . . ."

"Ron," said Hermione, in an I-don't-think-you're-being-very-sensitive sort of voice, "Harry doesn't want to play Quidditch right now. . . He's worried, and he's tired. . . . We all need to go to bed. . . ."

"Yeah, I want to play Quidditch," said Harry suddenly. "Hang on, I'll get my Firebolt."

Hermione left the room, muttering something that sounded very much like "Boys."

Neither Mr. Weasley nor Percy was at home much over the following week. Both left the house each morning before the rest of the family got up, and returned well after dinner every night.

"It's been an absolute uproar," Percy told them importantly the Sunday evening before they were due to return to Hogwarts. "I've been putting out fires all week. People keep sending Howlers, and of course, if you don't open a Howler straight away, it explodes. Scorch marks all over my desk and my best quill reduced to cinders."

"Why are they all sending Howlers?" asked Ginny, who was mending her copy of One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi with Spellotape on the rug in front of the living room fire.

"Complaining about security at the World Cup," said Percy. "They want compensation for their ruined property. Mundungus Fletcher's put in a claim for a twelve-bedroomed tent with en-suite Jacuzzi, but I've got his number. I know for a fact he was sleeping under a cloak propped on sticks."

Mrs. Weasley glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. Harry liked this clock. It was completely useless if you wanted to know the time, but otherwise very informative. It had nine golden hands, and each of them was engraved with one of the Weasley family's names. There were no numerals around the face, but descriptions of where each family member might be. "Home," "school," and "work" were there, but there was also "traveling," "lost," "hospital," "prison," and, in the position where the number twelve would be on a normal clock, "mortal peril."

Eight of the hands were currently pointing to the "home" position, but Mr. Weasley's, which was the longest, was still pointing to "work." Mrs. Weasley sighed.

"Your father hasn't had to go into the office on weekends since the days of You-Know-Who," she said. "They're working him far too hard. His dinner's going to be ruined if he doesn't come home soon."

"Well, Father feels he's got to make up for his mistake at the match, doesn't he?" said Percy. "If truth be told, he was a tad unwise to make a public statement without clearing it with his Head of Department first -"

"Don't you dare blame your father for what that wretched Skeeter woman wrote!" said Mrs. Weasley, flaring up at once.

"If Dad hadn't said anything, old Rita would just have said it was disgraceful that nobody from the Ministry had commented," said Bill, who was playing chess with Ron. "Rita Skeeter never makes anyone look good. Remember, she interviewed all the Gringotts' Charm Breakers once, and called me 'a long-haired pillock'?"

"Well, it is a bit long, dear," said Mrs. Weasley gently. "If you'd just let me -"

"No, Mum."

Rain lashed against the living room window. Hermione was immersed in The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, copies of which Mrs. Weasley had bought for her, Harry, and Ron in Diagon Alley. Charlie was darning a fireproof balaclava. Harry was polishing his Firebolt, the broomstick servicing kit Hermione had given him for his thirteenth birthday open at his feet. Fred and George were sitting in a far corner, quills out, talking in whispers, their heads bent over a piece of parchment.

"What are you two up to?" said Mrs. Weasley sharply, her eyes on the twins.

"Homework," said Fred vaguely.

"Don't be ridiculous, you're still on holiday," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Yeah, we've left it a bit late," said George.

"You're not by any chance writing out a new order form, are you?" said Mrs. Weasley shrewdly. "You wouldn't be thinking of restarting Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, by any chance?"

"Now, Mum," said Fred, looking up at her, a pained look on his face. "If the Hogwarts Express crashed tomorrow, and George and I died, how would you feel to know that the last thing we ever heard from you was an unfounded accusation?"

Everyone laughed, even Mrs. Weasley.

"Oh your father's coming!" she said suddenly, looking up at the clock again.

Mr. Weasley's hand had suddenly spun from "work" to "traveling"; a second later it had shuddered to a halt on "home" with the others, and they heard him calling from the kitchen.

"Coming, Arthur!" called Mrs. Weasley, hurrying out of the room.

A few moments later, Mr. Weasley came into the warm living room carrying his dinner on a tray. He looked completely exhausted.

"Well, the fat's really in the fire now," he told Mrs. Weasley as he sat down in an armchair near the hearth and toyed unenthusiastically with his somewhat shriveled cauliflower. "Rita Skeeter's been ferreting around all week, looking for more Ministry mess-ups to report. And now she's found out about poor old Bertha going missing, so that'll be the headline in the Prophet tomorrow. I told Bagman he should have sent someone to look for her ages ago."

"Mr. Crouch has been saying it for weeks and weeks," said Percy swiftly.

"Crouch is very lucky Rita hasn't found out about Winky," said Mr.

Weasley irritably. "There'd be a week's worth of headlines in his house-elf being caught holding the wand that conjured the Dark Mark."

"I thought we were all agreed that that elf, while irresponsible, did not conjure the Mark?" said Percy hotly.

"If you ask me, Mr. Crouch is very lucky no one at the Daily Prophet knows how mean he is to elves!" said Hermione angrily.

"Now look here, Hermione!" said Percy. "A high-ranking Ministry official like Mr. Crouch deserves unwavering obedience from his servants -"

"His slave, you mean!" said Hermione, her voice rising passionately, "because he didn't pay Winky, did he?"

"I think you'd all better go upstairs and check that you've packed properly!" said Mrs. Weasley, breaking up the argument. "Come on now, all of you. . . ."

Harry repacked his broomstick servicing kit, put his Firebolt over his shoulder, and went back upstairs with Ron. The rain sounded even louder at the top of the house, accompanied by loud whistlings and moans from the wind, not to mention sporadic howls from the ghoul who lived in the attic. Pigwidgeon began twittering and zooming around his cage when they entered. The sight of the half-packed trunks seemed to have sent him into a frenzy of excitement.

"Bung him some Owl Treats," said Ron, throwing a packet across to Harry.
"It might shut him up."

Harry poked a few Owl Treats through the bars of Pigwidgeon's cage, then turned to his trunk. Hedwig's cage stood next to it, still empty.

"It's been over a week," Harry said, looking at Hedwig's deserted perch.
"Ron, you don't reckon Sirius has been caught, do you?"

"Nah, it would've been in the Daily Prophet," said Ron. "The Ministry would want to show they'd caught someone, wouldn't they?"

"Yeah, I suppose. . . ."

"Look, here's the stuff Mum got for you in Diagon Alley. And she's got some gold out of your vault for you. . . and she's washed all your socks."

He heaved a pile of parcels onto Harry's camp bed and dropped the money bag and a load of socks next to it. Harry started unwrapping the shopping. Apart from The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, by Miranda Goshawk, he had a handful of new quills, a dozen rolls of parchment, and refills for his potion-making kit - he had been running low on spine of lionfish and essence of belladonna. He was just piling underwear into his cauldron when Ron made a loud noise of disgust behind him.

"What is that supposed to be?"

He was holding up something that looked to Harry like a long, maroon velvet dress. It had a moldy-looking lace frill at the collar and matching lace cuffs.

There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Weasley entered, carrying an armful of freshly laundered Hogwarts robes.

"Here you are," she said, sorting them into two piles. "Now, mind you pack them properly so they don't crease."

"Mum, you've given me Ginny's new dress," said Ron, handing it out to her.

"Of course I haven't," said Mrs. Weasley. "That's for you. Dress robes."

"What?" said Ron, looking horror-struck.

"Dress robes!" repeated Mrs. Weasley. "It says on your school list that you're supposed to have dress robes this year. . . robes for formal occasions."

"You've got to be kidding," said Ron in disbelief. "I'm not wearing that, no way."

"Everyone wears them, Ron!" said Mrs. Weasley crossly. "They're all like that! Your father's got some for smart parties!"

"I'll go starkers before I put that on," said Ron stubbornly.

"Don't be so silly," said Mrs. Weasley. "You've got to have dress robes, they're on your list! I got some for Harry too. . . show him, Harry..."

In some trepidation, Harry opened the last parcel on his camp bed. It wasn't as bad as he had expected, however; his dress robes didn't have any lace on them at all - in fact, they were more or less the same as his school ones, except that they were bottle green instead of black.

"I thought they'd bring out the color of your eyes, dear," said Mrs. Weasley fondly.

"Well, they're okay!" said Ron angrily, looking at Harry's robes. "Why couldn't I have some like that?"

"Because. . . well, I had to get yours secondhand, and there wasn't a lot of choice!" said Mrs. Weasley, flushing.

Harry looked away. He would willingly have split all the money in his Gringotts vault with the Weasleys, but he knew they would never take it. "I'm never wearing them," Ron was saying stubbornly. "Never." "Fine," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "Go naked. And, Harry, make sure you get a picture of him. Goodness knows I could do with a laugh." She left the room, slamming the door behind her. There was a funny spluttering noise from behind them. Pigwidgeon was choking on an overlarge Owl Treat. "Why is everything I own rubbish?" said Ron furiously, striding across the room to unstick Pigwidgeon's beak.

CHAPTER ELEVEN - ABOARD THE HOGWART EXPRESS

There was a definite end-of-the-holidays gloom in the air when Harry awoke next morning. Heavy rain was still splattering against the window as he got dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt; they would change into their school robes on the Hogwarts Express.

He, Ron, Fred, and George had just reached the first-floor landing on their way down to breakfast, when Mrs. Weasley appeared at the foot of the stairs, looking harassed.

"Arthur!" she called up the staircase. "Arthur! Urgent message from the Ministry!"

Harry flattened himself against the wall as Mr. Weasley came clattering past with his robes on back-to-front and hurtled out of sight. When Harry and the others entered the kitchen, they saw Mrs. Weasley rummaging anxiously in the drawers - "I've got a quill here somewhere!" - and Mr. Weasley bending over the fire, talking to - Harry shut his eyes hard and opened them again to make sure that they were working properly.

Amos Diggory's head was sitting in the middle of the flames like a large, bearded egg. It was talking very fast, completely unperturbed by the sparks flying around it and the flames licking its ears.

". . . Muggle neighbors heard bangs and shouting, so they went and called those what-d'you-call-'ems - please-men. Arthur, you've got to get over there --"

"Here!" said Mrs. Weasley breathlessly, pushing a piece of parchment, a bottle of ink, and a crumpled quill into Mr. Weasley's hands.

"- it's a real stroke of luck I heard about it," said Mr. Diggory's head. "I had to come into the office early to send a couple of owls, and I found the Improper Use of Magic lot all setting off -- if Rita Skeeter gets hold of this one, Arthur --"

"What does Mad-Eye say happened?" asked Mr. Weasley, unscrewing the ink bottle, loading up his quill, and preparing to take notes.

Mr. Diggory's head rolled its eyes. "Says he heard an intruder in his yard. Says he was creeping toward the house, but was ambushed by his dustbins."

"What did the dustbins do?" asked Mr. Weasley, scribbling frantically. "Made one hell of a noise and fired rubbish everywhere, as far as I can tell," said Mr. Diggory. "Apparently one of them was still rocketing around when the please-men turned up --"

Mr. Weasley groaned.

"And what about the intruder?"

"Arthur, you know Mad-Eye," said Mr. Diggory's head, rolling its eyes again. "Someone creeping into his yard in the dead of night? More likely there's a very shell-shocked cat wandering around somewhere, covered in potato peelings. But if the Improper Use of Magic lot get their hands on Mad-Eye, he's had it -- think of his record -- we've got to get him off on a minor charge, something in your department -- what are exploding dustbins worth?"

"Might be a caution," said Mr. Weasley, still writing very fast, his brow furrowed. "Mad-Eye didn't use his wand? He didn't actually attack anyone?"

"I'll bet he leapt out of bed and started jinxing everything he could reach through the window," said Mr. Diggory, "but they'll have a job proving it, there aren't any casualties."

"All right, I'm off," Mr. Weasley said, and he stuffed the parchment with his notes on it into his pocket and dashed out of the kitchen again. Mr. Diggory's head looked around at Mrs. Weasley.

"Sorry about this, Molly," it said, more calmly, "bothering you so early and everything...but Arthur's the only one who can get Mad-Eye off, and Mad-Eye's supposed to be starting his new job today. Why he had to choose last night. . ."

"Never mind, Amos," said Mrs. Weasley. "Sure you won't have a bit of toast or anything before you go?"

"Oh go on, then," said Mr. Diggory.

Mrs. Weasley took a piece of buttered toast from a stack on the kitchen table, put it into the fire tongs, and transferred it into Mr. Diggory's mouth.

"Fanks," he said in a muffled voice, and then, with a small pop, vanished.

Harry could hear Mr. Weasley calling hurried good-byes to Bill, Charlie, Percy, and the girls. Within five minutes, he was back in the kitchen, his robes on the right way now, dragging a comb through his hair.

"I'd better hurry - you have a good term, boys, said Mr. Weasley to Harry, Ron, and the twins, fastening a cloak over his shoulders and preparing to Disapparate. "Molly, are you going to be all right taking the kids to King's Cross?"

"Of course I will," she said. "You just look after Mad-Eye, we'll be fine."

As Mr. Weasley vanished, Bill and Charlie entered the kitchen.

"Did someone say Mad-Eye?" Bill asked. "What's he been up to now."

"He says someone tried to break into his house last night," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Mad-Eye Moody?" said George thoughtfully, spreading marmalade on his toast. "Isn't he that nutter -"

"Your father thinks very highly of Mad-Eye Moody," said Mrs. Weasley sternly.

"Yeah, well, Dad collects plugs, doesn't he?" said Fred quietly as Mrs. Weasley left the room. "Birds of a feather. . ."

"Moody was a great wizard in his time," said Bill.

"He's an old friend of Dumbledore's, isn't he?" said Charlie.

"Dumbledore's not what you'd call normal, though, is he?" said Fred. "I mean, I know he's a genius and everything. . ."

"Who is Mad-Eye?" asked Harry.

"He's retired, used to work at the Ministry," said Charlie. "I met him once when Dad took me into work with him. He was an Auror - one of the best. . . a Dark wizard catcher," he added, seeing Harry's blank look. "Half the cells in Azkaban are full because of him. He made himself loads of enemies, though. . . the families of people he caught, mainly. . . and I heard he's been getting really paranoid in his old age. Doesn't trust anyone anymore. Sees Dark wizards everywhere."

Bill and Charlie decided to come and see everyone off at King's Cross station, but Percy, apologizing most profusely, said that he really needed to get to work.

"I just can't justify taking more time off at the moment," he told them.

"Mr. Crouch is really starting to rely on me."

"Yeah, you know what, Percy?" said George seriously. "I reckon he'll know your name soon."

Mrs. Weasley had braved the telephone in the village post office to order three ordinary Muggle taxis to take them into London.

"Arthur tried to borrow Ministry cars for us," Mrs. Weasley whispered to Harry as they stood in the rain-washed yard, watching the taxi drivers heaving six heavy Hogwarts trunks into their cars. "But there weren't any to spare. . . . Oh dear, they don't look happy, do they?"

Harry didn't like to tell Mrs. Weasley that Muggle taxi drivers rarely transported overexcited owls, and Pigwidgeon was making an earsplitting racket. Nor did it help that a number of Filibuster's Fabulous No-Heat, Wet-Start Fireworks went off unexpectedly when Fred's trunk sprang open, causing the driver carrying it to yell with fright and pain as Crookshanks clawed his way up the man's leg.

The journey was uncomfortable, owing to the fact that they were jammed in the back of the taxis with their trunks. Crookshanks took quite a while to recover from the fireworks, and by the time they entered London, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were all severely scratched. They were very relieved to get out at King's Cross, even though the rain was coming down harder than ever, and they got soaked carrying their trunks across the busy road and into the station.

Harry was used to getting onto platform nine and three-quarters by now. It was a simple matter of walking straight through the apparently solid barrier dividing platforms nine and ten. The only tricky part was doing this in an unobtrusive way, so as to avoid attracting Muggle attention. They did it in groups today; Harry, Ron, and Hermione (the most conspicuous, since they were accompanied by Pigwidgeon and Crookshanks) went first; they leaned casually against the barrier, chatting unconcernedly, and slid sideways through it. . . and as they did so, platform nine and three-quarters materialized in front of them.

The Hogwarts Express, a gleaming scarlet steam engine, was already there, clouds of steam billowing from it, through which the many Hogwarts students and parents on the platform appeared like dark ghosts.

Pigwidgeon became noisier than ever in response to the hooting of many owls through the mist. Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off to find seats, and were soon stowing their luggage in a compartment halfway along the train. They then hopped back down onto the platform to say good-bye to Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie.

"I might be seeing you all sooner than you think," said Charlie, grinning, as he hugged Ginny good-bye.

"Why?" said Fred keenly.

"You'll see," said Charlie. "Just don't tell Percy I mentioned it. . . it's 'classified information, until such time as the Ministry sees fit to release it,' after all."

"Yeah, I sort of wish I were back at Hogwarts this year," said Bill, hands in his pockets, looking almost wistfully at the train.

"Why?" said George impatiently.

"You're going to have an interesting year," said Bill, his eyes twinkling. "I might even get time off to come and watch a bit of it."

"A bit of what?" said Ron.

But at that moment, the whistle blew, and Mrs. Weasley chivvied them toward the train doors.

"Thanks for having us to stay, Mrs. Weasley," said Hermione as they climbed on board, closed the door, and leaned out of the window to talk to her.

"Yeah, thanks for everything, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry.

"Oh it was my pleasure, dears," said Mrs. Weasley. "I'd invite you for Christmas, but...well, I expect you're all going to want to stay at Hogwarts, what with. . . one thing and another."

"Mum!" said Ron irritably. "What d'you three know that we don't?"

"You'll find out this evening, I expect," said Mrs. Weasley, smiling. "It's going to be very exciting - mind you, I'm very glad they've changed the rules -"

"What rules?" said Harry, Ron, Fred, and George together.

"I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will tell you. . . . Now, behave, won't you? Won't you, Fred? And you, George?"

The pistons hissed loudly and the train began to move.

"Tell us what's happening at Hogwarts!" Fred bellowed out of the window as Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie sped away from them. "What rules are they changing?"

But Mrs. Weasley only smiled and waved. Before the train had rounded the corner, she, Bill, and Charlie had Disapparated.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went back to their compartment. The thick rain splattering the windows made it very difficult to see out of them. Ron undid his trunk, pulled out his maroon dress robes, and flung them over Pigwidgeon's cage to muffle his hooting.

"Bagman wanted to tell us what's happening at Hogwarts," he said grumpily, sitting down next to Harry. "At the World Cup, remember? But my own mother won't say. Wonder what --"

"Shh!" Hermione whispered suddenly, pressing her finger to her lips and pointing toward the compartment next to theirs. Harry and Ron listened, and heard a familiar drawling voice drifting in through the open door.

". . . Father actually considered sending me to Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts, you know. He knows the headmaster, you see. Well, you know his opinion of Dumbledore - the man's such a Mudblood-lover - and Durmstrang doesn't admit that sort of riffraff. But Mother didn't like the idea of me going to school so far away. Father says Durmstrang takes a far more sensible line than Hogwarts about the Dark Arts. Durmstrang students actually learn them, not just the defense rubbish we do. . . ." Hermione got up, tiptoed to the compartment door, and slid it shut, blocking out Malfoy's voice.

"So he thinks Durmstrang would have suited him, does he?" she said angrily. "I wish he had gone, then we wouldn't have to put up with him." "Durmstrang's another wizarding school?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Hermione sniffily, "and it's got a horrible reputation. According to An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe, it puts a lot of emphasis on the Dark Arts."

"I think I've heard of it," said Ron vaguely. "Where is it? What country?"

"Well, nobody knows, do they?" said Hermione, raising her eyebrows.

"Er - why not?" said Harry.

"There's traditionally been a lot of rivalry between all the magic schools. Durmstrang and Beauxbatons like to conceal their whereabouts so nobody can steal their secrets," said Hermione matter-of-factly.

"Come off it," said Ron, starting to laugh. "Durmstrang's got to be about the same size as Hogwarts -- how are you going to hide a great big castle?"

"But Hogwarts is hidden," said Hermione, in surprise. "Everyone knows that. . . well, everyone who's read Hogwarts, A History, anyway."

"Just you, then," said Ron. "So go on - how d'you hide a place like Hogwarts?"

"It's bewitched," said Hermione. "If a Muggle looks at it, all they see is a moldering old ruin with a sign over the entrance saying DANGER, DO NOT ENTER, UNSAFE."

"So Durmstrang'll just look like a ruin to an outsider too?"

"Maybe," said Hermione, shrugging, "or it might have Muggle-repelling charms on it, like the World Cup stadium. And to keep foreign wizards from finding it, they'll have made it Unplottable -"

"Come again?"

"Well, you can enchant a building so it's impossible to plot on a map, can't you?"

"Er. . . if you say so," said Harry.

"But I think Durmstrang must be somewhere in the far north," said Hermione thoughtfully. "Somewhere very cold, because they've got fur capes as part of their uniforms."

"Ah, think of the possibilities," said Ron dreamily. "It would've been so easy to push Malfoy off a glacier and make it look like an accident. . . . Shame his mother likes him. . . ."

The rain became heavier and heavier as the train moved farther north. The sky was so dark and the windows so steamy that the lanterns were lit by midday. The lunch trolley came rattling along the corridor, and Harry bought a large stack of Cauldron Cakes for them to share.

Several of their friends looked in on them as the afternoon progressed, including Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom, a round-faced, extremely forgetful boy who had been brought up by his formidable witch of a grandmother. Seamus was still wearing his Ireland rosette. Some of its magic seemed to be wearing off now; it was still squeaking "Troy - Mullet - Moran!" but in a very feeble and exhausted sort of way. After half an hour or so, Hermione, growing tired of the endless Quidditch talk, buried herself once more in *The Standard Book of Spells*, Grade 4, and started trying to learn a Summoning Charm.

Neville listened jealously to the others' conversation as they relived the Cup match.

"Gran didn't want to go," he said miserably. "Wouldn't buy tickets. It sounded amazing though."

"It was," said Ron. "Look at this, Neville. . . ."

He rummaged in his trunk up in the luggage rack and pulled out the miniature figure of Viktor Krum.

"Oh wow," said Neville enviously as Ron tipped Krum onto his pudgy hand.

"We saw him right up close, as well," said Ron. "We were in the Top Box -"

"For the first and last time in your life, Weasley."

Draco Malfoy had appeared in the doorway. Behind him stood Crabbe and Goyle, his enormous, thuggish cronies, both of whom appeared to have grown at least a foot during the summer. Evidently they had overheard the conversation through the compartment door, which Dean and Seamus had left ajar.

"Don't remember asking you to join us, Malfoy," said Harry coolly.

"Weasley. . . what is that?" said Malfoy, pointing at Pigwidgeon's cage. A sleeve of Ron's dress robes was dangling from it, swaying with the motion of the train, the moldy lace cuff very obvious.

Ron made to stuff the robes out of sight, but Malfoy was too quick for him; he seized the sleeve and pulled.

"Look at this!" said Malfoy in ecstasy, holding up Ron's robes and showing Crabbe and Goyle, "Weasley, you weren't thinking of wearing these, were you? I mean - they were very fashionable in about eighteen ninety. . . ."

"Eat dung, Malfoy!" said Ron, the same color as the dress robes as he snatched them back out of Malfoy's grip. Malfoy howled with derisive laughter; Crabbe and Goyle guffawed stupidly.

"So. . . going to enter, Weasley? Going to try and bring a bit of glory to the family name? There's money involved as well, you know. . . you'd be able to afford some decent robes if you won. . . ."

"What are you talking about?" snapped Ron.

'Are you going to enter?' Malfoy repeated. "I suppose you will, Potter? You never miss a chance to show off, do you?"

"Either explain what you're on about or go away, Malfoy," said Hermione testily, over the top of *The Standard Book of Spells*, Grade 4.

A gleeful smile spread across Malfoy's pale face

"Don't tell me you don't know?" he said delightedly. "You've got a father and brother at the Ministry and you don't even know? My God, my father told me about it ages ago. . . . heard it from Cornelius Fudge. But then, Father's always associated with the top people at the Ministry. . . . Maybe your father's too junior to know about it, Weasley. . . . yes. . . . they probably don't talk about important stuff in front of him. . . ."

Laughing once more, Malfoy beckoned to Crabbe and Goyle, and the three of them disappeared.

Ron got to his feet and slammed the sliding compartment door so hard behind them that the glass shattered.

"Ron!" said Hermione reproachfully, and she pulled out her wand, muttered "Reparo!" and the glass shards flew back into a single pane and back into the door.

"Well... . making it look like he knows everything and we don't... . ." Ron snarled. "Father's always associated with the top people at the Ministry.' . . . Dad could've got a promotion any time... he just likes it where he is. . . ."

"Of course he does," said Hermione quietly. "Don't let Malfoy get to you, Ron -"

"Him! Get to me!? As if!" said Ron, picking up one of the remaining Cauldron Cakes and squashing it into a pulp.

Ron's bad mood continued for the rest of the journey. He didn't talk much as they changed into their school robes, and was still glowering when the Hogwarts Express slowed down at last and finally stopped in the pitch-darkness of Hogsmeade station.

As the train doors opened, there was a rumble of thunder overhead. Hermione bundled up Crookshanks in her cloak and Ron left his dress robes over Pigwidgeon as they left the train, heads bent and eyes narrowed against the downpour. The rain was now coming down so thick and fast that it was as though buckets of ice-cold water were being emptied repeatedly over their heads.

"Hi, Hagrid!" Harry yelled, seeing a gigantic silhouette at the far end of the platform.

"All righ', Harry?" Hagrid bellowed back, waving. "See yeh at the feast if we don' drown!"

First years traditionally reached Hogwarts Castle by sailing across the lake with Hagrid.

"Oooh, I wouldn't fancy crossing the lake in this weather," said Hermione fervently, shivering as they inched slowly along the dark platform with the rest of the crowd. A hundred horseless carriages stood waiting for them outside the station. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville climbed gratefully into one of them, the door shut with a snap, and a few moments later, with a great lurch, the long procession of carriages was rumbling and splashing its way up the track toward Hogwarts Castle.

CHAPTER TWELVE - THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT

Through the gates, flanked with statues of winged boars, and up the sweeping drive the carriages trundled, swaying dangerously in what was fast becoming a gale. Leaning against the window, Harry could see Hogwarts coming nearer, its many lighted windows blurred and shimmering behind the thick curtain of rain. Lightning flashed across the sky as their carriage came to a halt before the great oak front doors, which stood at the top of a flight of stone steps. People who had occupied the carriages in front were already hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville jumped down from their carriage and dashed up the steps too, looking up only when they were safely inside the cavernous, torch-lit entrance hall, with its magnificent marble staircase.

"Blimey," said Ron, shaking his head and sending water everywhere, "if that keeps up the lake's going to overflow. I'm soak - ARRGH!"

A large, red, water-filled balloon had dropped from out of the ceiling onto Ron's head and exploded. Drenched and sputtering, Ron staggered sideways into Harry, just as a second water bomb dropped - narrowly missing Hermione, it burst at Harry's feet, sending a wave of cold water over his sneakers into his socks. People all around them shrieked and started pushing one another in their efforts to get out of the line of fire. Harry looked up and saw, floating twenty feet above them, Peeves the Poltergeist, a little man in a bell-covered hat and orange bow tie, his wide, malicious face contorted with concentration as he took aim again.

"PEEVES!" yelled an angry voice. "Peeves, come down here at ONCE!" Professor McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and head of Gryffindor House, had come dashing out of the Great Hall; she skidded on the wet floor and grabbed Hermione around the neck to stop herself from falling.

"Ouch - sorry, Miss Granger -"

"That's all right, Professor!" Hermione gasped, massaging her throat. "Peeves, get down here NOW!" barked Professor McGonagall, straightening her pointed hat and glaring upward through her square-rimmed spectacles. "Not doing nothing!" cackled Peeves, lobbing a water bomb at several fifth-year girls, who screamed and dived into the Great Hall. "Already wet, aren't they? Little squirts! Wheeeeeeeeeee!" And he aimed another bomb at a group of second years who had just arrived.

"I shall call the headmaster!" shouted Professor McGonagall. "I'm warning you, Peeves -"

Peeves stuck out his tongue, threw the last of his water bombs into the air, and zoomed off up the marble staircase, cackling insanely.

"Well, move along, then!" said Professor McGonagall sharply to the bedraggled crowd. "Into the Great Hall, come on!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione slipped and slid across the entrance hall and through the double doors on the right, Ron muttering furiously under his breath as he pushed his sopping hair off his face.

The Great Hall looked its usual splendid self, decorated for the start-of-term feast. Golden plates and goblets gleamed by the light of hundreds and hundreds of candles, floating over the tables in midair. The four long House tables were packed with chattering students; at the top of the Hall, the staff sat along one side of a fifth table, facing their pupils. It was much warmer in here. Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked past the Slytherins, the Ravenclaws, and the Hufflepuffs, and sat down with the rest of the Gryffindors at the far side of the Hall, next to Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost. Pearly white and semitransparent, Nick was dressed tonight in his usual doublet, but with a particularly large ruff, which served the dual purpose of looking extra-festive, and insuring that his head didn't wobble too much on his partially severed neck.

"Good evening," he said, beaming at them.

"Says who?" said Harry, taking off his sneakers and emptying them of water. "Hope they hurry up with the Sorting. I'm starving."

The Sorting of the new students into Houses took place at the start of every school year, but by an unlucky combination of circumstances, Harry hadn't been present at one since his own. He was quite looking forward to it. Just then, a highly excited, breathless voice called down the table.

"Hiya, Harry!"

It was Colin Creevey, a third year to whom Harry was something of a hero.

"Hi, Colin," said Harry warily.

"Harry, guess what? Guess what, Harry? My brother's starting! My brother Dennis!"

"Er - good," said Harry.

"He's really excited!" said Colin, practically bouncing up and down in his seat. "I just hope he's in Gryffindor! Keep your fingers crossed, eh, Harry?"

"Er - yeah, all right," said Harry. He turned back to Hermione, Ron, and Nearly Headless Nick. "Brothers and sisters usually go in the same Houses, don't they?" he said. He was judging by the Weasleys, all seven of whom had been put into Gryffindor.

"Oh no, not necessarily," said Hermione. "Parvati Patil's twin's in Ravenclaw, and they're identical. You'd think they'd be together, wouldn't you?"

Harry looked up at the staff table. There seemed to be rather more empty seats there than usual. Hagrid, of course, was still fighting his way across the lake with the first years; Professor McGonagall was presumably supervising the drying of the entrance hall floor, but there was another empty chair too, and Harry couldn't think who else was missing.

"Where's the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?" said Hermione, who was also looking up at the teachers.

They had never yet had a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who had lasted more than three terms. Harry's favorite by far had been Professor Lupin, who had resigned last year. He looked up and down the staff table. There was definitely no new face there.

"Maybe they couldn't get anyone!" said Hermione, looking anxious. Harry scanned the table more carefully. Tiny little Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was sitting on a large pile of cushions beside Professor Sprout, the Herbology teacher, whose hat was askew over her flyaway gray hair. She was talking to Professor Sinistra of the Astronomy department. On Professor Sinistra's other side was the sallow-faced, hook-nosed, greasy-haired Potions master, Snape - Harry's least favorite person at Hogwarts. Harry's loathing of Snape was matched only by Snape's hatred of him, a hatred which had, if possible, intensified last year, when Harry had helped Sirius escape right under Snape's overlarge nose - Snape and Sirius had been enemies since their own school days.

On Snape's other side was an empty seat, which Harry guessed was Professor McGonagall's. Next to it, and in the very center of the table, sat Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster, his sweeping silver hair and beard shining in the candlelight, his magnificent deep green robes embroidered with many stars and moons. The tips of Dumbledore's long, thin fingers were together and he was resting his chin upon them, staring up at the ceiling through his half-moon spectacles as though lost in thought. Harry glanced up at the ceiling too. It was enchanted to look like the sky outside, and he had never seen it look this stormy. Black and purple clouds were swirling across it, and as another thunderclap sounded outside, a fork of lightning flashed across it.

"Oh hurry up," Ron moaned, beside Harry, "I could eat a hippogriff."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the doors of the Great Hall opened and silence fell. Professor McGonagall was leading a long line of first years up to the top of the Hall. If Harry, Ron, and Hermione were wet, it was nothing to how these first years looked. They appeared to have swum across the lake rather than sailed. All of them were shivering with a combination of cold and nerves as they filed along the staff table and came to a halt in a line facing the rest of the school - all of them except the smallest of the lot, a boy with mousy hair, who was wrapped in what Harry recognized as Hagrid's moleskin overcoat. The coat was so big for him that it hooked as though he were draped in a furry black circus tent. His small face protruded from over the collar, looking almost painfully excited. When he had lined up with his terrified-looking peers, he caught Colin Creevey's eye, gave a double

thumbs-up, and mouthed, I fell in the lake! He looked positively delighted about it.

Professor McGonagall now placed a three-legged stool on the ground before the first years and, on top of it, an extremely old, dirty patched wizard's hat. The first years stared at it. So did everyone else. For a moment, there was silence. Then a long tear near the brim opened wide like a mouth, and the hat broke into song:

A thousand years or more ago,
When I was newly sewn,
There lived four wizards of renown,
Whose names are still well known:
Bold Gryffindor, from wild moor,
Fair Ravenclaw, from glen,
Sweet Hufflepuff, from valley broad,
Shrewd Slytherin, from fin.

They shared a wish, a hope, a dream,
They hatched a daring plan
To educate young sorcerers
Thus Hogwarts School began.
Now each of these four founders
Formed their own house, for each
Did value different virtues
In the ones they had to teach.
By Gryffindor, the bravest were
Prized far beyond the rest;
For Ravenclaw, the cleverest
Would always be the best;
For Hufflepuff, hard workers were
Most worthy of admission;
And power-hungry Slytherin
Loved those of great ambition.
While still alive they did divide
Their favorites from the throng,
Yet how to pick the worthy ones
When they were dead and gone?
'Twas Gryffindor who found the way,
He whipped me off his head
The founders put some brains in me
So I could choose instead!
Now slip me snug about your ears,
I've never yet been wrong,
I'll have a look inside your mind
And tell where you belong!

The Great Hall rang with applause as the Sorting Hat finished.

"That's not the song it sang when it Sorted us," said Harry, clapping along with everyone else.

"Sings a different one every year," said Ron. "It's got to be a pretty boring life, hasn't it, being a hat? I suppose it spends all year making up the next one."

Professor McGonagall was now unrolling a large scroll of parchment.

"When I call out your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool," she told the first years. "When the hat announces your House, you will go and sit at the appropriate table.

"Ackerley, Stewart!"

A boy walked forward, visibly trembling from head to foot, picked up the Sorting Hat, put it on, and sat down on the stool.

"RAVENCLAW!" shouted the hat.

Stewart Ackerley took off the hat and hurried into a seat at the Ravenclaw table, where everyone was applauding him. Harry caught a glimpse of Cho, the Ravenclaw Seeker, cheering Stewart Ackerley as he sat down. For a fleeting second, Harry had a strange desire to join the Ravenclaw table too.

"Baddock, Malcolm!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

The table on the other side of the hall erupted with cheers; Harry could see Malfoy clapping as Baddock joined the Slytherins. Harry wondered whether Baddock knew that Slytherin House had turned out more Dark witches and wizards than any other. Fred and George hissed Malcolm Baddock as he sat down.

"Branstone, Eleanor!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Cauldwell, Owen!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Creevey, Dennis!"

Tiny Dennis Creevey staggered forward, tripping over Hagrid's moleskin, just as Hagrid himself sidled into the Hall through a door behind the teachers' table. About twice as tall as a normal man, and at least three times as broad, Hagrid, with his long, wild, tangled black hair and beard, looked slightly alarming - a misleading impression, for Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew Hagrid to possess a very kind nature. He winked at them as he sat down at the end of the staff table and watched Dennis Creevey putting on the Sorting Hat. The rip at the brim opened wide-- "GRYFFINDOR!" the hat shouted.

Hagrid clapped along with the Gryffindors as Dennis Creevey, beaming widely, took off the hat, placed it back on the stool, and hurried over to join his brother.

"Colin, I fell in!" he said shrilly, throwing himself into an empty seat. "It was brilliant! And something in the water grabbed me and pushed me back in the boat!"

"Cool!" said Colin, just as excitedly. "It was probably the giant squid, Dennis!"

"Wow!" said Dennis, as though nobody in their wildest dreams could hope for more than being thrown into a storm-tossed, fathoms-deep lake, and pushed out of it again by a giant sea monster.

"Dennis! Dennis! See that boy down there? The one with the black hair and glasses? See him? Know who he is, Dennis?"

Harry looked away, staring very hard at the Sorting Hat, now Sorting Emma Dobbs.

The Sorting continued; boys and girls with varying degrees of fright on their faces moving one by one to the three-legged stool, the line dwindling slowly as Professor McGonagall passed the L's.

"Oh hurry up," Ron moaned, massaging his stomach.

"Now, Ron, the Sorting's much more important than food," said Nearly Headless Nick as "Madley, Laura!" became a Hufflepuff.

"Course it is, if you're dead," snapped Ron.

"I do hope this year's batch of Gryffindors are up to scratch," said Nearly Headless Nick, applauding as "McDonald, Natalie!" joined the Gryffindor table. "We don't want to break our winning streak, do we?" Gryffindor had won the Inter-House Championship for the last three years in a row.

"Pritchard, Graham!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

"Quirke, Orla!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

And finally, with "Whitby, Kevin!" ("HUFFLEPUFF!"), the Sorting ended. Professor McGonagall picked up the hat and the stool and carried them away.

"About time," said Ron, seizing his knife and fork and looking expectantly at his golden plate.

Professor Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was smiling around at the students, his arms opened wide in welcome.

"I have only two words to say to you," he told them, his deep voice echoing around the Hall. "Tuck in."

"Hear, hear!" said Harry and Ron loudly as the empty dishes filled magically before their eyes.

Nearly Headless Nick watched mournfully as Harry, Ron, and Hermione loaded their own plates.

"Aaah, 'at's be'er," said Ron, with his mouth full of mashed potato.

"You're lucky there's a feast at all tonight, you know," said Nearly Headless Nick. "There was trouble in the kitchens earlier."

"Why? Wha' 'appened?" said Harry, through a sizable chunk of steak.

"Peeves, of course," said Nearly Headless Nick, shaking his head, which wobbled dangerously. He pulled his ruff a little higher up on his neck.

"The usual argument, you know. He wanted to attend the feast - well, it's quite out of the question, you know what he's like, utterly uncivilized, can't see a plate of food without throwing it. We held a ghost's council - the Fat Friar was all for giving him the chance - but most wisely, in my opinion, the Bloody Baron put his foot down."

The Bloody Baron was the Slytherin ghost, a gaunt and silent specter covered in silver bloodstains. He was the only person at Hogwarts who could really control Peeves.

"Yeah, we thought Peeves seemed hacked off about something," said Ron darkly. "So what did he do in the kitchens?"

"Oh the usual," said Nearly Headless Nick, shrugging. "Wreaked havoc and mayhem. Pots and pans everywhere. Place swimming in soup. Terrified the house-elves out of their wits--"

Clang.

Hermione had knocked over her golden goblet. Pumpkin juice spread steadily over the tablecloth, staining several feet of white linen orange, but Hermione paid no attention.

"There are house-elves here?" she said, staring, horror-struck, at Nearly Headless Nick. "Here at Hogwarts?"

"Certainly," said Nearly Headless Nick, looking surprised at her reaction. "The largest number in any dwelling in Britain, I believe. Over a hundred."

"I've never seen one!" said Hermione.

"Well, they hardly ever leave the kitchen by day, do they?" said Nearly Headless Nick. "They come out at night to do a bit of cleaning... see to the fires and so on... I mean, you're not supposed to see them, are you? That's the mark of a good house-elf, isn't it, that you don't know it's there?"

Hermione stared at him.

"But they get paid?" she said. "They get holidays, don't they? And - and sick leave, and pensions, and everything?"

Nearly Headless Nick chortled so much that his ruff slipped and his head flopped off, dangling on the inch or so of ghostly skin and muscle that still attached it to his neck.

"Sick leave and pensions?" he said, pushing his head back onto his shoulders and securing it once more with his ruff. "House-elves don't want sick leave and pensions!"

Hermione looked down at her hardly touched plate of food, then put her knife and fork down upon it and pushed it away from her.

"Oh c'mon, 'Er-my-knee," said Ron, accidentally spraying Harry with bits of Yorkshire pudding. "Oops -- sorry, 'Arry --" He swallowed. "You won't get them sick leave by starving yourself!"

"Slave labor," said Hermione, breathing hard through her nose. "That's what made this dinner. Slave labor."

And she refused to eat another bite.

The rain was still drumming heavily against the high, dark glass. Another clap of thunder shook the windows, and the stormy ceiling flashed, illuminating the golden plates as the remains of the first course vanished and were replaced, instantly, with puddings.

"Treacle tart, Hermione!" said Ron, deliberately wafting its smell toward her. "Spotted dick, look! Chocolate gateau!"

But Hermione gave him a look so reminiscent of Professor McGonagall that he gave up.

When the puddings too had been demolished, and the last crumbs had faded off the plates, leaving them sparkling clean, Albus Dumbledore got to his feet again. The buzz of chatter filling the Hall ceased almost at once, so that only the howling wind and pounding rain could be heard.

"So!" said Dumbledore, smiling around at them all. "Now that we are all fed and watered," ("Hmph!" said Hermione) "I must once more ask for your attention, while I give out a few notices.

"Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me to tell you that the list of objects forbidden inside the castle has this year been extended to include Screaming Yo-yos, Fanged Frisbees, and Ever-Bashing Boomerangs. The full list comprises some four hundred and thirty-seven items, I believe, and can be viewed in Mr. Filch's office, if anybody would like to check it."

The corners of Dumbledore's mouth twitched. He continued, "As ever, I would like to remind you all that the forest on the grounds is out-of-bounds to students, as is the village of Hogsmeade to all below third year.

"It is also my painful duty to inform you that the Inter-House Quidditch Cup will not take place this year."

"What?" Harry gasped. He looked around at Fred and George, his fellow members of the Quidditch team. They were mouthing soundlessly at Dumbledore, apparently too appalled to speak. Dumbhedore went on, "This is due to an event that will be starting in October, and continuing throughout the school year, taking up much of the teachers' time and energy - but I am sure you will all enjoy it immensely. I have great pleasure in announcing that this year at Hogwarts -"

But at that moment, there was a deafening rumble of thunder and the doors of the Great Hall banged open.

A man stood in the doorway, leaning upon a long staff, shrouded in a black traveling cloak. Every head in the Great Hall swiveled toward the stranger, suddenly brightly illuminated by a fork of lightning that flashed across the ceiling. He lowered his hood, shook out a long mane of grizzled, dark gray hair, then began to walk up toward the teachers' table.

A dull clunk echoed through the Hall on his every other step. He reached the end of the top table, turned right, and limped heavily toward Dumbledore. Another flash of lightning crossed the ceiling. Hermione gasped.

The lightning had thrown the man's face into sharp relief, and it was a face unlike any Harry had ever seen. It looked as though it had been carved out of weathered wood by someone who had only the vaguest idea of what human faces are supposed to look like, and was none too skilled with a chisel. Every inch of skin seemed to be scarred. The mouth looked like a diagonal gash, and a large chunk of the nose was missing. But it was the man's eyes that made him frightening.

One of them was small, dark, and beady. The other was large, round as a coin, and a vivid, electric blue. The blue eye was moving ceaselessly, without blinking, and was rolling up, down, and from side to side, quite independently of the normal eye - and then it rolled right over, pointing into the back of the man's head, so that all they could see was whiteness.

The stranger reached Dumbledore. He stretched out a hand that was as badly scarred as his face, and Dumbhedore shook it, muttering words Harry couldn't hear. He seemed to be making some inquiry of the stranger, who shook his head unsmilingly and replied in an undertone. Dumbledore nodded and gestured the man to the empty seat on his right-hand side. The stranger sat down, shook his mane of dark gray hair out of his face, pulled a plate of sausages toward him, raised it to what was left of his nose, and sniffed it. He then took a small knife out of his pocket, speared a sausage on the end of it, and began to eat. His normal eye was fixed upon the sausages, but the blue eye was still darting restlessly around in its socket, taking in the Hall and the students.

"May I introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?" said Dumbledore brightly into the silence. "Professor Moody."

It was usual for new staff members to be greeted with applause, but none of the staff or students clapped except Dumbledore and Hagrid, who both put their hands together and applauded, but the sound echoed dismally into the silence, and they stopped fairly quickly. Everyone else seemed too transfixed by Moody's bizarre appearance to do more than stare at him.

"Moody?" Harry muttered to Ron. "Mad-Eye Moody? The one your dad went to help this morning?"

"Must be," said Ron in a low, awed voice.

"What happened to him?" Hermione whispered. "What happened to his face?"

"Dunno," Ron whispered back, watching Moody with fascination.

Moody seemed totally indifferent to his less-than-warm welcome. Ignoring the jug of pumpkin juice in front of him, he reached again into his traveling cloak, pulled out a hip flask, and took a long draught from it. As he lifted his arm to drink, his cloak was pulled a few inches from the ground, and Harry saw, below the table, several inches of carved wooden leg, ending in a clawed foot.

Dumbledore cleared his throat.

"As I was saying," he said, smiling at the sea of students before him, all of whom were still gazing transfixed at Mad-Eye Moody, "we are to have the honor of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months, an event that has not been held for over a century. It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Triwizard Tournament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year."

"You're JOKING!" said Fred Weasley loudly.

The tension that had filled the Hall ever since Moody's arrival suddenly broke. Nearly everyone laughed, and Dumbledore chuckled appreciatively.

"I am not joking, Mr. Weasley," he said, "though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun who all go into a bar."

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

"Er - but maybe this is not the time... no. . ." said Dumbledore, "where was I? Ah yes, the Triwizard Tournament. . . well, some of you will not know what this tournament involves, so I hope those who do know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander freely."

"The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The schools took it in turns to host the tournament once every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of establishing ties between young witches and wizards of different nationalities - until, that is, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued."

"Death toll?" Hermione whispered, looking alarmed. But her anxiety did not seem to be shared by the majority of students in the Hall; many of them were whispering excitedly to one another, and Harry himself was far more interested in hearing about the tournament than in worrying about deaths that had happened hundreds of years ago.

"There have been several attempts over the centuries to reinstate the tournament," Dumbledore continued, "none of which has been very successful. However, our own departments of International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another attempt. We have worked hard over the summer to ensure that this time, no champion will find himself or herself in mortal danger.

"The heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving with their short-listed contenders in October, and the selection of the three champions will take place at Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a thousand Galleons personal prize money."

"I'm going for it!" Fred Weasley hissed down the table, his face lit with enthusiasm at the prospect of such glory and riches. He was not the only person who seemed to be visualizing himself as the Hogwarts champion. At every House table, Harry could see people either gazing raptly at Dumbledore, or else whispering fervently to their neighbors. But then Dumbledore spoke again, and the Hall quieted once more.

"Eager though I know all of you will be to bring the Triwizard Cup to Hogwarts," he said, "the heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age - that is to say, seventeen years or older - will be allowed to put forward their names for consideration. This" -- Dumbledore raised his voice slightly, for several people had made noises of outrage at these words, and the Weasley twins were suddenly looking furious - "is a measure we feel is necessary, given that the tournament tasks will still be difficult and dangerous, whatever precautions we take, and it is highly unlikely that students below sixth and seventh year will be able to cope with them. I will personally be ensuring that no underage student hoodwinks our impartial judge into making them Hog-warts champion." His light blue eyes twinkled as they flickered over Fred's and George's mutinous faces. "I therefore beg you not to waste your time submitting yourself if you are under seventeen.

"The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving in October and remaining with us for the greater part of this year. I know that you will all extend every courtesy to our foreign guests while they are with us, and will give your whole-hearted support to the Hogwarts champion when he or she is selected. And now, it is late, and I know how important it is to you all to be alert and rested as you enter your lessons tomorrow morning. Bedtime! Chop chop!"

Dumbledore sat down again and turned to talk to Mad-Eye Moody. There was a great scraping and banging as all the students got to their feet and swarmed toward the double doors into the entrance hall.

"They can't do that!" said George Weasley, who had not joined the crowd moving toward the door, but was standing up and glaring at Dumbledore.

"We're seventeen in April, why can't we have a shot?"

"They're not stopping me entering," said Fred stubbornly, also scowling at the top table. "The champions'll get to do all sorts of stuff you'd never be allowed to do normally. And a thousand Galleons prize money!"

"Yeah," said Ron, a faraway look on his face. "Yeah, a thousand Galleons. . ."

"Come on," said Hermione, "we'll be the only ones left here if you don't move."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George set off for the entrance hall, Fred and George debating the ways in which Dumbledore might stop those who were under seventeen from entering the tournament.

"Who's this impartial judge who's going to decide who the champions are?" said Harry.

"Dunno," said Fred, "but it's them we'll have to fool. I reckon a couple of drops of Aging Potion might do it, George... ."

"Dumbledore knows you're not of age, though," said Ron.

"Yeah, but he's not the one who decides who the champion is, is he?" said Fred shrewdly. "Sounds to me like once this judge knows who wants to enter, he'll choose the best from each school and never mind how old they are. Dumbledore's trying to stop us giving our names."

"People have died, though!" said Hermione in a worried voice as they walked through a door concealed behind a tapestry and started up another, narrower staircase.

"Yeah," said Fred airily, "but that was years ago, wasn't it? Anyway, where's the fun without a bit of risk? Hey, Ron, what if we find out how to get 'round Dumbledore? Fancy entering?"

"What d'you reckon?" Ron asked Harry. "Be cool to enter, wouldn't it? But I s'pose they might want someone older.... Dunno if we've learned enough... ."

"I definitely haven't," came Neville's gloomy voice from behind Fred and George.

"I expect my gran'd want me to try, though. She's always going on about how I should be upholding the family honor. I'll just have to -- oops. . . ."

Neville's foot had sunk right through a step halfway up the staircase. There were many of these trick stairs at Hogwarts; it was second nature to most of the older students to jump this particular step, but Neville's memory was notoriously poor. Harry and Ron seized him under the armpits and pulled him out, while a suit of armor at the top of the stairs creaked and clanked, laughing wheezily.

"Shut it, you," said Ron, banging down its visor as they passed. They made their way up to the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, which was concealed behind a large portrait of a fat lady in a pink silk dress.

"Password?" she said as they approached.

"Balderdash," said George, "a prefect downstairs told me."

The portrait swung forward to reveal a hole in the wall through which they all climbed. A crackling fire warmed the circular common room, which was full of squashy armchairs and tables. Hermione cast the merrily dancing flames a dark look, and Harry distinctly heard her mutter "Slave labor" before bidding them good night and disappearing through the doorway to the girls' dormitory.

Harry, Ron, and Neville climbed up the last, spiral staircase until they reached their own dormitory, which was situated at the top of the tower. Five four-poster beds with deep crimson hangings stood against the walls, each with its owner's trunk at the foot. Dean and Seamus were already getting into bed; Seamus had pinned his Ireland rosette to his headboard, and Dean had tacked up a poster of Viktor Krum over his bedside table. His old poster of the West Ham football team was pinned right next to it. "Mental," Ron sighed, shaking his head at the completely stationary soccer players.

Harry, Ron, and Neville got into their pajamas and into bed. Someone - a house-elf, no doubt - had placed warming pans between the sheets. It was extremely comfortable, lying there in bed and listening to the storm raging outside.

"I might go in for it, you know," Ron said sleepily through the darkness, "if Fred and George find out how to. . . . the tournament. . . . you never know, do you?"

"S'pose not. . . ."

Harry rolled over in bed, a series of dazzling new pictures forming in his mind's eye. . . . He had hoodwinked the impartial judge into believing he was seventeen. . . he had become Hogwarts champion. . . he was standing on the grounds, his arms raised in triumph in front of the whole school, all of whom were applauding and screaming. . . he had just won the Triwizard Tournament. Cho's face stood out particularly clearly in the blurred crowd, her face glowing with admiration.... Harry grinned into his pillow, exceptionally glad that Ron couldn't see what he could.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - MAD-EYE MOODY

The storm had blown itself out by the following morning, though the ceiling in the Great Hall was still gloomy; heavy clouds of pewter gray swirled overhead as Harry, Ron, and Hermione examined their new course schedules at breakfast. A few seats along, Fred, George, and Lee Jordan were discussing magical methods of aging themselves and bluffing their way into the Triwizard Tournament.

"Today's not bad... outside all morning," said Ron, who was running his finger down the Monday column of his schedule. "Herbology with the Hufflepuffs and Care of Magical Creatures... damn it, we're still with the Slytherins. . . ."

"Double Divination this afternoon," Harry groaned, looking down. Divination was his least favorite subject, apart from Potions. Professor Trelawney kept predicting Harry's death, which he found extremely annoying.

"You should have given it up like me, shouldn't you?" said Hermione briskly, buttering herself some toast. "Then you'd be doing something sensible like Arithmancy."

"You're eating again, I notice," said Ron, watching Hermione adding liberal amounts of jam to her toast too.

"I've decided there are better ways of making a stand about elf rights," said Hermione haughtily.

"Yeah. . . and you were hungry," said Ron, grinning.

There was a sudden rustling noise above them, and a hundred owls came soaring through the open windows carrying the morning mail. Instinctively, Harry looked up, but there was no sign of white among the mass of brown and gray. The owls circled the tables, looking for the people to whom their letters and packages were addressed. A large tawny owl soared down to Neville Longbottom and deposited a parcel into his lap - Neville almost always forgot to pack something. On the other side of the Hall Draco Malfoy's eagle owl had landed on his shoulder, carrying what looked like his usual supply of sweets and cakes from home. Trying to ignore the sinking feeling of disappointment in his stomach, Harry returned to his porridge. Was it possible that something had happened to Hedwig, and that Sirius hadn't even got his letter?

His preoccupation lasted all the way across the sodden vegetable patch until they arrived in greenhouse three, but here he was distracted by Professor Sprout showing the class the ugliest plants Harry had ever seen. Indeed, they looked less like plants than thick, black, giant slugs, protruding vertically out of the soil. Each was squirming slightly and had a number of large, shiny swellings upon it, which appeared to be full of liquid.

"Bubotubers," Professor Sprout told them briskly. "They need squeezing. You will collect the pus -"

"The what?" said Seamus Finnigan, sounding revolted.

"Pus, Finnigan, pus," said Professor Sprout, "and it's extremely valuable, so don't waste it. You will collect the pus, I say, in these bottles. Wear your dragon-hide gloves; it can do funny things to the skin when undiluted, bubotuber pus."

Squeezing the bubotubers was disgusting, but oddly satisfying. As each swelling was popped, a large amount of thick yellowish-green liquid burst forth, which smelled strongly of petrol. They caught it in the bottles as Professor Sprout had indicated, and by the end of the lesson had collected several pints.

"This'll keep Madam Pomfrey happy," said Professor Sprout, stoppering the last bottle with a cork. "An excellent remedy for the more stubborn forms of acne, bubotuber pus. Should stop students resorting to desperate measures to rid themselves of pimples."

"Like poor Eloise Midgen," said Hannah Abbott, a Hufflepuff, in a hushed voice. "She tried to curse hers off."

"Silly girl," said Professor Sprout, shaking her head. "But Madam Pomfrey fixed her nose back on in the end."

A booming bell echoed from the castle across the wet grounds, signaling the end of the lesson, and the class separated; the Hufflepuffs climbing the stone steps for Transfiguration, and the Gryffindors heading in the other direction, down the sloping lawn toward Hagrid's small wooden cabin, which stood on the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Hagrid was standing outside his hut, one hand on the collar of his enormous black boarhound, Fang. There were several open wooden crates on the ground at his feet, and Fang was whimpering and straining at his collar, apparently keen to investigate the contents more closely. As they drew nearer, an odd rattling noise reached their ears, punctuated by what sounded like minor explosions.

"Mornin'!" Hagrid said, grinning at Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Be'er wait fer the Slytherins, they won' want ter miss this - Blast-Ended Skrewts!"

"Come again?" said Ron.

Hagrid pointed down into the crates.

"Eurgh!" squealed Lavender Brown, jumping backward. "Eurgh" just about summed up the Blast-Ended Skrewts in Harry's opinion. They looked like deformed, shell-less lobsters, horribly pale and slimy-looking, with legs sticking out in very odd places and no visible heads. There were about a hundred of them in each crate, each about six inches long, crawling over one another, bumping blindly into the sides of the boxes. They were giving off a very powerful smell of rotting fish. Every now and then, sparks would fly out of the end of a skrewt, and with a small phut, it would be propelled forward several inches.

"On'y jus' hatched," said Hagrid proudly, "so yeh'll be able ter raise 'em yerselves! Thought we'd make a bit of a project of it!"

"And why would we want to raise them?" said a cold voice.

The Slytherins had arrived. The speaker was Draco Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle were chuckling appreciatively at his words.

Hagrid looked stumped at the question.

"I mean, what do they do?" asked Malfoy. "What is the point of them?" Hagrid opened his mouth, apparently thinking hard; there was a few seconds' pause, then he said roughly, "Tha's next lesson, Malfoy. Yer jus' feedin' 'em today. Now, yeh'll wan' ter try 'em on a few diff'rent things - I've never had 'em before, not sure what they'll go fer - I got ant eggs an' frog livers an' a bit o' grass snake - just try 'em out with a bit of each."

"First pus and now this," muttered Seamus.

Nothing but deep affection for Hagrid could have made Harry, Ron, and Hermione pick up squelchy handfuls of frog liver and lower them into the crates to tempt the Blast-Ended Skrewts. Harry couldn't suppress the suspicion that the whole thing was entirely pointless, because the skrewts didn't seem to have mouths.

"Ouch!" yelled Dean Thomas after about ten minutes. "It got me." Hagrid hurried over to him, looking anxious.

"Its end exploded!" said Dean angrily, showing Hagrid a burn on his hand.

"Ah, yeah, that can happen when they blast off," said Hagrid, nodding. "Eurgh!" said Lavender Brown again. "Eurgh, Hagrid, what's that pointy thing on it?"

"Ah, some of 'em have got stings," said Hagrid enthusiastically (Lavender quickly withdrew her hand from the box). "I reckon they're the males. . . . The females've got sorta sucker things on their bellies. . . . I think they might be ter suck blood."

"Well, I can certainly see why we're trying to keep them alive," said Malfoy sarcastically. "Who wouldn't want pets that can burn, sting, and bite all at once?"

"Just because they're not very pretty, it doesn't mean they're not useful," Hermione snapped. "Dragon blood's amazingly magical, but you wouldn't want a dragon for a pet, would you?"

Harry and Ron grinned at Hagrid, who gave them a furtive smile from behind his bushy beard. Hagrid would have liked nothing better than a pet dragon, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew only too well - he had owned one for a brief period during their first year, a vicious Norwegian Ridgeback by the name of Norbert. Hagrid simply loved monstrous creatures, the more lethal, the better.

"Well, at least the skrewts are small," said Ron as they made their way back up to the castle for lunch an hour later.

"They are now," said Hermione in an exasperated voice, "but once Hagrid's found out what they eat, I expect they'll be six feet long."

"Well, that won't matter if they turn out to cure seasickness or something, will it?" said Ron, grinning slyly at her.

"You know perfectly well I only said that to shut Malfoy up," said Hermione. "As a matter of fact I think he's right. The best thing to do would be to stamp on the lot of them before they start attacking us all." They sat down at the Gryffindor table and helped themselves to lamb chops and potatoes. Hermione began to eat so fast that Harry and Ron stared at her.

"Er - is this the new stand on elf rights?" said Ron. "You're going to make yourself puke instead?"

"No," said Hermione, with as much dignity as she could muster with her mouth bulging with sprouts. "I just want to get to the library."

"What?" said Ron in disbelief. "Hermione - it's the first day back! We haven't even got homework yet!"

Hermione shrugged and continued to shovel down her food as though she had not eaten for days. Then she leapt to her feet, said, "See you at dinner!" and departed at high speed.

When the bell rang to signal the start of afternoon lessons, Harry and Ron set off for North Tower where, at the top of a tightly spiraling staircase, a silver stepladder led to a circular trapdoor in the ceiling, and the room where Professor Trelawney lived.

The familiar sweet perfume spreading from the fire met their nostrils as they emerged at the top of the stepladder. As ever, the curtains were all closed; the circular room was bathed in a dim reddish light cast by the many lamps, which were all draped with scarves and shawls. Harry and Ron walked through the mass of occupied chintz chairs and poufs that cluttered the room, and sat down at the same small circular table.

"Good day," said the misty voice of Professor Trelawney right behind Harry, making him jump.

A very thin woman with enormous glasses that made her eyes appear far too large for her face, Professor Trelawney was peering down at Harry with the tragic expression she always wore whenever she saw him. The usual large amount of beads, chains, and bangles glittered upon her person in the firelight.

"You are preoccupied, my dear," she said mournfully to Harry. "My inner eye sees past your brave face to the troubled soul within. And I regret to say that your worries are not baseless. I see difficult times ahead

for you, alas. . . most difficult. . . I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass. . . and perhaps sooner than you think..." Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. Ron rolled his eyes at Harry, who looked stonily back. Professor Trelawney swept past them and seated herself in a large winged armchair before the fire, facing the class. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil, who deeply admired Professor Trelawney, were sitting on poufs very close to her.

"My dears, it is time for us to consider the stars," she said. "The movements of the planets and the mysterious portents they reveal only to those who understand the steps of the celestial dance. Human destiny may be deciphered by the planetary rays, which intermingle. . ."

But Harry's thoughts had drifted. The perfumed fire always made him feel sleepy and dull-witted, and Professor Trelawney's rambling talks on fortune-telling never held him exactly spellbound - though he couldn't help thinking about what she had just said to him. "I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass..."

But Hermione was right, Harry thought irritably, Professor Trelawney really was an old fraud. He wasn't dreading anything at the moment at all. . . well, unless you counted his fears that Sirius had been caught. . . but what did Professor Trelawney know? He had long since come to the conclusion that her brand of fortunetelling was really no more than lucky guesswork and a spooky manner.

Except, of course, for that time at the end of last term, when she had made the prediction about Voldemort rising again. . . and Dumbledore himself had said that he thought that trance had been genuine, when Harry had described it to him.

"Harry!" Ron muttered.

"What?"

Harry looked around; the whole class was staring at him. He sat up straight; he had been almost dozing off, lost in the heat and his thoughts.

"I was saying, my dear, that you were clearly born under the baleful influence of Saturn," said Professor Trelawney, a faint note of resentment in her voice at the fact that he had obviously not been hanging on her words.

"Born under - what, sorry?" said Harry.

"Saturn, dear, the planet Saturn!" said Professor Trelawney, sounding definitely irritated that he wasn't riveted by this news. "I was saying that Saturn was surely in a position of power in the heavens at the moment of your birth. . . . Your dark hair. . . your mean stature...tragic losses so young in life. . . I think I am right in saying, my dear, that you were born in midwinter?"

"No," said Harry, "I was born in July."

Ron hastily turned his laugh into a hacking cough.

Half an hour later, each of them had been given a complicated circular chart, and was attempting to fill in the position of the planets at their moment of birth. It was dull work, requiring much consultation of timetables and calculation of angles.

"I've got two Neptunes here," said Harry after a while, frowning down at his piece of parchment, "that can't be right, can it?"

"Aaaaah," said Ron, imitating Professor Trelawney's mystical whisper, "when two Neptunes appear in the sky, it is a sure sign that a midget in glasses is being born, Harry. . . ."

Seamus and Dean, who were working nearby, sniggered loudly, though not loudly enough to mask the excited squeals from Lavender Brown - "Oh Professor, look! I think I've got an unanticipated planet! Oooh, which one's that, Professor?"

"It is Uranus, my dear," said Professor Trelawney, peering down at the chart.

"Can I have a look at Uranus too, Lavender?" said Ron.

Most unfortunately, Professor Trelawney heard him, and it was this, perhaps, that made her give them so much homework at the end of the class.

"A detailed analysis of the way the planetary movements in the coming month will affect you, with reference to your personal chart," she snapped, sounding much more like Professor McGonagall than her usual airy-fairy self. "I want it ready to hand in next Monday, and no excuses!"

"Miserable old bat," said Ron bitterly as they joined the crowds descending the staircases back to the Great Hall and dinner. "That'll take all weekend, that will. . . ."

"Lots of homework?" said Hermione brightly, catching up with them.

"Professor Vector didn't give us any at all!"

"Well, bully for Professor Vector," said Ron moodily.

They reached the entrance hall, which was packed with people queuing for dinner. They had just joined the end of the line, when a loud voice rang out behind them.

"Weasley! Hey, Weasley!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing there, each looking thoroughly pleased about something.

"What?" said Ron shortly.

"Your dad's in the paper, Weasley!" said Malfoy, brandishing a copy of the Daily Prophet and speaking very loudly, so that everyone in the packed entrance hall could hear. "Listen to this!"

FURTHER MISTAKES AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

It seems as though the Ministry of Magic's troubles are not yet at an end, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Recently under fire for its poor crowd control at the Quidditch World Cup, and still unable to account for the disappearance of one of its witches, the Ministry was plunged into fresh embarrassment yesterday by the antics of Arnold Weasley, of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office."

Malfoy looked up.

"Imagine them not even getting his name right, Weasley. It's almost as though he's a complete nonentity, isn't it?" he crowed.

Everyone in the entrance hall was listening now. Malfoy straightened the paper with a flourish and read on:

Arnold Weasley, who was charged with possession of a flying car two years ago, was yesterday involved in a tussle with several Muggle law-keepers ("policemen") over a number of highly aggressive dustbins. Mr. Weasley appears to have rushed to the aid of "Mad-Eye" Moody, the aged ex-Auror who retired from the Ministry when no longer able to tell the difference between a handshake and attempted murder. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Weasley found, upon arrival at Mr. Moody's heavily guarded house, that Mr. Moody had once again raised a false alarm. Mr. Weasley was forced to modify several memories before he could escape from the policemen, but refused to answer Daily Prophet questions about why he had involved the Ministry in such an undignified and potentially embarrassing scene.

"And there's a picture, Weasley!" said Malfoy, flipping the paper over and holding it up. "A picture of your parents outside their house - if you can call it a house! Your mother could do with losing a bit of weight, couldn't she?"

Ron was shaking with fury. Everyone was staring at him.

"Get stuffed, Malfoy," said Harry. "C'mon, Ron. . . ."

"Oh yeah, you were staying with them this summer, weren't you, Potter?" sneered Malfoy. "So tell me, is his mother really that porky, or is it just the picture?"

"You know your mother, Malfoy?" said Harry - both he and Hermione had grabbed the back of Ron's robes to stop him from launching himself at Malfoy - "that expression she's got, like she's got dung under her nose? Has she always looked like that, or was it just because you were with her?"

Malfoy's pale face went slightly pink.

"Don't you dare insult my mother, Potter."

"Keep your fat mouth shut, then," said Harry, turning away.

BANG!

Several people screamed - Harry felt something white-hot graze the side of his face - he plunged his hand into his robes for his wand, but before he'd even touched it, he heard a second loud BANG, and a roar that echoed through the entrance hall.

"OH NO YOU DON'T, LADDIE!"

Harry spun around. Professor Moody was limping down the marble staircase. His wand was out and it was pointing right at a pure white ferret, which was shivering on the stone-flagged floor, exactly where Malfoy had been standing.

There was a terrified silence in the entrance hall. Nobody but Moody was moving a muscle. Moody turned to look at Harry -- at least, his normal eye was looking at Harry; the other one was pointing into the back of his head.

"Did he get you?" Moody growled. His voice was low and gravelly.

"No," said Harry, "missed."

"LEAVE IT!" Moody shouted.

"Leave - what?" Harry said, bewildered.

"Not you - him!" Moody growled, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at Crabbe, who had just frozen, about to pick up the white ferret. It seemed that Moody's rolling eye was magical and could see out of the back of his head.

Moody started to limp toward Crabbe, Goyle, and the ferret, which gave a terrified squeak and took off, streaking toward the dungeons.

"I don't think so!" roared Moody, pointing his wand at the ferret again - it flew ten feet into the air, fell with a smack to the floor, and then bounced upward once more.

"I don't like people who attack when their opponent's back's turned," growled Moody as the ferret bounced higher and higher, squealing in pain.

"Stinking, cowardly, scummy thing to do..."

The ferret flew through the air, its legs and tail flailing helplessly.

"Never - do - that - again -" said Moody, speaking each word as the ferret hit the stone floor and bounced upward again.

"Professor Moody!" said a shocked voice.

Professor McGonagall was coming down the marble staircase with her arms full of books.

"Hello, Professor McGonagall," said Moody calmly, bouncing the ferret still higher.

"What - what are you doing?" said Professor McGonagall, her eyes following the bouncing ferret's progress through the air.

"Teaching," said Moody.

"Teach - Moody, is that a student?" shrieked Professor McGonagall, the books spilling out of her arms.

"Yep," said Moody.

"No!" cried Professor McGonagall, running down the stairs and pulling out her wand; a moment later, with a loud snapping noise, Draco Malfoy had reappeared, lying in a heap on the floor with his sleek blond hair all over his now brilliantly pink face. He got to his feet, wincing.

"Moody, we never use Transfiguration as a punishment!" said Professor McGonagall wearily. "Surely Professor Dumbledore told you that?"
"He might've mentioned it, yeah," said Moody, scratching his chin unconcernedly, "but I thought a good sharp shock -"
"We give detentions, Moody! Or speak to the offender's Head of House!"
"I'll do that, then," said Moody, staring at Malfoy with great dislike. Malfoy, whose pale eyes were still watering with pain and humiliation, looked malevolently up at Moody and muttered something in which the words "my father" were distinguishable.

"Oh yeah?" said Moody quietly, limping forward a few steps, the dull clunk of his wooden leg echoing around the hall. "Well, I know your father of old, boy... . You tell him Moody's keeping a close eye on his son. . . you tell him that from me. . . . Now, your Head of House'll be Snape, will it?"

"Yes," said Malfoy resentfully.

"Another old friend," growled Moody. "I've been looking forward to a chat with old Snape. . . . Come on, you. . . ."

And he seized Malfoy's upper arm and marched him off toward the dungeons. Professor McGonagall stared anxiously after them for a few moments, then waved her wand at her fallen books, causing them to soar up into the air and back into her arms.

"Don't talk to me," Ron said quietly to Harry and Hermione as they sat down at the Gryffindor table a few minutes later, surrounded by excited talk on all sides about what had just happened.

"Why not?" said Hermione in surprise.

"Because I want to fix that in my memory forever," said Ron, his eyes closed and an uplifted expression on his face. "Draco Malfoy, the amazing bouncing ferret."

Harry and Hermione both laughed, and Hermione began doling beef casserole onto each of their plates.

"He could have really hurt Malfoy, though," she said. "It was good, really, that Professor McGonagall stopped it -"

"Hermione!" said Ron furiously, his eyes snapping open again, "you're ruining the best moment of my life!"

Hermione made an impatient noise and began to eat at top speed again.

"Don't tell me you're going back to the library this evening?" said Harry, watching her.

"Got to," said Hermione thickly. "Loads to do."

"But you told us Professor Vector -"

"It's not schoolwork," she said. Within five minutes, she had cleared her plate and departed. No sooner had she gone than her seat was taken by Fred Weasley.

"Moody!" he said. "How cool is he?"

"Beyond cool," said George, sitting down opposite Fred. "Supercool," said the twins' best friend, Lee Jordan, sliding into the seat beside George. "We had him this afternoon," he told Harry and Ron.

"What was it like?" said Harry eagerly.

Fred, George, and Lee exchanged looks full of meaning.

"Never had a lesson like it," said Fred.

"He knows, man," said Lee.

"Knows what?" said Ron, leaning forward.

"Knows what it's like to be out there doing it," said George impressively.

"Doing what?" said Harry.

"Fighting the Dark Arts," said Fred.

"He's seen it all," said George.

"Mazing," said Lee.

Ron dived into his bag for his schedule.

"We haven't got him till Thursday!" he said in a disappointed voice.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN - THE UNFORGIVABLE CURSES

The next two days passed without great incident, unless you counted Neville melting his sixth cauldron in Potions. Professor Snape, who seemed to have attained new levels of vindictiveness over the summer, gave Nevihle detention, and Neville returned from it in a state of nervous collapse, having been made to disembowel a barrel full of horned toads.

"You know why Snape's in such a foul mood, don't you?" said Ron to Harry as they watched Hermione teaching Neville a Scouring Charm to remove the frog guts from under his fingernails.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Moody."

It was common knowledge that Snape really wanted the Dark Arts job, and he had now failed to get it for the fourth year running. Snape had disliked all of their previous Dark Arts teachers, and shown it - but he seemed strangely wary of displaying overt animosity to Mad-Eye Moody. Indeed, whenever Harry saw the two of them together - at mealtimes, or when they passed in the corridors - he had the distinct impression that Snape was avoiding Moody's eye, whether magical or normal.

"I reckon Snape's a bit scared of him, you know," Harry said thoughtfully.

"Imagine if Moody turned Snape into a horned toad," said Ron, his eyes misting over, "and bounced him all around his dungeon..." The Gryffindor fourth years were looking forward to Moody's first lesson so much that they arrived early on Thursday lunchtime and queued up outside his classroom before the bell had even rung. The only person missing was Hermione, who turned up just in time for the lesson.

"Been in the -"

"Library." Harry finished her sentence for her. "C'mon, quick, or we won't get decent seats."

They hurried into three chairs right in front of the teacher's desk, took out their copies of *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection*, and waited, unusually quiet. Soon they heard Moody's distinctive clunking footsteps coming down the corridor, and he entered the room, looking as strange and frightening as ever. They could just see his clawed, wooden foot protruding from underneath his robes.

"You can put those away," he growled, stumping over to his desk and sitting down, "those books. You won't need them."

They returned the books to their bags, Ron looking excited.

Moody took out a register, shook his long mane of grizzled gray hair out of his twisted and scarred face, and began to call out names, his normal eye moving steadily down the list while his magical eye swiveled around, fixing upon each student as he or she answered.

"Right then," he said, when the last person had declared themselves present, "I've had a letter from Professor Lupin about this class. Seems you've had a pretty thorough grounding in tackling Dark creatures - you've covered boggarts, Red Caps, hinkypunks, grindylows, Kappas, and werewolves, is that right?"

There was a general murmur of assent.

"But you're behind - very behind - on dealing with curses," said Moody.

"So I'm here to bring you up to scratch on what wizards can do to each other. I've got one year to teach you how to deal with Dark -"

"What, aren't you staying?" Ron blurted out.

Moody's magical eye spun around to stare at Ron; Ron looked extremely apprehensive, but after a moment Moody smiled - the first time Harry had seen him do so. The effect was to make his heavily scarred face look more twisted and contorted than ever, but it was nevertheless good to know that he ever did anything as friendly as smile. Ron looked deeply relieved.

"You'll be Arthur Weasley's son, eh?" Moody said. "Your father got me out of a very tight corner a few days ago. . . . Yeah, I'm staying just the one year. Special favor to Dumbledore. . . . One year, and then back to my quiet retirement."

He gave a harsh laugh, and then clapped his gnarled hands together.

"So - straight into it. Curses. They come in many strengths and forms. Now, according to the Ministry of Magic, I'm supposed to teach you countercurses and leave it at that. I'm not supposed to show you what illegal Dark curses look like until you're in the sixth year. You're not supposed to be old enough to deal with it till then. But Professor Dumbledore's got a higher opinion of your nerves, he reckons you can cope, and I say, the sooner you know what you're up against, the better. How are you supposed to defend yourself against something you've never seen? A wizard who's about to put an illegal curse on you isn't going to tell you what he's about to do. He's not going to do it nice and polite to your face. You need to be prepared. You need to be alert and watchful. You need to put that away, Miss Brown, when I'm talking."

Lavender jumped and blushed. She had been showing Parvati her completed horoscope under the desk. Apparently Moody's magical eye could see through solid wood, as well as out of the back of his head.

"So. . . do any of you know which curses are most heavily punished by wizarding law?"

Several hands rose tentatively into the air, including Ron's and Hermione's. Moody pointed at Ron, though his magical eye was still fixed on Lavender.

"Er," said Ron tentatively, "my dad told me about one. . . . Is it called the Imperius Curse, or something?"

"Ah, yes," said Moody appreciatively. "Your father would know that one. Gave the Ministry a lot of trouble at one time, the Imperius Curse."

Moody got heavily to his mismatched feet, opened his desk drawer, and took out a glass jar. Three large black spiders were scuttling around inside it. Harry felt Ron recoil slightly next to him - Ron hated spiders.

Moody reached into the jar, caught one of the spiders, and held it in the palm of his hand so that they could all see it. He then pointed his wand at it and muttered, "Imperio!"

The spider leapt from Moody's hand on a fine thread of silk and began to swing backward and forward as though on a trapeze. It stretched out its legs rigidly, then did a back flip, breaking the thread and landing on the desk, where it began to cartwheel in circles. Moody jerked his wand, and the spider rose onto two of its hind legs and went into what was unmistakably a tap dance.

Everyone was laughing - everyone except Moody.

"Think it's funny, do you?" he growled. "You'd like it, would you, if I did it to you?"

The laughter died away almost instantly.

"Total control," said Moody quietly as the spider balled itself up and began to roll over and over. "I could make it jump out of the window, drown itself, throw itself down one of your throats. . . ."

Ron gave an involuntary shudder.

"Years back, there were a lot of witches and wizards being controlled by the Imperius Curse," said Moody, and Harry knew he was talking about the days in which Voldemort had been all-powerful. "Some job for the Ministry, trying to sort out who was being forced to act, and who was acting of their own free will.

"The Imperius Curse can be fought, and I'll be teaching you how, but it takes real strength of character, and not everyone's got it. Better avoid being hit with it if you can. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he barked, and everyone jumped.

Moody picked up the somersaulting spider and threw it back into the jar.

"Anyone else know one? Another illegal curse?"

Hermione's hand flew into the air again and so, to Harry's slight surprise, did Neville's. The only class in which Neville usually volunteered information was Herbology which was easily his best subject. Neville looked surprised at his own daring.

"Yes?" said Moody, his magical eye rolling right over to fix on Neville. "There's one - the Cruciatus Curse," said Neville in a small but distinct voice.

Moody was looking very intently at Neville, this time with both eyes.

"Your name's Longbottom?" he said, his magical eye swooping down to check the register again.

Neville nodded nervously, but Moody made no further inquiries. Turning back to the class at large, he reached into the jar for the next spider and placed it upon the desktop, where it remained motionless, apparently too scared to move.

"The Cruciatus Curse," said Moody. "Needs to be a bit bigger for you to get the idea," he said, pointing his wand at the spider. "Engorgio!" The spider swelled. It was now larger than a tarantula. Abandoning all pretense, Ron pushed his chair backward, as far away from Moody's desk as possible.

Moody raised his wand again, pointed it at the spider, and muttered, "Crucio!"

At once, the spider's legs bent in upon its body; it rolled over and began to twitch horribly, rocking from side to side. No sound came from it, but Harry was sure that if it could have given voice, it would have been screaming. Moody did not remove his wand, and the spider started to shudder and jerk more violently - "Stop it!" Hermione said shrilly. Harry looked around at her. She was looking, not at the spider, but at Neville, and Harry, following her gaze, saw that Neville's hands were clenched upon the desk in front of him, his knuckles white, his eyes wide and horrified.

Moody raised his wand. The spider's legs relaxed, but it continued to twitch.

"Reducio," Moody muttered, and the spider shrank back to its proper size. He put it back into the jar.

"Pain," said Moody softly. "You don't need thumbscrews or knives to torture someone if you can perform the Cruciatus Curse. . . . That one was very popular once too."

"Right. . . anyone know any others?"

Harry looked around. From the looks on everyone's faces, he guessed they were all wondering what was going to happen to the last spider.

Hermione's hand shook slightly as, for the third time, she raised it into the air.

"Yes?" said Moody, looking at her.

"Avada Kedavra," Hermione whispered.

Several people looked uneasily around at her, including Ron.

"Ah," said Moody, another slight smile twisting his lopsided mouth. "Yes, the last and worst. Avada Kedavra. . . the Killing Curse."

He put his hand into the glass jar, and almost as though it knew what was coming, the third spider scuttled frantically around the bottom of the jar, trying to evade Moody's fingers, but he trapped it, and placed it upon the desktop. It started to scuttle frantically across the wooden surface.

Moody raised his wand, and Harry felt a sudden thrill of foreboding.

"Avada Kedavra!" Moody roared.

There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound, as though a vast, invisible something was soaring through the air - instantaneously the spider rolled over onto its back, unmarked, but unmistakably dead.

Several of the students stifled cries; Ron had thrown himself backward and almost toppled off his seat as the spider skidded toward him.

Moody swept the dead spider off the desk onto the floor.

"Not nice," he said calmly. "Not pleasant. And there's no countercurse. There's no blocking it. Only one known person has ever survived it, and he's sitting right in front of me."

Harry felt his face redden as Moody's eyes (both of them) looked into his own. He could feel everyone else looking around at him too. Harry stared at the blank blackboard as though fascinated by it, but not really seeing it at all....

So that was how his parents had died. . . exactly like that spider. Had they been unblemished and unmarked too? Had they simply seen the flash of green light and heard the rush of speeding death, before life was wiped from their bodies?

Harry had been picturing his parents' deaths over and over again for three years now, ever since he'd found out they had been murdered, ever since he'd found out what had happened that night: Wormtail had betrayed his parents' whereabouts to Voldemort, who had come to find them at their cottage. How Voldemort had killed Harry's father first. How James Potter had tried to hold him off, while he shouted at his wife to take Harry and run. . . Voldemort had advanced on Lily Potter, told her to move aside so that he could kill Harry... how she had begged him to kill her instead, refused to stop shielding her son... and so Voldemort had murdered her too, before turning his wand on Harry.

Harry knew these details because he had heard his parents' voices when he had fought the dementors last year - for that was the terrible power of the dementors: to force their victims to relive the worst memories of their lives, and drown, powerless, in their own despair.

Moody was speaking again, from a great distance, it seemed to Harry. With a massive effort, he pulled himself back to the present and listened to what Moody was saying.

"Avada Kedavra's a curse that needs a powerful bit of magic behind it - you could all get your wands out now and point them at me and say the words, and I doubt I'd get so much as a nosebleed. But that doesn't matter. I'm not here to teach you how to do it.

"Now, if there's no countercurse, why am I showing you? Because you've got to know. You've got to appreciate what the worst is. You don't want to find yourself in a situation where you're facing it. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he roared, and the whole class jumped again.

"Now. . . those three curses - Avada Kedavra, Imperius, and Cruciatus - are known as the Unforgivable Curses. The use of any one of them on a fellow human being is enough to earn a life sentence in Azkaban. That's what you're up against. That's what I've got to teach you to fight. You need preparing. You need arming. But most of all, you need to practice constant, never-ceasing vigilance. Get out your quills. . . copy this down. . . ."

They spent the rest of the lesson taking notes on each of the Unforgivable Curses. No one spoke until the bell rang - but when Moody had dismissed them and they had left the classroom, a torrent of talk burst forth. Most people were discussing the curses in awed voices - "Did you see it twitch?" "- and when he killed it - just like that!" They were talking about the lesson, Harry thought, as though it had been some sort of spectacular show, but he hadn't found it very entertaining - and nor, it seemed, had Hermione.

"Hurry up," she said tensely to Harry and Ron.

"Not the ruddy library again?" said Ron.

"No," said Hermione curtly, pointing up a side passage. "Neville." Neville was standing alone, halfway up the passage, staring at the stone wall opposite him with the same horrified, wide-eyed look he had worn when Moody had demonstrated the Cruciatus Curse.

"Neville?" Hermione said gently.

Neville looked around.

"Oh hello," he said, his voice much higher than usual. "Interesting lesson, wasn't it? I wonder what's for dinner, I'm - I'm starving, aren't you?"

"Neville, are you all right?" said Hermione.

"Oh yes, I'm fine," Neville gabbled in the same unnaturally high voice.

"Very interesting dinner - I mean lesson - what's for eating?"

Ron gave Harry a startled look.

"Neville, what - ?"

But an odd clunking noise sounded behind them, and they turned to see Professor Moody limping toward them. All four of them fell silent, watching him apprehensively, but when he spoke, it was in a much lower and gentler growl than they had yet heard.

"It's all right, sonny," he said to Neville. "Why don't you come up to my office? Come on. . . we can have a cup of tea. . . ."

Neville looked even more frightened at the prospect of tea with Moody.

He neither moved nor spoke. Moody turned his magical eye upon Harry.

"You all right, are you, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, almost defiantly.

Moody's blue eye quivered slightly in its socket as it surveyed Harry. Then he said, "You've got to know. It seems harsh, maybe, but you've got to know. No point pretending. . . well. . . come on, Longbottom, I've got some books that might interest you."

Neville looked pleadingly at Harry, Ron, and Hermione, but they didn't say anything, so Neville had no choice but to allow himself to be steered away, one of Moody's gnarled hands on his shoulder.

"What was that about?" said Ron, watching Neville and Moody turn the corner.

"I don't know," said Hermione, looking pensive.

"Some lesson, though, eh?" said Ron to Harry as they set off for the Great Hall. "Fred and George were right, weren't they? He really knows his stuff, Moody, doesn't he? When he did Avada Kedavra, the way that spider just died, just snuffed it right -"

But Ron fell suddenly silent at the look on Harry's face and didn't speak again until they reached the Great Hall, when he said he supposed they had better make a start on Professor Trelawney's predictions tonight, since they would take hours.

Hermione did not join in with Harry and Ron's conversation during dinner, but ate furiously fast, and then left for the library again. Harry and Ron walked back to Gryffindor Tower, and Harry, who had been thinking of nothing else all through dinner, now raised the subject of the Unforgivable Curses himself.

"Wouldn't Moody and Dumbledore be in trouble with the Ministry if they knew we'd seen the curses?" Harry asked as they approached the Fat Lady.

"Yeah, probably," said Ron. "But Dumbledore's always done things his way, hasn't he, and Moody's been getting in trouble for years, I reckon. Attacks first and asks questions later - look at his dustbins. Balderdash."

The Fat Lady swung forward to reveal the entrance hole, and they climbed into the Gryffindor common room, which was crowded and noisy.

"Shall we get our Divination stuff, then?" said Harry.

"I s'pose," Ron groaned.

They went up to the dormitory to fetch their books and charts, to find Neville there alone, sitting on his bed, reading. He looked a good deal calmer than at the end of Moody's lesson, though still not entirely normal. His eyes were rather red.

"You all right, Neville?" Harry asked him.

"Oh yes," said Neville, "I'm fine, thanks. Just reading this book Professor Moody lent me. . . ."

He held up the book: *Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean*.

"Apparently, Professor Sprout told Professor Moody I'm really good at Herbology," Neville said. There was a faint note of pride in his voice that Harry had rarely heard there before. "He thought I'd like this." Telling Neville what Professor Sprout had said, Harry thought, had been a very tactful way of cheering Neville up, for Neville very rarely heard that he was good at anything. It was the sort of thing Professor Lupin would have done.

Harry and Ron took their copies of *Unfogging the Future* back down to the common room, found a table, and set to work on their predictions for the coming month. An hour later, they had made very little progress, though their table was littered with bits of parchment bearing sums and symbols, and Harry's brain was as fogged as though it had been filled with the fumes from Professor Trelawney's fire.

"I haven't got a clue what this lot's supposed to mean," he said, staring down at a long list of calculations.

"You know," said Ron, whose hair was on end because of all the times he had run his fingers through it in frustration, "I think it's back to the old Divination standby."

"What - make it up?"

"Yeah," said Ron, sweeping the jumble of scrawled notes off the table, dipping his pen into some ink, and starting to write.

"Next Monday," he said as he scribbled, "I am likely to develop a cough, owing to the unlucky conjunction of Mars and Jupiter." He looked up at Harry. "You know her - just put in loads of misery, she'll lap it up."

"Right," said Harry, crumpling up his first attempt and lobbing it over the heads of a group of chattering first years into the fire. "Okay. . . on Monday, I will be in danger of- er - burns."

"Yeah, you will be," said Ron darkly, "we're seeing the skrewts again on Monday. Okay, Tuesday, I'll. . . erm. . .

"Lose a treasured possession," said Harry, who was flicking through *Unfogging the Future* for ideas.

"Good one," said Ron, copying it down. "Because of... erm. . . Mercury. Why don't you get stabbed in the back by someone you thought was a friend?"

"Yeah. . . cool. . ." said Harry, scribbling it down, "because... Venus is in the twelfth house."

"And on Wednesday, I think I'll come off worst in a fight."

"Aaah, I was going to have a fight. Okay, I'll lose a bet."

"Yeah, you'll be betting I'll win my fight. . .

They continued to make up predictions (which grew steadily more tragic) for another hour, while the common room around them slowly emptied as people went up to bed. Crookshanks wandered over to them, leapt lightly into an empty chair, and stared inscrutably at Harry, rather as Hermione might look if she knew they weren't doing their homework properly.

Staring around the room, trying to think of a kind of misfortune he hadn't yet used, Harry saw Fred and George sitting together against the opposite wall, heads together, quills out, poring over a single piece of parchment. It was most unusual to see Fred and George hidden away in a corner and working silently; they usually liked to be in the thick of things and the noisy center of attention. There was something secretive about the way they were working on the piece of parchment, and Harry was reminded of how they had sat together writing something back at the Burrow. He had thought then that it was another order form for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, but it didn't look like that this time; if it had been, they would surely have let Lee Jordan in on the joke. He wondered whether it had anything to do with entering the Triwizard Tournament.

As Harry watched, George shook his head at Fred, scratched out something with his quill, and said, in a very quiet voice that nevertheless carried across the almost deserted room, "No - that sounds like we're accusing him. Got to be careful. . ."

Then George looked over and saw Harry watching him. Harry grinned and quickly returned to his predictions - he didn't want George to think he was eavesdropping. Shortly after that, the twins rolled up their parchment, said good night, and went off to bed.

Fred and George had been gone ten minutes or so when the portrait hole opened and Hermione climbed into the common room carrying a sheaf of parchment in one hand and a box whose contents rattled as she walked in the other. Crookshanks arched his back, purring.

"Hello," she said, "I've just finished!"

"So have I!" said Ron triumphantly, throwing down his quill.

Hermione sat down, laid the things she was carrying in an empty armchair, and pulled Ron's predictions toward her.

"Not going to have a very good month, are you?" she said sardonically as Crookshanks curled up in her lap.

"Ah well, at least I'm forewarned," Ron yawned.

"You seem to be drowning twice," said Hermione.

"Oh am I?" said Ron, peering down at his predictions. "I'd better change one of them to getting trampled by a rampaging hippogriff."

"Don't you think it's a bit obvious you've made these up?" said Hermione.

"How dare you!" said Ron, in mock outrage. "We've been working like house-elves here!"

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"It's just an expression," said Ron hastily.

Harry laid down his quill too, having just finished predicting his own death by decapitation.

"What's in the box?" he asked, pointing at it.

"Funny you should ask," said Hermione, with a nasty look at Ron. She took off the lid and showed them the contents.

Inside were about fifty badges, all of different colors, but all bearing the same letters: S. P. E .W.

"Spew?" said Harry, picking up a badge and looking at it. "What's this about?"

"Not spew," said Hermione impatiently. "It's S-P-E-W. Stands for the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare."

"Never heard of it," said Ron.

"Well, of course you haven't," said Hermione briskly, "I've only just started it."

"Yeah?" said Ron in mild surprise. "How many members have you got?"

"Well - if you two join - three," said Hermione.

"And you think we want to walk around wearing badges saying 'spew,' do you?" said Ron.

"S-P-E-W!" said Hermione hotly. "I was going to put Stop the Outrageous Abuse of Our Fellow Magical Creatures and Campaign for a Change in Their Legal Status - but it wouldn't fit. So that's the heading of our manifesto."

She brandished the sheaf of parchment at them.

"I've been researching it thoroughly in the library. Elf enslavement goes back centuries. I can't believe no one's done anything about it before now."

"Hermione - open your ears," said Ron loudly. "They. Like. It. They like being enslaved!"

"Our short-term aims," said Hermione, speaking even more loudly than Ron, and acting as though she hadn't heard a word, "are to secure house-elves fair wages and working conditions. Our long-term aims include changing the law about non-wand use, and trying to get an elf into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, because they're shockingly underrepresented."

"And how do we do all this?" Harry asked.

"We start by recruiting members," said Hermione happily. "I thought two Sickles to join - that buys a badge - and the proceeds can fund our

leaflet campaign. You're treasurer, Ron - I've got you a collecting tin upstairs - and Harry, you're secretary, so you might want to write down everything I'm saying now, as a record of our first meeting."

There was a pause in which Hermione beamed at the pair of them, and Harry sat, torn between exasperation at Hermione and amusement at the look on Ron's face. The silence was broken, not by Ron, who in any case looked as though he was temporarily dumbstruck, but by a soft tap, tap on the window. Harry looked across the now empty common room and saw, illuminated by the moonlight, a snowy owl perched on the windowsill.

"Hedwig!" he shouted, and he launched himself out of his chair and across the room to pull open the window.

Hedwig flew inside, soared across the room, and landed on the table on top of Harry's predictions.

"About time!" said Harry, hurrying after her.

"She's got an answer!" said Ron excitedly, pointing at the grubby piece of parchment tied to Hedwig's leg.

Harry hastily untied it and sat down to read, whereupon Hedwig fluttered onto his knee, hooting softly.

"What does it say?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

The letter was very short, and looked as though it had been scrawled in a great hurry. Harry read it aloud:

Harry -

I'm flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumors that have reached me here. If it hurts again, go straight to Dumbledore - they're saying he's got Mad-Eye out of retirement, which means he's reading the signs, even if no one else is. I'll be in touch soon. My best to Ron and Hermione. Keep your eyes open, Harry.

Sirius

Harry looked up at Ron and Hermione, who stared back at him.

"He's flying north?" Hermione whispered. "He's coming back?"

"Dumbledore's reading what signs?" said Ron, looking perplexed. "Harry - what's up?"

For Harry had just hit himself in the forehead with his fist, jolting Hedwig out of his lap.

"I shouldn't've told him!" Harry said furiously.

"What are you on about?" said Ron in surprise.

"It's made him think he's got to come back!" said Harry, now slamming his fist on the table so that Hedwig landed on the back of Ron's chair, hooting indignantly. "Coming back, because he thinks I'm in trouble! And there's nothing wrong with me! And I haven't got anything for you," Harry snapped at Hedwig, who was clicking her beak expectantly, "you'll have to go up to the Owlery if you want food."

Hedwig gave him an extremely offended look and took off for the open window, cuffing him around the head with her outstretched wing as she went.

"Harry," Hermione began, in a pacifying sort of voice.

"I'm going to bed," said Harry shortly. "See you in the morning."

Upstairs in the dormitory he pulled on his pajamas and got into his four-poster, but he didn't feel remotely tired.

If Sirius came back and got caught, it would be his, Harry's, fault. Why hadn't he kept his mouth shut? A few seconds' pain and he'd had to blab. . . . If he'd just had the sense to keep it to himself.

He heard Ron come up into the dormitory a short while later, but did not speak to him. For a long time, Harry lay staring up at the dark canopy of his bed. The dormitory was completely silent, and, had he been less preoccupied, Harry would have realized that the absence of Neville's usual snores meant that he was not the only one lying awake.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN - BEAUXBATONS AND DURMSTRANG

Early next morning, Harry woke with a plan fully formed in his mind, as though his sleeping brain had been working on it all night. He got up, dressed in the pale dawn light, left the dormitory without waking Ron, and went back down to the deserted common room. Here he took a piece of parchment from the table upon which his Divination homework still lay and wrote the following letter:

Dear Sirius,

I reckon I just imagined my scar hurting, I was half asleep when I wrote to you last time. There's no point coming back, everything's fine here. Don't worry about me, my head feels completely normal.

Harry

He then climbed out of the portrait hole, up through the silent castle (held up only briefly by Peeves, who tried to overturn a large vase on him halfway along the fourth-floor corridor), finally arriving at the Owlery, which was situated at the top of West Tower.

The Owlery was a circular stone room, rather cold and drafty, because none of the windows had glass in them. The floor was entirely covered in straw, owl droppings, and the regurgitated skeletons of mice and voles. Hundreds upon hundreds of owls of every breed imaginable were nestled here on perches that rose right up to the top of the tower, nearly all of them asleep, though here and there a round amber eye glared at Harry. He spotted Hedwig nestled between a barn owl and a tawny, and hurried over to her, sliding a little on the dropping-strewn floor.

It took him a while to persuade her to wake up and then to look at him, as she kept shuffling around on her perch, showing him her tail. She was evidently still furious about his lack of gratitude the previous night. In the end, it was Harry suggesting she might be too tired, and that perhaps he would ask Ron to borrow Pigwidgeon, that made her stick out her leg and allow him to tie the letter to it.

"Just find him, all right?" Harry said, stroking her back as he carried her on his arm to one of the holes in the wall. "Before the dementors do."

She nipped his finger, perhaps rather harder than she would ordinarily have done, but hooted softly in a reassuring sort of way all the same. Then she spread her wings and took off into the sunrise. Harry watched her fly out of sight with the familiar feeling of unease back in his stomach. He had been so sure that Sirius's reply would alleviate his worries rather than increasing them.

"That was a lie, Harry," said Hermione sharply over breakfast, when he told her and Ron what he had done. "You didn't imagine your scar hurting and you know it."

"So what?" said Harry. "He's not going back to Azkaban because of me."

"Drop it," said Ron sharply to Hermione as she opened her mouth to argue some more, and for once, Hermione heeded him, and fell silent.

Harry did his best not to worry about Sirius over the next couple of weeks. True, he could not stop himself from looking anxiously around every morning when the post owls arrived, nor, late at night before he went to sleep, prevent himself from seeing horrible visions of Sirius, cornered by dementors down some dark London street, but betweentimes he tried to keep his mind off his godfather. He wished he still had Quidditch to distract him; nothing worked so well on a troubled mind as a good, hard training session. On the other hand, their lessons were becoming more difficult and demanding than ever before, particularly Moody's Defense Against the Dark Arts.

To their surprise, Professor Moody had announced that he would be putting the Imperius Curse on each of them in turn, to demonstrate its power and to see whether they could resist its effects.

"But - but you said it's illegal, Professor," said Hermione uncertainly as Moody cleared away the desks with a sweep of his wand, leaving a large clear space in the middle of the room. "You said - to use it against another human was -"

"Dumbledore wants you taught what it feels like," said Moody, his magical eye swiveling onto Hermione and fixing her with an eerie, unblinking stare. "If you'd rather learn the hard way - when someone's putting it on you so they can control you completely - fine by me. You're excused. Off you go."

He pointed one gnarled finger toward the door. Hermione went very pink and muttered something about not meaning that she wanted to leave. Harry and Ron grinned at each other. They knew Hermione would rather eat bubotuber pus than miss such an important lesson.

Moody began to beckon students forward in turn and put the Imperius Curse upon them. Harry watched as, one by one, his classmates did the most extraordinary things under its influence. Dean Thomas hopped three times around the room, singing the national anthem. Lavender Brown imitated a squirrel. Neville performed a series of quite astonishing gymnastics he would certainly not have been capable of in his normal state. Not one of them seemed to be able to fight off the curse, and each of them recovered only when Moody had removed it.

"Potter," Moody growled, "you next."

Harry moved forward into the middle of the classroom, into the space that Moody had cleared of desks. Moody raised his wand, pointed it at Harry, and said, 'Imperio!'

It was the most wonderful feeling. Harry felt a floating sensation as every thought and worry in his head was wiped gently away, leaving nothing but a vague, untraceable happiness. He stood there feeling immensely relaxed, only dimly aware of everyone watching him. And then he heard Mad-Eye Moody's voice, echoing in some distant chamber of his empty brain: Jump onto the desk. . . jump onto the desk. . . Harry bent his knees obediently, preparing to spring.

Jump onto the desk....

Why, though? Another voice had awoken in the back of his brain.

Stupid thing to do, really, said the voice.

Jump onto the desk....

No, I don't think I will, thanks, said the other voice, a little more firmly. . . no, I don't really want to.

Jump! NOW!

The next thing Harry felt was considerable pain. He had both jumped and tried to prevent himself from jumping - the result was that he'd smashed headlong into the desk knocking it over, and, by the feeling in his legs, fractured both his kneecaps.

"Now, that's more like it!" growled Moody's voice, and suddenly, Harry felt the empty, echoing feeling in his head disappear. He remembered exactly what was happening, and the pain in his knees seemed to double. "Look at that, you lot. . . Potter fought! He fought it, and he damn near beat it! We'll try that again, Potter, and the rest of you, pay attention - watch his eyes, that's where you see it - very good, Potter, very good indeed! They'll have trouble controlling you!"

"The way he talks," Harry muttered as he hobbled out of the Defense Against the Dark Arts class an hour later (Moody had insisted on putting Harry through his paces four times in a row, until Harry could throw off the curse entirely), "you'd think we were all going to be attacked any second."

"Yeah, I know," said Ron, who was skipping on every alternate step. He had had much more difficulty with the curse than Harry, though Moody assured him the effects would wear off by lunchtime. "Talk about paranoid. . ." Ron glanced nervously over his shoulder to check that Moody was definitely out of earshot and went on. "No wonder they were glad to get shot of him at the Ministry. Did you hear him telling Seamus what he did to that witch who shouted 'Boo' behind him on April Fools' Day? And when are we supposed to read up on resisting the Imperius Curse with everything else we've got to do?"

All the fourth years had noticed a definite increase in the amount of work they were required to do this term. Professor McGonagall explained why, when the class gave a particularly loud groan at the amount of Transfiguration homework she had assigned.

"You are now entering a most important phase of your magical education!" she told them, her eyes glinting dangerously behind her square spectacles. "Your Ordinary Wizarding Levels are drawing closer --" "We don't take O.W.L.s till fifth year!" said Dean Thomas indignantly. "Maybe not, Thomas, but believe me, you need all the preparation you can get! Miss Granger remains the only person in this class who has managed to turn a hedgehog into a satisfactory pincushion. I might remind you that your pincushion, Thomas, still curls up in fright if anyone approaches it with a pin!"

Hermione, who had turned rather pink again, seemed to be trying not to look too pleased with herself.

Harry and Ron were deeply amused when Professor Trelawney told them that they had received top marks for their homework in their next Divination class. She read out large portions of their predictions, commending them for their unflinching acceptance of the horrors in store for them - but they were less amused when she asked them to do the same thing for the month after next; both of them were running out of ideas for catastrophes.

Meanwhile Professor Binns, the ghost who taught History of Magic, had them writing weekly essays on the goblin rebellions of the eighteenth century. Professor Snape was forcing them to research antidotes. They took this one seriously, as he had hinted that he might be poisoning one of them before Christmas to see if their antidote worked. Professor Flitwick had asked them to read three extra books in preparation for their lesson on Summoning Charms.

Even Hagrid was adding to their workload. The Blast-Ended Skrewts were growing at a remarkable pace given that nobody had yet discovered what they ate. Hagrid was delighted, and as part of their "project," suggested that they come down to his hut on alternate evenings to observe the skrewts and make notes on their extraordinary behavior.

"I will not," said Draco Malfoy flatly when Hagrid had proposed this with the air of Father Christmas pulling an extra-large toy out of his sack.

"I see enough of these foul things during lessons, thanks."

Hagrid's smile faded off his face.

"Yeh'll do wha' yeh told," he growled, "or I'll be takin' a leaf outta Professor Moody's book. . . . I hear yeh made a good ferret, Malfoy." The Gryffindors roared with laughter. Malfoy flushed with anger, but apparently the memory of Moody's punishment was still sufficiently painful to stop him from retorting. Harry, Ron, and Hermione returned to the castle at the end of the lesson in high spirits; seeing Hagrid put down Malfoy was particularly satisfying, especially because Malfoy had done his very best to get Hagrid sacked the previous year.

When they arrived in the entrance hall, they found themselves unable to proceed owing to the large crowd of students congregated there, all milling around a large sign that had been erected at the foot of the marble staircase. Ron, the tallest of the three, stood on tiptoe to see over the heads in front of them and read the sign aloud to the other two:

TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT
THE DELEGATIONS FROM BEAUXBATONS AND
DURMSTRANG WILL BE ARRIVING AT 6 O'CLOCK
ON FRIDAY THE 30TH OF OCTOBER. LESSONS WILL
END HALF AN HOUR EARLY --

"Brilliant!" said Harry. "It's Potions last thing on Friday!
Snape won't have time to poison us all!"

STUDENTS WILL RETURN THEIR BAGS AND BOOKS
TO THEIR DORMITORIES AND ASSEMBLE IN FRONT
OF THE CASTLE TO GREET OUR GUESTS BEFORE
THE WELCOMING FEAST.

"Only a week away!" said Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff, emerging from the crowd, his eyes gleaming. "I wonder if Cedric knows? Think I'll go and tell him. . . ."

"Cedric?" said Ron blankly as Ernie hurried off.

"Diggory," said Harry. "He must be entering the tournament."

"That idiot, Hogwarts champion?" said Ron as they pushed their way through the chattering crowd toward the staircase.

"He's not an idiot. You just don't like him because he beat Gryffindor at Quidditch," said Hermione. "I've heard he's a really good student - and he's a prefect."

She spoke as though this settled the matter.

"You only like him because he's handsome," said Ron scathingly.

"Excuse me, I don't like people just because they're handsome!" said Hermione indignantly.

Ron gave a loud false cough, which sounded oddly like "Lockhart!" The appearance of the sign in the entrance hall had a marked effect upon the inhabitants of the castle. During the following week, there seemed to be only one topic of conversation, no matter where Harry went: the Triwizard Tournament. Rumors were flying from student to student like highly contagious germs: who was going to try for Hogwarts champion, what the tournament would involve, how the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang differed from themselves.

Harry noticed too that the castle seemed to be undergoing an extra-thorough cleaning. Several grimy portraits had been scrubbed, much to the displeasure of their subjects, who sat huddled in their frames muttering darkly and wincing as they felt their raw pink faces. The suits of armor were suddenly gleaming and moving without squeaking, and Argus Filch, the caretaker, was behaving so ferociously to any students who forgot to wipe their shoes that he terrified a pair of first-year girls into hysterics. Other members of the staff seemed oddly tense too.

"Longbottom, kindly do not reveal that you can't even perform a simple Switching Spell in front of anyone from Durmstrang!" Professor McGonagall barked at the end of one particularly difficult lesson, during which Neville had accidentally transplanted his own ears onto a cactus. When they went down to breakfast on the morning of the thirtieth of October, they found that the Great Hall had been decorated overnight. Enormous silk banners hung from the walls, each of them representing a Hogwarts House: red with a gold lion for Gryffindor, blue with a bronze eagle for Ravenclaw, yellow with a black badger for Hufflepuff, and green with a silver serpent for Slytherin. Behind the teachers' table, the largest banner of all bore the Hogwarts coat of arms: lion, eagle, badger, and snake united around a large letter H.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down beside Fred and George at the Gryffindor table. Once again, and most unusually, they were sitting apart

from everyone else and conversing in low voices. Ron led the way over to them.

"It's a bummer, all right," George was saying gloomily to Fred. "But if he won't talk to us in person, we'll have to send him the letter after all. Or we'll stuff it into his hand. He can't avoid us forever."

"Who's avoiding you?" said Ron, sitting down next to them.

"Wish you would," said Fred, looking irritated at the interruption.

"What's a bummer?" Ron asked George.

"Having a nosy git like you for a brother," said George.

"You two got any ideas on the Triwizard Tournament yet?" Harry asked.

"Thought any more about trying to enter?"

"I asked McGonagall how the champions are chosen but she wasn't telling," said George bitterly. "She just told me to shut up and get on with transfiguring my raccoon."

"Wonder what the tasks are going to be?" said Ron thoughtfully. "You know, I bet we could do them, Harry. We've done dangerous stuff before."

...

"Not in front of a panel of judges, you haven't," said Fred. "McGonagall says the champions get awarded points according to how well they've done the tasks."

"Who are the judges?" Harry asked.

"Well, the Heads of the participating schools are always on the panel," said Hermione, and everyone looked around at her, rather surprised, "because all three of them were injured during the Tournament of 1792, when a cockatrice the champions were supposed to be catching went on the rampage."

She noticed them all looking at her and said, with her usual air of impatience that nobody else had read all the books she had, "It's all in Hogwarts, A History. Though, of course, that book's not entirely reliable. A Revised History of Hogwarts would be a more accurate title. Or A Highly Biased and Selective History of Hogwarts, Which Glosses Over the Nastier Aspects of the School."

"What are you on about?" said Ron, though Harry thought he knew what was coming.

"House-elves!" said Hermione, her eyes flashing. "Not once, in over a thousand pages, does Hogwarts, A History mention that we are all colluding in the oppression of a hundred slaves!"

Harry shook his head and applied himself to his scrambled eggs. His and Ron's lack of enthusiasm had done nothing whatsoever to curb Hermione's determination to pursue justice for house-elves.

True, both of them had paid two Sickles for a S.P.E.W. badge, but they had only done it to keep her quiet. Their Sickles had been wasted, however; if anything, they seemed to have made Hermione more vociferous. She had been badgering Harry and Ron ever since, first to wear the badges, then to persuade others to do the same, and she had also taken to rattling around the Gryffindor common room every evening, cornering people and shaking the collecting tin under their noses.

"You do realize that your sheets are changed, your fires lit, your classrooms cleaned, and your food cooked by a group of magical creatures who are unpaid and enslaved?" she kept saying fiercely.

Some people, like Neville, had paid up just to stop Hermione from glowering at them. A few seemed mildly interested in what she had to say, but were reluctant to take a more active role in campaigning. Many regarded the whole thing as a joke.

Ron now rolled his eyes at the ceiling, which was flooding them all in autumn sunlight, and Fred became extremely interested in his bacon (both twins had refused to buy a S.P.E.W. badge). George, however, leaned in toward Hermione.

"Listen, have you ever been down in the kitchens, Hermione?"

"No, of course not," said Hermione curtly, "I hardly think students are supposed to -"

"Well, we have," said George, indicating Fred, "loads of times, to nick food. And we've met them, and they're happy. They think they've got the best job in the world -"

"That's because they're uneducated and brainwashed!" Hermione began hotly, but her next few words were drowned out by the sudden whooshing noise from overhead, which announced the arrival of the post owls. Harry looked up at once, and saw Hedwig soaring toward him. Hermione stopped talking abruptly; she and Ron watched Hedwig anxiously as she fluttered down onto Harry's shoulder, folded her wings, and held out her leg wearily.

Harry pulled off Sirius's reply and offered Hedwig his bacon rinds, which she ate gratefully. Then, checking that Fred and George were safely immersed in further discussions about the Triwizard Tournament, Harry read out Sirius's letter in a whisper to Ron and Hermione.

Nice try, Harry.

I'm back in the country and well hidden. I want you to keep me posted on everything that's going on at Hogwarts. Don't use Hedwig, keep changing owls, and don't worry about me, just watch out for yourself. Don't forget what I said about your scar.

Sirius

"Why d'you have to keep changing owls?" Ron asked in a low voice.

"Hedwig'll attract too much attention," said Hermione at once. "She stands out. A snowy owl that keeps returning to wherever he's hiding. . . I mean, they're not native birds, are they?"

Harry rolled up the letter and slipped it inside his robes, wondering whether he felt more or less worried than before. He supposed that Sirius managing to get back without being caught was something. He couldn't deny either that the idea that Sirius was much nearer was reassuring; at least he wouldn't have to wait so long for a response every time he wrote.

"Thanks, Hedwig," he said, stroking her. She hooted sleepily, dipped her beak briefly into his goblet of orange juice, then took off again, clearly desperate for a good long sleep in the Owlery.

There was a pleasant feeling of anticipation in the air that day. Nobody was very attentive in lessons, being much more interested in the arrival that evening of the people from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang; even Potions was more bearable than usual, as it was half an hour shorter. When the bell rang early, Harry, Ron, and Hermione hurried up to Gryffindor Tower, deposited their bags and books as they had been instructed, pulled on their cloaks, and rushed back downstairs into the entrance hall.

The Heads of Houses were ordering their students into lines.

"Weasley, straighten your hat," Professor McGonagall snapped at Ron.

"Miss Patil, take that ridiculous thing out of your hair."

Parvati scowled and removed a large ornamental butterfly from the end of her plait.

"Follow me, please," said Professor McGonagall. "First years in front. . . no pushing.. . .

They filed down the steps and lined up in front of the castle. It was a cold, clear evening; dusk was falling and a pale, transparent-looking moon was already shining over the Forbidden Forest. Harry, standing between Ron and Hermione in the fourth row from the front, saw Dennis Creevey positively shivering with anticipation among the other first years.

"Nearly six," said Ron, checking his watch and then staring down the drive that led to the front gates. "How d'you reckon they're coming? The train?"

"I doubt it," said Hermione.

"How, then? Broomsticks?" Harry suggested, looking up at the starry sky.

"I don't think so. . . not from that far away. . . .

"A Portkey?" Ron suggested. "Or they could Apparate - maybe you're allowed to do it under seventeen wherever they come from?"

"You can't Apparate inside the Hogwarts grounds, how often do I have to tell you?" said Hermione impatiently.

They scanned the darkening grounds excitedly, but nothing was moving; everything was still, silent, and quite as usual. Harry was starting to feel cold. He wished they'd hurry up. . . . Maybe the foreign students were preparing a dramatic entrance. . . . He remembered what Mr. Weasley had said back at the campsite before the Quidditch World Cup: "always the same - we can't resist showing off when we get together. . . ."

And then Dumbledore called out from the back row where he stood with the other teachers - "Aha! Unless I am very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!"

"Where?" said many students eagerly, all looking in different directions.

"There!" yelled a sixth year, pointing over the forest.

Something large, much larger than a broomstick - or, indeed, a hundred broomsticks - was hurtling across the deep blue sky toward the castle, growing larger all the time.

"It's a dragon!" shrieked one of the first years, losing her head completely.

"Don't be stupid. . . it's a flying house!" said Dennis Creevey.

Dennis's guess was closer. . . . As the gigantic black shape skimmed over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest and the lights shining from the castle windows hit it, they saw a gigantic, powderblue, horse-drawn carriage, the size of a large house, soaring toward them, pulled through the air by a dozen winged horses, all palominos, and each the size of an elephant.

The front three rows of students drew backward as the carriage hurtled ever lower, coming in to land at a tremendous speed - then, with an almighty crash that made Neville jump backward onto a Slytherin fifth year's foot, the horses' hooves, larger than dinner plates, hit the ground. A second later, the carriage landed too, bouncing upon its vast wheels, while the golden horses tossed their enormous heads and rolled large, fiery red eyes.

Harry just had time to see that the door of the carriage bore a coat of arms (two crossed, golden wands, each emitting three stars) before it opened.

A boy in pale blue robes jumped down from the carriage, bent forward, fumbled for a moment with something on the carriage floor, and unfolded a set of golden steps. He sprang back respectfully. Then Harry saw a shining, high-heeled black shoe emerging from the inside of the carriage - a shoe the size of a child's sled - followed, almost immediately, by the largest woman he had ever seen in his life. The size of the carriage, and of the horses, was immediately explained. A few people gasped.

Harry had only ever seen one person as large as this woman in his life, and that was Hagrid; he doubted whether there was an inch difference in their heights. Yet somehow - maybe simply because he was used to Hagrid - this woman (now at the foot of the steps, and looking around at the waiting, wide-eyed crowd) seemed even more unnaturally large. As she stepped into the light flooding from the entrance hall, she was revealed to have a handsome, olive-skinned face; large, black, liquid-looking eyes; and a rather beaky nose. Her hair was drawn back in a shining knob

at the base of her neck. She was dressed from head to foot in black satin, and many magnificent opals gleamed at her throat and on her thick fingers.

Dumbledore started to clap; the students, following his lead, broke into applause too, many of them standing on tiptoe, the better to look at this woman.

Her face relaxed into a gracious smile and she walked forward toward Dumbledore, extending a glittering hand. Dumbledore, though tall himself, had barely to bend to kiss it.

"My dear Madame Maxime," he said. "Welcome to Hogwarts."

"Dumbly-dort," said Madame Maxime in a deep voice. "I 'ope I find you well?"

"In excellent form, I thank you," said Dumbledore.

"My pupils," said Madame Maxime, waving one of her enormous hands carelessly behind her.

Harry, whose attention had been focused completely upon Madame Maxime, now noticed that about a dozen boys and girls, all, by the look of them, in their late teens, had emerged from the carriage and were now standing behind Madame Maxime. They were shivering, which was unsurprising, given that their robes seemed to be made of fine silk, and none of them were wearing cloaks. A few had wrapped scarves and shawls around their heads. From what Harry could see of them (they were standing in Madame Maxime's enormous shadow), they were staring up at Hogwarts with apprehensive looks on their faces.

"As Karkaroff arrived yet?" Madame Maxime asked.

"He should be here any moment," said Dumbledore. "Would you like to wait here and greet him or would you prefer to step inside and warm up a trifle?"

"Warm up, I think," said Madame Maxime. "But ze 'orses -"

"Our Care of Magical Creatures teacher will be delighted to take care of them," said Dumbledore, "the moment he has returned from dealing with a slight situation that has arisen with some of his other - er - charges."

"Skrewts," Ron muttered to Harry, grinning.

"My steeds require - er - forceful 'andling," said Madame Maxime, looking as though she doubted whether any Care of Magical Creatures teacher at Hogwarts could be up to the job. "Zey are very strong. . . ."

"I assure you that Hagrid will be well up to the job," said Dumbledore, smiling.

"Very well," said Madame Maxime, bowing slightly. "Will you please inform zis 'Agrid zat ze 'orses drink only single-malt whiskey?"

"It will be attended to," said Dumbledore, also bowing.

"Come," said Madame Maxime imperiously to her students, and the Hogwarts crowd parted to allow her and her students to pass up the stone steps.

"How big d'you reckon Durmstrang's horses are going to be?" Seamus Finnigan said, leaning around Lavender and Parvati to address Harry and Ron.

"Well, if they're any bigger than this lot, even Hagrid won't be able to handle them," said Harry. "That's if he hasn't been attacked by his skrewts. Wonder what's up with them?"

"Maybe they've escaped," said Ron hopefully.

"Oh don't say that," said Hermione with a shudder. "Imagine that lot loose on the grounds. . . ."

They stood, shivering slightly now, waiting for the Durmstrang party to arrive. Most people were gazing hopefully up at the sky.

For a few minutes, the silence was broken only by Madame Maxime's huge horses snorting and stamping. But then - "Can you hear something?" said Ron suddenly.

Harry listened; a loud and oddly eerie noise was drifting toward them from out of the darkness: a muffled rumbling and sucking sound, as though an immense vacuum cleaner were moving along a riverbed.

"The lake!" yelled Lee Jordan, pointing down at it. "Look at the lake!" From their position at the top of the lawns overlooking the grounds, they had a clear view of the smooth black surface of the water - except that the surface was suddenly not smooth at all. Some disturbance was taking place deep in the center; great bubbles were forming on the surface, waves were now washing over the muddy banks - and then, out in the very middle of the lake, a whirlpool appeared, as if a giant plug had just been pulled out of the lake's floor. .

What seemed to be a long, black pole began to rise slowly out of the heart of the whirlpool. . . and then Harry saw the rigging....

"It's a mast!" he said to Ron and Hermione.

Slowly, magnificently, the ship rose out of the water, gleaming in the moonlight. It had a strangely skeletal look about it, as though it were a resurrected wreck, and the dim, misty lights shimmering at its portholes looked like ghostly eyes. Finally, with a great sloshing noise, the ship emerged entirely, bobbing on the turbulent water, and began to glide toward the bank. A few moments later, they heard the splash of an anchor being thrown down in the shallows, and the thud of a plank being lowered onto the bank.

People were disembarking; they could see their silhouettes passing the lights in the ship's portholes. All of them, Harry noticed, seemed to be built along the lines of Crabbe and Goyle... but then, as they drew nearer, walking up the lawns into the light streaming from the entrance hall, he saw that their bulk was really due to the fact that they were wearing cloaks of some kind of shaggy, matted fur. But the man who was leading them up to the castle was wearing furs of a different sort: sleek and silver, like his hair.

"Dumbledore!" he called heartily as he walked up the slope. "How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?"

"Blooming, thank you, Professor Karkaroff," Dumbledore replied.

Karkaroff had a fruity, unctuous voice; when he stepped into the light pouring from the front doors of the castle they saw that he was tall and thin like Dumbledore, but his white hair was short, and his goatee (finishing in a small curl) did not entirely hide his rather weak chin. When he reached Dumbledore, he shook hands with both of his own.

"Dear old Hogwarts," he said, looking up at the castle and smiling; his teeth were rather yellow, and Harry noticed that his smile did not extend to his eyes, which remained cold and shrewd. "How good it is to be here, how good... . Viktor, come along, into the warmth. . . you don't mind, Dumbledore? Viktor has a slight head cold..."

Karkaroff beckoned forward one of his students. As the boy passed, Harry caught a glimpse of a prominent curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He didn't need the punch on the arm Ron gave him, or the hiss in his ear, to recognize that profile.

"Harry - it's Krum!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN - THE GOBLET OF FIRE

I don't believe it!" Ron said, in a stunned voice, as the Hogwarts students filed back up the steps behind the party from Durmstrang. "Krum, Harry! Viktor Krum!"

"For heaven's sake, Ron, he's only a Quidditch player," said Hermione.

"Only a Quidditch player?" Ron said, looking at her as though he couldn't believe his ears. "Hermione - he's one of the best Seekers in the world! I had no idea he was still at school!"

As they recrossed the entrance hall with the rest of the Hogwarts students heading for the Great Hall, Harry saw Lee Jordan jumping up and down on the soles of his feet to get a better look at the back of Krum's head. Several sixth-year girls were frantically searching

their pockets as they walked - "Oh I don't believe it, I haven't got a single quill on me -"

"D'you think he'd sign my hat in lipstick?"

"Really," Hermione said loftily as they passed the girls, now squabbling over the lipstick.

"I'm getting his autograph if I can," said Ron. "You haven't got a quill, have you, Harry?"

"Nope, they're upstairs in my bag," said Harry.

They walked over to the Gryffindor table and sat down. Ron took care to sit on the side facing the doorway, because Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students were still gathered around it, apparently unsure about where they should sit. The students from Beauxbatons had chosen seats at the Ravenclaw table. They were looking around the Great Hall with glum expressions on their faces. Three of them were still clutching scarves and shawls around their heads.

"It's not that cold," said Hermione defensively. "Why didn't they bring cloaks?"

"Over here! Come and sit over here!" Ron hissed. "Over here! Hermione, budge up, make a space -"

"What?"

"Too late," said Ron bitterly.

Viktor Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students had settled themselves at the Slytherin table. Harry could see Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle looking very smug about this. As he watched, Malfoy bent forward to speak to Krum.

"Yeah, that's right, smarm up to him, Malfoy," said Ron scathingly. "I bet Krum can see right through him, though. . . bet he gets people fawning over him all the time. . . Where d'you reckon they're going to sleep? We could offer him a space in our dormitory, Harry. . . I wouldn't mind giving him my bed, I could kip on a camp bed."

Hermione snorted.

"They look a lot happier than the Beauxbatons lot," said Harry. The Durmstrang students were pulling off their heavy furs and looking up at the starry black ceiling with expressions of interest; a couple of them were picking up the golden plates and goblets and examining them, apparently impressed.

Up at the staff table, Filch, the caretaker, was adding chairs. He was wearing his moldy old tailcoat in honor of the occasion. Harry was surprised to see that he added four chairs, two on either side of Dumbledore's.

"But there are only two extra people," Harry said. "Why's Filch putting out four chairs, who else is coming?"

"Eh?" said Ron vaguely. He was still staring avidly at Krum.

When all the students had entered the Hall and settled down at their House tables, the staff entered, filing up to the top table and taking their seats. Last in line were Professor Dumbledore, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime. When their headmistress appeared, the pupils from Beauxbatons leapt to their feet. A few of the Hogwarts students laughed. The Beauxbatons party appeared quite unembarrassed, however, and did not resume their seats until Madame Maxime had sat down on Dumbledore's left-hand side. Dumbledore remained standing, and a silence fell over the Great Hall.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and - most particularly - guests," said Dumbledore, beaming around at the foreign students. "I have great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable."

One of the Beauxbatons girls still clutching a muffler around her head gave what was unmistakably a derisive laugh.

"No one's making you stay!" Hermione whispered, bristling at her.

"The tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast," said Dumbledore. "I now invite you all to eat, drink, and make yourselves at home!"

He sat down, and Harry saw Karkaroff lean forward at once and engage him in conversation.

The plates in front of them filled with food as usual. The house-elves in the kitchen seemed to have pulled out all the stops; there was a greater variety of dishes in front of them than Harry had ever seen, including several that were definitely foreign.

"What's that?" said Ron, pointing at a large dish of some sort of shellfish stew that stood beside a large steak-and-kidney pudding.

"Bouillabaisse," said Hermione.

"Bless you," said Ron.

"It's French," said Hermione, "I had it on holiday summer before last. It's very nice."

"I'll take your word for it," said Ron, helping himself to black pudding. The Great Hall seemed somehow much more crowded than usual, even though there were barely twenty additional students there; perhaps it was because their differently colored uniforms stood out so clearly against the black of the Hogwarts' robes. Now that they had removed their furs, the Durmstrang students were revealed to be wearing robes of a deep bloodred.

Hagrid sidled into the Hall through a door behind the staff table twenty minutes after the start of the feast. He slid into his seat at the end and waved at Harry, Ron, and Hermione with a very heavily bandaged hand.

"Skrewts doing all right, Hagrid?" Harry called.

"Thrivin'," Hagrid called back happily.

"Yeah, I'll just bet they are," said Ron quietly. "Looks like they've finally found a food they like, doesn't it? Hagrid's fingers."

At that moment, a voice said, "Excuse me, are you wanting ze bouillabaisse?"

It was the girl from Beauxbatons who had laughed during Dumbledore's speech. She had finally removed her muffler. A long sheet of silvery-blonde hair fell almost to her waist. She had large, deep blue eyes, and very white, even teeth.

Ron went purple. He stared up at her, opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out except a faint gurgling noise.

"Yeah, have it," said Harry, pushing the dish toward the girl.

"You 'ave finished wiz it?"

"Yeah," Ron said breathlessly. "Yeah, it was excellent."

The girl picked up the dish and carried it carefully off to the Ravenclaw table. Ron was still goggling at the girl as though he had never seen one before. Harry started to laugh. The sound seemed to jog Ron back to his senses.

"She's a veela!" he said hoarsely to Harry.

"Of course she isn't!" said Hermione tartly. "I don't see anyone else gaping at her like an idiot!"

But she wasn't entirely right about that. As the girl crossed the Hall, many boys' heads turned, and some of them seemed to have become temporarily speechless, just like Ron.

"I'm telling you, that's not a normal girl!" said Ron, leaning sideways so he could keep a clear view of her. "They don't make them like that at Hogwarts!"

"They make them okay at Hogwarts," said Harry without thinking. Cho happened to be sitting only a few places away from the girl with the silvery hair.

"When you've both put your eyes back in," said Hermione briskly, "you'll be able to see who's just arrived."

She was pointing up at the staff table. The two remaining empty seats had just been filled. Ludo Bagman was now sitting on Professor Karkaroff's other side, while Mr. Crouch, Percy's boss, was next to Madame Maxime.

"What are they doing here?" said Harry in surprise.

"They organized the Triwizard Tournament, didn't they?" said Hermione. "I suppose they wanted to be here to see it start."

When the second course arrived they noticed a number of unfamiliar desserts too. Ron examined an odd sort of pale blancmange closely, then moved it carefully a few inches to his right, so that it would be clearly visible from the Ravenclaw table. The girl who looked like a veela appeared to have eaten enough, however, and did not come over to get it. Once the golden plates had been wiped clean, Dumbledore stood up again. A pleasant sort of tension seemed to fill the Hall now. Harry felt a slight thrill of excitement, wondering what was coming. Several seats down from them, Fred and George were leaning forward, staring at Dumbledore with great concentration.

"The moment has come," said Dumbledore, smiling around at the sea of upturned faces. "The Triwizard Tournament is about to start. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket --"

"The what?" Harry muttered.

Ron shrugged.

"- just to clarify the procedure that we will be following this year.

But first, let me introduce, for those who do not know them, Mr.

Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation" - there was a smattering of polite applause - "and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

There was a much louder round of applause for Bagman than for Crouch, perhaps because of his fame as a Beater, or simply because he looked so much more likable. He acknowledged it with a jovial wave of his hand.

Bartemius Crouch did not smile or wave when his name was announced.

Remembering him in his neat suit at the Quidditch World Cup, Harry thought he looked strange in wizard's robes. His toothbrush mustache and severe parting looked very odd next to Dumbledore's long white hair and beard.

"Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament," Dumbledore continued, "and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions' efforts." At the mention of the word "champions," the attentiveness of the listening students seemed to sharpen. Perhaps Dumbledore had noticed their sudden stillness, for he smiled as he said, "The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch."

Filch, who had been lurking unnoticed in a far corner of the Hall, now approached Dumbledore carrying a great wooden chest encrusted with jewels. It looked extremely old. A murmur of excited interest rose from the watching students; Dennis Creevey actually stood on his chair to see it properly, but, being so tiny, his head hardly rose above anyone else's.

"The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman," said Dumbledore as Filch placed the chest carefully on the table before him, "and they have made the necessary arrangements for each challenge. There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways.. their magical prowess - their daring - their powers of deduction - and, of course, their ability to cope with danger."

At this last word, the Hall was filled with a silence so absolute that nobody seemed to be breathing.

"As you know, three champions compete in the tournament," Dumbledore went on calmly, "one from each of the participating schools. They will be

marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire."

Dumbledore now took out his wand and tapped three times upon the top of the casket. The lid creaked slowly open. Dumbledore reached inside it and pulled out a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It would have been entirely unremarkable had it not been full to the brim with dancing blue-white flames.

Dumbledore closed the casket and placed the goblet carefully on top of it, where it would be clearly visible to everyone in the Hall.

"Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet," said Dumbledore. "Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete.

"To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation," said Dumbledore, "I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line.

"Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have become a champion. Please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you drop your name into the goblet. Now, I think it is time for bed. Good night to you all."

"An Age Line!" Fred Weasley said, his eyes glinting, as they all made their way across the Hall to the doors into the entrance hall. "Well, that should be fooled by an Aging Potion, shouldn't it? And once your name's in that goblet, you're laughing - it can't tell whether you're seventeen or not!"

"But I don't think anyone under seventeen will stand a chance," said Hermione, "we just haven't learned enough. . ."

"Speak for yourself," said George shortly. "You'll try and get in, won't you, Harry?"

Harry thought briefly of Dumbledore's insistence that nobody under seventeen should submit their name, but then the wonderful picture of himself winning the Triwizard Tournament filled his mind again. . . . He wondered how angry Dumbledore would be if someone younger than seventeen did find a way to get over the Age Line.

"Where is he?" said Ron, who wasn't listening to a word of this conversation, but looking through the crowd to see what had become of Krum. "Dumbledore didn't say where the Durmstrang people are sleeping, did he?"

But this query was answered almost instantly; they were level with the Slytherin table now, and Karkaroff had just hustled up to his students. "Back to the ship, then," he was saying. "Viktor, how are you feeling? Did you eat enough? Should I send for some mulled wine from the kitchens?"

Harry saw Krum shake his head as he pulled his furs back on. "Professor, I wood like some vine," said one of the other Durmstrang boys hopefully. "I wasn't offering it to you, Poliakoff," snapped Karkaroff, his warmly paternal air vanishing in an instant. "I notice you have dribbled food all down the front of your robes again, disgusting boy -"

Karkaroff turned and led his students toward the doors, reaching them at exactly the same moment as Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Harry stopped to let him walk through first.

"Thank you," said Karkaroff carelessly, glancing at him. And then Karkaroff froze. He turned his head back to Harry and stared at him as though he couldn't believe his eyes. Behind their headmaster, the students from Durmstrang came to a halt too. Karkaroff's eyes moved slowly up Harry's face and fixed upon his scar. The Durmstrang students were staring curiously at Harry too. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw comprehension dawn on a few of their faces. The boy with food all down his front nudged the girl next to him and pointed openly at Harry's forehead.

"Yeah, that's Harry Potter," said a growling voice from behind them. Professor Karkaroff spun around. Mad-Eye Moody was standing there, leaning heavily on his staff, his magical eye glaring unblinkingly at the Durmstrang headmaster.

The color drained from Karkaroff's face as Harry watched. A terrible look of mingled fury and fear came over him.

"You!" he said, staring at Moody as though unsure he was really seeing him.

"Me," said Moody grimly. "And unless you've got anything to say to Potter, Karkaroff, you might want to move. You're blocking the doorway." It was true; half the students in the Hall were now waiting behind them, looking over one another's shoulders to see what was causing the holdup. Without another word, Professor Karkaroff swept his students away with him. Moody watched him until he was out of sight, his magical eye fixed upon his back, a look of intense dislike upon his mutilated face.

As the next day was Saturday, most students would normally have breakfasted late. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were not alone in rising much earlier than they usually did on weekends. When they went down into the entrance hall, they saw about twenty people milling around it, some of them eating toast, all examining the Goblet of Fire. It had been placed in the center of the hall on the stool that normally bore the Sorting Hat. A thin golden line had been traced on the floor, forming a circle ten feet around it in every direction.

"Anyone put their name in yet?" Ron asked a third-year girl eagerly.

"All the Durmstrang lot," she replied. "But I haven't seen anyone from Hogwarts yet."

"Bet some of them put it in last night after we'd all gone to bed," said Harry. "I would've if it had been me. . . wouldn't have wanted everyone watching. What if the goblet just gobbed you right back out again?"

Someone laughed behind Harry. Turning, he saw Fred, George, and Lee Jordan hurrying down the staircase, all three of them looking extremely excited.

"Done it," Fred said in a triumphant whisper to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"Just taken it."

"What?" said Ron.

"The Aging Potion, dung brains," said Fred.

"One drop each," said George, rubbing his hands together with glee. "We only need to be a few months older."

"We're going to split the thousand Galleons between the three of us if one of us wins," said Lee, grinning broadly.

"I'm not sure this is going to work, you know," said Hermione warily.

"I'm sure Dumbledore will have thought of this."

Fred, George, and Lee ignored her.

"Ready?" Fred said to the other two, quivering with excitement. "C'mon, then - I'll go first -"

Harry watched, fascinated, as Fred pulled a slip of parchment out of his pocket bearing the words Fred Weasley - Hogwarts. Fred walked right up

to the edge of the line and stood there, rocking on his toes like a diver preparing for a fifty-foot drop. Then, with the eyes of every person in the entrance hall upon him, he took a great breath and stepped over the line.

For a split second Harry thought it had worked - George certainly thought so, for he let out a yell of triumph and leapt after Fred - but next moment, there was a loud sizzling sound, and both twins were hurled out of the golden circle as though they had been thrown by an invisible shot-putter. They landed painfully, ten feet away on the cold stone floor, and to add insult to injury, there was a loud popping noise, and both of them sprouted identical long white beards.

The entrance hall rang with laughter. Even Fred and George joined in, once they had gotten to their feet and taken a good look at each other's beards.

"I did warn you," said a deep, amused voice, and everyone turned to see Professor Dumbledore coming out of the Great Hall. He surveyed Fred and George, his eyes twinkling. "I suggest you both go up to Madam Pomfrey. She is already tending to Miss Fawcett, of Ravenclaw, and Mr. Summers, of Hufflepuff, both of whom decided to age themselves up a little too. Though I must say, neither of their beards is anything like as fine as yours."

Fred and George set off for the hospital wing, accompanied by Lee, who was howling with laughter, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione, also chortling, went in to breakfast.

The decorations in the Great Hall had changed this morning. As it was Halloween, a cloud of live bats was fluttering around the enchanted ceiling, while hundreds of carved pumpkins leered from every corner. Harry led the way over to Dean and Seamus, who were discussing those Hogwarts students of seventeen or over who might be entering.

"There's a rumor going around that Warrington got up early and put his name in," Dean told Harry. "That big bloke from Slytherin who looks like a sloth."

Harry, who had played Quidditch against Warrington, shook his head in disgust.

"We can't have a Slytherin champion!"

"And all the Hufflepuffs are talking about Diggory," said Seamus contemptuously. "But I wouldn't have thought he'd have wanted to risk his good looks."

"Listen!" said Hermione suddenly.

People were cheering out in the entrance hall. They all swiveled around in their seats and saw Angelina Johnson coming into the Hall, grinning in an embarrassed sort of way. A tall black girl who played Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Angelina came over to them, sat down, and said, "Well, I've done it! Just put my name in!"

"You're kidding!" said Ron, looking impressed.

"Are you seventeen, then?" asked Harry.

"Course she is, can't see a beard, can you?" said Ron.

"I had my birthday last week," said Angelina.

"Well, I'm glad someone from Gryffindor's entering," said Hermione. "I really hope you get it, Angelina!"

"Thanks, Hermione," said Angelina, smiling at her.

Yeah, better you than Pretty-Boy Diggory, said Seamus, causing several Hufflepuffs passing their table to scowl heavily at him.

"What're we going to do today, then?" Ron asked Harry and Hermione when they had finished breakfast and were leaving the Great Hall.

"We haven't been down to visit Hagrid yet," said Harry.

"Okay," said Ron, "just as long as he doesn't ask us to donate a few fingers to the skrewts."

A look of great excitement suddenly dawned on Hermione's face.

"I've just realized - I haven't asked Hagrid to join S.P.E.W. yet!" she said brightly. "Wait for me, will you, while I nip upstairs and get the badges?"

"What is it with her?" said Ron, exasperated, as Hermione ran away up the marble staircase.

"Hey, Ron," said Harry suddenly. "It's your friend. . ."

The students from Beauxbatons were coming through the front doors from the grounds, among them, the veela-girl. Those gathered around the Goblet of Fire stood back to let them pass, watching eagerly.

Madame Maxime entered the hall behind her students and organized them into a line. One by one, the Beauxbatons students stepped across the Age Line and dropped their slips of parchment into the blue-white flames. As each name entered the fire, it turned briefly red and emitted sparks.

"What d'you reckon'll happen to the ones who aren't chosen?" Ron muttered to Harry as the veela-girl dropped her parchment into the Goblet of Fire. "Reckon they'll go back to school, or hang around to watch the tournament?"

"Dunno," said Harry. "Hang around, I suppose... . Madame Maxime's staying to judge, isn't she?"

When all the Beauxbatons students had submitted their names, Madame Maxime led them back out of the hall and out onto the grounds again.

"Where are they sleeping, then?" said Ron, moving toward the front doors and staring after them.

A loud rattling noise behind them announced Hermione's reappearance with the box of S. P. E.W. badges.

"Oh good, hurry up," said Ron, and he jumped down the stone steps, keeping his eyes on the back of the veela-girl, who was now halfway across the lawn with Madame Maxime.

As they neared Hagrid's cabin on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, the mystery of the Beauxbatons' sleeping quarters was solved. The gigantic powder-blue carriage in which they had arrived had been parked two hundred yards from Hagrid's front door, and the students were climbing back inside it. The elephantine flying horses that had pulled the carriage were now grazing in a makeshift paddock alongside it.

Harry knocked on Hagrid's door, and Fang's booming barks answered instantly.

"Bout time!" said Hagrid, when he'd flung open the door. "Thought you lot'd forgotten where I live!"

"We've been really busy, Hag -" Hermione started to say, but then she stopped dead, looking up at Hagrid, apparently lost for words.

Hagrid was wearing his best (and very horrible) hairy brown suit, plus a checked yellow-and-orange tie. This wasn't the worst of it, though; he had evidently tried to tame his hair, using large quantities of what appeared to be axle grease. It was now slicked down into two bunches - perhaps he had tried a ponytail like Bill's, but found he had too much hair. The look didn't really suit Hagrid at all. For a moment, Hermione goggled at him, then, obviously deciding not to comment, she said, "Erm - where are the skrewts."

"Out by the pumpkin patch," said Hagrid happily. "They're get-tin' massive, mus' be nearly three foot long now. On'y trouble is, they've started killin' each other."

"Oh no, really?" said Hermione, shooting a repressive look at Ron, who, staring at Hagrid's odd hairstyle, had just opened his mouth to say something about it.

"Yeah," said Hagrid sadly. "S' okay, though, I've got 'em in separate boxes now. Still got abou' twenty."

"Well, that's lucky," said Ron. Hagrid missed the sarcasm.

Hagrid's cabin comprised a single room, in one corner of which was a gigantic bed covered in a patchwork quilt. A similarly enormous wooden table and chairs stood in front of the fire beneath the quantity of cured

hams and dead birds hanging from the ceiling. They sat down at the table while Hagrid started to make tea, and were soon immersed in yet more discussion of the Triwizard Tournament. Hagrid seemed quite as excited about it as they were.

"You wait," he said, grinning. "You jus' wait. Yer going ter see some stuff yeh've never seen before. Firs' task. . . ah, but I'm not supposed ter say."

"Go on, Hagrid!" Harry, Ron, and Hermione urged him, but he just shook his head, grinning.

"I don' want ter spoil it fer yeh," said Hagrid. "But it's gonna be spectacular, I'll tell yeh that. Them champions're going ter have their work cut out. Never thought I'd live ter see the Triwizard Tournament played again!"

They ended up having lunch with Hagrid, though they didn't eat much - Hagrid had made what he said was a beef casserole, but after Hermione unearthed a large talon in hers, she, Harry, and Ron rather lost their appetites. However, they enjoyed themselves trying to make Hagrid tell them what the tasks in the tournament were going to be, speculating which of the entrants were likely to be selected as champions, and wondering whether Fred and George were beardless yet.

A light rain had started to fall by midafternoon; it was very cozy sitting by the fire, listening to the gentle patter of the drops on the window, watching Hagrid darning his socks and arguing with Hermione about house-elves - for he flatly refused to join S.P.E.W. when she showed him her badges.

"It'd be doin' 'em an unkindness, Hermione," he said gravely, threading a massive bone needle with thick yellow yarn. "It's in their nature ter look after humans, that's what they like, see? Yeh'd be makin' 'em unhappy ter take away their work, an' insutin' 'em if yeh tried ter pay 'em."

"But Harry set Dobby free, and he was over the moon about it!" said Hermione. "And we heard he's asking for wages now!"

"Yeah, well, yeh get weirdos in every breed. I'm not sayin' there isn't the odd elf who'd take freedom, but yeh'll never persuade most of 'em ter do it - no, nothin' doin', Hermione."

Hermione looked very cross indeed and stuffed her box of badges back into her cloak pocket.

By half past five it was growing dark, and Ron, Harry, and Hermione decided it was time to get back up to the castle for the Halloween feast - and, more important, the announcement of the school champions.

"I'll come with yeh," said Hagrid, putting away his darning. "Jus' give us a sec."

Hagrid got up, went across to the chest of drawers beside his bed, and began searching for something inside it. They didn't pay too much attention until a truly horrible smell reached their nostrils. Coughing, Ron said, "Hagrid, what's that?"

"Eh?" said Hagrid, turning around with a large bottle in his hand. "Don' yeh like it?"

"Is that aftershave?" said Hermione in a slightly choked voice.

"Er - eau de cologne," Hagrid muttered. He was blushing.

"Maybe it's a bit much," he said gruffly. "I'll go take it off, hang on..."

He stumped out of the cabin, and they saw him washing himself vigorously in the water barrel outside the window.

"Eau de cologne?" said Hermione in amazement. "Hagrid?"

"And what's with the hair and the suit?" said Harry in an undertone.

"Look!" said Ron suddenly, pointing out of the window. Hagrid had just straightened up and turned 'round. If he had been blushing before, it was nothing to what he was doing now. Getting to their feet very cautiously, so that Hagrid wouldn't spot them, Harry, Ron, and Hermione

peered through the window and saw that Madame Maxime and the Beauxbatons students had just emerged from their carriage, clearly about to set off for the feast too. They couldn't hear what Hagrid was saying, but he was talking to Madame Maxime with a rapt, misty-eyed expression Harry had only ever seen him wear once before - when he had been looking at the baby dragon, Norbert.

"He's going up to the castle with her!" said Hermione indignantly. "I thought he was waiting for us!"

Without so much as a backward glance at his cabin, Hagrid was trudging off up the grounds with Madame Maxime, the Beaux-batons students following in their wake, jogging to keep up with their enormous strides. "He fancies her!" said Ron incredulously. "Well, if they end up having children, they'll be setting a world record - bet any baby of theirs would weigh about a ton."

They let themselves out of the cabin and shut the door behind them. It was surprisingly dark outside. Drawing their cloaks more closely around themselves, they set off up the sloping lawns.

"Ooh it's them, look!" Hermione whispered.

The Durmstrang party was walking up toward the castle from the lake. Viktor Krum was walking side by side with Karkaroff, and the other Durmstrang students were straggling along behind them. Ron watched Krum excitedly, but Krum did not look around as he reached the front doors a little ahead of Hermione, Ron, and Harry and proceeded through them. When they entered the candlelit Great Hall it was almost full. The Goblet of Fire had been moved; it was now standing in front of Dumbledore's empty chair at the teachers' table. Fred and George - clean-shaven again - seemed to have taken their disappointment fairly well. "Hope it's Angelina," said Fred as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down. "So do I!" said Hermione breathlessly. "Well, we'll soon know!"

The Halloween feast seemed to take much longer than usual. Perhaps because it was their second feast in two days, Harry didn't seem to fancy the extravagantly prepared food as much as he would have normally. Like everyone else in the Hall, judging by the constantly craning necks, the impatient expressions on every face, the fidgeting, and the standing up to see whether Dumbledore had finished eating yet, Harry simply wanted the plates to clear, and to hear who had been selected as champions.

At long last, the golden plates returned to their original spotless state; there was a sharp upswing in the level of noise within the Hall, which died away almost instantly as Dumbledore got to his feet. On either side of him, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime looked as tense and expectant as anyone. Ludo Bagman was beaming and winking at various students. Mr. Crouch, however, looked quite uninterested, almost bored. "Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision," said Dumbledore. "I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions' names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber" - he indicated the door behind the staff table - "where they will be receiving their first instructions."

He took out his wand and gave a great sweeping wave with it; at once, all the candles except those inside the carved pumpkins were extinguished, plunging them into a state of semidarkness. The Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole Hall, the sparkling bright, bluey-whiteness of the flames almost painful on the eyes. Everyone watched, waiting. . . . A few people kept checking their watches. . .

"Any second," Lee Jordan whispered, two seats away from Harry.

The flames inside the goblet turned suddenly red again. Sparks began to fly from it. Next moment, a tongue of flame shot into the air, a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it - the whole room gasped.

Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and held it at arm's length, so that he could read it by the light of the flames, which had turned back to blue-white.

"The champion for Durmstrang," he read, in a strong, clear voice, "will be Viktor Krum."

"No surprises there!" yelled Ron as a storm of applause and cheering swept the Hall. Harry saw Viktor Krum rise from the Slytherin table and slouch up toward Dumbledore; he turned right, walked along the staff table, and disappeared through the door into the next chamber.

"Bravo, Viktor!" boomed Karkaroff, so loudly that everyone could hear him, even over all the applause. "Knew you had it in you!"

The clapping and chatting died down. Now everyone's attention was focused again on the goblet, which, seconds later, turned red once more. A second piece of parchment shot out of it, propelled by the flames.

"The champion for Beauxbatons," said Dumbledore, "is Fleur Delacour!"

"It's her, Ron!" Harry shouted as the girl who so resembled a veela got gracefully to her feet, shook back her sheet of silvery blonde hair, and swept up between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables.

"Oh look, they're all disappointed," Hermione said over the noise, nodding toward the remainder of the Beauxbatons party. "Disappointed" was a bit of an understatement, Harry thought. Two of the girls who had not been selected had dissolved into tears and were sobbing with their heads on their arms.

When Fleur Delacour too had vanished into the side chamber, silence fell again, but this time it was a silence so stiff with excitement you could almost taste it. The Hogwarts champion next...

And the Goblet of Fire turned red once more; sparks showered out of it; the tongue of flame shot high into the air, and from its tip Dumbledore pulled the third piece of parchment.

"The Hogwarts champion," he called, "is Cedric Diggory!"

"No!" said Ron loudly, but nobody heard him except Harry; the uproar from the next table was too great. Every single Hufflepuff had jumped to his or her feet, screaming and stamping, as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers' table. Indeed, the applause for Cedric went on so long that it was some time before Dumbledore could make himself heard again.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore called happily as at last the tumult died down.

"Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real --"

But Dumbledore suddenly stopped speaking, and it was apparent to everybody what had distracted him.

The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were flying out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Automatically, it seemed, Dumbledore reached out a long hand and seized the

parchment. He held it out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause, during which Dumbledore stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room stared at Dumbledore. And then Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out - "Harry Potter."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN - THE FOUR CHAMPIONS

Harry sat there, aware that every head in the Great Hall had turned to look at him. He was stunned. He felt numb. He was surely dreaming. He had not heard correctly.

There was no applause. A buzzing, as though of angry bees, was starting to fill the Hall; some students were standing up to get a better look at Harry as he sat, frozen, in his seat.

Up at the top table, Professor McGonagall had got to her feet and swept past Ludo Bagman and Professor Karkaroff to whisper urgently to Professor Dumbledore, who bent his ear toward her, frowning slightly.

Harry turned to Ron and Hermione; beyond them, he saw the long Gryffindor table all watching him, openmouthed.

"I didn't put my name in," Harry said blankly. "You know I didn't."

Both of them stared just as blankly back.

At the top table, Professor Dumbledore had straightened up, nodding to Professor McGonagall.

"Harry Potter!" he called again. "Harry! Up here, if you please!"

"Go on," Hermione whispered, giving Harry a slight push.

Harry got to his feet, trod on the hem of his robes, and stumbled slightly. He set off up the gap between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables. It felt like an immensely long walk; the top table didn't seem to be getting any nearer at all, and he could feel hundreds and hundreds of eyes upon him, as though each were a searchlight. The buzzing grew louder and louder. After what seemed like an hour, he was right in front of Dumbledore, feeling the stares of all the teachers upon him.

"Well... through the door, Harry," said Dumbledore. He wasn't smiling.

Harry moved off along the teachers' table. Hagrid was seated right at the end. He did not wink at Harry, or wave, or give any of his usual signs of greeting. He looked completely astonished and stared at Harry as he passed like everyone else. Harry went through the door out of the Great Hall and found himself in a smaller room, lined with paintings of witches and wizards. A handsome fire was roaring in the fireplace opposite him.

The faces in the portraits turned to look at him as he entered. He saw a wizened witch flit out of the frame of her picture and into the one next to it, which contained a wizard with a walrus mustache. The wizened witch started whispering in his ear.

Viktor Krum, Cedric Diggory, and Fleur Delacour were grouped around the fire. They looked strangely impressive, silhouetted against the flames. Krum, hunched-up and brooding, was leaning against the mantelpiece, slightly apart from the other two. Cedric was standing with his hands behind his back, staring into the fire. Fleur Delacour looked around when Harry walked in and threw back her sheet of long, silvery hair.

"What is it?" she said. "Do zey want us back in ze Hall?"

She thought he had come to deliver a message. Harry didn't know how to explain what had just happened. He just stood there, looking at the three champions. It struck him how very tall all of them were.

There was a sound of scurrying feet behind him, and Ludo Bagman entered the room. He took Harry by the arm and led him forward.

"Extraordinary!" he muttered, squeezing Harry's arm. "Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen... lady," he added, approaching the fireside and addressing the other three. "May I introduce - incredible though it may seem - the fourth Triwizard champion?"

Viktor Krum straightened up. His surly face darkened as he surveyed Harry. Cedric looked nonplussed. He looked from Bagman to Harry and back again as though sure he must have misheard what Bagman had said. Fleur Delacour, however, tossed her hair, smiling, and said, "Oh, vairy funny joke, Meester Bagman."

"Joke?" Bagman repeated, bewildered. "No, no, not at all! Harry's name just came out of the Goblet of Fire!"

Krum's thick eyebrows contracted slightly. Cedric was still looking politely bewildered. Fleur frowned.

"But evidently zair 'as been a mistake," she said contemptuously to Bagman. "E cannot compete. 'E is too young."

"Well. . . it is amazing," said Bagman, rubbing his smooth chin and smiling down at Harry. "But, as you know, the age restriction was only imposed this year as an extra safety measure. And as his name's come out of the goblet. . . I mean, I don't think there can be any ducking out at this stage. . . . It's down in the rules, you're obliged. . . Harry will just have to do the best he --"

The door behind them opened again, and a large group of people came in: Professor Dumbledore, followed closely by Mr. Crouch, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Snape.

Harry heard the buzzing of the hundreds of students on the other side of the wall, before Professor McGonagall closed the door.

"Madame Maxime!" said Fleur at once, striding over to her headmistress.

"Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete also!"

Somewhere under Harry's numb disbelief he felt a ripple of anger. Little boy?

Madame Maxime had drawn herself up to her full, and considerable, height. The top of her handsome head brushed the candle-filled chandelier, and her gigantic black-satin bosom swelled.

"What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-dorr?" she said imperiously. "I'd rather like to know that myself, Dumbledore," said Professor Karkaroff.

He was wearing a steely smile, and his blue eyes were like chips of ice.

"Two Hogwarts champions? I don't remember anyone telling me the host school is allowed two champions - or have I not read the rules carefully enough?"

He gave a short and nasty laugh.

"C'est impossible," said Madame Maxime, whose enormous hand with its many superb opals was resting upon Fleur's shoulder. "Ogwarts cannot 'ave two champions. It is most injust."

"We were under the impression that your Age Line would keep out younger contestants, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff, his steely smile still in place, though his eyes were colder than ever. "Otherwise, we would, of course, have brought along a wider selection of candidates from our own schools."

"It's no one's fault but Potter's, Karkaroff," said Snape softly. His black eyes were alight with malice. "Don't go blaming Dumbledore for Potter's determination to break rules. He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here -"

"Thank you, Severus," said Dumbledore firmly, and Snape went quiet, though his eyes still glinted malevolently through his curtain of greasy black hair.

Professor Dumbledore was now looking down at Harry, who looked right back at him, trying to discern the expression of the eyes behind the half-moon spectacles.

"Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry?" he asked calmly.

"No," said Harry. He was very aware of everybody watching him closely.

Snape made a soft noise of impatient disbelief in the shadows.

"Did you ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?" said Professor Dumbledore, ignoring Snape.

"No," said Harry vehemently.

"Ah, but of course 'e is lying!" cried Madame Maxime. Snape was now shaking his head, his lip curling.

"He could not have crossed the Age Line," said Professor McGonagall sharply. "I am sure we are all agreed on that -"

"Dumbly-dorr must 'ave made a mistake wiz ze line," said Madame Maxime, shrugging.

"It is possible, of course," said Dumbledore politely.

"Dumbledore, you know perfectly well you did not make a mistake!" said Professor McGonagall angrily. "Really, what nonsense! Harry could not have crossed the line himself, and as Professor Dumbledore believes that he did not persuade an older student to do it for him, I'm sure that should be good enough for everybody else!"

She shot a very angry look at Professor Snape.

"Mr. Crouch... Mr. Bagman," said Karkaroff, his voice unctuous once more, "you are our - er - objective judges. Surely you will agree that this is most irregular?"

Bagman wiped his round, boyish face with his handkerchief and looked at Mr. Crouch, who was standing outside the circle of the firelight, his face half hidden in shadow. He looked slightly eerie, the half darkness making him look much older, giving him an almost skull-like appearance. When he spoke, however, it was in his usual curt voice.

"We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament."

"Well, Barty knows the rule book back to front," said Bagman, beaming and turning back to Karkaroff and Madame Maxime, as though the matter was now closed.

"I insist upon resubmitting the names of the rest of my students," said Karkaroff. He had dropped his unctuous tone and his smile now. His face wore a very ugly look indeed. "You will set up the Goblet of Fire once more, and we will continue adding names until each school has two champions. It's only fair, Dumbledore."

"But Karkaroff, it doesn't work like that," said Bagman. "The Goblet of Fire's just gone out - it won't reignite until the start of the next tournament -"

"- in which Durmstrang will most certainly not be competing!" exploded Karkaroff. "After all our meetings and negotiations and compromises, I little expected something of this nature to occur! I have half a mind to leave now!"

"Empty threat, Karkaroff," growled a voice from near the door. "You can't leave your champion now. He's got to compete. They've all got to compete. Binding magical contract, like Dumbledore said. Convenient, eh?"

Moody had just entered the room. He limped toward the fire, and with every right step he took, there was a loud clunk.

"Convenient?" said Karkaroff. "I'm afraid I don't understand you, Moody."

Harry could tell he was trying to sound disdainful, as though what Moody was saying was barely worth his notice, but his hands gave him away; they had balled themselves into fists.

"Don't you?" said Moody quietly. "It's very simple, Karkaroff. Someone put Potter's name in that goblet knowing he'd have to compete if it came out."

"Evidently, someone 'oo wished to give 'Ogwarts two bites at ze apple!" said Madame Maxime.

"I quite agree, Madame Maxime," said Karkaroff, bowing to her. "I shall be lodging complaints with the Ministry of Magic and the International Confederation of Wizards -"

"If anyone's got reason to complain, it's Potter," growled Moody, "but. . . funny thing. . . I don't hear him saying a word. . .

"Why should 'e complain?" burst out Fleur Delacour, stamping her foot. "E 'as ze chance to compete, 'asn't 'e? We 'ave all been 'oping to be chosen for weeks and weeks! Ze honor for our schools! A thousand Galleons in prize money - zis is a chance many would die for!"

"Maybe someone's hoping Potter is going to die for it," said Moody, with the merest trace of a growl.

An extremely tense silence followed these words. Ludo Bagman, who was looking very anxious indeed, bounced nervously up and down on his feet and said, "Moody, old man. . . what a thing to say!"

"We all know Professor Moody considers the morning wasted if he hasn't discovered six plots to murder him before lunchtime," said Karkaroff loudly. "Apparently he is now teaching his students to fear assassination too. An odd quality in a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Dumbledore, but no doubt you had your reasons.

"Imagining things, am I?" growled Moody. "Seeing things, eh? It was a skilled witch or wizard who put the boy's name in that goblet. . .

"Ah, what evidence is zere of zat?" said Madame Maxime, throwing up her huge hands.

"Because they hoodwinked a very powerful magical object!" said Moody.

"It would have needed an exceptionally strong Confundus Charm to bamboozle that goblet into forgetting that only three schools compete in the tournament. . . I'm guessing they submitted Potter's name under a fourth school, to make sure he was the only one in his category. . . ."

"You seem to have given this a great deal of thought, Moody," said Karkaroff coldly, "and a very ingenious theory it is - though of course, I heard you recently got it into your head that one of your birthday presents contained a cunningly disguised basilisk egg, and smashed it to pieces before realizing it was a carriage clock. So you'll understand if we don't take you entirely seriously. . . ."

"There are those who'll turn innocent occasions to their advantage," Moody retorted in a menacing voice. "It's my job to think the way Dark wizards do, Karkaroff - as you ought to remember..."

"Alastor!" said Dumbledore warningly. Harry wondered for a moment whom he was speaking to, but then realized "Mad-Eye" could hardly be Moody's real first name. Moody fell silent, though still surveying Karkaroff with satisfaction - Karkaroff's face was burning.

"How this situation arose, we do not know," said Dumbledore, speaking to everyone gathered in the room. "It seems to me, however, that we have no choice but to accept it. Both Cedric and Harry have been chosen to compete in the Tournament. This, therefore, they will do. . .

"Ah, but Dumbly-dorr -"

"My dear Madame Maxime, if you have an alternative, I would be delighted to hear it."

Dumbledore waited, but Madame Maxime did not speak, she merely glared. She wasn't the only one either. Snape looked furious; Karkaroff livid; Bagman, however, looked rather excited.

"Well, shall we crack on, then?" he said, rubbing his hands together and smiling around the room. "Got to give our champions their instructions, haven't we? Barty, want to do the honors?"

Mr. Crouch seemed to come out of a deep reverie.

"Yes," he said, "instructions. Yes . . . the first task . . ."

He moved forward into the firelight. Close up, Harry thought he looked ill. There were dark shadows beneath his eyes and a thin, papery look about his wrinkled skin that had not been there at the Quidditch World Cup.

"The first task is designed to test your daring," he told Harry, Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor, "so we are not going to be telling you what it is. Courage in the face of the unknown is an important quality in a wizard. . . very important.

"The first task will take place on November the twenty-fourth, in front of the other students and the panel of judges.

"The champions are not permitted to ask for or accept help of any kind from their teachers to complete the tasks in the tournament. The champions will face the first challenge armed only with their wands. They will receive information about the second task when the first is

over. Owing to the demanding and time-consuming nature of the tournament, the champions are exempted from end-of-year tests."

Mr. Crouch turned to look at Dumbledore.

"I think that's all, is it, Albus?"

"I think so," said Dumbledore, who was looking at Mr. Crouch with mild concern. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay at Hogwarts tonight, Barty?"

"No, Dumbledore, I must get back to the Ministry," said Mr. Crouch. "It is a very busy, very difficult time at the moment.... I've left young Weatherby in charge... . Very enthusiastic. . . a little overenthusiastic, if truth be told. . .

"You'll come and have a drink before you go, at least?" said Dumbledore. "Come on, Barry, I'm staying!" said Bagman brightly. "It's all happening at Hogwarts now, you know, much more exciting here than at the office!"

"I think not, Ludo," said Crouch with a touch of his old impatience.

"Professor Karkaroff - Madame Maxime - a nightcap?" said Dumbledore.

But Madame Maxime had already put her arm around Fleur's shoulders and was leading her swiftly out of the room. Harry could hear them both talking very fast in French as they went off into the Great Hall.

Karkaroff beckoned to Krum, and they, too, exited, though in silence.

"Harry, Cedric, I suggest you go up to bed," said Dumbledore, smiling at both of them. "I am sure Gryffindor and Hufflepuff are waiting to celebrate with you, and it would be a shame to deprive them of this excellent excuse to make a great deal of mess and noise."

Harry glanced at Cedric, who nodded, and they left together.

The Great Hall was deserted now; the candles had burned low, giving the jagged smiles of the pumpkins an eerie, flickering quality.

"So," said Cedric, with a slight smile. "We're playing against each other again!"

"I s'pose," said Harry. He really couldn't think of anything to say. The inside of his head seemed to be in complete disarray, as though his brain had been ransacked.

"So. . . tell me. . ." said Cedric as they reached the entrance hall, which was now lit only by torches in the absence of the Goblet of Fire.

"How did you get your name in?"

"I didn't," said Harry, staring up at him. "I didn't put it in. I was telling the truth."

"Ah. . . okay," said Cedric. Harry could tell Cedric didn't believe him. "Well . . . see you, then."

Instead of going up the marble staircase, Cedric headed for a door to its right. Harry stood listening to him going down the stone steps beyond it, then, slowly, he started to climb the marble ones.

Was anyone except Ron and Hermione going to believe him, or would they all think he'd put himself in for the tournament? Yet how could anyone think that, when he was facing competitors who'd had three years' more magical education than he had - when he was now facing tasks that not only sounded very dangerous, but which were to be performed in front of hundreds of people? Yes, he'd thought about it. . . he'd fantasized about it. . . but it had been a joke, really, an idle sort of dream. . . he'd never really, seriously considered entering. . .

But someone else had considered it. . . someone else had wanted him in the tournament, and had made sure he was entered. Why? To give him a treat? He didn't think so, somehow...

To see him make a fool of himself? Well, they were likely to get their wish. . .

But to get him killed?

Was Moody just being his usual paranoid self? Couldn't someone have put Harry's name in the goblet as a trick, a practical joke? Did anyone really want him dead?

Harry was able to answer that at once. Yes, someone wanted him dead, someone had wanted him dead ever since he had been a year old. . . Lord Voldemort. But how could Voldemort have ensured that Harry's name got into the Goblet of Fire? Voldemort was supposed to be far away, in some distant country, in hiding, alone. . . feeble and powerless....

Yet in that dream he had had, just before he had awoken with his scar hurting, Voldemort had not been alone. . . he had been talking to Wormtail... plotting Harry's murder.

Harry got a shock to find himself facing the Fat Lady already. He had barely noticed where his feet were carrying him. It was also a surprise to see that she was not alone in her frame. The wizened witch who had flitted into her neighbor's painting when he had joined the champions downstairs was now sitting smugly beside the Fat Lady. She must have dashed through every picture lining seven staircases to reach here before him. Both she and the Fat Lady were looking down at him with the keenest interest.

"Well, well, well," said the Fat Lady, "Violet's just told me everything. Who's just been chosen as school champion, then?"

"Balderdash," said Harry dully.

"It most certainly isn't!" said the pale witch indignantly.

"No, no, Vi, it's the password," said the Fat Lady soothingly, and she swung forward on her hinges to let Harry into the common room.

The blast of noise that met Harry's ears when the portrait opened almost knocked him backward. Next thing he knew, he was being wrenched inside the common room by about a dozen pairs of hands, and was facing the whole of Gryffindor House, all of whom were screaming, applauding, and whistling.

"You should've told us you'd entered!" bellowed Fred; he looked half annoyed, half deeply impressed.

"How did you do it without getting a beard? Brilliant!" roared George.

"I didn't," Harry said. "I don't know how -"

But Angelina had now swooped down upon him; "Oh if it couldn't be me, at least it's a Gryffindor -"

"You'll be able to pay back Diggory for that last Quidditch match, Harry!" shrieked Katie Bell, another of the Gryffindor Chasers.

"We've got food, Harry, come and have some -"

"I'm not hungry, I had enough at the feast -"

But nobody wanted to hear that he wasn't hungry; nobody wanted to hear that he hadn't put his name in the goblet; not one single person seemed to have noticed that he wasn't at all in the mood to celebrate. . . . Lee Jordan had unearthed a Gryffindor banner from somewhere, and he insisted on draping it around Harry like a cloak. Harry couldn't get away; whenever he tried to sidle over to the staircase up to the dormitories, the crowd around him closed ranks, forcing another butterbeer on him, stuffing crisps and peanuts into his hands. . . . Everyone wanted to know how he had done it, how he had tricked Dumbledore's Age Line and managed to get his name into the goblet....

"I didn't," he said, over and over again, "I don't know how it happened." But for all the notice anyone took, he might just as well not have answered at all.

"I'm tired!" he bellowed finally, after nearly half an hour. "No, seriously, George - I'm going to bed -"

He wanted more than anything to find Ron and Hermione, to find a bit of sanity, but neither of them seemed to be in the common room. Insisting that he needed to sleep, and almost flattening the little Creevey brothers as they attempted to waylay him at the foot of the stairs, Harry managed to shake everyone off and climb up to the dormitory as fast as he could.

To his great relief, he found Ron was lying on his bed in the otherwise empty dormitory, still fully dressed. He looked up when Harry slammed the door behind him.

"Where've you been?" Harry said.

"Oh hello," said Ron.

He was grinning, but it was a very odd, strained sort of grin. Harry suddenly became aware that he was still wearing the scarlet Gryffindor banner that Lee had tied around him. He hastened to take it off, but it was knotted very tightly. Ron lay on the bed without moving, watching Harry struggle to remove it.

"So," he said, when Harry had finally removed the banner and thrown it into a corner. "Congratulations."

"What d'you mean, congratulations?" said Harry, staring at Ron. There was definitely something wrong with the way Ron was smiling: It was more like a grimace.

"Well. . . no one else got across the Age Line," said Ron. "Not even Fred and George. What did you use - the Invisibility Cloak?"

"The Invisibility Cloak wouldn't have got me over that line," said Harry slowly.

"Oh right," said Ron. "I thought you might've told me if it was the cloak. . . because it would've covered both of us, wouldn't it? But you found another way, did you?"

"Listen," said Harry, "I didn't put my name in that goblet. Someone else must've done it."

Ron raised his eyebrows.

"What would they do that for?"

"I dunno," said Harry. He felt it would sound very melodramatic to say, "To kill me."

Ron's eyebrows rose so high that they were in danger of disappearing into his hair.

"It's okay, you know, you can tell me the truth," he said. "If you don't want everyone else to know, fine, but I don't know why you're bothering to lie, you didn't get into trouble for it, did you? That friend of the Fat Lady's, that Violet, she's already told us all Dumbledore's letting you enter. A thousand Galleons prize money, eh? And you don't have to do end-of-year tests either. . ."

"I didn't put my name in that goblet!" said Harry, starting to feel angry.

"Yeah, okay," said Ron, in exactly the same sceptical tone as Cedric.

"Only you said this morning you'd have done it last night, and no one would've seen you. . . I'm not stupid, you know."

"You're doing a really good impression of it," Harry snapped.

"Yeah?" said Ron, and there was no trace of a grin, forced or otherwise, on his face now. "You want to get to bed, Harry. I expect you'll need to be up early tomorrow for a photo-call or something."

He wrenches the hangings shut around his four-poster, leaving Harry standing there by the door, staring at the dark red velvet curtains, now hiding one of the few people he had been sure would believe him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN - THE WEIGHING OF THE WANDS

When Harry woke up on Sunday morning, it took him a moment to remember why he felt so miserable and worried. Then the memory of the previous night rolled over him. He sat up and ripped back the curtains of his own four-poster, intending to talk to Ron, to force Ron to believe him - only to find that Ron's bed was empty; he had obviously gone down to breakfast.

Harry dressed and went down the spiral staircase into the common room. The moment he appeared, the people who had already finished breakfast broke into applause again. The prospect of going down into the

Great Hall and facing the rest of the Gryffindors, all treating him like some sort of hero, was not inviting; it was that, however, or stay here and allow himself to be cornered by the Creevey brothers, who were both beckoning frantically to him to join them. He walked resolutely over to the portrait hole, pushed it open, climbed out of it, and found himself face-to-face with Hermione.

"Hello," she said, holding up a stack of toast, which she was carrying in a napkin. "I brought you this. . . . Want to go for a walk?" "Good idea," said Harry gratefully.

They went downstairs, crossed the entrance hall quickly without looking in at the Great Hall, and were soon striding across the lawn toward the lake, where the Durmstrang ship was moored, reflected blackly in the water. It was a chilly morning, and they kept moving, munching their toast, as Harry told Hermione exactly what had happened after he had left the Gryffindor table the night before. To his immense relief, Hermione accepted his story without question.

"Well, of course I knew you hadn't entered yourself," she said when he'd finished telling her about the scene in the chamber off the Hall. "The look on your face when Dumbledore read out your name! But the question is, who did put it in? Because Moody's right, Harry... I don't think any student could have done it. . . they'd never be able to fool the Goblet, or get over Dumbledore's -"

"Have you seen Ron?" Harry interrupted.

Hermione hesitated.

"Erm. . . yes. . . he was at breakfast," she said.

"Does he still think I entered myself?"

"Well. . . no, I don't think so. . . not really," said Hermione awkwardly.

"What's that supposed to mean, 'not really'?"

"Oh Harry, isn't it obvious?" Hermione said despairingly.

"He's jealous!"

"Jealous?" Harry said incredulously. "Jealous of what? He wants to make a prat of himself in front of the whole school, does he?" "Look," said Hermione patiently, "it's always you who gets all the attention, you know it is. I know it's not your fault," she added quickly, seeing Harry open his mouth furiously. "I know you don't ask for it.. . but - well - you know, Ron's got all those brothers to compete against at home, and you're his best friend, and you're really famous - he's always shunted to one side whenever people see you, and he puts up with it, and he never mentions it, but I suppose this is just one time too many. . .

"Great," said Harry bitterly. "Really great. Tell him from me I'll swap any time he wants. Tell him from me he's welcome to it.... People gawping at my forehead everywhere I go. . ."

"I'm not telling him anything," Hermione said shortly. "Tell him yourself. It's the only way to sort this out."

"I'm not running around after him trying to make him grow up!" Harry said, so loudly that several owls in a nearby tree took flight in alarm. "Maybe he'll believe I'm not enjoying myself once I've got my neck broken or -"

"That's not funny," said Hermione quietly. "That's not funny at all." She looked extremely anxious. "Harry, I've been thinking - you know what we've got to do, don't you? Straight away, the moment we get back to the castle?"

"Yeah, give Ron a good kick up the -"

"Write to Sirius. You've got to tell him what's happened. He asked you to keep him posted on everything that's going on at Hogwarts. . . . It's almost as if he expected something like this to happen. I brought some parchment and a quill out with me -"

"Come off it," said Harry, looking around to check that they couldn't be overheard, but the grounds were quite deserted. "He came back to the country just because my scar twinged. He'll probably come bursting right into the castle if I tell him someone's entered me in the Triwizard Tournament -"

"He'd want you to tell him," said Hermione sternly. "He's going to find out anyway."

"How?"

"Harry, this isn't going to be kept quiet," said Hermione, very seriously. "This tournament's famous, and you're famous. I'll be really surprised if there isn't anything in the Daily Prophet about you competing. . . . You're already in half the books about You-Know-Who, you know... and Sirius would rather hear it from you, I know he would."

"Okay, okay, I'll write to him," said Harry, throwing his last piece of toast into the lake. They both stood and watched it floating there for a moment, before a large tentacle rose out of the water and scooped it beneath the surface. Then they returned to the castle.

"Whose owl am I going to use?" Harry said as they climbed the stairs. "He told me not to use Hedwig again."

"Ask Ron if you can borrow -"

"I'm not asking Ron for anything," Harry said flatly.

"Well, borrow one of the school owls, then, anyone can use them," said Hermione.

They went up to the Owlery. Hermione gave Harry a piece of parchment, a quill, and a bottle of ink, then strolled around the long lines of perches, looking at all the different owls, while Harry sat down against a wall and wrote his letter.

Dear Sirius,

You told me to keep you posted on what's happening at Hogwarts, so here goes - I don't know if you've heard, but the Triwizard Tournament's happening this year and on Saturday night I got picked as a fourth champion. I don't who put my name in the Goblet of Fire, because I didn't. The other Hogwarts champion is Cedric Diggory, from Hufflepuff

He paused at this point, thinking. He had an urge to say something about the large weight of anxiety that seemed to have settled inside his chest since last night, but he couldn't think how to translate this into words, so he simply dipped his quill back into the ink bottle and wrote,

Hope you're okay, and Buckbeak - Harry

"Finished," he told Hermione, getting to his feet and brushing straw off his robes. At this, Hedwig fluttered down onto his shoulder and held out her leg.

"I can't use you," Harry told her, looking around for the school owls. "I've got to use one of these."

Hedwig gave a very loud hoot and took off so suddenly that her talons cut into his shoulder. She kept her back to Harry all the time he was tying his letter to the leg of a large barn owl. When the barn owl had flown off, Harry reached out to stroke Hedwig, but she clicked her beak furiously and soared up into the rafters out of reach.

"First Ron, then you," Harry said angrily. "This isn't my fault."

If Harry had thought that matters would improve once everyone got used to the idea of him being champion, the following day showed him how mistaken he was. He could no longer avoid the rest of the school once he was back at lessons - and it was clear that the rest of the school, just like the Gryffindors, thought Harry had entered himself for the tournament.

Unlike the Gryffindors, however, they did not seem impressed.

The Hufflepuffs, who were usually on excellent terms with the Gryffindors, had turned remarkably cold toward the whole lot of them. One Herbology lesson was enough to demonstrate this. It was plain that the Hufflepuffs felt that Harry had stolen their champion's glory; a feeling exacerbated, perhaps, by the fact that Hufflepuff House very rarely got any glory, and that Cedric was one of the few who had ever given them any, having beaten Gryffindor once at Quidditch. Ernie Macmillan and Justin FinchFletchley, with whom Harry normally got on very well, did not talk to him even though they were repotting Bouncing Bulbs at the same tray - though they did laugh rather unpleasantly when one of the Bouncing Bulbs wriggled free from Harry's grip and smacked him hard in the face. Ron wasn't talking to Harry either. Hermione sat between them, making very forced conversation, but though both answered her normally, they avoided making eye contact with each other. Harry thought even Professor Sprout seemed distant with him - but then, she was Head of Hufflepuff House.

He would have been looking forward to seeing Hagrid under normal circumstances, but Care of Magical Creatures meant seeing the Slytherins too - the first time he would come face-to-face with them since becoming champion.

Predictably, Malfoy arrived at Hagrid's cabin with his familiar sneer firmly in place.

"Ah, look, boys, it's the champion," he said to Crabbe and Goyle the moment he got within earshot of Harry. "Got your autograph books? Better get a signature now, because I doubt he's going to be around much longer. . . . Half the Triwizard champions have died. . . how long d'you reckon you're going to last, Potter? Ten minutes into the first task's my bet."

Crabbe and Goyle guffawed sycophantically, but Malfoy had to stop there, because Hagrid emerged from the back of his cabin balancing a teetering tower of crates, each containing a very large Blast-Ended Skrewt. To the class's horror, Hagrid proceeded to explain that the reason the skrewts had been killing one another was an excess of pent-up energy, and that the solution would be for each student to fix a leash on a skrewt and take it for a short walk. The only good thing about this plan was that it distracted Malfoy completely.

"Take this thing for a walk?" he repeated in disgust, staring into one of the boxes. "And where exactly are we supposed to fix the leash? Around the sting, the blasting end, or the sucker?"

"Roun' the middle," said Hagrid, demonstrating. "Er - yeh might want ter put on yer dragon-hide gloves, jus' as an extra precaution, like. Harry - you come here an' help me with this big one....

Hagrid's real intention, however, was to talk to Harry away from the rest of the class. He waited until everyone else had set off with their skrewts, then turned to Harry and said, very seriously, "So - yer competin', Harry. In the tournament. School champion."

"One of the champions," Harry corrected him.

Hagrid's beetle-black eyes looked very anxious under his wild eyebrows.

"No idea who put yeh in fer it, Harry?"

"You believe I didn't do it, then?" said Harry, concealing with difficulty the rush of gratitude he felt at Hagrid's words.

"Course I do," Hagrid grunted. "Yeh say it wasn't you, an' I believe yeh - an' Dumbledore believes yer, an' all."

"Wish I knew who did do it," said Harry bitterly.

The pair of them looked out over the lawn; the class was widely scattered now, and all in great difficulty. The skrewts were now over three feet long, and extremely powerful. No longer shell-less and colorless, they had developed a kind of thick, grayish, shiny armor. They looked like a cross between giant scorpions and elongated crabs - but still without

recognizable heads or eyes. They had become immensely strong and very hard to control.

"Look like they're havin' fun, don' they?" Hagrid said happily. Harry assumed he was talking about the skrewts, because his classmates certainly weren't; every now and then, with an alarming bang, one of the skrewts' ends would explode, causing it to shoot forward several yards, and more than one person was being dragged along on their stomach, trying desperately to get back on their feet.

"Ah, I don' know, Harry," Hagrid sighed suddenly, looking back down at him with a worried expression on his face. "School champion. . . . everythin' seems ter happen ter you, doesn' it?"

Harry didn't answer. Yes, everything did seem to happen to him. . . . that was more or less what Hermione had said as they had walked around the lake, and that was the reason, according to her, that Ron was no longer talking to him.

The next few days were some of Harry's worst at Hogwarts. The closest he had ever come to feeling like this had been during those months, in his second year, when a large part of the school had suspected him of attacking his fellow students. But Ron had been on his side then. He thought he could have coped with the rest of the school's behavior if he could just have had Ron back as a friend, but he wasn't going to try and persuade Ron to talk to him if Ron didn't want to. Nevertheless, it was lonely with dislike pouring in on him from all sides.

He could understand the Hufflepuffs' attitude, even if he didn't like it; they had their own champion to support. He expected nothing less than vicious insults from the Slytherins - he was highly unpopular there and always had been, because he had helped Gryffindor beat them so often, both at Quidditch and in the Inter-House Championship. But he had hoped the Ravenclaws might have found it in their hearts to support him as much as Cedric. He was wrong, however. Most Ravenclaws seemed to think that he had been desperate to earn himself a bit more fame by tricking the goblet into accepting his name.

Then there was the fact that Cedric looked the part of a champion so much more than he did. Exceptionally handsome, with his straight nose, dark hair, and gray eyes, it was hard to say who was receiving more admiration these days, Cedric or Viktor Krum. Harry actually saw the same sixth-year girls who had been so keen to get Krum's autograph begging Cedric to sign their school bags one lunchtime.

Meanwhile there was no reply from Sirius, Hedwig was refusing to come anywhere near him, Professor Trelawney was predicting his death with even more certainty than usual, and he did so badly at Summoning Charms in Professor Flitwick's class that he was given extra homework - the only person to get any, apart from Neville.

"It's really not that difficult, Harry," Hermione tried to reassure him as they left Flitwick's class - she had been making objects zoom across the room to her all lesson, as though she were some sort of weird magnet for board dusters, wastepaper baskets, and lunascopes. "You just weren't concentrating properly -"

"Wonder why that was," said Harry darkly as Cedric Diggory walked past, surrounded by a large group of simpering girls, all of whom looked at Harry as though he were a particularly large Blast-Ended Skrewt. "Still - never mind, eh? Double Potions to look forward to this afternoon. . ." Double Potions was always a horrible experience, but these days it was nothing short of torture. Being shut in a dungeon for an hour and a half with Snape and the Slytherins, all of whom seemed determined to punish Harry as much as possible for daring to become school champion, was about the most unpleasant thing Harry could imagine. He had already struggled through one Friday's worth, with Hermione sitting next to him intoning

"ignore them, ignore them, ignore them" under her breath, and he couldn't see why today should be any better.

When he and Hermione arrived at Snape's dungeon after lunch, they found the Slytherins waiting outside, each and every one of them wearing a large badge on the front of his or her robes. For one wild moment Harry thought they were S.P.E.W. badges - then he saw that they all bore the same message, in luminous red letters that burnt brightly in the dimly lit underground passage:

SUPPORT CEDRIC DIGGORY--
THE REAL HOGWARTS CHAMPION!

"Like them, Potter?" said Malfoy loudly as Harry approached. "And this isn't all they do - look!"

He pressed his badge into his chest, and the message upon it vanished, to be replaced by another one, which glowed green:

POTTER STINKS!

The Slytherins howled with laughter. Each of them pressed their badges too, until the message POTTER STINKS was shining brightly all around Harry. He felt the heat rise in his face and neck.

"Oh very funny," Hermione said sarcastically to Pansy Parkinson and her gang of Slytherin girls, who were laughing harder than anyone, "really witty."

Ron was standing against the wall with Dean and Seamus. He wasn't laughing, but he wasn't sticking up for Harry either.

"Want one, Granger?" said Malfoy, holding out a badge to Hermione.

"I've got loads. But don't touch my hand, now. I've just washed it, you see; don't want a Mudblood sliming it up."

Some of the anger Harry had been feeling for days and days seemed to burst through a dam in his chest. He had reached for his wand before he'd thought what he was doing. People all around them scrambled out of the way, backing down the corridor.

"Harry!" Hermione said warningly.

"Go on, then, Potter," Malfoy said quietly, drawing out his own wand.

"Moody's not here to look after you now - do it, if you've got the guts -"

For a split second, they looked into each other's eyes, then, at exactly the same time, both acted.

"Funnunculus!" Harry yelled.

"Densaugeo!" screamed Malfoy.

Jets of light shot from both wands, hit each other in midair, and ricocheted off at angles -- Harry's hit Goyle in the face, and Malfoy's hit Hermione. Goyle bellowed and put his hands to his nose, where great ugly boils were springing up - Hermione, whimpering in panic, was clutching her mouth.

"Hermione!"

Ron had hurried forward to see what was wrong with her; Harry turned and saw Ron dragging Hermione's hand away from her face. It wasn't a pretty sight. Hermione's front teeth - already larger than average - were now growing at an alarming rate; she was looking more and more like a beaver as her teeth elongated, past her bottom lip, toward her chin - panic-stricken, she felt them and let out a terrified cry.

"And what is all this noise about?" said a soft, deadly voice.

Snape had arrived. The Slytherins clamored to give their explanations; Snape pointed a long yellow finger at Malfoy and said, "Explain."

"Potter attacked me, sir -"

"We attacked each other at the same time!" Harry shouted.

"- and he hit Goyle - look -"

Snape examined Goyle, whose face now resembled something that would have been at home in a book on poisonous fungi.

"Hospital wing, Goyle," Snape said calmly.

"Malfoy got Hermione!" Ron said. "Look!"

He forced Hermione to show Snape her teeth - she was doing her best to hide them with her hands, though this was difficult as they had now grown down past her collar. Pansy Parkinson and the other Slytherin girls were doubled up with silent giggles, pointing at Hermione from behind Snape's back.

Snape looked coldly at Hermione, then said, "I see no difference.". Hermione let out a whimper; her eyes filled with tears, she turned on her heel and ran, ran all the way up the corridor and out of sight.

It was lucky, perhaps, that both Harry and Ron started shouting at Snape at the same time; lucky their voices echoed so much in the stone corridor, for in the confused din, it was impossible for him to hear exactly what they were calling him. He got the gist, however.

"Let's see," he said, in his silkiest voice. "Fifty points from Gryffindor and a detention each for Potter and Weasley. Now get inside, or it'll be a week's worth of detentions."

Harry's ears were ringing. The injustice of it made him want to curse Snape into a thousand slimy pieces. He passed Snape, walked with Ron to the back of the dungeon, and slammed his bag down onto the table. Ron was shaking with anger too - for a moment, it felt as though everything was back to normal between them, but then Ron turned and sat down with Dean and Seamus instead, leaving Harry alone at his table. On the other side of the dungeon, Malfoy turned his back on Snape and pressed his badge, smirking. POTTER STINKS flashed once more across the room.

Harry sat there staring at Snape as the lesson began, picturing horrific things happening to him. . . . If only he knew how to do the Cruciatus Curse. . . he'd have Snape flat on his back like that spider, jerking and twitching.

"Antidotes!" said Snape, looking around at them all, his cold black eyes glittering unpleasantly. "You should all have prepared your recipes now. I want you to brew them carefully, and then, we will be selecting someone on whom to test one. . ."

Snape's eyes met Harry's, and Harry knew what was coming. Snape was going to poison him. Harry imagined picking up his cauldron, and sprinting to the front of the class, and bringing it down on Snape's greasy head - And then a knock on the dungeon door burst in on Harry's thoughts.

It was Colin Creevey; he edged into the room, beaming at Harry, and walked up to Snape's desk at the front of the room.

"Yes?" said Snape curtly.

"Please, sir, I'm supposed to take Harry Potter upstairs." Snape stared down his hooked nose at Colin, whose smile faded from his eager face.

"Potter has another hour of Potions to complete," said Snape coldly. "He will come upstairs when this class is finished."

Colin went pink.

"Sir - sir, Mr. Bagman wants him," he said nervously. "All the champions have got to go, I think they want to take photographs. . ."

Harry would have given anything he owned to have stopped Colin saying those last few words. He chanced half a glance at Ron, but Ron was staring determinedly at the ceiling.

"Very well, very well," Snape snapped. "Potter, leave your things here, I want you back down here later to test your antidote."

"Please, sir - he's got to take his things with him," squeaked Cohn.

"All the champions..."

"Very well!" said Snape. "Potter - take your bag and get out of my sight!"

Harry swung his bag over his shoulder, got up, and headed for the door. As he walked through the Slytherin desks, POTTER STINKS flashed at him from every direction.

"It's amazing, isn't it, Harry?" said Colin, starting to speak the moment Harry had closed the dungeon door behind him. "Isn't it, though? You being champion?"

"Yeah, really amazing," said Harry heavily as they set off toward the steps into the entrance hall. "What do they want photos for, Colin?"

"The Daily Prophet, I think!"

"Great," said Harry dully. "Exactly what I need. More publicity."

"Good luck!" said Colin when they had reached the right room. Harry knocked on the door and entered.

He was in a fairly small classroom; most of the desks had been pushed away to the back of the room, leaving a large space in the middle; three of them, however, had been placed end-to-end in front of the blackboard and covered with a long length of velvet. Five chairs had been set behind the velvet-covered desks, and Ludo Bagman was sitting in one of them, talking to a witch Harry had never seen before, who was wearing magenta robes.

Viktor Krum was standing moodily in a corner as usual and not talking to anybody. Cedric and Fleur were in conversation. Fleur looked a good deal happier than Harry had seen her so far; she kept throwing back her head so that her long silvery hair caught the light. A paunchy man, holding a large black camera that was smoking slightly, was watching Fleur out of the corner of his eye.

Bagman suddenly spotted Harry, got up quickly, and bounded forward.

"Ah, here he is! Champion number four! In you come, Harry, in you come... nothing to worry about, it's just the wand weighing ceremony, the rest of the judges will be here in a moment --"

"Wand weighing?" Harry repeated nervously.

"We have to check that your wands are fully functional, no problems, you know, as they're your most important tools in the tasks ahead," said Bagman. "The expert's upstairs now with Dumbledore. And then there's going to be a little photo shoot. This is Rita Skeeter," he added, gesturing toward the witch in magenta robes. "She's doing a small piece on the tournament for the Daily Prophet. . . ."

"Maybe not that small, Ludo," said Rita Skeeter, her eyes on Harry. Her hair was set in elaborate and curiously rigid curls that contrasted oddly with her heavy-jawed face. She wore jeweled spectacles. The thick fingers clutching her crocodile-skin handbag ended in two-inch nails, painted crimson.

"I wonder if I could have a little word with Harry before we start?" she said to Bagman, but still gazing fixedly at Harry. "The youngest champion, you know. . . to add a bit of color?"

"Certainly!" cried Bagman. "That is - if Harry has no objection?"

"Er -" said Harry.

"Lovely," said Rita Skeeter, and in a second, her scarlet-taloned fingers had Harry's upper arm in a surprisingly strong grip, and she was steering him out of the room again and opening a nearby door.

"We don't want to be in there with all that noise," she said. "Let's see . . . ah, yes, this is nice and cozy."

It was a broom cupboard. Harry stared at her.

"Come along, dear - that's right - lovely," said Rita Skeeter again, perching herself precariously upon an upturned bucket, pushing Harry down onto a cardboard box, and closing the door, throwing them into darkness.

"Let's see now. . ."

She unsnapped her crocodile-skin handbag and pulled out a handful of candles, which she lit with a wave of her wand and magicked into midair, so that they could see what they were doing.

"You won't mind, Harry, if I use a Quick-Quotes Quill? It leaves me free to talk to you normally. . ."

"A what?" said Harry.

Rita Skeeter's smile widened. Harry counted three gold teeth. She reached again into her crocodile bag and drew out a long acid-green quill and a roll of parchment, which she stretched out between them on a crate of Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover. She put the tip of the green quill into her mouth, sucked it for a moment with apparent relish, then placed it upright on the parchment, where it stood balanced on its point, quivering slightly.

"Testing. . . my name is Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter."

Harry hooked down quickly at the quill. The moment Rita Skeeter had spoken, the green quill had started to scribble, skidding across the parchment:

Attractive blonde Rita Skeeter, forty-three, who's savage quill has punctured many inflated reputations -

"Lovely," said Rita Skeeter, yet again, and she ripped the top piece of parchment off, crumpled it up, and stuffed it into her handbag. Now she leaned toward Harry and said, "So, Harry... what made you decide to enter the Triwizard Tournament?"

"Er -" said Harry again, but he was distracted by the quill. Even though he wasn't speaking, it was dashing across the parchment, and in its wake he could make out a fresh sentence:

An ugly scar, souvenir of a tragic past, disfigures the otherwise charming face of Harry Potter, whose eyes --

"Ignore the quill, Harry," said Rita Skeeter firmly. Reluctantly Harry looked up at her instead. "Now -- why did you decide to enter the tournament, Harry?"

"I didn't," said Harry. "I don't know how my name got into the Goblet of Fire. I didn't put it in there."

Rita Skeeter raised one heavily penciled eyebrow.

"Come now, Harry, there's no need to be scared of getting into trouble. We all know you shouldn't really have entered at all. But don't worry about that. Our readers hove a rebel."

"But I didn't enter," Harry repeated. "I don't know who -"

"How do you feel about the tasks ahead?" said Rita Skeeter. "Excited? Nervous?"

"I haven't really thought. . . yeah, nervous, I suppose," said Harry. His insides squirmed uncomfortably as he spoke.

"Champions have died in the past, haven't they?" said Rita Skeeter briskly. "Have you thought about that at all?"

"Well. . . they say it's going to be a lot safer this year," said Harry. The quill whizzed across the parchment between them, back and forward as though it were skating.

"Of course, you've looked death in the face before, haven't you?" said Rita Skeeter, watching him closely. "How would you say that's affected you?"

"Er," said Harry, yet again.

"Do you think that the trauma in your past might have made you keen to prove yourself? To live up to your name? Do you think that perhaps you were tempted to enter the Triwizard Tournament because - "

"I didn't enter," said Harry, starting to feel irritated.

"Can you remember your parents at all?" said Rita Skeeter, talking over him.

"No," said Harry.

"How do you think they'd feel if they knew you were competing in the Triwizard Tournament? Proud? Worried? Angry?"

Harry was feeling really annoyed now. How on earth was he to know how his parents would feel if they were alive? He could feel Rita Skeeter watching him very intently. Frowning, he avoided her gaze and hooked down at words the quill had just written:

Tears fill those startlingly green eyes as our conversation turns to the parents he can barely remember.

"I have NOT got tears in my eyes!" said Harry loudly.

Before Rita Skeeter could say a word, the door of the broom cupboard was pulled open. Harry looked around, blinking in the bright light. Albus Dumbledore stood there, looking down at both of them, squashed into the cupboard.

"Dumbledore!" cried Rita Skeeter, with every appearance of delight - but Harry noticed that her quill and the parchment had suddenly vanished from the box of Magical Mess Remover, and Rita's clawed fingers were hastily snapping shut the clasp of her crocodile-skin bag. "How are you?" she said, standing up and holding out one of her large, mannish hands to Dumbledore. "I hope you saw my piece over the summer about the International Confederation of Wizards' Conference?"

"Enchantingly nasty," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "I particularly enjoyed your description of me as an obsolete dingbat." Rita Skeeter didn't look remotely abashed.

"I was just making the point that some of your ideas are a little old-fashioned, Dumbhedore, and that many wizards in the street -"

"I will be delighted to hear the reasoning behind the rudeness, Rita," said Dumbledore, with a courteous bow and a smile, "but I'm afraid we will have to discuss the matter later. The Weighing of the Wands is about to start, and it cannot take place if one of our champions is hidden in a broom cupboard."

Very glad to get away from Rita Skeeter, Harry hurried back into the room. The other champions were now sitting in chairs near the door, and he sat down quickly next to Cedric, hooking up at the velvet-covered table, where four of the five judges were now sitting - Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Mr. Crouch, and Ludo Bagman. Rita Skeeter settled herself down in a corner; Harry saw her slip the parchment out of her bag again, spread it on her knee, suck the end of the Quick-Quotes Quill, and place it once more on the parchment.

"May I introduce Mr. Ollivander?" said Dumbledore, taking his place at the judges' table and talking to the champions. "He will be checking your wands to ensure that they are in good condition before the tournament."

Harry hooked around, and with a jolt of surprise saw an old wizard with large, pale eyes standing quietly by the window. Harry had met Mr. Ollivander before - he was the wand-maker from whom Harry had bought his own wand over three years ago in Diagon Alley.

"Mademoiselle Delacour, could we have you first, please?" said Mr. Ollivander, stepping into the empty space in the middle of the room. Fleur Delacour swept over to Mr. Olhivander and handed him her wand. "Hmm..." he said.

He twirled the wand between his long fingers like a baton and it emitted a number of pink and gold sparks. Then he held it close to his eyes and examined it carefully.

"Yes," he said quietly, "nine and a half inches. . . inflexible.. rosewood.. . and containing. . . dear me. . ."

"An 'air from ze 'ead of a veela," said Fleur. "One of my grandmuzzer's."

So Fleur was part veela, thought Harry, making a mental note to tell Ron. . . then he remembered that Ron wasn't speaking to him.

"Yes," said Mr. Ollivander, "yes, I've never used veela hair myself, of course. I find it makes for rather temperamental wands...however, to each his own, and if this suits you..."

Mr. Ollivander ran his fingers along the wand, apparently checking for scratches or bumps; then he muttered, "Orchideous!" and a bunch of flowers burst from the wand tip.

"Very well, very well, it's in fine working order," said Mr. Ollivander, scooping up the flowers and handing them to Fleur with her wand. "Mr. Diggory, you next."

Fleur glided back to her seat, smiling at Cedric as he passed her.

"Ah, now, this is one of mine, isn't it?" said Mr. Ollivander, with much more enthusiasm, as Cedric handed over his wand. "Yes, I remember it well. Containing a single hair from the tail of a particularly fine male unicorn. . . must have been seventeen hands; nearly gored me with his horn after I plucked his tail. Twelve and a quarter inches. . . ash. . . pleasantly springy. It's in fine condition...You treat it regularly?"

"Polished it last night," said Cedric, grinning.

Harry hooked down at his own wand. He could see finger marks all over it. He gathered a fistful of robe from his knee and tried to rub it clean surreptitiously. Several gold sparks shot out of the end of it.

Fleur Delacour gave him a very patronizing look, and he desisted.

Mr. Ollivander sent a stream of silver smoke rings across the room from the tip of Cedric's wand, pronounced himself satisfied, and then said, "Mr. Krum, if you please."

Viktor Krum got up and slouched, round-shouldered and duck-footed, toward Mr. Ollivander. He thrust out his wand and stood scowling, with his hands in the pockets of his robes.

"Hmm," said Mr. Olhivander, "this is a Gregorovitch creation, unless I'm much mistaken? A fine wand-maker, though the styling is never quite what I. . . however. . ."

He lifted the wand and examined it minutely, turning it over and over before his eyes.

"Yes. . . hornbeam and dragon heartstring?" he shot at Krum, who nodded.

"Rather thicker than one usually sees. . . quite rigid. . . ten and a quarter inches. . . Avis!"

The hornbeam wand let off a blast like a gun, and a number of small, twittering birds flew out of the end and through the open window into the watery sunlight.

"Good," said Mr. Ollivander, handing Krum back his wand. "Which leaves. . . Mr. Potter."

Harry got to his feet and walked past Krum to Mr. Ollivander. He handed over his wand.

"Aaaah, yes," said Mr. Ohlivander, his pale eyes suddenly gleaming.

"Yes, yes, yes. How well I remember."

Harry could remember too. He could remember it as though it had happened yesterday....

Four summers ago, on his eleventh birthday, he had entered Mr. Ollivander's shop with Hagrid to buy a wand. Mr. Ollivander had taken his measurements and then started handing him wands to try. Harry had waved what felt like every wand in the shop, until at last he had found the one that suited him - this one, which was made of holly, eleven inches long, and contained a single feather from the tail of a phoenix. Mr. Ollivander had been very surprised that Harry had been so compatible with this wand. "Curious," he had said, "curious," and not until Harry asked what was curious had Mr. Olhivander explained that the phoenix feather in Harry's wand had come from the same bird that had supplied the core of Lord Voldemort's.

Harry had never shared this piece of information with anybody. He was very fond of his wand, and as far as he was concerned its relation to Voldemort's wand was something it couldn't help - rather as he couldn't help being related to Aunt Petunia. However, he really hoped that Mr. Ollivander wasn't about to tell the room about it. He had a funny feeling Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill might just explode with excitement if he did.

Mr. Ollivander spent much longer examining Harry's wand than anyone else's. Eventually, however, he made a fountain of wine shoot out of it, and handed it back to Harry, announcing that it was still in perfect condition.

"Thank you all," said Dumbledore, standing up at the judges' table. "You may go back to your lessons now - or perhaps it would be quicker just to go down to dinner, as they are about to end -"

Feeling that at last something had gone right today, Harry got up to leave, but the man with the black camera jumped up and cleared his throat.

"Photos, Dumbledore, photos!" cried Bagman excitedly. "All the judges and champions, what do you think, Rita?"

"Er - yes, let's do those first," said Rita Skeeter, whose eyes were upon Harry again. "And then perhaps some individual shots."

The photographs took a long time. Madame Maxime cast everyone else into shadow wherever she stood, and the photographer couldn't stand far enough back to get her into the frame; eventually she had to sit while everyone else stood around her. Karkaroff kept twirling his goatee around his finger to give it an extra curl; Krum, whom Harry would have thought would have been used to this sort of thing, skulked, half-hidden, at the back of the group. The photographer seemed keenest to get Fleur at the front, but Rita Skeeter kept hurrying forward and dragging Harry into greater prominence. Then she insisted on separate shots of all the champions. At last, they were free to go.

Harry went down to dinner. Hermione wasn't there - he supposed she was still in the hospital wing having her teeth fixed. He ate alone at the end of the table, then returned to Gryffindor Tower, thinking of all the extra work on Summoning Charms that he had to do. Up in the dormitory, he came across Ron.

"You've had an owl," said Ron brusquely the moment he walked in. He was pointing at Harry's pillow. The school barn owl was waiting for him there.

"Oh - right," said Harry.

"And we've got to do our detentions tomorrow night, Snape's dungeon," said Ron.

He then walked straight out of the room, not looking at Harry. For a moment, Harry considered going after him - he wasn't sure whether he wanted to talk to him or hit him, both seemed quite appealing - but the lure of Sirius's answer was too strong. Harry strode over to the barn owl, took the letter off its leg, and unrolled it.

Harry -

I can't say everything I would like to in a letter, it's too risky
in case the owl is intercepted - we need to talk face-to-face. Can you ensure that you are alone by the fire in Gryffindor Tower at one o'clock in the morning on the 22nd of November?

I know better than anyone that you can look after yourself and while you're around Dumbledore and Moody I don't think anyone will be able to hurt you. However, someone seems to be having a good try. Entering you in that tournament would have been very risky, especially right under Dumbldore's nose.

Be on the watch, Harry. I still want to hear about anything unusual. Let me know about the 22nd of November as quickly as you can.

Sirius

CHAPTER NINETEEN - THE HUNGARIAN HORNTAIL

The prospect of talking face-to-face with Sirius was all that sustained Harry over the next fortnight, the only bright spot on a horizon that had never looked darker. The shock of finding himself school champion had worn off slightly now, and the fear of what was facing him had started to sink in. The first task was drawing steadily nearer; he felt as though it were crouching ahead of him like some horrific monster, barring his path. He had never suffered nerves like these; they were way beyond anything he had experienced before a Quidditch match, not even his last one against Slytherin, which had decided who would win the Quidditch Cup. Harry was finding it hard to think about the future at all; he felt as though his whole life had been heading up to, and would finish with, the first task. Admittedly, he didn't see how Sirius was going to make him feel any better about having to perform an unknown piece of difficult and dangerous magic in front of hundreds of people, but the mere sight of a friendly face would be something at the moment. Harry wrote back to Sirius saying that he would be beside the common room fire at the time Sirius had suggested; and he and Hermione spent a long time going over plans for forcing any stragglers out of the common room on the night in question. If the worst came to the worst, they were going to drop a bag of Dungbombs, but they hoped they wouldn't have to resort to that - Filch would skin them alive.

In the meantime, life became even worse for Harry within the confines of the castle, for Rita Skeeter had published her piece about the Triwizard Tournament, and it had turned out to be not so much a report on the tournament as a highly colored life story of Harry. Much of the front page had been given over to a picture of Harry; the article (continuing on pages two, six, and seven) had been all about Harry, the names of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang champions (misspelled) had been squashed into the last line of the article, and Cedric hadn't been mentioned at all. The article had appeared ten days ago, and Harry still got a sick, burning feeling of shame in his stomach every time he thought about it. Rita Skeeter had reported him saying an awful lot of things that he couldn't remember ever saying in his life, let alone in that broom cupboard.

I suppose I get my strength from my parents. I know they'd be very proud of me if they could see me now. . . . Yes, sometimes at night I still cry about them, I'm not ashamed to admit it. . . . I know nothing will hurt me during the tournament, because they're watching over me. . . .

But Rita Skeeter had gone even further than transforming his "er's" into long, sickly sentences: She had interviewed other people about him too.

Harry has at last found love at Hogwarts. His close friend, Colin Creevey, says that Harry is rarely seen out of the company of one Hermione Granger, a stunningly pretty Muggle-born girl who, like Harry, is one of the top students in the school.

From the moment the article had appeared, Harry had had to endure people --Slytherins, mainly -- quoting it at him as he passed and making sneering comments.

"Want a hanky, Potter, in case you start crying in Transfiguration?"
"Since when have you been one of the top students in the school, Potter?
Or is this a school you and Longbottom have set up together?"

"Hey - Harry!"

"Yeah, that's right!" Harry found himself shouting as he wheeled around in the corridor, having had just about enough. "I've just been crying my eyes out over my dead mum, and I'm just off to do a bit more. . .

"No - it was just - you dropped your quill."

It was Cho. Harry felt the color rising in his face.

"Oh - right - sorry," he muttered, taking the quill back.

"Er. . . good luck on Tuesday," she said. "I really hope you do well."

Which left Harry feeling extremely stupid.

Hermione had come in for her fair share of unpleasantness too, but she hadn't yet started yelling at innocent bystanders; in fact, Harry was full of admiration for the way she was handling the situation.

"Stunningly pretty? Her?" Pansy Parkinson had shrieked the first time she had come face-to-face with Hermione after Rita's article had appeared. "What was she judging against - a chipmunk?"

"Ignore it," Hermione said in a dignified voice, holding her head in the air and stalking past the sniggering Slytherin girls as though she couldn't hear them. "Just ignore it, Harry."

But Harry couldn't ignore it. Ron hadn't spoken to him at all since he had told him about Snape's detentions. Harry had half hoped they would make things up during the two hours they were forced to pickle rats' brains in Snape's dungeon, but that had been the day Rita's article had appeared, which seemed to have confirmed Ron's belief that Harry was really enjoying all the attention.

Hermione was furious with the pair of them; she went from one to the other, trying to force them to talk to each other, but Harry was adamant: He would talk to Ron again only if Ron admitted that Harry hadn't put his name in the Goblet of Fire and apologized for calling him a liar.

"I didn't start this," Harry said stubbornly. "It's his problem."

"You miss him!" Hermione said impatiently. "And I know he misses you -"

"Miss him?" said Harry. "I don't miss him. . .

But this was a downright lie. Harry liked Hermione very much, but she just wasn't the same as Ron. There was much less laughter and a lot more hanging around in the library when Hermione was your best friend. Harry still hadn't mastered Summoning Charms, he seemed to have developed something of a block about them, and Hermione insisted that learning the theory would help. They consequently spent a lot of time poring over books during their lunchtimes.

Viktor Krum was in the library an awful lot too, and Harry wondered what he was up to. Was he studying, or was he looking for things to help him through the first task? Hermione often complained about Krum being there - not that he ever bothered them - but because groups of giggling girls often turned up to spy on him from behind bookshelves, and Hermione found the noise distracting.

"He's not even good-looking!" she muttered angrily, glaring at Krum's sharp profile. "They only like him because he's famous! They wouldn't look twice at him if he couldn't do that WonkyFaint thing -"

"Wronski Feint," said Harry, through gritted teeth. Quite apart from liking to get Quidditch terms correct, it caused him another pang to imagine Ron's expression if he could have heard Hermione talking about Wonky-Faints.

It is a strange thing, but when you are dreading something, and would give anything to slow down time, it has a disobliging habit of speeding up. The days until the first task seemed to slip by as though someone had fixed the clocks to work at double speed. Harry's feeling of barely controlled panic was with him wherever he went, as everpresent as the snide comments about the Daily Prophet article.

On the Saturday before the first task, all students in the third year and above were permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade. Hermione told

Harry that it would do him good to get away from the castle for a bit, and Harry didn't need much persuasion.

"What about Ron, though?" he said. "Don't you want to go with him?"

"Oh. . . well... ." Hermione went slightly pink. "I thought we might meet up with him in the Three Broomsticks. . . ."

"No," said Harry flatly.

"Oh Harry, this is so stupid -"

"I'll come, but I'm not meeting Ron, and I'm wearing my Invisibility Cloak."

"Oh all right then. . ." Hermione snapped, "but I hate talking to you in that cloak, I never know if I'm looking at you or not."

So Harry put on his Invisibility Cloak in the dormitory, went back downstairs, and together he and Hermione set off for Hogsmeade.

Harry felt wonderfully free under the cloak; he watched other students walking past them as they entered the village, most of them sporting Support Cedric Diggory! badges, but no horrible remarks came his way for a change, and nobody was quoting that stupid article.

"People keep looking at me now," said Hermione grumpily as they came out of Honeydukes Sweetshop later, eating large cream-filled chocolates.

"They think I'm talking to myself."

"Don't move your lips so much then."

"Come on, please just take off your cloak for a bit, no one's going to bother you here."

"Oh yeah?" said Harry. "Look behind you."

Rita Skeeter and her photographer friend had just emerged from the Three Broomsticks pub. Talking in low voices, they passed right by Hermione without hooking at her. Harry backed into the wall of Honeydukes to stop Rita Skeeter from hitting him with her crocodile-skin handbag. When they were gone, Harry said, "She's staying in the village. I bet she's coming to watch the first task."

As he said it, his stomach flooded with a wave of molten panic. He didn't mention this; he and Hermione hadn't discussed what was coming in the first task much; he had the feeling she didn't want to think about it.

"She's gone," said Hermione, looking right through Harry toward the end of the street. "Why don't we go and have a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks, it's a bit cold, isn't it? You don't have to talk to Ron!" she added irritably, correctly interpreting his silence.

The Three Broomsticks was packed, mainly with Hogwarts students enjoying their free afternoon, but also with a variety of magical people Harry rarely saw anywhere else. Harry supposed that as Hogsmeade was the only all-wizard village in Britain, it was a bit of a haven for creatures like hags, who were not as adept as wizards at disguising themselves.

It was very hard to move through crowds in the Invisibility Cloak, in case you accidentally trod on someone, which tended to lead to awkward questions. Harry edged slowly toward a spare table in the corner while Hermione went to buy drinks. On his way through the pub, Harry spotted Ron, who was sitting with Fred, George, and Lee Jordan. Resisting the urge to give Ron a good hard poke in the back of the head, he finally reached the table and sat down at it.

Hermione joined him a moment later and slipped him a butterbeer under his cloak.

"I look like such an idiot, sitting here on my own," she muttered. "Lucky I brought something to do."

And she pulled out a notebook in which she had been keeping a record of S.P.E.W. members. Harry saw his and Ron's names at the top of the very short list. It seemed a long time ago that they had sat making up those predictions together, and Hermione had turned up and appointed them secretary and treasurer.

"You know, maybe I should try and get some of the villagers involved in S.P.E.W.," Hermione said thoughtfully, looking around the pub.

"Yeah, right," said Harry. He took a swig of butterbeer under his cloak.

"Hermione, when are you going to give up on this spew stuff?"

"When house-elves have decent wages and working conditions!" she hissed back. "You know, I'm starting to think it's time for more direct action. I wonder how you get into the school kitchens?"

"No idea, ask Fred and George," said Harry.

Hermione lapsed into thoughtful silence, while Harry drank his butterbeer, watching the people in the pub. All of them looked cheerful and relaxed. Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbot were swapping Chocolate Frog cards at a nearby table; both of them sporting Support Cedric Diggory! badges on their cloaks. Right over by the door he saw Cho and a large group of her Ravenclaw friends. She wasn't wearing a Cedric badge though. . . . This cheered up Harry very slightly.

What wouldn't he have given to be one of these people, sitting around laughing and talking, with nothing to worry about but homework? He imagined how it would have felt to be here if his name hadn't come out of the Goblet of Fire. He wouldn't be wearing the Invisibility Cloak, for one thing. Ron would be sitting with him. The three of them would probably be happily imagining what deadly dangerous task the school champions would be facing on Tuesday. He'd have been really hooking forward to it, watching them do whatever it was...cheering on Cedric with everyone else, safe in a seat at the back of the stands...

He wondered how the other champions were feeling. Every time he had seen Cedric lately, he had been surrounded by admirers and looking nervous but excited. Harry glimpsed Fleur Delacour from time to time in the corridors; she looked exactly as she always did, haughty and unruffled. And Krum just sat in the library, poring over books.

Harry thought of Sirius, and the tight, tense knot in his chest seemed to ease slightly. He would be speaking to him in just over twelve hours, for tonight was the night they were meeting at the common room fire - assuming nothing went wrong, as everything else had done lately...

"Look, it's Hagrid!" said Hermione.

The back of Hagrid's enormous shaggy head - he had mercifully abandoned his bunches - emerged over the crowd. Harry wondered why he hadn't spotted him at once, as Hagrid was so large, but standing up carefully, he saw that Hagrid had been leaning low, talking to Professor Moody. Hagrid had his usual enormous tankard in front of him, but Moody was drinking from his hip flask. Madam Rosmerta, the pretty landlady, didn't seem to think much of this; she was looking askance at Moody as she collected glasses from tables around them. Perhaps she thought it was an insult to her mulled mead, but Harry knew better. Moody had told them all during their last Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson that he preferred to prepare his own food and drink at all times, as it was so easy for Dark wizards to poison an unattended cup.

As Harry watched, he saw Hagrid and Moody get up to leave. He waved, then remembered that Hagrid couldn't see him. Moody, however, paused, his magical eye on the corner where Harry was standing. He tapped Hagrid in the small of the back (being unable to reach his shoulder), muttered something to him, and then the pair of them made their way back across the pub toward Harry and Hermione's table.

"All right, Hermione?" said Hagrid loudly.

"Hello," said Hermione, smiling back.

Moody limped around the table and bent down; Harry thought he was reading the S.P.E.W. notebook, until he muttered, "Nice cloak, Potter."

Harry stared at him in amazement. The large chunk missing from Moody's nose was particularly obvious at a few inches' distance. Moody grinned.

"Can your eye - I mean, can you - ?"

"Yeah, it can see through Invisibility Cloaks," Moody said quietly. "And it's come in useful at times, I can tell you."

Hagrid was beaming down at Harry too. Harry knew Hagrid couldn't see him, but Moody had obviously told Hagrid he was there. Hagrid now bent down on the pretext of reading the S.P.E.W. notebook as well, and said in a whisper so low that only Harry could hear it, "Harry, meet me tonight at midnight at me cabin. Wear that cloak."

Straightening up, Hagrid said loudly, "Nice ter see yeh, Hermione," winked, and departed. Moody followed him.

"Why does Hagrid want me to meet him at midnight?" Harry said, very surprised.

"Does he?" said Hermione, looking startled. "I wonder what he's up to? I don't know whether you should go, Harry. . . ." She looked nervously around and hissed, "It might make you late for Sirius."

It was true that going down to Hagrid's at midnight would mean cutting his meeting with Sirius very fine indeed; Hermione suggested sending Hedwig down to Hagrid's to tell him he couldn't go - always assuming she would consent to take the note, of course - Harry, however, thought it better just to be quick at whatever Hagrid wanted him for. He was very curious to know what this might be; Hagrid had never asked Harry to visit him so late at night.

At half past eleven that evening, Harry, who had pretended to go up to bed early, pulled the Invisibility Cloak back over himself and crept back downstairs through the common room. Quite a few people were still in there. The Creevey brothers had managed to get hold of a stack of Support Cedric Diggory! badges and were trying to bewitch them to make them say Support Harry Potter! instead. So far, however, all they had managed to do was get the badges stuck on POTTER STINKS. Harry crept past them to the portrait hole and waited for a minute or so, keeping an eye on his watch. Then Hermione opened the Fat Lady for him from outside as they had planned. He slipped past her with a whispered "Thanks!" and set off through the castle.

The grounds were very dark. Harry walked down the lawn toward the lights shining in Hagrid's cabin. The inside of the enormous Beauxbatons carriage was also lit up; Harry could hear Madame Maxime talking inside it as he knocked on Hagrid's front door.

"You there, Harry?" Hagrid whispered, opening the door and looking around.

"Yeah," said Harry, slipping inside the cabin and pulling the cloak down off his head. "What's up?"

"Got summat ter show yeh," said Hagrid.

There was an air of enormous excitement about Hagrid. He was wearing a flower that resembled an oversized artichoke in his buttonhole. It looked as though he had abandoned the use of axle grease, but he had certainly attempted to comb his hair - Harry could see the comb's broken teeth tangled in it.

"What're you showing me?" Harry said warily, wondering if the skrewts had laid eggs, or Hagrid had managed to buy another giant three-headed dog off a stranger in a pub.

"Come with me, keep quiet, an' keep yerself covered with that cloak," said Hagrid. "We won' take Fang, he won' like it. . . ."

"Listen, Hagrid, I can't stay long. . . . I've got to be back up at the castle by one o'clock -"

But Hagrid wasn't listening; he was opening the cabin door and striding off into the night. Harry hurried to follow and found, to his great surprise, that Hagrid was leading him to the Beauxbatons carriage.

"Hagrid, what - ?"

"Shhh!" said Hagrid, and he knocked three times on the door bearing the crossed golden wands.

Madame Maxime opened it. She was wearing a silk shawl wrapped around her massive shoulders. She smiled when she saw Hagrid.

"Ah, 'Agrid . . . it is time?"

"Bong-sewer," said Hagrid, beaming at her, and holding out a hand to help her down the golden steps.

Madame Maxime closed the door behind her, Hagrid offered her his arm, and they set off around the edge of the paddock containing Madame Maxime's giant winged horses, with Harry, totally bewildered, running to keep up with them. Had Hagrid wanted to show him Madame Maxime? He could see her any old time he wanted... . she wasn't exactly hard to miss....

But it seemed that Madame Maxime was in for the same treat as Harry, because after a while she said playfully, "Wair is it you are taking me, 'Agrid?"

"Yeh'll enjoy this," said Hagrid gruffly, "worth seein', trust me. On'y - don' go tellin' anyone I showed yeh, right? Yeh're not s'posed ter know."

"Of course not," said Madame Maxime, fluttering her long black eyelashes. And still they walked, Harry getting more and more irritated as he jogged along in their wake, checking his watch every now and then. Hagrid had some harebrained scheme in hand, which might make him miss Sirius. If they didn't get there soon, he was going to turn around, go straight back to the castle, and leave Hagrid to enjoy his moonlit stroll with Madame Maxime.

But then - when they had walked so far around the perimeter of the forest that the castle and the lake were out of sight - Harry heard something. Men were shouting up ahead. . . then came a deafening, earsplitting roar.

Hagrid led Madame Maxime around a clump of trees and came to a halt. Harry hurried up alongside them - for a split second, he thought he was seeing bonfires, and men darting around them - and then his mouth fell open.

Dragons.

Four fully grown, enormous, vicious-looking dragons were rearing onto their hind legs inside an enclosure fenced with thick planks of wood, roaring and snorting - torrents of fire were shooting into the dark sky from their open, fanged mouths, fifty feet above the ground on their outstretched necks. There was a silvery-blue one with long, pointed horns, snapping and snarling at the wizards on the ground; a smooth-scaled green one, which was writhing and stamping with all its might; a red one with an odd fringe of fine gold spikes around its face, which was shooting mushroom-shaped fire clouds into the air; and a gigantic black one, more lizard-like than the others, which was nearest to them.

At least thirty wizards, seven or eight to each dragon, were attempting to control them, pulling on the chains connected to heavy leather straps around their necks and legs. Mesmerized, Harry looked up, high above him, and saw the eyes of the black dragon, with vertical pupils like a cat's, bulging with either fear or rage, he couldn't tell which. . . It was making a horrible noise, a yowling, screeching scream.

"Keep back there, Hagrid!" yelled a wizard near the fence, straining on the chain he was holding. "They can shoot fire at a range of twenty feet, you know! I've seen this Horntail do forty!"

"Is'n' it beautiful?" said Hagrid softly.

"It's no good!" yelled another wizard. "Stunning Spells, on the count of three!"

Harry saw each of the dragon keepers pull out his wand.

"Stupefy!" they shouted in unison, and the Stunning Spells shot into the darkness like fiery rockets, bursting in showers of stars on the dragons' scaly hides -

Harry watched the dragon nearest to them teeter dangerously on its back legs; its jaws stretched wide in a silent howl; its nostrils were

suddenly devoid of flame, though still smoking - then, very slowly, it fell. Several tons of sinewy, scaly-black dragon hit the ground with a thud that Harry could have sworn made the trees behind him quake.

The dragon keepers lowered their wands and walked forward to their fallen charges, each of which was the size of a small hill. They hurried to tighten the chains and fasten them securely to iron pegs, which they forced deep into the ground with their wands.

"Wan' a closer look?" Hagrid asked Madame Maxime excitedly. The pair of them moved right up to the fence, and Harry followed. The wizard who had warned Hagrid not to come any closer turned, and Harry realized who it was: Charlie Weasley.

"All right, Hagrid?" he panted, coming over to talk. "They should be okay now - we put them out with a Sleeping Draft on the way here, thought it might be better for them to wake up in the dark and the quiet - but, like you saw, they weren't happy, not happy at all -"

"What breeds you got here, Charlie?" said Hagrid, gazing at the closest dragon, the black one, with something chose to reverence. Its eyes were still just open. Harry could see a strip of gleaming yellow beneath its wrinkled black eyelid.

"This is a Hungarian Horntail," said Charlie. "There's a Common Welsh Green over there, the smaller one -- a Swedish Short-Snout, that blue-gray -- and a Chinese Fireball, that's the red."

Charlie looked around; Madame Maxime was strolling away around the edge of the enclosure, gazing at the stunned dragons.

"I didn't know you were bringing her, Hagrid," Charlie said, frowning. "The champions aren't supposed to know what's coming - she's bound to tell her student, isn't she?"

"Jus' thought she'd like ter see 'em," shrugged Hagrid, still gazing, enraptured, at the dragons.

"Really romantic date, Hagrid," said Charlie, shaking his head.

"Four. . ." said Hagrid, "so it's one fer each o' the champions, is it? What've they gotta do - fight 'em?"

"Just get past them, I think," said Charlie. "We'll be on hand if it gets nasty, Extinguishing Spells at the ready. They wanted nesting mothers, I don't know why. . . but I tell you this, I don't envy the one who gets the Horntail. Vicious thing. Its back end's as dangerous as its front, look."

Charlie pointed toward the Horntail's tail, and Harry saw long, bronze-colored spikes protruding along it every few inches.

Five of Charlie's fellow keepers staggered up to the Horntail at that moment, carrying a clutch of huge granite-gray eggs between them in a blanket. They placed them carefully at the Horntail's side. Hagrid let out a moan of longing.

"I've got them counted, Hagrid," said Charlie sternly. Then he said, "How's Harry?"

"Fine," said Hagrid. He was still gazing at the eggs.

"Just hope he's still fine after he's faced this lot," said Charlie grimly, looking out over the dragons' enclosure. "I didn't dare tell Mum what he's got to do for the first task; she's already having kittens about him. . . ." Charlie imitated his mother's anxious voice. "How could they let him enter that tournament, he's much too young! I thought they were all safe, I thought there was going to be an age limit!" She was in floods after that Daily Prophet article about him. 'He still cries about his parents! Oh bless him, I never knew!"

Harry had had enough. Trusting to the fact that Hagrid wouldn't miss him, with the attractions of four dragons and Madame Maxime to occupy him, he turned silently and began to walk away, back to the castle.

He didn't know whether he was glad he'd seen what was coming or not. Perhaps this way was better. The first shock was over now. Maybe if he'd seen the dragons for the first time on Tuesday, he would have passed

out cold in front of the whole school. . . but maybe he would anyway. . . . He was going to be armed with his wand - which, just now, felt like nothing more than a narrow strip of wood -- against a fifty-foot-high, scaly, spike-ridden, fire-breathing dragon. And he had to get past it. With everyone watching. How?

Harry sped up, skirting the edge of the forest; he had just under fifteen minutes to get back to the fireside and talk to Sirius, and he couldn't remember, ever, wanting to talk to someone more than he did right now -- when, without warning, he ran into something very solid.

Harry fell backward, his glasses askew, clutching the cloak around him. A voice nearby said, "Ouch! Who's there?"

Harry hastily checked that the cloak was covering him and lay very still, staring up at the dark outline of the wizard he had hit. He recognized the goatee. . . it was Karkaroff.

"Who's there?" said Karkaroff again, very suspiciously, looking around in the darkness. Harry remained still and silent. After a minute or so, Karkaroff seemed to decide that he had hit some sort of animal; he was looking around at waist height, as though expecting to see a dog. Then he crept back under the cover of the trees and started to edge forward toward the place where the dragons were.

Very slowly and very carefully, Harry got to his feet and set off again as fast as he could without making too much noise, hurrying through the darkness back toward Hogwarts.

He had no doubt whatsoever what Karkaroff was up to. He had sneaked off his ship to try and find out what the first task was going to be. He might even have spotted Hagrid and Madame Maxime heading off around the forest together - they were hardly difficult to spot at a distance. . . and now all Karkaroff had to do was follow the sound of voices, and he, like Madame Maxime, would know what was in store for the champions.

By the looks of it, the only champion who would be facing the unknown on Tuesday was Cedric.

Harry reached the castle, slipped in through the front doors, and began to climb the marble stairs; he was very out of breath, but he didn't dare slow down. . . . He had less than five minutes to get up to the fire.

"Balderdash!" he gasped at the Fat Lady, who was snoozing in her frame in front of the portrait hole.

"If you say so," she muttered sleepily, without opening her eyes, and the picture swung forward to admit him. Harry climbed inside. The common room was deserted, and, judging by the fact that it smelled quite normal, Hermione had not needed to set off any Dungbombs to ensure that he and Sirius got privacy.

Harry pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and threw himself into an armchair in front of the fire. The room was in semidarkness; the flames were the only source of light. Nearby, on a table, the Support Cedric Diggory! badges the Creeveys had been trying to improve were glinting in the firelight. They now read POTTER REALLY STINKS. Harry looked back into the flames, and jumped.

Sirius's head was sitting in the fire. If Harry hadn't seen Mr. Diggory do exactly this back in the Weasleys' kitchen, it would have scared him out of his wits. Instead, his face breaking into the first smile he had worn for days, he scrambled out of his chair, crouched down by the hearth, and said, "Sirius - how're you doing?"

Sirius looked different from Harry's memory of him. When they had said good-bye, Sirius's face had been gaunt and sunken, surrounded by a quantity of long, black, matted hair - but the hair was short and clean now, Sirius's face was fuller, and he looked younger, much more like the only photograph Harry had of him, which had been taken at the Potters' wedding.

"Never mind me, how are you?" said Sirius seriously.

"I'm -" For a second, Harry tried to say "fine" - but he couldn't do it. Before he could stop himself, he was talking more than he'd talked in days - about how no one believed he hadn't entered the tournament of his own free will, how Rita Skeeter had lied about him in the Daily Prophet, how he couldn't walk down a corridor without being sneered at - and about Ron, Ron not believing him, Ron's jealousy...

". . . and now Hagrid's just shown me what's coming in the first task, and it's dragons, Sirius, and I'm a goner," he finished desperately. Sirius looked at him, eyes full of concern, eyes that had not yet lost the look that Azkaban had given them - that deadened, haunted look. He had let Harry talk himself into silence without interruption, but now he said, "Dragons we can deal with, Harry, but we'll get to that in a minute - I haven't got long here. . . I've broken into a wizarding house to use the fire, but they could be back at any time. There are things I need to warn you about."

"What?" said Harry, feeling his spirits slip a further few notches. . . . Surely there could be nothing worse than dragons coming?

"Karkaroff," said Sirius. "Harry, he was a Death Eater. You know what Death Eaters are, don't you?"

"Yes - he - what?"

"He was caught, he was in Azkaban with me, but he got released. I'd bet everything that's why Dumbledore wanted an Auror at Hogwarts this year - to keep an eye on him. Moody caught Karkaroff. Put him into Azkaban in the first place."

"Karkaroff got released?" Harry said slowly - his brain seemed to be struggling to absorb yet another piece of shocking information. "Why did they release him?"

"He did a deal with the Ministry of Magic," said Sirius bitterly. "He said he'd seen the error of his ways, and then he named names. . . he put a load of other people into Azkaban in his place. . . . He's not very popular in there, I can tell you. And since he got out, from what I can tell, he's been teaching the Dark Arts to every student who passes through that school of his. So watch out for the Durmstrang champion as well."

"Okay," said Harry slowly. "But. . . are you saying Karkaroff put my name in the goblet? Because if he did, he's a really good actor. He seemed furious about it. He wanted to stop me from competing."

"We know he's a good actor," said Sirius, "because he convinced the Ministry of Magic to set him free, didn't he? Now, I've been keeping an eye on the Daily Prophet, Harry.."

"- you and the rest of the world," said Harry bitterly.

"- and reading between the lines of that Skeeter woman's article last month, Moody was attacked the night before he started at Hogwarts. Yes, I know she says it was another false alarm," Sirius said hastily, seeing Harry about to speak, "but I don't think so, somehow. I think someone tried to stop him from getting to Hogwarts. I think someone knew their job would be a lot more difficult with him around. And no one's going to look into it too closely; Mad-Eye's heard intruders a bit too often. But that doesn't mean he can't still spot the real thing. Moody was the best Auror the Ministry ever had."

"So. . . what are you saying?" said Harry slowly. "Karkaroff's trying to kill me? But - why?"

Sirius hesitated.

"I've been hearing some very strange things," he said slowly. "The Death Eaters seem to be a bit more active than usual lately. They showed themselves at the Quidditch World Cup, didn't they? Someone set off the Dark Mark. . . and then - did you hear about that Ministry of Magic witch who's gone missing?"

"Bertha Jorkins?" said Harry.

"Exactly. . . she disappeared in Albania, and that's definitely where Voldemort was rumored to be last. . . and she would have known the Triwizard Tournament was coming up, wouldn't she?"

"Yeah, but. . . it's not very likely she'd have walked straight into Voldemort, is it?" said Harry.

"Listen, I knew Bertha Jorkins," said Sirius grimly. "She was at Hogwarts when I was, a few years above your dad and me. And she was an idiot. Very nosy, but no brains, none at all. It's not a good combination, Harry. I'd say she'd be very easy to lure into a trap."

"So. . . so Voldemort could have found out about the tournament?" said Harry. "Is that what you mean? You think Karkaroff might be here on his orders?"

"I don't know," said Sirius slowly, "I just don't know...Karkaroff doesn't strike me as the type who'd go back to Voldemort unless he knew Voldemort was powerful enough to protect him. But whoever put your name in that goblet did it for a reason, and I can't help thinking the tournament would be a very good way to attack you and make it look like an accident."

"Looks like a really good plan from where I'm standing," said Harry grinning bleakly. "They'll just have to stand back and let the dragons do their stuff."

"Right - these dragons," said Sirius, speaking very quickly now.

"There's a way, Harry. Don't be tempted to try a Stunning Spell - dragons are strong and too powerfully magical to be knocked out by a single Stunner, you need about half a dozen wizards at a time to overcome a dragon -"

"Yeah, I know, I just saw," said Harry.

"But you can do it alone," said Sirius. "There is away, and a simple spell's all you need. Just -"

But Harry held up a hand to silence him, his heart suddenly pounding as though it would burst. He could hear footsteps coming down the spiral staircase behind him.

"Go!" he hissed at Sirius. " Go! There's someone coming!"

Harry scrambled to his feet, hiding the fire - if someone saw Sirius's face within the walls of Hogwarts, they would raise an almighty uproar - the Ministry would get dragged in - he, Harry, would be questioned about Sirius's whereabouts -

Harry heard a tiny pop! in the fire behind him and knew Sirius had gone. He watched the bottom of the spiral staircase. Who had decided to go for a stroll at one o'clock in the morning, and stopped Sirius from telling him how to get past a dragon?

It was Ron. Dressed in his maroon paisley pajamas, Ron stopped dead facing Harry across the room, and looked around.

"Who were you talking to?" he said.

"What's that got to do with you?" Harry snarled. "What are you doing down here at this time of night?"

"I just wondered where you -" Ron broke off, shrugging. "Nothing. I'm going back to bed."

"Just thought you'd come nosing around, did you?" Harry shouted. He knew that Ron had no idea what he'd walked in on, knew he hadn't done it on purpose, but he didn't care - at this moment he hated everything about Ron, right down to the several inches of bare ankle showing beneath his pajama trousers.

"Sorry about that," said Ron, his face reddening with anger. "Should've realized you didn't want to be disturbed. I'll let you get on with practicing for your next interview in peace."

Harry seized one of the POTTER REALLY STINKS badges off the table and chucked it, as hard as he could, across the room. It hit Ron on the forehead and bounced off.

"There you go," Harry said. "Something for you to wear on Tuesday. You might even have a scar now, if you're lucky. . . . That's what you want, isn't it?"

He strode across the room toward the stairs; he half expected Ron to stop him, he would even have liked Ron to throw a punch at him, but Ron just stood there in his too-small pajamas, and Harry, having stormed upstairs, lay awake in bed fuming for a long time afterward and didn't hear him come up to bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY - THE FIRST TASK

Harry got up on Sunday morning and dressed so inattentively that it was a while before he realized he was trying to pull his hat onto his foot instead of his sock. When he'd finally got all his clothes on the right parts of his body, he hurried off to find Hermione, locating her at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, where she was eating breakfast with Ginny. Feeling too queasy to eat, Harry waited until Hermione had swallowed her last spoonful of porridge, then dragged her out onto the grounds. There, he told her all about the dragons, and about everything Sirius had said, while they took another long walk around the lake.

Alarmed as she was by Sirius's warnings about Karkaroff, Hermione still thought that the dragons were the more pressing problem. "Let's just try and keep you alive until Tuesday evening," she said desperately, "and then we can worry about Karkaroff."

They walked three times around the lake, trying all the way to think of a simple spell that would subdue a dragon. Nothing whatsoever occurred to them, so they retired to the library instead. Here, Harry pulled down every book he could find on dragons, and both of them set to work searching through the large pile.

"Talon-clipping by charms. . . treating scale-rot. . . ' This is no good, this is for nutters like Hagrid who want to keep them healthy. . . . "Dragons are extremely difficult to slay, owing to the ancient magic that imbues their thick hides, which none but the most powerful spells can penetrate. . . ' But Sirius said a simple one would do it. . . .

"Let's try some simple spellbooks, then," said Harry, throwing aside *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*.

He returned to the table with a pile of spellbooks, set them down, and began to flick through each in turn, Hermione whispering nonstop at his elbow.

"Well, there are Switching Spells. . . but what's the point of Switching it? Unless you swapped its fangs for wine-gums or something that would make it less dangerous. . . . The trouble is, like that book said, not much is going to get through a dragon's hide. . . . I'd say Transfigure it, but something that big, you really haven't got a hope, I doubt even Professor McGonagall. . . unless you're supposed to put the spell on yourself? Maybe to give yourself extra powers? But they're not simple spells, I mean, we haven't done any of those in class, I only know about them because I've been doing O.W.L. practice papers. . . ."

"Hermione," Harry said, through gritted teeth, "will you shut up for a bit, please? I'm trying to concentrate."

But all that happened, when Hermione fell silent, was that Harry's brain filled with a sort of blank buzzing, which didn't seem to allow room for concentration. He stared hopelessly down the index of Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed. Instant scalping. . . but dragons had no hair. . . pepper breath. . . that would probably increase a dragon's firepower. . . horn tongue. . . just what he needed, to give it an extra weapon...

"Oh no, he's back again, why can't he read on his stupid ship?" said Hermione irritably as Viktor Krum slouched in, cast a surly look over at the pair of them, and settled himself in a distant corner with a pile of

books. "Come on, Harry, we'll go back to the common room. . . his fan club'll be here in a moment, twittering away. . ."

And sure enough, as they left the library, a gang of girls tiptoed past them, one of them wearing a Bulgaria scarf tied around her waist.

Harry barely slept that night. When he awoke on Monday morning, he seriously considered for the first time ever just running away from Hogwarts. But as he looked around the Great Hall at breakfast time, and thought about what leaving the castle would mean, he knew he couldn't do it. It was the only place he had ever been happy. . . well, he supposed he must have been happy with his parents too, but he couldn't remember that.

Somehow, the knowledge that he would rather be here and facing a dragon than back on Privet Drive with Dudley was good to know; it made him feel slightly calmer. He finished his bacon with difficulty (his throat wasn't working too well), and as he and Hermione got up, he saw Cedric Diggory leaving the Hufflepuff table.

Cedric still didn't know about the dragons. . . the only champion who didn't, if Harry was right in thinking that Maxime and Karkaroff would have told Fleur and Krum....

"Hermione, I'll see you in the greenhouses," Harry said, coming to his decision as he watched Cedric leaving the Hall. "Go on, I'll catch you up."

"Harry, you'll be late, the bell's about to ring -"

"I'll catch you up, okay?"

By the time Harry reached the bottom of the marble staircase, Cedric was at the top. He was with a load of sixth-year friends. Harry didn't want to talk to Cedric in front of them; they were among those who had been quoting Rita Skeeter's article at him every time he went near them. He followed Cedric at a distance and saw that he was heading toward the Charms corridor. This gave Harry an idea. Pausing at a distance from them, he pulled out his wand, and took careful aim.

"Diffindo!"

Cedric's bag split. Parchment, quills, and books spilled out of it onto the floor. Several bottles of ink smashed.

"Don't bother," said Cedric in an exasperated voice as his friends bent down to help him. "Tell Flitwick I'm coming, go on. . .

This was exactly what Harry had been hoping for. He slipped his wand back into his robes, waited until Cedric's friends had disappeared into their classroom, and hurried up the corridor, which was now empty of everyone but himself and Cedric.

"Hi," said Cedric, picking up a copy of *A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration* that was now splattered with ink. "My bag just split. . . brand-new and all. . ."

"Cedric," said Harry, "the first task is dragons."

"What?" said Cedric, looking up.

"Dragons," said Harry, speaking quickly, in case Professor Flitwick came out to see where Cedric had got to. "They've got four, one for each of us, and we've got to get past them."

Cedric stared at him. Harry saw some of the panic he'd been feeling since Saturday night flickering in Cedric's gray eyes.

"Are you sure?" Cedric said in a hushed voice.

"Dead sure," said Harry. "I've seen them."

"But how did you find out? We're not supposed to know. . . ."

"Never mind," said Harry quickly - he knew Hagrid would be in trouble if he told the truth. "But I'm not the only one who knows. Fleur and Krum will know by now - Maxime and Karkaroff both saw the dragons too."

Cedric straightened up, his arms full of inky quills, parchment, and books, his ripped bag dangling off one shoulder. He stared at Harry, and there was a puzzled, almost suspicious look in his eyes.

"Why are you telling me?" he asked.

Harry looked at him in disbelief. He was sure Cedric wouldn't have asked that if he had seen the dragons himself. Harry wouldn't have let his worst enemy face those monsters unprepared - well, perhaps Malfoy or Snape...

"It's just . . . fair, isn't it?" he said to Cedric. "We all know now. . . we're on an even footing, aren't we?"

Cedric was still hooking at him in a slightly suspicious way when Harry heard a familiar clunking noise behind him. He turned around and saw Mad-Eye Moody emerging from a nearby classroom.

"Come with me, Potter," he growled. "Diggory, off you go."

Harry stared apprehensively at Moody. Had he overheard them?

"Er - Professor, I'm supposed to be in Herbology -"

"Never mind that, Potter. In my office, please..."

Harry followed him, wondering what was going to happen to him now. What if Moody wanted to know how he'd found out about the dragons? Would Moody go to Dumbledore and tell on Hagrid, or just turn Harry into a ferret? Well, it might be easier to get past a dragon if he were a ferret, Harry thought dully, he'd be smaller, much less easy to see from a height of fifty feet..

He followed Moody into his office. Moody closed the door behind them and turned to look at Harry, his magical eye fixed upon him as well as the normal one.

"That was a very decent thing you just did, Potter," Moody said quietly. Harry didn't know what to say; this wasn't the reaction he had expected at all.

"Sit down," said Moody, and Harry sat, looking around.

He had visited this office under two of its previous occupants. In Professor Lockhart's day, the walls had been plastered with beaming, winking pictures of Professor Lockhart himself. When Lupin had lived here, you were more likely to come across a specimen of some fascinating new Dark creature he had procured for them to study in class. Now, however, the office was full of a number of exceptionally odd objects that Harry supposed Moody had used in the days when he had been an Auror. On his desk stood what looked like a large, cracked, glass spinning top; Harry recognized it at once as a Sneakoscope, because he owned one himself, though it was much smaller than Moody's. In the corner on a small table stood an object that looked something like an extra-squiggly, golden television aerial. It was humming slightly. What appeared to be a mirror hung opposite Harry on the wall, but it was not reflecting the room. Shadowy figures were moving around inside it, none of them clearly in focus.

"Like my Dark Detectors, do you?" said Moody, who was watching Harry closely.

"What's that?" Harry asked, pointing at the squiggly golden aerial.

"Secrecy Sensor. Vibrates when it detects concealment and lies... no use here, of course, too much interference - students in every direction lying about why they haven't done their homework. Been humming ever since I got here. I had to disable my Sneakoscope because it wouldn't stop whistling. It's extra-sensitive, picks up stuff about a mile around. Of course, it could be picking up more than kid stuff," he added in a growl.

"And what's the mirror for?"

"Oh that's my Foe-Glass. See them out there, skulking around? I'm not really in trouble until I see the whites of their eyes. That's when I open my trunk."

He let out a short, harsh laugh, and pointed to the large trunk under the window. It had seven keyholes in a row. Harry wondered what was in there, until Moody's next question brought him sharply back to earth.

"So. . . found out about the dragons, have you?"

Harry hesitated. He'd been afraid of this - but he hadn't told Cedric, and he certainly wasn't going to tell Moody, that Hagrid had broken the rules.

"It's all right," said Moody, sitting down and stretching out his wooden leg with a groan. "Cheating's a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and always has been."

"I didn't cheat," said Harry sharply. "It was - a sort of accident that I found out."

Moody grinned. "I wasn't accusing you, laddie. I've been telling Dumbledore from the start, he can be as high-minded as he likes, but you can bet old Karkaroff and Maxime won't be. They'll have told their champions everything they can. They want to win. They want to beat Dumbledore. They'd like to prove he's only human."

Moody gave another harsh laugh, and his magical eye swiveled around so fast it made Harry feel queasy to watch it.

"So. . . got any ideas how you're going to get past your dragon yet?" said Moody.

"No," said Harry.

"Well, I'm not going to tell you," said Moody gruffly. "I don't show favoritism, me. I'm just going to give you some good, general advice. And the first bit is - play to your strengths."

"I haven't got any," said Harry, before he could stop himself. "Excuse me," growled Moody, "you've got strengths if I say you've got them. Think now. What are you best at?"

Harry tried to concentrate. What was he best at? Well, that was easy, really --

"Quidditch," he said dully, "and a fat lot of help -"

"That's right," said Moody, staring at him very hard, his magical eye barely moving at all. "You're a damn good flier from what I've heard."

"Yeah, but. . ." Harry stared at him. "I'm not allowed a broom, I've only got my wand..."

"My second piece of general advice," said Moody loudly, interrupting him, "is to use a nice, simple spell that will enable you to get what you need."

Harry looked at him blankly. What did he need?

"Come on, boy. . ." whispered Moody. "Put them together... it's not that difficult..."

And it clicked. He was best at flying. He needed to pass the dragon in the air. For that, he needed his Firebolt. And for his Fire-bolt, he needed -

"Hermione," Harry whispered, when he had sped into greenhouse three minutes later, uttering a hurried apology to Professor Sprout as he passed her. "Hermione - I need you to help me."

"What d'you think I've been trying to do, Harry?" she whispered back, her eyes round with anxiety over the top of the quivering Flutterby Bush she was pruning.

"Hermione, I need to learn how to do a Summoning Charm properly by tomorrow afternoon."

And so they practiced. They didn't have lunch, but headed for a free classroom, where Harry tried with all his might to make various objects fly across the room toward him. He was still having problems. The books and quills kept losing heart halfway across the room and dropping like stones to the floor.

"Concentrate, Harry, concentrate. . . ."

"What d'you think I'm trying to do?" said Harry angrily. "A great big dragon keeps popping up in my head for some reason...Okay, try again. . . ."

He wanted to skip Divination to keep practicing, but Hermione refused point-blank to skive off Arithmancy, and there was no point in staying without her. He therefore had to endure over an hour of Professor Trelawney, who spent half the lesson telling everyone that the position of Mars with relation to Saturn at that moment meant that people born in July were in great danger of sudden, violent deaths.

"Well, that's good," said Harry loudly, his temper getting the better of him, "just as long as it's not drawn-out. I don't want to suffer."

Ron looked for a moment as though he was going to laugh; he certainly caught Harry's eye for the first time in days, but Harry was still feeling too resentful toward Ron to care. He spent the rest of the lesson trying to attract small objects toward him under the table with his wand. He managed to make a fly zoom straight into his hand, though he wasn't entirely sure that was his prowess at Summoning Charms - perhaps the fly was just stupid.

He forced down some dinner after Divination, then returned to the empty classroom with Hermione, using the Invisibility Cloak to avoid the teachers. They kept practicing until past midnight. They would have stayed longer, but Peeves turned up and, pretending to think that Harry wanted things thrown at him, started chucking chairs across the room.

Harry and Hermione left in a hurry before the noise attracted Filch, and went back to the Gryffindor common room, which was now mercifully empty. At two o'clock in the morning, Harry stood near the fireplace, surrounded by heaps of objects: books, quills, several upturned chairs, an old set of Gobstones, and Neville's toad, Trevor. Only in the last hour had Harry really got the hang of the Summoning Charm.

"That's better, Harry, that's loads better," Hermione said, looking exhausted but very pleased.

"Well, now we know what to do next time I can't manage a spell," Harry said, throwing a rune dictionary back to Hermione, so he could try again, "threaten me with a dragon. Right..." He raised his wand once more.

"Accio Dictionary!"

The heavy book soared out of Hermione's hand, flew across the room, and Harry caught it.

"Harry, I really think you've got it!" said Hermione delightedly.

"Just as long as it works tomorrow," Harry said. "The Firebolt's going to be much farther away than the stuff in here, it's going to be in the castle, and I'm going to be out there on the grounds. . . ."

"That doesn't matter," said Hermione firmly. "Just as long as you're concentrating really, really hard on it, it'll come. Harry, we'd better get some sleep... you're going to need it."

Harry had been focusing so hard on learning the Summoning Charm that evening that some of his blind panic had heft him. It returned in full measure, however, on the following morning. The atmosphere in the school was one of great tension and excitement. Lessons were to stop at midday, giving all the students time to get down to the dragons' enclosure - though of course, they didn't yet know what they would find there.

Harry felt oddly separate from everyone around him, whether they were wishing him good luck or hissing "We'll have a box of tissues ready, Potter" as he passed. It was a state of nervousness so advanced that he wondered whether he mightn't just lose his head when they tried to lead him out to his dragon, and start trying to curse everyone in sight. Time was behaving in a more peculiar fashion than ever, rushing past in great dollops, so that one moment he seemed to be sitting down in his first lesson, History of Magic, and the next, walking into lunch... and then (where had the morning gone? the last of the dragon-free hours?), Professor McGonagall was hurrying over to him in the Great Hall. Lots of people were watching.

"Potter, the champions have to come down onto the grounds now. . . . You have to get ready for your first task."

"Okay," said Harry, standing up, his fork falling onto his plate with a clatter.

"Good luck, Harry," Hermione whispered. "You'll be fine!"

"Yeah," said Harry in a voice that was most unlike his own.

He heft the Great Hall with Professor McGonagall. She didn't seem herself either; in fact, she looked nearly as anxious as Hermione. As she walked him down the stone steps and out into the cold November afternoon, she put her hand on his shoulder.

"Now, don't panic," she said, "just keep a cool head. . . . We've got wizards standing by to control the situation if it gets out of hand. . . . The main thing is just to do your best, and nobody will think any the worse of you. . . . Are you all right?"

"Yes," Harry heard himself say. "Yes, I'm fine."

She was leading him toward the place where the dragons were, around the edge of the forest, but when they approached the clump of trees behind which the enclosure would be clearly visible, Harry saw that a tent had been erected, its entrance facing them, screening the dragons from view.

"You're to go in here with the other champions," said Professor McGonagall, in a rather shaky sort of voice, "and wait for your turn, Potter. Mr. Bagman is in there. . . he'll be telling you the - the procedure. . . . Good luck."

"Thanks," said Harry, in a flat, distant voice. She left him at the entrance of the tent. Harry went inside.

Fleur Delacour was sitting in a corner on a low wooden stool. She didn't look nearly as composed as usual, but rather pale and clammy. Viktor Krum looked even surlier than usual, which Harry supposed was his way of showing nerves. Cedric was pacing up and down. When Harry entered, Cedric gave him a small smile, which Harry returned, feeling the muscles in his face working rather hard, as though they had forgotten how to do it.

"Harry! Good-o!" said Bagman happily, looking around at him. "Come in, come in, make yourself at home!"

Bagman looked somehow like a slightly overblown cartoon figure, standing amid all the pale-faced champions. He was wearing his old Wasp robes again.

"Well, now we're all here - time to fill you in!" said Bagman brightly. "When the audience has assembled, I'm going to be offering each of you this bag" - he held up a small sack of purple silk and shook it at them - "from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are different - er - varieties, you see. And I have to tell you something else too. . . ah, yes... your task is to collect the golden egg!"

Harry glanced around. Cedric had nodded once, to show that he understood Bagman's words, and then started pacing around the tent again; he looked slightly green. Fleur Delacour and Krum hadn't reacted at all. Perhaps they thought they might be sick if they opened their mouths; that was certainly how Harry felt. But they, at least, had volunteered for this.

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And in no time at all, hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of feet could be heard passing the tent, their owners talking excitedly, laughing, joking. . . . Harry felt as separate from the crowd as though they were a different species. And then - it seemed like about a second later to Harry - Bagman was opening the neck of the purple silk sack.

"Ladies first," he said, offering it to Fleur Delacour.

She put a shaking hand inside the bag and drew out a tiny, perfect model of a dragon - a Welsh Green. It had the number two around its neck. And Harry knew, by the fact that Fleur showed no sign of surprise, but rather

a determined resignation, that he had been right: Madame Maxime had told her what was coming.

The same held true for Krum. He pulled out the scarlet Chinese Fireball. It had a number three around its neck. He didn't even blink, just sat back down and stared at the ground.

Cedric put his hand into the bag, and out came the blueish-gray Swedish Short-Snout, the number one tied around its neck. Knowing what was left, Harry put his hand into the silk bag and pulled out the Hungarian Horntail, and the number four. It stretched its wings as he looked down at it, and bared its minuscule fangs.

"Well, there you are!" said Bagman. "You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which you are to take on the dragons, do you see? Now, I'm going to have to leave you in a moment, because I'm commentating. Mr. Diggory, you're first, just go out into the enclosure when you hear a whistle, all right? Now. . . Harry. . . could I have a quick word? Outside?"

"Er. . . yes," said Harry blankly, and he got up and went out of the tent with Bagman, who walked him a short distance away, into the trees, and then turned to him with a fatherly expression on his face.

"Feeling all right, Harry? Anything I can get you?"

"What?" said Harry. "I - no, nothing."

"Got a plan?" said Bagman, lowering his voice conspiratorially.

"Because I don't mind sharing a few pointers, if you'd like them, you know. I mean," Bagman continued, lowering his voice still further,

"you're the underdog here, Harry. . . . Anything I can do to help. . ."

"No," said Harry so quickly he knew he had sounded rude, "no - I - I know what I'm going to do, thanks."

"Nobody would know, Harry," said Bagman, winking at him.

"No, I'm fine," said Harry, wondering why he kept telling people this, and wondering whether he had ever been less fine. "I've got a plan worked out, I -"

A whistle had blown somewhere.

"Good lord, I've got to run!" said Bagman in alarm, and he hurried off. Harry walked back to the tent and saw Cedric emerging from it, greener than ever. Harry tried to wish him luck as he walked past, but all that came out of his mouth was a sort of hoarse grunt.

Harry went back inside to Fleur and Krum. Seconds later, they heard the roar of the crowd, which meant Cedric had entered the enclosure and was now face-to-face with the living counterpart of his model.

It was worse than Harry could ever have imagined, sitting there and listening. The crowd screamed. . . yelled. . . gasped like a single many-headed entity, as Cedric did whatever he was doing to get past the Swedish Short-Snout. Krum was still staring at the ground. Fleur had now taken to retracing Cedric's steps, around and around the tent. And Bagman's commentary made everything much, much worse. . . . Horrible pictures formed in Harry's mind as he heard: "Oooh, narrow miss there, very narrow". . . "He's taking risks, this one!". . . "Clever move - pity it didn't work!"

And then, after about fifteen minutes, Harry heard the deafening roar that could mean only one thing: Cedric had gotten past his dragon and captured the golden egg.

"Very good indeed!" Bagman was shouting. "And now the marks from the judges!"

But he didn't shout out the marks; Harry supposed the judges were holding them up and showing them to the crowd.

"One down, three to go!" Bagman yelled as the whistle blew again. "Miss Delacour, if you please!"

Fleur was trembling from head to foot; Harry felt more warmly toward her than he had done so far as she hefted the tent with her head held high and

her hand clutching her wand. He and Krum were left alone, at opposite sides of the tent, avoiding each other's gaze.

The same process started again. . . ."Oh I'm not sure that was wise!" they could hear Bagman shouting gleefully. "Oh. . . nearly! Careful now. . . good lord, I thought she'd had it then!"

Ten minutes later, Harry heard the crowd erupt into applause once more. . . Fleur must have been successful too. A pause, while Fleur's marks were being shown. . . more clapping. . . then, for the third time, the whistle.

"And here comes Mr. Krum!" cried Bagman, and Krum slouched out, leaving Harry quite alone.

He felt much more aware of his body than usual; very aware of the way his heart was pumping fast, and his fingers tingling with fear. . . yet at the same time, he seemed to be outside himself, seeing the walls of the tent, and hearing the crowd, as though from far away.

"Very daring!" Bagman was yelling, and Harry heard the Chinese Fireball emit a horrible, roaring shriek, while the crowd drew its collective breath. "That's some nerve he's showing - and - yes, he's got the egg!" Applause shattered the wintery air like breaking glass; Krum had finished - it would be Harry's turn any moment.

He stood up, noticing dimly that his legs seemed to be made of marshmallow. He waited. And then he heard the whistle blow. He walked out through the entrance of the tent, the panic rising into a crescendo inside him. And now he was walking past the trees, through a gap in the enclosure fence.

He saw everything in front of him as though it was a very highly colored dream. There were hundreds and hundreds of faces staring down at him from stands that had been magicked there since he'd last stood on this spot. And there was the Horntail, at the other end of the enclosure, crouched low over her clutch of eggs, her wings half-furled, her evil, yellow eyes upon him, a monstrous, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, heaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground. The crowd was making a great deal of noise, but whether friendly or not, Harry didn't know or care. It was time to do what he had to do. . . to focus his mind, entirely and absolutely, upon the thing that was his only chance.

He raised his wand.

"Accio Firebolt!" he shouted.

Harry waited, every fiber of him hoping, praying. . . . If it hadn't worked. . . if it wasn't coming. . . He seemed to be looking at everything around him through some sort of shimmering, transparent barrier, like a heat haze, which made the enclosure and the hundreds of faces around him swim strangely....

And then he heard it, speeding through the air behind him; he turned and saw his Firebolt hurtling toward him around the edge of the woods, soaring into the enclosure, and stopping dead in midair beside him, waiting for him to mount. The crowd was making even more noise. . . .

Bagman was shouting something. . . but Harry's ears were not working properly anymore. . . listening wasn't important....

He swung his leg over the broom and kicked off from the ground. And a second later, something miraculous happened....

As he soared upward, as the wind rushed through his hair, as the crowd's faces became mere flesh-colored pinpricks below, and the Horntail shrank to the size of a dog, he realized that he had left not only the ground behind, but also his fear. . . . He was back where he belonged....

This was just another Quidditch match, that was all. . . just another Quidditch match, and that Horntail was just another ugly opposing team. He looked down at the clutch of eggs and spotted the gold one, gleaming against its cement-colored fellows, residing safely between the dragon's

front legs. "Okay," Harry told himself, "diversionary tactics. . . let's go. . ."

He dived. The Horntail's head followed him; he knew what it was going to do and pulled out of the dive just in time; a jet of fire had been released exactly where he would have been had he not swerved away. . . but Harry didn't care. . . that was no more than dodging a Bludger.

"Great Scott, he can fly!" yelled Bagman as the crowd shrieked and gasped. "Are you watching this, Mr. Krum?"

Harry soared higher in a circle; the Horntail was still following his progress; its head revolving on its long neck - if he kept this up, it would be nicely dizzy - but better not push it too long, or it would be breathing fire again -

Harry plummeted just as the Horntail opened its mouth, but this time he was less lucky - he missed the flames, but the tail came whipping up to meet him instead, and as he swerved to the left, one of the long spikes grazed his shoulder, ripping his robes --

He could feel it stinging, he could hear screaming and groans from the crowd, but the cut didn't seem to be deep. . . . Now he zoomed around the back of the Horntail, and a possibility occurred to him....

The Horntail didn't seem to want to take off, she was too protective of her eggs. Though she writhed and twisted, furling and unfurling her wings and keeping those fearsome yellow eyes on Harry, she was afraid to move too far from them. . . but he had to persuade her to do it, or he'd never get near them. . . . The trick was to do it carefully, gradually....

He began to fly, first this way, then the other, not near enough to make her breathe fire to stave him off, but still posing a sufficient threat to ensure she kept her eyes on him. Her head swayed this way and that, watching him out of those vertical pupils, her fangs bared...

He flew higher. The Horntail's head rose with him, her neck now stretched to its fullest extent, still swaying, like a snake before its charmer. . .

Harry rose a few more feet, and she let out a roar of exasperation. He was like a fly to her, a fly she was longing to swat; her tail thrashed again, but he was too high to reach now. . . . She shot fire into the air, which he dodged. . . . Her jaws opened wide....

"Come on," Harry hissed, swerving tantalizingly above her, "come on, come and get me. . . up you get now. ."

And then she reared, spreading her great, black, leathery wings at last, as wide as those of a small airplane - and Harry dived. Before the dragon knew what he had done, or where he had disappeared to, he was speeding toward the ground as fast as he could go, toward the eggs now unprotected by her clawed front legs - he had taken his hands off his Firebolt - he had seized the golden egg -

And with a huge spurt of speed, he was off, he was soaring out over the stands, the heavy egg safely under his uninjured arm, and it was as though somebody had just turned the volume back up - for the first time, he became properly aware of the noise of the crowd, which was screaming and applauding as loudly as the Irish supporters at the World Cup -

"Look at that!" Bagman was yelling. "Will you look at that! Our youngest champion is quickest to get his egg! Well, this is going to shorten the odds on Mr. Potter!"

Harry saw the dragon keepers rushing forward to subdue the Horntail, and, over at the entrance to the enclosure, Professor McGonagall, Professor Moody, and Hagrid hurrying to meet him, all of them waving him toward them, their smiles evident even from this distance. He flew back over the stands, the noise of the crowd pounding his eardrums, and came in smoothly to land, his heart lighter than it had been in weeks. . . . He had got through the first task, he had survived.

"That was excellent, Potter!" cried Professor McGonagall as he got off the Firebolt - which from her was extravagant praise. He noticed that her hand shook as she pointed at his shoulder. "You'll need to see Madam Pomfrey before the judges give out your score. . . . Over there, she's had to mop up Diggory already. . . ."

"Yeh did it, Harry!" said Hagrid hoarsely. "Yeh did it! An' agains' the Horntail an' all, an' yeh know Charlie said that was the wors' - "

"Thanks, Hagrid," said Harry loudly, so that Hagrid wouldn't blunder on and reveal that he had shown Harry the dragons beforehand.

Professor Moody looked very pleased too; his magical eye was dancing in its socket.

"Nice and easy does the trick, Potter," he growled.

"Right then, Potter, the first aid tent, please. . ." said Professor McGonagall.

Harry walked out of the enclosure, still panting, and saw Madam Pomfrey standing at the mouth of a second tent, looking worried.

"Dragons!" she said, in a disgusted tone, pulling Harry inside. The tent was divided into cubicles; he could make out Cedric's shadow through the canvas, but Cedric didn't seem to be badly injured; he was sitting up, at least. Madam Pomfrey examined Harry's shoulder, talking furiously all the while. "Last year dementors, this year dragons, what are they going to bring into this school next? You're very lucky. . . this is quite shallow. . . it'll need cleaning before I heal it up, though... ." She cleaned the cut with a dab of some purple liquid that smoked and stung, but then poked his shoulder with her wand, and he felt it heal instantly.

"Now, just sit quietly for a minute - sit! And then you can go and get your score."

She bustled out of the tent and he heard her go next door and say, "How does it feel now, Diggory?"

Harry didn't want to sit still: He was too full of adrenaline. He got to his feet, wanting to see what was going on outside, but before he'd reached the mouth of the tent, two people had come darting inside - Hermione, followed closely by Ron.

"Harry, you were brilliant!" Hermione said squeakily. There were fingernail marks on her face where she had been clutching it in fear.

"You were amazing! You really were!"

But Harry was looking at Ron, who was very white and staring at Harry as though he were a ghost.

"Harry," he said, very seriously, "whoever put your name in that goblet - I - I reckon they're trying to do you in!"

It was as though the last few weeks had never happened - as though Harry were meeting Ron for the first time, right after he'd been made champion.

"Caught on, have you?" said Harry coldly. "Took you long enough."

Hermione stood nervously between them, looking from one to the other.

Ron opened his mouth uncertainly. Harry knew Ron was about to apologize and suddenly he found he didn't need to hear it.

"It's okay," he said, before Ron could get the words out. "Forget it."

"No," said Ron, "I shouldn't've -"

"Forget it," Harry said.

Ron grinned nervously at him, and Harry grinned back
Hermione burst into tears.

"There's nothing to cry about!" Harry told her, bewildered.

"You two are so stupid!" she shouted, stamping her foot on the ground, tears splashing down her front. Then, before either of them could stop her, she had given both of them a hug and dashed away, now positively howling.

"Barking mad," said Ron, shaking his head. "Harry, c'mon, they'll be putting up your scores. . . ."

Picking up the golden egg and his Firebolt, feeling more elated than he would have believed possible an hour ago, Harry ducked out of the tent, Ron by his side, talking fast.

"You were the best, you know, no competition. Cedric did this weird thing where he Transfigured a rock on the ground. . . turned it into a dog. . . he was trying to make the dragon go for the dog instead of him. Well, it was a pretty cool bit of Transfiguration, and it sort of worked, because he did get the egg, but he got burned as well - the dragon changed its mind halfway through and decided it would rather have him than the Labrador; he only just got away. And that Fleur girl tried this sort of charm, I think she was trying to put it into a trance - well, that kind of worked too, it went all sleepy, but then it snored, and this great jet of flame shot out, and her skirt caught fire - she put it out with a bit of water out of her wand. And Krum - you won't believe this, but he didn't even think of flying! He was probably the best after you, though. Hit it with some sort of spell right in the eye. Only thing is, it went trampling around in agony and squashed half the real eggs - they took marks off for that, he wasn't supposed to do any damage to them."

Ron drew breath as he and Harry reached the edge of the enclosure. Now that the Horntail had been taken away, Harry could see where the five judges were sitting - right at the other end, in raised seats draped in gold.

"It's marks out of ten from each one," Ron said, and Harry squinting up the field, saw the first judge - Madame Maxime - raise her wand in the air. What hooked like a long silver ribbon shot out of it, which twisted itself into a large figure eight.

"Not bad!" said Ron as the crowd applauded. "I suppose she took marks off for your shoulder. . . .

Mr. Crouch came next. He shot a number nine into the air.

"Looking good!" Ron yelled, thumping Harry on the back.

Next, Dumbledore. He too put up a nine. The crowd was cheering harder than ever.

Ludo Bagman - ten.

"Ten?" said Harry in disbelief. "But. . . I got hurt. . . . What's he playing at?"

"Harry, don't complain!" Ron yelled excitedly.

And now Karkaroff raised his wand. He paused for a moment, and then a number shot out of his wand too - four.

"What?" Ron bellowed furiously. "Four? You lousy, biased scum-bag, you gave Krum ten!"

But Harry didn't care, he wouldn't have cared if Karkaroff had given him zero; Ron's indignation on his behalf was worth about a hundred points to him. He didn't tell Ron this, of course, but his heart felt lighter than air as he turned to leave the enclosure. And it wasn't just Ron. . . those weren't only Gryffindors cheering in the crowd. When it had come to it, when they had seen what he was facing, most of the school had been on his side as well as Cedric's. . . . He didn't care about the Slytherins, he could stand whatever they threw at him now.

"You're tied in first place, Harry! You and Krum!" said Charlie Weasley, hurrying to meet them as they set off back toward the school.

"Listen, I've got to run, I've got to go and send Mum an owl, I swore I'd tell her what happened - but that was unbelievable! Oh yeah - and they told me to tell you you've got to hang around for a few more minutes. . . . Bagman wants a word, back in the champions' tent."

Ron said he would wait, so Harry reentered the tent, which somehow looked quite different now: friendly and welcoming. He thought back to how he'd felt while dodging the Horntail, and compared it to the long wait before he'd walked out to face it.... There was no comparison; the wait had been immeasurably worse.

Fleur, Cedric, and Krum all came in together. One side of Cedric's face was covered in a thick orange paste, which was presumably mending his burn. He grinned at Harry when he saw him.

"Good one, Harry."

"And you," said Harry, grinning back.

"Well done, all of you!" said Ludo Bagman, bouncing into the tent and looking as pleased as though he personally had just got past a dragon. "Now, just a quick few words. You've got a nice long break before the second task, which will take place at half past nine on the morning of February the twenty-fourth - but we're giving you something to think about in the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you're all holding, you will see that they open. . . see the hinges there? You need to solve the clue inside the egg - because it will tell you what the second task is, and enable you to prepare for it! All clear? Sure? Well, off you go, then!"

Harry left the tent, rejoined Ron, and they started to walk back around the edge of the forest, talking hard; Harry wanted to hear what the other champions had done in more detail. Then, as they rounded the clump of trees behind which Harry had first heard the dragons roar, a witch leapt out from behind them.

It was Rita Skeeter. She was wearing acid-green robes today; the Quick-Quotes Quill in her hand blended perfectly against them.

"Congratulations, Harry!" she said, beaming at him. "I wonder if you could give me a quick word? How you felt facing that dragon? How you feel now, about the fairness of the scoring?"

"Yeah, you can have a word," said Harry savagely. "Good-bye."

And he set off back to the castle with Ron.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE - THE HOUSE-ELF LIBERATION FRONT

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery that evening to find Pigwidgeon, so that Harry could send Sirius a letter telling him that he had managed to get past his dragon unscathed. On the way, Harry filled Ron in on everything Sirius had told him about Karkaroff. Though shocked at first to hear that Karkaroff had been a Death Eater, by the time they entered the Owlery Ron was saying that they ought to have suspected it all along.

"Fits, doesn't it?" he said. "Remember what Malfoy said on the train, about his dad being friends with Karkaroff? Now we know where they knew each other. They were probably running around in masks together at the World Cup.... I'll tell you one thing, though, Harry, if it was Karkaroff who put your name in the goblet, he's going to be feeling really stupid now, isn't he? Didn't work, did it? You only got a scratch! Come here - I'll do it -"

Pigwidgeon was so overexcited at the idea of a delivery he was flying around and around Harry's head, hooting incessantly. Ron snatched Pigwidgeon out of the air and held him still while Harry attached the letter to his leg.

"There's no way any of the other tasks are going to be that dangerous, how could they be?" Ron went on as he carried Pigwidgeon to the window. "You know what? I reckon you could win this tournament, Harry, I'm serious."

Harry knew that Ron was only saying this to make up for his behavior of the last few weeks, but he appreciated it all the same. Hermione, however, leaned against the Owlery wall, folded her arms, and frowned at Ron.

"Harry's got a long way to go before he finishes this tournament," she said seriously. "If that was the first task, I hate to think what's coming next."

"Right little ray of sunshine, aren't you?" said Ron. "You and Professor Trelawney should get together sometime."

He threw Pigwidgeon out of the window. Pigwidgeon plummeted twelve feet before managing to pull himself back up again; the letter attached to his leg was much longer and heavier than usual - Harry hadn't been able to resist giving Sirius a blow-by-blow account of exactly how he had swerved, circled, and dodged the Horntail. They watched Pigwidgeon disappear into the darkness, and then Ron said, "Well, we'd better get downstairs for your surprise party, Harry - Fred and George should have nicked enough food from the kitchens by now."

Sure enough, when they entered the Gryffindor common room it exploded with cheers and yells again. There were mountains of cakes and flagons of pumpkin juice and butterbeer on every surface; Lee Jordan had let off some Filibuster's Fireworks, so that the air was thick with stars and sparks; and Dean Thomas, who was very good at drawing, had put up some impressive new banners, most of which depicted Harry zooming around the Horntail's head on his Firebolt, though a couple showed Cedric with his head on fire.

Harry helped himself to food; he had almost forgotten what it was like to feel properly hungry, and sat down with Ron and Hermione. He couldn't believe how happy he felt; he had Ron back on his side, he'd gotten through the first task, and he wouldn't have to face the second one for three months.

"Blimey, this is heavy," said Lee Jordan, picking up the golden egg, which Harry had left on a table, and weighing it in his hands. "Open it, Harry, go on! Let's just see what's inside it!"

"He's supposed to work out the clue on his own," Hermione said swiftly. "It's in the tournament rules. . . ."

"I was supposed to work out how to get past the dragon on my own too," Harry muttered, so only Hermione could hear him, and she grinned rather guiltily.

"Yeah, go on, Harry, open it!" several people echoed.

Lee passed Harry the egg, and Harry dug his fingernails into the groove that ran all the way around it and prised it open.

It was hollow and completely empty - but the moment Harry opened it, the most horrible noise, a loud and screechy wailing, filled the room. The nearest thing to it Harry had ever heard was the ghost orchestra at Nearly Headless Nick's deathday party, who had all been playing the musical saw.

"Shut it!" Fred bellowed, his hands over his ears.

"What was that?" said Seamus Finnigan, staring at the egg as Harry slammed it shut again. "Sounded like a banshee ... Maybe you've got to get past one of those next, Harry!"

"It was someone being tortured!" said Neville, who had gone very white and spilled sausage rolls all over the floor. "You're going to have to fight the Cruciatus Curse!"

"Don't be a prat, Neville, that's illegal," said George. "They wouldn't use the Cruciatus Curse on the champions. I thought it sounded a bit like Percy singing . . . maybe you've got to attack him while he's in the shower. Harry."

"Want a jam tart, Hermione?" said Fred.

Hermione looked doubtfully at the plate he was offering her. Fred grinned.

"It's all right," he said. "I haven't done anything to them. It's the custard creams you've got to watch -"

Neville, who had just bitten into a custard cream, choked and spat it out. Fred laughed.

"Just my little joke, Neville... . . ."

Hermione took a jam tart. Then she said, "Did you get all this from the kitchens, Fred?"

"Yep," said Fred, grinning at her. He put on a high-pitched squeak and imitated a house-elf. "'Anything we can get you, sir, anything at all!' They're dead helpful... get me a roast ox if I said I was peckish." "How do you get in there?" Hermione said in an innocently casual sort of voice.

"Easy," said Fred, "concealed door behind a painting of a bowl of fruit. Just tickle the pear, and it giggles and -" He stopped and looked suspiciously at her. "Why?"

"Nothing," said Hermione quickly.

"Going to try and lead the house-elves out on strike now, are you?" said George. "Going to give up all the leaflet stuff and try and stir them up into rebellion?"

Several people chortled. Hermione didn't answer.

"Don't you go upsetting them and telling them they've got to take clothes and salaries!" said Fred warningly. "You'll put them off their cooking!" Just then, Neville caused a slight diversion by turning into a large canary.

"Oh - sorry, Neville!" Fred shouted over all the laughter. "I forgot - it was the custard creams we hexed -"

Within a minute, however, Neville had molted, and once his feathers had fallen off, he reappeared looking entirely normal. He even joined in laughing.

"Canary Creams!" Fred shouted to the excitable crowd. "George and I invented them - seven Sickles each, a bargain!"

It was nearly one in the morning when Harry finally went up to the dormitory with Ron, Neville, Seamus, and Dean. Before he pulled the curtains of his four-poster shut. Harry set his tiny model of the Hungarian Horntail on the table next to his bed, where it yawned, curled up, and closed its eyes. Really, Harry thought, as he pulled the hangings on his four-poster closed, Hagrid had a point.. . they were all right, really, dragons. . . .

The start of December brought wind and sleet to Hogwarts. Drafty though the castle always was in winter. Harry was glad of its fires and thick walls every time he passed the Durmstrang ship on the lake, which was pitching in the high winds, its black sails billowing against the dark skies. He thought the Beauxbatons caravan was likely to be pretty chilly too. Hagrid, he noticed, was keeping Madame Maxime's horses well provided with their preferred drink of single-malt whiskey; the fumes wafting from the trough in the corner of their paddock was enough to make the entire Care of Magical Creatures class light-headed. This was unhelpful, as they were still tending the horrible skrewts and needed their wits about them.

"I'm not sure whether they hibernate or not," Hagrid told the shivering class in the windy pumpkin patch next lesson. "Thought we'd jus' try an see if they fancied a kip . . . we'll jus' settle 'em down in these boxes. . . ."

There were now only ten skrewts left; apparently their desire to kill one another had not been exercised out of them. Each of them was now approaching six feet in length. Their thick gray armor; their powerful, scuttling legs; their fire-blasting ends; their stings and their suckers, combined to make the skrewts the most repulsive things Harry had ever seen. The class looked dispiritedly at the enormous boxes Hagrid had brought out, all lined with pillows and fluffy blankets.

"We'll jus' lead 'em in here," Hagrid said, "an' put the lids on, and we'll see what happens."

But the skrewts, it transpired, did not hibernate, and did not appreciate being forced into pillow-lined boxes and nailed in. Hagrid was soon yelling, "Don panic, now, don' panic!" while the skrewts rampaged around

the pumpkin patch, now strewn with the smoldering wreckage of the boxes. Most of the class - Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle in the lead - had fled into Hagrid's cabin through the back door and barricaded themselves in; Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were among those who remained outside trying to help Hagrid. Together they managed to restrain and tie up nine of the skrewts, though at the cost of numerous burns and cuts; finally, only one skrewt was left.

"Don' frighten him, now!" Hagrid shouted as Ron and Harry used their wands to shoot jets of fiery sparks at the skrewt, which was advancing menacingly on them, its sting arched, quivering, over its back. "Jus' try an slip the rope 'round his sting, so he won hurt any o' the others!" "Yeah, we wouldn't want that!" Ron shouted angrily as he and Harry backed into the wall of Hagrid's cabin, still holding the skrewt off with their sparks.

"Well, well, well. . . this does look like fun."

Rita Skeeter was leaning on Hagrid's garden fence, looking in at the mayhem. She was wearing a thick magenta cloak with a furry purple collar today, and her crocodile-skin handbag was over her arm.

Hagrid launched himself forward on top of the skrewt that was cornering Harry and Ron and flattened it; a blast of fire shot out of its end, withering the pumpkin plants nearby.

"Who're you?" Hagrid asked Rita Skeeter as he slipped a loop of rope around the skrewt's sting and tightened it.

"Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter," Rita replied, beaming at him. Her gold teeth glinted.

"Thought Dumbledore said you weren' allowed inside the school anymore," said Hagrid, frowning slightly as he got off the slightly squashed skrewt and started tugging it over to its fellows.

Rita acted as though she hadn't heard what Hagrid had said.

"What are these fascinating creatures called?" she asked, beaming still more widely.

"Blast-Ended Skrewts," grunted Hagrid.

"Really?" said Rita, apparently full of lively interest. "I've never heard of them before...where do they come from?"

Harry noticed a dull red flush rising up out of Hagrid's wild black beard, and his heart sank. Where had Hagrid got the skrewts from?

Hermione, who seemed to be thinking along these lines, said quickly,

"They're very interesting, aren't they? Aren't they. Harry?"

"What? Oh yeah . . . ouch . . . interesting," said Harry as he stepped on his foot.

"Ah, you're here. Harry!" said Rita Skeeter as she looked around. "So you like Care of Magical Creatures, do you? One of your favorite lessons?"

"Yes," said Harry stoutly. Hagrid beamed at him.

"Lovely," said Rita. "Really lovely. Been teaching long?" she added to Hagrid.

Harry noticed her eyes travel over Dean (who had a nasty cut across one cheek). Lavender (whose robes were badly singed), Seamus (who was nursing several burnt fingers), and then to the cabin windows, where most of the class stood, their noses pressed against the glass waiting to see if the coast was clear.

"This is o'ny me second year," said Hagrid.

"Lovely... I don't suppose you'd like to give an interview, would you? Share some of your experience of magical creatures? The Prophet does a zoological column every Wednesday, as I'm sure you know. We could feature these - er - Bang-Ended Scoots."

"Blast-Ended Skrewts," Hagrid said eagerly. "Er - yeah, why not?"

Harry had a very bad feeling about this, but there was no way of communicating it to Hagrid without Rita Skeeter seeing, so he had to stand and watch in silence as Hagrid and Rita Skeeter made arrangements

to meet in the Three Broomsticks for a good long interview later that week. Then the bell rang up at the castle, signaling the end of the lesson.

"Well, good-bye, Harry!" Rita Skeeter called merrily to him as he set off with Ron and Hermione. "Until Friday night, then, Hagrid!"

"She'll twist everything he says," Harry said under his breath.

"Just as long as he didn't import those skrewts illegally or anything," said Hermione desperately. They looked at one another - it was exactly the sort of thing Hagrid might do.

"Hagrids been in loads of trouble before, and Dumbledores never sacked him," said Ron consolingly. "Worst that can happen is Hagrid'll have to get rid of the skrewts. Sorry . . . did I say worst? I meant best." Harry and Hermione laughed, and, feeling slightly more cheerful, went off to lunch.

Harry thoroughly enjoyed double Divination that afternoon; they were still doing star charts and predictions, but now that he and Ron were friends once more, the whole thing seemed very funny again. Professor Trelawney, who had been so pleased with the pair of them when they had been predicting their own horrific deaths, quickly became irritated as they sniggered through her explanation of the various ways in which Pluto could disrupt everyday life.

"I would think," she said, in a mystical whisper that did not conceal her obvious annoyance, "that some of us" - she stared very meaningfully at Harry- "might be a little less frivolous had they seen what I have seen during my crystal gazing last night. As I sat here, absorbed in my needlework, the urge to consult the orb overpowered me. I arose, I settled myself before it, and I gazed into its crystalline depths . . . and what do you think I saw gazing back at me?"

"An ugly old bat in outsize specs?" Ron muttered under his breath.

Harry fought hard to keep his face straight.

"Death, my dears."

Parvati and Lavender both put their hands over their mouths, looking horrified.

"Yes," said Professor Trelawney, nodding impressively, "it comes, ever closer, it circles overhead like a vulture, ever lower. . . ever lower over the castle. . . ."

She stared pointedly at Harry, who yawned very widely and obviously.

"It'd be a bit more impressive if she hadn't done it about eighty times before," Harry said as they finally regained the fresh air of the staircase beneath Professor Trelawney's room. "But if I'd dropped dead every time she's told me I'm going to, I'd be a medical miracle."

"You'd be a sort of extra-concentrated ghost," said Ron, chortling, as they passed the Bloody Baron going in the opposite direction, his wide eyes staring sinisterly. "At least we didn't get homework. I hope Hermione got loads off Professor Vector, I love not working when she is. . . ."

But Hermione wasn't at dinner, nor was she in the library when they went to look for her afterward. The only person in there was Viktor Krum. Ron hovered behind the bookshelves for a while, watching Krum, debating in whispers with Harry whether he should ask for an autograph - but then Ron realized that six or seven girls were lurking in the next row of books, debating exactly the same thing, and he lost his enthusiasm for the idea.

"Wonder where she's got to?" Ron said as he and Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Dunno . . . balderdash."

But the Fat Lady had barely begun to swing forward when the sound of racing feet behind them announced Hermione's arrival.

"Harry!" she panted, skidding to a halt beside him (the Fat Lady stared down at her, eyebrows raised). "Harry, you've got to come - you've got to come, the most amazing thing's happened- please -"

She seized Harry's arm and started to try to drag him back along the corridor.

"What's the matter?" Harry said.

"I'll show you when we get there - oh come on, quick -"

Harry looked around at Ron; he looked back at Harry, intrigued.

"Okay," Harry said, starting off back down the corridor with Hermione, Ron hurrying to keep up.

"Oh don't mind me!" the Fat Lady called irritably after them. "Don't apologize for bothering me! I'll just hang here, wide open, until you get back, shall I?"

"Yeah, thanks!" Ron shouted over his shoulder.

"Hermione, where are we going?" Harry asked, after she had led them down through six floors, and started down the marble staircase into the entrance hall.

"You'll see, you'll see in a minute!" said Hermione excitedly.

She turned left at the bottom of the staircase and hurried toward the door through which Cedric Diggory had gone the night after the Goblet of Fire had regurgitated his and Harry's names. Harry had never been through here before. He and Ron followed Hermione down a flight of stone steps, but instead of ending up in a gloomy underground passage like the one that led to Snape's dungeon, they found themselves in a broad stone corridor, brightly lit with torches, and decorated with cheerful paintings that were mainly of food.

"Oh hang on . . ." said Harry slowly, halfway down the corridor. "Wait a minute, Hermione. . . ."

"What?" She turned around to look at him, anticipation all over her face.

"I know what this is about," said Harry.

He nudged Ron and pointed to the painting just behind Hermione. It showed a gigantic silver fruit bowl.

"Hermione!" said Ron, cottoning on. "You're trying to rope us into that spew stuff again!"

"No, no, I'm not!" she said hastily. "And it's not spew, Ron -"

"Changed the name, have you?" said Ron, frowning at her. "What are we now, then, the House-Elf Liberation Front? I'm not barging into that kitchen and trying to make them stop work, I'm not doing it -"

"I'm not asking you to!" Hermione said impatiently. "I came down here just now, to talk to them all, and I found - oh come on, Harry, I want to show you!"

She seized his arm again, pulled him in front of the picture of the giant fruit bowl, stretched out her forefinger, and tickled the huge green pear. It began to squirm, chuckling, and suddenly turned into a large green door handle. Hermione seized it, pulled the door open, and pushed Harry hard in the back, forcing him inside.

He had one brief glimpse of an enormous, high-ceilinged room, large as the Great Hall above it, with mounds of glittering brass pots and pans heaped around the stone walls, and a great brick fireplace at the other end, when something small hurtled toward him from the middle of the room, squealing, "Harry Potter, sir! Harry Potter!"

Next second all the wind had been knocked out of him as the squealing elf hit him hard in the midriff, hugging him so tightly he thought his ribs would break.

"D-Dobby?" Harry gasped.

"It is Dobby, sir, it is!" squealed the voice from somewhere around his navel. "Dobby has been hoping and hoping to see Harry Potter, sir, and Harry Potter has come to see him, sir!"

Dobby let go and stepped back a few paces, beaming up at Harry, his enormous, green, tennis-ball-shaped eyes brimming with tears of

happiness. He looked almost exactly as Harry remembered him; the pencil-shaped nose, the batlike ears, the long fingers and feet - all except the clothes, which were very different.

When Dobby had worked for the Malfoys, he had always worn the same filthy old pillowcase. Now, however, he was wearing the strangest assortment of garments Harry had ever seen; he had done an even worse job of dressing himself than the wizards at the World Cup. He was wearing a tea cozy for a hat, on which he had pinned a number of bright badges; a tie patterned with horseshoes over a bare chest, a pair of what looked like children's soccer shorts, and odd socks. One of these, Harry saw, was the black one Harry had removed from his own foot and tricked Mr. Malfoy into giving Dobby, thereby setting Dobby free. The other was covered in pink and orange stripes.

"Dobby, what're you doing here?" Harry said in amazement. "Dobby has come to work at Hogwarts, sir!" Dobby squealed excitedly. "Professor Dumbledore gave Dobby and Winky jobs, sir!"

"Winky?" said Harry. "She's here too?"

"Yes, sir, yes!" said Dobby, and he seized Harry's hand and pulled him off into the kitchen between the four long wooden tables that stood there. Each of these tables, Harry noticed as he passed them, was positioned exactly beneath the four House tables above, in the Great Hall. At the moment, they were clear of food, dinner having finished, but he supposed that an hour ago they had been laden with dishes that were then sent up through the ceiling to their counterparts above.

At least a hundred little elves were standing around the kitchen, beaming, bowing, and curtsying as Dobby led Harry past them. They were all wearing the same uniform: a tea towel stamped with the Hogwarts crest, and tied, as Winky's had been, like a toga.

Dobby stopped in front of the brick fireplace and pointed.

"Winky, sir!" he said.

Winky was sitting on a stool by the fire. Unlike Dobby, she had obviously not foraged for clothes. She was wearing a neat little skirt and blouse with a matching blue hat, which had holes in it for her large ears. However, while every one of Dobby's strange collection of garments was so clean and well cared for that it looked brand-new, Winky was plainly not taking care other clothes at all. There were soup stains all down her blouse and a burn in her skirt.

"Hello, Winky," said Harry.

Winky's lip quivered. Then she burst into tears, which spilled out of her great brown eyes and splashed down her front, just as they had done at the Quidditch World Cup.

"Oh dear," said Hermione. She and Ron had followed Harry and Dobby to the end of the kitchen. "Winky, don't cry, please don't..."

But Winky cried harder than ever. Dobby, on the other hand, beamed up at Harry.

"Would Harry Potter like a cup of tea?" he squeaked loudly, over Winky's sobs.

"Er - yeah, okay," said Harry.

Instantly, about six house-elves came trotting up behind him, bearing a large silver tray laden with a teapot, cups for Harry, Ron, and Hermione, a milk jug, and a large plate of biscuits.

"Good service!" Ron said, in an impressed voice. Hermione frowned at him, but the elves all looked delighted; they bowed very low and retreated.

"How long have you been here, Dobby?" Harry asked as Dobby handed around the tea.

"Only a week. Harry Potter, sir!" said Dobby happily. "Dobby came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir. You see, sir, it is very difficult for a house-elf who has been dismissed to get a new position, sir, very difficult indeed -"

At this, Winky howled even harder, her squashed-tomato of a nose dribbling all down her front, though she made no effort to stem the flow. "Dobby has traveled the country for two whole years, sir, trying to find work!" Dobby squeaked. "But Dobby hasn't found work, sir, because Dobby wants paying now!"

The house-elves all around the kitchen, who had been listening and watching with interest, all looked away at these words, as though Dobby had said something rude and embarrassing. Hermione, however, said, "Good for you, Dobby!"

"Thank you, miss!" said Dobby, grinning toothily at her. "But most wizards doesn't want a house-elf who wants paying, miss. 'That's not the point of a house-elf,' they says, and they slammed the door in Dobby's face! Dobby likes work, but he wants to wear clothes and he wants to be paid. Harry Potter.... Dobby likes being free!"

The Hogwarts house-elves had now started edging away from Dobby, as though he were carrying something contagious. Winky, however, remained where she was, though there was a definite increase in the volume other crying.

"And then, Harry Potter, Dobby goes to visit Winky, and finds out Winky has been freed too, sir!" said Dobby delightedly.

At this, Winky flung herself forward off her stool and lay face-down on the flagged stone floor, beating her tiny fists upon it and positively screaming with misery. Hermione hastily dropped down to her knees beside her and tried to comfort her, but nothing she said made the slightest difference. Dobby continued with his story, shouting shrilly over Winky's screeches.

"And then Dobby had the idea. Harry Potter, sir! 'Why doesn't Dobby and Winky find work together?' Dobby says. 'Where is there enough work for two house-elves?' says Winky. And Dobby thinks, and it comes to him, sir! Hogwarts! So Dobby and Winky came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir, and Professor Dumbledore took us on!"

Dobby beamed very brightly, and happy tears welled in his eyes again.

"And Professor Dumbledore says he will pay Dobby, sir, if Dobby wants paying! And so Dobby is a free elf, sir, and Dobby gets a Galleon a week and one day off a month!"

"That's not very much!" Hermione shouted indignantly from the floor, over Winky's continued screaming and fist-beating.

"Professor Dumbledore offered Dobby ten Galleons a week, and weekends off," said Dobby, suddenly giving a little shiver, as though the prospect of so much leisure and riches were frightening, "but Dobby beat him down, miss. . . . Dobby likes freedom, miss, but he isn't wanting too much, miss, he likes work better."

"And how much is Professor Dumbledore paying you, Winky?" Hermione asked kindly.

If she had thought this would cheer up Winky, she was wildly mistaken. Winky did stop crying, but when she sat up she was glaring at Hermione through her massive brown eyes, her whole face sopping wet and suddenly furious.

"Winky is a disgraced elf, but Winky is not yet getting paid!" she squeaked. "Winky is not sunk so low as that! Winky is properly ashamed of being freed!"

"Ashamed?" said Hermione blankly. "But - Winky, come on! It's Mr. Crouch who should be ashamed, not you! You didn't do anything wrong, he was really horrible to you -"

But at these words, Winky clapped her hands over the holes in her hat, flattening her ears so that she couldn't hear a word, and screeched, "You is not insulting my master, miss! You is not insulting Mr. Crouch! Mr. Crouch is a good wizard, miss! Mr. Crouch is right to sack bad Winky!"

"Winky is having trouble adjusting, Harry Potter," squeaked Dobby confidentially. "Winky forgets she is not bound to Mr. Crouch anymore; she is allowed to speak her mind now, but she won't do it."

"Can't house-elves speak their minds about their masters, then?" Harry asked.

"Oh no, sir, no," said Dobby, looking suddenly serious. "'Tis part of the house-elf's enslavement, sir. We keeps their secrets and our silence, sir. We upholds the family's honor, and we never speaks ill of them - though Professor Dumbledore told Dobby he does not insist upon this. Professor Dumbledore said we is free to - to -"

Dobby looked suddenly nervous and beckoned Harry closer. Harry bent forward. Dobby whispered, "He said we is free to call him a - a barmy old codger if we likes, sir!"

Dobby gave a frightened sort of giggle.

"But Dobby is not wanting to, Harry Potter," he said, talking normally again, and shaking his head so that his ears flapped. "Dobby likes Professor Dumbledore very much, sir, and is proud to keep his secrets and our silence for him."

"But you can say what you like about the Malfoys now?" Harry asked him, grinning.

A slightly fearful look came into Dobby's immense eyes.

"Dobby - Dobby could," he said doubtfully. He squared his small shoulders. "Dobby could tell Harry Potter that his old masters were - were - bad Dark wizards'."

Dobby stood for a moment, quivering all over, horror-struck by his own daring - then he rushed over to the nearest table and began banging his head on it very hard, squealing, "Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!"

Harry seized Dobby by the back of his tie and pulled him away from the table.

"Thank you. Harry Potter, thank you," said Dobby breathlessly, rubbing his head.

"You just need a bit of practice," Harry said.

"Practice!" squealed Winky furiously. "You is ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dobby, talking that way about your masters!"

"They isn't my masters anymore, Winky!" said Dobby defiantly. "Dobby doesn't care what they think anymore!"

"Oh you is a bad elf, Dobby!" moaned Winky, tears leaking down her face once more. "My poor Mr. Crouch, what is he doing without Winky? He is needing me, he is needing my help! I is looking after the Crouches all my life, and my mother is doing it before me, and my grandmother is doing it before her ... oh what is they saying if they knew Winky was freed? Oh the shame, the shame!" She buried her face in her skirt again and bawled.

"Winky," said Hermione firmly, "I'm quite sure Mr. Crouch is getting along perfectly well without you. We've seen him, you know -"

"You is seeing my master?" said Winky breathlessly, raising her tearstained face out of her skirt once more and goggling at Hermione.

"You is seeing him here at Hogwarts?"

"Yes," said Hermione, "he and Mr. Bagman are judges in the Triwizard Tournament."

"Mr. Bagman comes too?" squeaked Winky, and to Harry's great surprise (and Ron's and Hermione's too, by the looks on their faces), she looked angry again. "Mr. Bagman is a bad wizard! A very bad wizard! My master isn't liking him, oh no, not at all!"

"Bagman - bad?" said Harry.

"Oh yes," Winky said, nodding her head furiously, "My master is telling Winky some things! But Winky is not saying... . Winky - Winky keeps her master's secrets."

She dissolved yet again in tears; they could hear her sobbing into her skirt, "Poor master, poor master, no Winky to help him no more!"

They couldn't get another sensible word out of Winky. They left her to her crying and finished their tea, while Dobby chatted happily about his life as a free elf and his plans for his wages.

"Dobby is going to buy a sweater next, Harry Potter!" he said happily, pointing at his bare chest,

"Tell you what, Dobby," said Ron, who seemed to have taken a great liking to the elf, "I'll give you the one my mum knits me this Christmas, I always get one from her. You don't mind maroon, do you?"

Dobby was delighted.

"We might have to shrink it a bit to fit you," Ron told him, "but it'll go well with your tea cozy."

As they prepared to take their leave, many of the surrounding elves pressed in upon them, offering snacks to take back upstairs. Hermione refused, with a pained look at the way the elves kept bowing and curtsying, but Harry and Ron loaded their pockets with cream cakes and pies.

"Thanks a lot!" Harry said to the elves, who had all clustered around the door to say good night. "See you, Dobby!"

"Harry Potter . . . can Dobby come and see you sometimes, sir?" Dobby asked tentatively.

"Course you can," said Harry, and Dobby beamed.

"You know what?" said Ron, once he, Hermione, and Harry had left the kitchens behind and were climbing the steps into the entrance hall again. "All these years I've been really impressed with Fred and George, nicking food from the kitchens - well, it's not exactly difficult, is it? They can't wait to give it away!"

"I think this is the best thing that could have happened to those elves, you know," said Hermione, leading the way back up the marble staircase.

"Dobby coming to work here, I mean. The other elves will see how happy he is, being free, and slowly it'll dawn on them that they want that too!"

"Let's hope they don't look too closely at Winky," said Harry.

"Oh she'll cheer up," said Hermione, though she sounded a bit doubtful.

"Once the shock's worn off, and she's got used to Hogwarts, she'll see how much better off she is without that Crouch man."

"She seems to love him," said Ron thickly (he had just started on a cream cake).

"Doesn't think much of Bagman, though, does she?" said Harry. "Wonder what Crouch says at home about him?"

"Probably says he's not a very good Head of Department," said Hermione, "and let's face it... he's got a point, hasn't he?"

"I'd still rather work for him than old Crouch," said Ron. "At least Bagman's got a sense of humor."

"Don't let Percy hear you saying that," Hermione said, smiling slightly.

"Yeah, well, Percy wouldn't want to work for anyone with a sense of humor, would he?" said Ron, now starting on a chocolate eclair. "Percy wouldn't recognize a joke if it danced naked in front of him wearing Dobby's tea cozy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO - THE UNEXPECTED TASK

Potter! Weasley! Will you pay attention?"

Professor McGonagall's irritated voice cracked like a whip through the Transfiguration class on Thursday, and Harry and Ron both jumped and looked up.

It was the end of the lesson; they had finished their work; the guinea fowl they had been changing into guinea pigs had been shut away in a large cage on Professor McGonagall's desk (Neville's still had feathers); they had copied down their homework from the blackboard ("Describe, with examples, the ways in which Transforming Spells must be adapted when

performing Cross-Species Switches"}. The bell was due to ring at any moment, and Harry and Ron, who had been having a sword fight with a couple of Fred and George's fake wands at the back of the class, looked up, Ron holding a tin parrot and Harry, a rubber haddock.

"Now that Potter and Weasley have been kind enough to act their age," said Professor McGonagall, with an angry look at the pair of them as the head of Harry's haddock drooped and fell silently to the floor - Ron's parrot's beak had severed it moments before - "I have something to say to you all.

"The Yule Ball is approaching - a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and an opportunity for us to socialize with our foreign guests. Now, the ball will be open only to fourth years and above - although you may invite a younger student if you wish -"

Lavender Brown let out a shrill giggle. Parvati Patil nudged her hard in the ribs, her face working furiously as she too fought not to giggle. They both looked around at Harry, Professor McGonagall ignored them, which Harry thought was distinctly unfair, as she had just told off him and Ron.

"Dress robes will be worn," Professor McGonagall continued, "and the ball will start at eight o'clock on Christmas Day, finishing at midnight in the Great Hall. Now then -"

Professor McGonagall stared deliberately around the class.

"The Yule Ball is of course a chance for us all to - er - let our hair down," she said, in a disapproving voice.

Lavender giggled harder than ever, with her hand pressed hard against her mouth to stifle the sound. Harry could see what was funny this time: Professor McGonagall, with her hair in a tight bun, looked as though she had never let her hair down in any sense.

"But that does NOT mean," Professor McGonagall went on, "that we will be relaxing the standards of behavior we expect from Hogwarts students. I will be most seriously displeased if a Gryffindor student embarrasses the school in any way."

The bell rang, and there was the usual scuffle of activity as everyone packed their bags and swung them onto their shoulders.

Professor McGonagall called above the noise, "Potter - a word, if you please."

Assuming this had something to do with his headless rubber haddock, Harry proceeded gloomily to the teacher's desk. Professor McGonagall waited until the rest of the class had gone, and then said, "Potter, the champions and their partners -"

"What partners?" said Harry.

Professor McGonagall looked suspiciously at him, as though she thought he was trying to be funny.

"Your partners for the Yule Ball, Potter," she said coldly. "Your dance partners."

Harry's insides seemed to curl up and shrivel.

"Dance partners?" He felt himself going red. "I don't dance," he said quickly.

"Oh yes, you do," said Professor McGonagall irritably. "That's what I'm telling you. Traditionally, the champions and their partners open the ball."

Harry had a sudden mental image of himself in a top hat and tails, accompanied by a girl in the sort of frilly dress Aunt Petunia always wore to Uncle Vernon's work parties.

"I'm not dancing," he said.

"It is traditional," said Professor McGonagall firmly. "You are a Hogwarts champion, and you will do what is expected of you as a representative of the school. So make sure you get yourself a partner, Potter."

"But-I don't-"

"You heard me, Potter," said Professor McGonagall in a very final sort of way.

A week ago. Harry would have said finding a partner for a dance would be a cinch compared to taking on a Hungarian Horntail. But now that he had done the latter, and was facing the prospect of asking a girl to the ball, he thought he'd rather have another round with the dragon.

Harry had never known so many people to put their names down to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas; he always did, of course, because the alternative was usually going back to Privet Drive, but he had always been very much in the minority before now. This year, however, everyone in the fourth year and above seemed to be staying, and they all seemed to Harry to be obsessed with the coming ball - or at least all the girls were, and it was amazing how many girls Hogwarts suddenly seemed to hold; he had never quite noticed that before. Girls giggling and whispering in the corridors, girls shrieking with laughter as boys passed them, girls excitedly comparing notes on what they were going to wear on Christmas night... .

"Why do they have to move in packs?" Harry asked Ron as a dozen or so girls walked past them, sniggering and staring at Harry. "How're you supposed to get one on their own to ask them?"

"Lasso one?" Ron suggested. "Got any idea who you're going to try?" Harry didn't answer. He knew perfectly well whom he'd like to ask, but working up the nerve was something else. . . . Cho was a year older than he was; she was very pretty; she was a very good Quidditch player, and she was also very popular.

Ron seemed to know what was going on inside Harry's head.

"Listen, you're not going to have any trouble. You're a champion. You've just beaten a Hungarian Horntail. I bet they'll be queuing up to go with you."

In tribute to their recently repaired friendship, Ron had kept the bitterness in his voice to a bare minimum. Moreover, to Harry's amazement, he turned out to be quite right.

A curly-haired third-year Hufflepuff girl to whom Harry had never spoken in his life asked him to go to the ball with her the very next day. Harry was so taken aback he said no before he'd even stopped to consider the matter. The girl walked off looking rather hurt, and Harry had to endure Dean's, Seamus's, and Ron's taunts about her all through History of Magic. The following day, two more girls asked him, a second year and (to his horror) a fifth year who looked as though she might knock him out if he refused.

"She was quite good-looking," said Ron fairly, after he'd stopped laughing.

"She was a foot taller than me," said Harry, still unnerved. "Imagine what I'd look like trying to dance with her."

Hermione's words about Krum kept coming back to him. "They only like him because he's famous!" Harry doubted very much if any of the girls who had asked to be his partner so far would have wanted to go to the ball with him if he hadn't been a school champion. Then he wondered if this would bother him if Cho asked him.

On the whole. Harry had to admit that even with the embarrassing prospect of opening the ball before him, life had definitely improved since he had got through the first task. He wasn't attracting nearly as much unpleasantness in the corridors anymore, which he suspected had a lot to do with Cedric - he had an idea Cedric might have told the Hufflepuffs to leave Harry alone, in gratitude for Harry's tip-off about the dragons.

There seemed to be fewer Support Cedric Diggory! badges around too.

Draco Malfoy, of course, was still quoting Rita Skeeter's article to him at every possible opportunity, but he was getting fewer and fewer laughs

out of it - and just to heighten Harry's feeling of well-being, no story about Hagrid had appeared in the Daily Prophet.

"She didn't seem very int'rested in magical creatures, ter tell yeh the truth," Hagrid said, when Harry, Ron, and Hermione asked him how his interview with Rita Skeeter had gone during the last Care of Magical Creatures lesson of the term. To their very great relief, Hagrid had given up on direct contact with the skrewts now, and they were merely sheltering behind his cabin today, sitting at a trestle table and preparing a fresh selection of food with which to tempt the skrewts.

"She jus' wanted me ter talk about you, Harry," Hagrid continued in a low voice. "Well, I told her we'd been friends since I went ter fetch yeh from the Dursleys. 'Never had to tell him off in four years?' she said. 'Never played you up in lessons, has he?' I told her no, an she didn't seem happy at all. Yeh'd think she wanted me to say yeh were horrible, Harry."

"'Course she did," said Harry, throwing lumps of dragon liver into a large metal bowl and picking up his knife to cut some more. "She can't keep writing about what a tragic little hero I am, it'll get boring."

"She wants a new angle, Hagrid," said Ron wisely as he shelled salamander eggs. "You were supposed to say Harry's a mad delinquent!"

"But he's not!" said Hagrid, looking genuinely shocked.

"She should've interviewed Snape," said Harry grimly. "He'd give her the goods on me any day. 'Potter has been crossing lines ever since he first arrived at this school. . . .'"

"Said that, did he?" said Hagrid, while Ron and Hermione laughed.

"Well, yeh might've bent a few rules. Harry, bu' yeh're all righ' really, aren' you?"

"Cheers, Hagrid," said Harry, grinning.

"You coming to this ball thing on Christmas Day, Hagrid?" said Ron.

"Though' I might look in on it, yeah," said Hagrid gruffly. "Should be a good do, I reckon. You'll be openin the dancin', won yeh, Harry? Who're you takin'?"

"No one, yet," said Harry, feeling himself going red again. Hagrid didn't pursue the subject.

The last week of term became increasingly boisterous as it progressed. Rumors about the Yule Ball were flying everywhere, though Harry didn't believe half of them - for instance, that Dumbledore had bought eight hundred barrels of mulled mead from Madam Rosmerta. It seemed to be fact, however, that he had booked the Weird Sisters. Exactly who or what the Weird Sisters were Harry didn't know, never having had access to a wizard's wireless, but he deduced from the wild excitement of those who had grown up listening to the WWN (Wizarding Wireless Network) that they were a very famous musical group.

Some of the teachers, like little Professor Flitwick, gave up trying to teach them much when their minds were so clearly elsewhere; he allowed them to play games in his lesson on Wednesday, and spent most of it talking to Harry about the perfect Summoning Charm

Harry had used during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. Other teachers were not so generous. Nothing would ever deflect Professor Binns, for example, from plowing on through his notes on goblin rebellions - as Binns hadn't let his own death stand in the way of continuing to teach, they supposed a small thing like Christmas wasn't going to put him off. It was amazing how he could make even bloody and vicious goblin riots sound as boring as Percys cauldron-bottom report. Professors McGonagall and Moody kept them working until the very last second of their classes too, and Snape, of course, would no sooner let them play games in class than adopt Harry. Staring nastily around at them all, he informed them that he would be testing them on poison antidotes during the last lesson of the term.

"Evil, he is," Ron said bitterly that night in the Gryffindor common room. "Springing a test on us on the last day. Ruining the last bit of term with a whole load of studying."

"Mmm . . . you're not exactly straining yourself, though, are you?" said Hermione, looking at him over the top of her Potions notes. Ron was busy building a card castle out of his Exploding Snap pack - a much more interesting pastime than with Muggle cards, because of the chance that the whole thing would blow up at any second.

"It's Christmas, Hermione," said Harry lazily; he was rereading Flying with the Cannons for the tenth time in an armchair near the fire.

Hermione looked severely over at him too. "I'd have thought you'd be doing something constructive, Harry, even if you don't want to learn your antidotes!"

"Like what?" Harry said as he watched Joey Jenkins of the Cannons belt a Bludger toward a Ballycastle Bats Chaser.

"That egg!" Hermione hissed.

"Come on, Hermione, I've got till February the twenty-fourth," Harry said.

He had put the golden egg upstairs in his trunk and hadn't opened it since the celebration party after the first task. There were still two and a half months to go until he needed to know what all the screechy wailing meant, after all.

"But it might take weeks to work it out!" said Hermione. "You're going to look a real idiot if everyone else knows what the next task is and you don't!"

"Leave him alone, Hermione, he's earned a bit of a break," said Ron, and he placed the last two cards on top of the castle and the whole lot blew up, singeing his eyebrows.

"Nice look, Ron ... go well with your dress robes, that will."

It was Fred and George. They sat down at the table with Harry, Ron, and Hermione as Ron felt how much damage had been done.

"Ron, can we borrow Pigwidgeon?" George asked.

"No, he's off delivering a letter," said Ron. "Why?"

"Because George wants to invite him to the ball," said Fred sarcastically.

"Because we want to send a letter, you stupid great prat," said George.

"Who d'you two keep writing to, eh?" said Ron.

"Nose out, Ron, or I'll burn that for you too," said Fred, waving his wand threateningly. "So . . . you lot got dates for the ball yet?"

"Nope," said Ron.

"Well, you'd better hurry up, mate, or all the good ones will be gone," said Fred.

"Who're you going with, then?" said Ron.

"Angelina," said Fred promptly, without a trace of embarrassment.

"What?" said Ron, taken aback. "You've already asked her?"

"Good point," said Fred. He turned his head and called across the common room, "Oi! Angelina!"

Angelina, who had been chatting with Alicia Spinnet near the fire, looked over at him.

"What?" she called back.

"Want to come to the ball with me?"

Angelina gave Fred an appraising sort of look.

"All right, then," she said, and she turned back to Alicia and carried on chatting with a bit of a grin on her face.

"There you go," said Fred to Harry and Ron, "piece of cake."

He got to his feet, yawning, and said, "We'd better use a school owl then, George, come on. . . ."

They left. Ron stopped feeling his eyebrows and looked across the smoldering wreck of his card castle at Harry.

"We should get a move on, you know . . . ask someone. He's right. We don't want to end up with a pair of trolls."

Hermione let out a sputter of indignation.

"A pair of... what, excuse me?"

"Well - you know," said Ron, shrugging. "I'd rather go alone than with - with Eloise Midgen, say."

"Her acne's loads better lately - and she's really nice!"

"Her nose is off-center," said Ron.

"Oh I see," Hermione said, bristling. "So basically, you're going to take the best-looking girl who'll have you, even if she's completely horrible?"

"Er - yeah, that sounds about right," said Ron.

"I'm going to bed," Hermione snapped, and she swept off toward the girls' staircase without another word.

The Hogwarts staff, demonstrating a continued desire to impress the visitors from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, seemed determined to show the castle at its best this Christmas. When the decorations went up. Harry noticed that they were the most stunning he had yet seen inside the school. Everlasting icicles had been attached to the banisters of the marble staircase; the usual twelve Christmas trees in the Great Hall were bedecked with everything from luminous holly berries to real, hooting, golden owls, and the suits of armor had all been bewitched to sing carols whenever anyone passed them. It was quite something to hear "O Come, All Ye Faithful" sung by an empty helmet that only knew half the words.

Several times, Filch the caretaker had to extract Peeves from inside the armor, where he had taken to hiding, filling in the gaps in the songs with lyrics of his own invention, all of which were very rude.

And still. Harry hadn't asked Cho to the ball. He and Ron were getting very nervous now, though as Harry pointed out, Ron would look much less stupid than he would without a partner;

Harry was supposed to be starting the dancing with the other champions.

"I suppose there's always Moaning Myrtle," he said gloomily, referring to the ghost who haunted the girls' toilets on the second floor.

"Harry - we've just got to grit our teeth and do it," said Ron on Friday morning, in a tone that suggested they were planning the storming of an impregnable fortress. "When we get back to the common room tonight, we'll both have partners - agreed?"

"Er . . . okay," said Harry.

But every time he glimpsed Cho that day - during break, and then lunchtime, and once on the way to History of Magic - she was surrounded by friends. Didn't she ever go anywhere alone? Could he perhaps ambush her as she was going into a bathroom? But no - she even seemed to go there with an escort of four or five girls. Yet if he didn't do it soon, she was bound to have been asked by somebody else.

He found it hard to concentrate on Snape's Potions test, and consequently forgot to add the key ingredient - a bezoar - meaning that he received bottom marks. He didn't care, though; he was too busy screwing up his courage for what he was about to do. When the bell rang, he grabbed his bag, and hurried to the dungeon door.

"I'll meet you at dinner," he said to Ron and Hermione, and he dashed off upstairs.

He'd just have to ask Cho for a private word, that was all. . . . He hurried off through the packed corridors looking for her, and (rather sooner than he had expected) he found her, emerging from a Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson.

"Er - Cho? Could I have a word with you?"

Giggling should be made illegal. Harry thought furiously, as all the girls around Cho started doing it. She didn't, though. She said,

"Okay," and followed him out of earshot other classmates.

Harry turned to look at her and his stomach gave a weird lurch as though he had missed a step going downstairs.

"Er," he said.

He couldn't ask her. He couldn't. But he had to. Cho stood there looking puzzled, watching him. The words came out before Harry had quite got his tongue around them.

"Wangoballwime?"

"Sorry?" said Cho.

"D'you - d'you want to go to the ball with me?" said Harry. Why did he have to go red now? Why?

"Oh!" said Cho, and she went red too. "Oh Harry, I'm really sorry," and she truly looked it. "I've already said I'll go with someone else."

"Oh," said Harry.

It was odd; a moment before his insides had been writhing like snakes, but suddenly he didn't seem to have any insides at all.

"Oh okay," he said, "no problem."

"I'm really sorry," she said again.

"That's okay," said Harry.

They stood there looking at each other, and then Cho said, "Well—"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"Well, 'bye," said Cho, still very red. She walked away.

Harry called after her, before he could stop himself.

"Who're you going with?"

"Oh - Cedric," she said. "Cedric Diggory."

"Oh right," said Harry.

His insides had come back again. It felt as though they had been filled with lead in their absence.

Completely forgetting about dinner, he walked slowly back up to Gryffindor Tower, Cho's voice echoing in his ears with every step he took. "Cedric - Cedric Diggory." He had been starting to quite like Cedric - prepared to overlook the fact that he had once beaten him at Quidditch, and was handsome, and popular, and nearly everyone's favorite champion. Now he suddenly realized that Cedric was in fact a useless pretty boy who didn't have enough brains to fill an eggcup.

"Fairy lights," he said dully to the Fat Lady - the password had been changed the previous day.

"Yes, indeed, dear!" she trilled, straightening her new tinsel hair band as she swung forward to admit him.

Entering the common room, Harry looked around, and to his surprise he saw Ron sitting ashen-faced in a distant corner. Ginny was sitting with him, talking to him in what seemed to be a low, soothing voice.

"What's up, Ron?" said Harry, joining them.

Ron looked up at Harry, a sort of blind horror in his face.

"Why did I do it?" he said wildly. "I don't know what made me do it!"

"What?" said Harry.

"He - er - just asked Fleur Delacour to go to the ball with him," said Ginny. She looked as though she was fighting back a smile, but she kept patting Ron's arm sympathetically.

"You what?" said Harry.

"I don't know what made me do it!" Ron gasped again. "What was I playing at? There were people - all around - I've gone mad - everyone watching! I was just walking past her in the entrance hall - she was standing there talking to Diggory - and it sort of came over me - and I asked her!"

Ron moaned and put his face in his hands. He kept talking, though the words were barely distinguishable.

"She looked at me like I was a sea slug or something. Didn't even answer. And then - I dunno - I just sort of came to my senses and ran for it."

"She's part veela," said Harry. "You were right - her grandmother was one. It wasn't your fault, I bet you just walked past when she was turning on the old charm for Diggory and got a blast of it - but she was wasting her time. He's going with Cho Chang."

Ron looked up.

"I asked her to go with me just now," Harry said dully, "and she told me."

Ginny had suddenly stopped smiling.

"This is mad," said Ron. "We're the only ones left who haven't got anyone - well, except Neville. Hey - guess who he asked? Hermione!"

"What?" said Harry, completely distracted by this startling news.

"Yeah, I know!" said Ron, some of the color coming back into his face as he started to laugh. "He told me after Potions! Said she's always been really nice, helping him out with work and stuff- but she told him she was already going with someone. Ha! As if! She just didn't want to go with Neville ... I mean, who would?"

"Don't!" said Ginny, annoyed. "Don't laugh -"

Just then Hermione climbed in through the portrait hole.

"Why weren't you two at dinner?" she said, coming over to join them.

"Because - oh shut up laughing, you two - because they've both just been turned down by girls they asked to the ball!" said Ginny.

That shut Harry and Ron up.

"Thanks a bunch, Ginny," said Ron sourly.

"All the good-looking ones taken, Ron?" said Hermione loftily. "Eloise Midgen starting to look quite pretty now, is she? Well, I'm sure you'll find someone somewhere who'll have you."

But Ron was staring at Hermione as though suddenly seeing her in a whole new light.

"Hermione, Neville's right - you are a girl. . . ."

"Oh well spotted," she said acidly.

"Well - you can come with one of us!"

"No, I can't," snapped Hermione.

"Oh come on," he said impatiently, "we need partners, we're going to look really stupid if we haven't got any, everyone else has"

"I can't come with you," said Hermione, now blushing, "because I'm already going with someone."

"No, you're not!" said Ron. "You just said that to get rid of Neville!"

"Oh did I?" said Hermione, and her eyes flashed dangerously. "Just because it's taken you three years to notice, Ron, doesn't mean no one else has spotted I'm a girl!"

Ron stared at her. Then he grinned again.

"Okay, okay, we know you're a girl," he said. "That do? Will you come now?"

"I've already told you!" Hermione said very angrily. "I'm going with someone else!"

And she stormed off toward the girls' dormitories again.

"She's lying," said Ron flatly, watching her go.

"She's not," said Ginny quietly.

"Who is it then?" said Ron sharply.

"I'm not telling you, it's her business," said Ginny.

"Right," said Ron, who looked extremely put out, "this is getting stupid. Ginny, you can go with Harry, and I'll just -"

"I can't," said Ginny, and she went scarlet too. "I'm going with - with Neville. He asked me when Hermione said no, and I thought. . . well. . . I'm not going to be able to go otherwise, I'm not in fourth year." She looked extremely miserable. "I think I'll go and have dinner," she said, and she got up and walked off to the portrait hole, her head bowed.

Ron goggled at Harry.

"What's got into them?" he demanded.

But Harry had just seen Parvati and Lavender come in through the portrait hole. The time had come for drastic action.

"Wait here," he said to Ron, and he stood up, walked straight up to Parvati, and said, "Parvati? Will you go to the ball with me?" Parvati went into a fit of giggles. Harry waited for them to subside, his fingers crossed in the pocket of his robes.

"Yes, all right then," she said finally, blushing furiously.

"Thanks," said Harry, in relief. "Lavender - will you go with Ron?"

"She's going with Seamus," said Parvati, and the pair of them giggled harder than ever.

Harry sighed.

"Can't you think of anyone who'd go with Ron?" he said, lowering his voice so that Ron wouldn't hear.

"What about Hermione Granger?" said Parvati.

"She's going with someone else."

Parvati looked astonished.

"Ooooh - who?" she said keenly.

Harry shrugged. "No idea," he said. "So what about Ron?"

"Well. . ." said Parvati slowly, "I suppose my sister might. . . Padma, you know . . . in Ravenclaw. I'll ask her if you like."

"Yeah, that would be great," said Harry. "Let me know, will you?"

And he went back over to Ron, feeling that this ball was a lot more trouble than it was worth, and hoping very much that Padma Patil's nose was dead center.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE - THE YULE BALL

Despite the very heavy load of homework that the fourth years had been given for the holidays. Harry was in no mood to work when term ended, and spent the week leading up to Christmas enjoying himself as fully as possible along with everyone else. Gryffindor Tower was hardly less crowded now than during term-time; it seemed to have shrunk slightly too, as its inhabitants were being so much rowdier than usual. Fred and George had had a great success with their Canary Creams, and for the first couple of days of the holidays, people kept bursting into feather all over the place. Before long, however, all the Gryffindors had learned to treat food anybody else offered them with extreme caution, in case it had a Canary Cream concealed in the center, and George confided to Harry that he and Fred were now working on developing something else. Harry made a mental note never to accept so much as a crisp from Fred and George in future. He still hadn't forgotten Dudley and the Ton-Tongue Toffee.

Snow was falling thickly upon the castle and its grounds now. The pale blue Beauxbatons carriage looked like a large, chilly, frosted pumpkin next to the iced gingerbread house that was Hagrid's cabin, while the Durmstrang ship's portholes were glazed with ice, the rigging white with frost. The house-elves down in the kitchen were outdoing themselves with a series of rich, warming stews and savory puddings, and only Fleur Delacour seemed to be able to find anything to complain about.

"It is too 'eavy, all zis 'Ogwarts food," they heard her saying grumpily as they left the Great Hall behind her one evening (Ron skulking behind Harry, keen not to be spotted by Fleur). "I will not fit into my dress robes!"

"Oooh there's a tragedy," Hermione snapped as Fleur went out into the entrance hall. "She really thinks a lot of herself, that one, doesn't she?"

"Hermione - who are you going to the ball with?" said Ron.

He kept springing this question on her, hoping to startle her into a response by asking it when she least expected it. However, Hermione

merely frowned and said, "I'm not telling you, you'll just make fun of me."

"You're joking, Weasley!" said Malfoy, behind them. "You're not telling me someone's asked that to the ball? Not the long-molared Mudblood?"
;

Harry and Ron both whipped around, but Hermione said loudly, waving to somebody over Malfoys shoulder, "Hello, Professor Moody!"

Malfoy went pale and jumped backward, looking wildly around for Moody, but he was still up at the staff table, finishing his stew.

"Twitchy little ferret, aren't you, Malfoy?" said Hermione scathingly, and she, Harry, and Ron went up the marble staircase laughing heartily. "Hermione," said Ron, looking sideways at her, suddenly frowning, "your teeth ..."

"What about them?" she said.

"Well, they're different. . . I've just noticed. . . ."

"Of course they are - did you expect me to keep those fangs Malfoy gave me?"

"No, I mean, they're different to how they were before he put that hex on you. . . . They're all... straight and - and normal-sized."

Hermione suddenly smiled very mischievously, and Harry noticed it too: It was a very different smile from the one he remembered.

"Well. . . when I went up to Madam Pomfrey to get them shrunk, she held up a mirror and told me to stop her when they were back to how they normally were," she said. "And I just. . . let her carry on a bit." She smiled even more widely. "Mum and Dad won't be too pleased. I've been trying to persuade them to let me shrink them for ages, but they wanted me to carry on with my braces. You know, they're dentists, they just don't think teeth and magic should - look! Pigwidgeons back!"

Ron's tiny owl was twittering madly on the top of the icicle-laden banisters, a scroll of parchment tied to his leg. People passing him were pointing and laughing, and a group of third-year girls paused and said, "Oh look at the weeny owl! Isn't he cute?"

Stupid little feathery git!" Ron hissed, hurrying up the stairs and snatching up Pigwidgeon. "You bring letters to the addressee! You don't hang around showing off!"

Pigwidgeon hooted happily, his head protruding over Ron's fist. The third-year girls all looked very shocked.

"Clear off!" Ron snapped at them, waving the fist holding Pigwidgeon, who hooted more happily than ever as he soared through the air. "Here - take it, Harry," Ron added in an undertone as the third-year girls scuttled away looking scandalized. He pulled Sirius's reply off Pigwidgeons leg. Harry pocketed it, and they hurried back to Gryffindor Tower to read it.

Everyone in the common room was much too busy in letting off more holiday steam to observe what anyone else was up to. Ron, Harry, and Hermione sat apart from everyone else by a dark window that was gradually filling up with snow, and Harry read out:

Dear Harry,

Congratulations on getting past the Horntail. Whoever put your name in that goblet shouldn't be feeling too happy right now! I was going to suggest a Conjunctivitus Curse, as a dragon's eyes are its weakest point - "That's what Krum did!" Hermione whispered - but your way was better, I'm impressed.

Don't get complacent, though. Harry. You've only done one task; whoever put you in for the tournament's got plenty more opportunity if they're trying to hurt you. Keep your eyes open -particularly when the person we discussed is around and concentrate on keeping yourself out of trouble. Keep in touch, I still want to hear about anything unusual.

Sirius

"He sounds exactly like Moody," said Harry quietly, tucking the letter away again inside his robes. "'Constant vigilance!' You'd think I walk around with my eyes shut, banging off the walls. . . ."

"But he's right, Harry," said Hermione, "you have still got two tasks to do. You really ought to have a look at that egg, you know, and start working out what it means. . . ."

"Hermione, he's got ages!" snapped Ron. "Want a game of chess, Harry?" "Yeah, okay," said Harry. Then, spotting the look on Hermione's face, he said, "Come on, how'm I supposed to concentrate with all this noise going on? I won't even be able to hear the egg over this lot."

"Oh I suppose not," she sighed, and she sat down to watch their chess match, which culminated in an exciting checkmate of Ron's, involving a couple of recklessly brave pawns and a very violent bishop.

Harry awoke very suddenly on Christmas Day. Wondering what had caused his abrupt return to consciousness, he opened his eyes, and saw something with very large, round, green eyes staring back at him in the darkness, so close they were almost nose to nose.

"Dobby!" Harry yelled, scrambling away from the elf so fast he almost fell out of bed. "Don't do that!"

"Dobby is sorry, sir!" squeaked Dobby anxiously, jumping backward with his long fingers over his mouth. "Dobby is only wanting to wish Harry Potter 'Merry Christmas' and bring him a present, Sir! Harry Potter did say Dobby could come and see him sometimes, sir!"

"It's okay," said Harry, still breathing rather faster than usual, while his heart rate returned to normal. "Just - just prod me or something in future, all right, don't bend over me like that. . . ."

Harry pulled back the curtains around his four-poster, took his glasses from his bedside table, and put them on. His yell had awoken Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville. All of them were peering through the gaps in their own hangings, heavy-eyed and tousle-haired.

"Someone attacking you, Harry?" Seamus asked sleepily.

"No, it's just Dobby," Harry muttered. "Go back to sleep."

"Nah . . . presents!" said Seamus, spotting the large pile at the foot of his bed. Ron, Dean, and Neville decided that now they were awake they might as well get down to some present-opening too. Harry turned back to Dobby, who was now standing nervously next to Harry's bed, still looking worried that he had upset Harry. There was a Christmas bauble tied to the loop on top of his tea cozy.

"Can Dobby give Harry Potter his present?" he squeaked tentatively.

"Course you can," said Harry. "Er. . . I've got something for you too." It was a lie; he hadn't bought anything for Dobby at all, but he quickly opened his trunk and pulled out a particularly knobbly rolled-up pair of socks. They were his oldest and foulest, mustard yellow, and had once belonged to Uncle Vernon. The reason they were extra-knobbly was that Harry had been using them to cushion his Sneakoscope for over a year now. He pulled out the Sneako-scope and handed the socks to Dobby, saying, "Sorry, I forgot to wrap them..."

But Dobby was utterly delighted.

"Socks are Dobby's favorite, favorite clothes, sir!" he said, ripping off his odd ones and pulling on Uncle Vernon's. "I has seven now, sir. . . . But sir . . ." he said, his eyes widening, having pulled both socks up to their highest extent, so that they reached to the bottom of his shorts, "they has made a mistake in the shop, Harry Potter, they is giving you two the same!"

"Ah, no, Harry, how come you didn't spot that?" said Ron, grinning over from his own bed, which was now strewn with wrapping paper. "Tell you what, Dobby - here you go - take these two, and you can mix them up properly. And here's your sweater."

He threw Dobby a pair of violet socks he had just unwrapped, and the hand-knitted sweater Mrs. Weasley had sent, Dobby looked quite overwhelmed.

"Sir is very kind!" he squeaked, his eyes brimming with tears again, bowing deeply to Ron. "Dobby knew sir must be a great wizard, for he is Harry Potter's greatest friend, but Dobby did not know that he was also as generous of spirit, as noble, as selfless -"

"They're only socks," said Ron, who had gone slightly pink around the ears, though he looked rather pleased all the same. "Wow, Harry -" He had just opened Harry's present, a Chudley Cannon hat. "Cool!" He jammed it onto his head, where it clashed horribly with his hair.

Dobby now handed Harry a small package, which turned out to be - socks. "Dobby is making them himself, sir!" the elf said happily. "He is buying the wool out of his wages, sir!"

The left sock was bright red and had a pattern of broomsticks upon it; the right sock was green with a pattern of Snitches.

"They're . . . they're really . . . well, thanks, Dobby," said Harry, and he pulled them on, causing Dobby's eyes to leak with happiness again.

"Dobby must go now, sir, we is already making Christmas dinner in the kitchens!" said Dobby, and he hurried out of the dormitory, waving goodbye to Ron and the others as he passed.

Harry's other presents were much more satisfactory than Dobby's odd socks - with the obvious exception of the Dursleys', which consisted of a single tissue, an all-time low - Harry supposed they too were remembering the Ton-Tongue Toffee. Hermione had given Harry a book called Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland; Ron, a bulging bag of Dungbombs; Sirius, a handy penknife with attachments to unlock any lock and undo any knot; and Hagrid, a vast box of sweets including all Harry's favorites: Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Chocolate Frogs, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, and Fizzing Whizbees. There was also, of course, Mrs. Weasley's usual package, including a new sweater (green, with a picture of a dragon on it - Harry supposed Charlie had told her all about the Horntail), and a large quantity of homemade mince pies.

Harry and Ron met up with Hermione in the common room, and they went down to breakfast together. They spent most of the morning in Gryffindor Tower, where everyone was enjoying their presents, then returned to the Great Hall for a magnificent lunch, which included at least a hundred turkeys and Christmas puddings, and large piles of Cribbage's Wizarding Crackers.

They went out onto the grounds in the afternoon; the snow was untouched except for the deep channels made by the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students on their way up to the castle. Hermione chose to watch Harry and the Weasleys' snowball fight rather than join in, and at five o'clock said she was going back upstairs to get ready for the ball.

"What, you need three hours?" said Ron, looking at her incredulously and paying for his lapse in concentration when a large snowball, thrown by George, hit him hard on the side of the head. "Who're you going with?" he yelled after Hermione, but she just waved and disappeared up the stone steps into the castle.

There was no Christmas tea today, as the ball included a feast, so at seven o'clock, when it had become hard to aim properly, the others abandoned their snowball fight and trooped back to the common room. The Fat Lady was sitting in her frame with her friend Violet from downstairs, both of them extremely tipsy, empty boxes of chocolate liqueurs littering the bottom other picture.

"Lairy fights, that's the one!" she giggled when they gave the password, and she swung forward to let them inside.

Harry, Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville changed into their dress robes up in their dormitory, all of them looking very self-conscious, but none as much as Ron, who surveyed himself in the long mirror in the corner with

an appalled look on his face. There was just no getting around the fact that his robes looked more like a dress than anything else. In a desperate attempt to make them look more manly, he used a Severing Charm on the ruff and cuffs. It worked fairly well; at least he was now lace-free, although he hadn't done a very neat job, and the edges still looked depressingly frayed as the boys set off downstairs.

"I still can't work out how you two got the best-looking girls in the year," muttered Dean.

"Animal magnetism," said Ron gloomily, pulling stray threads out of his cuffs.

The common room looked strange, full of people wearing different colors instead of the usual mass of black. Parvati was waiting for Harry at the foot of the stairs. She looked very pretty indeed, in robes of shocking pink, with her long dark plait braided with gold, and gold bracelets glimmering at her wrists. Harry was relieved to see that she wasn't giggling.

"You - er - look nice," he said awkwardly.

"Thanks," she said. "Padma's going to meet you in the entrance hall," she added to Ron.

"Right," said Ron, looking around. "Where's Hermione?"

Parvati shrugged. "Shall we go down then, Harry?"

"Okay," said Harry, wishing he could just stay in the common room. Fred winked at Harry as he passed him on the way out of the portrait hole. The entrance hall was packed with students too, all milling around waiting for eight o'clock, when the doors to the Great Hall would be thrown open. Those people who were meeting partners from different Houses were edging through the crowd trying to find one another. Parvati found her sister, Padma, and led her over to Harry and Ron.

"Hi," said Padma, who was looking just as pretty as Parvati in robes of bright turquoise. She didn't look too enthusiastic about having Ron as a partner, though; her dark eyes lingered on the frayed neck and sleeves of his dress robes as she looked him up and down.

"Hi," said Ron, not looking at her, but staring around at the crowd. "Oh no . . ."

He bent his knees slightly to hide behind Harry, because Fleur Delacour was passing, looking stunning in robes of silver-gray satin, and accompanied by the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain, Roger Davies. When they had disappeared, Ron stood straight again and stared over the heads of the crowd.

"Where is Hermione?" he said again.

A group of Slytherins came up the steps from their dungeon common room. Malfoy was in front; he was wearing dress robes of black velvet with a high collar, which in Harry's opinion made him look like a vicar. Pansy Parkinson in very frilly robes of pale pink was clutching Malfoy's arm. Crabbe and Goyle were both wearing green; they resembled moss-colored boulders, and neither of them, Harry was pleased to see, had managed to find a partner.

The oak front doors opened, and everyone turned to look as the Durmstrang students entered with Professor Karkaroff. Krum was at the front of the party, accompanied by a pretty girl in blue robes Harry didn't know.

Over their heads he saw that an area of lawn right in front of the castle had been transformed into a sort of grotto full of fairy lights - meaning hundreds of actual living fairies were sitting in the rosebushes that had been conjured there, and fluttering over the statues of what seemed to be Father Christmas and his reindeer.

Then Professor McGonagall's voice called, "Champions over here, please!" Parvati readjusted her bangles, beaming; she and Harry said, "See you in a minute" to Ron and Padma and walked forward, the chattering crowd parting to let them through. Professor McGonagall, who was wearing dress robes of red tartan and had arranged a rather ugly wreath of thistles

around the brim other hat, told them to wait on one side of the doors while everyone else went inside; they were to enter the Great Hall in procession when the rest of the students had sat down. Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies stationed themselves nearest the doors; Davies looked so stunned by his good fortune in having Fleur for a partner that he could hardly take his eyes off her. Cedric and Cho were close to Harry too; he looked away from them so he wouldn't have to talk to them. His eyes fell instead on the girl next to Krum. His jaw dropped.

It was Hermione.

But she didn't look like Hermione at all. She had done something with her hair; it was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny, and twisted up into an elegant knot at the back of her head. She was wearing robes made of a floaty, periwinkle-blue material, and she was holding herself differently, somehow - or maybe it was merely the absence of the twenty or so books she usually had slung over her back. She was also smiling - rather nervously, it was true - but the reduction in the size of her front teeth was more noticeable than ever; Harry couldn't understand how he hadn't spotted it before.

"Hi, Harry!" she said. "Hi, Parvati!"

Parvati was gazing at Hermione in unflattering disbelief. She wasn't the only one either; when the doors to the Great Hall opened, Krum's fan club from the library stalked past, throwing Hermione looks of deepest loathing. Pansy Parkinson gaped at her as she walked by with Malfoy, and even he didn't seem to be able to find an insult to throw at her. Ron, however, walked right past Hermione without looking at her.

Once everyone else was settled in the Hall, Professor McGonagall told the champions and their partners to get in line in pairs and to follow her. They did so, and everyone in the Great Hall applauded as they entered and started walking up toward a large round table at the top of the Hall, where the judges were sitting.

The walls of the Hall had all been covered in sparkling silver frost, with hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crossing the starry black ceiling. The House tables had vanished; instead, there were about a hundred smaller, lantern-lit ones, each seating about a dozen people. Harry concentrated on not tripping over his feet. Parvati seemed to be enjoying herself; she was beaming around at everybody, steering Harry so forcefully that he felt as though he were a show dog she was putting through its paces. He caught sight of Ron and Padma as he neared the top table. Ron was watching Hermione pass with narrowed eyes. Padma was looking sulky.

Dumbledore smiled happily as the champions approached the top table, but Karkaroff wore an expression remarkably like Ron's as he watched Krum and Hermione draw nearer. Ludo Bagman, tonight in robes of bright purple with large yellow stars, was clapping as enthusiastically as any of the students; and Madame Maxime, who had changed her usual uniform of black satin for a flowing gown of lavender silk, was applauding them politely. But Mr. Crouch, Harry suddenly realized, was not there. The fifth seat at the table was occupied by Percy Weasley.

When the champions and their partners reached the table, Percy drew out the empty chair beside him, staring pointedly at Harry. Harry took the hint and sat down next to Percy, who was wearing brand-new, navy-blue dress robes and an expression of such smugness that Harry thought it ought to be fined.

"I've been promoted," Percy said before Harry could even ask, and from his tone, he might have been announcing his election as supreme ruler of the universe. "I'm now Mr. Crouch's personal assistant, and I'm here representing him."

"Why didn't he come?" Harry asked. He wasn't looking forward to being lectured on cauldron bottoms all through dinner.

"I'm afraid to say Mr. Crouch isn't well, not well at all. Hasn't been right since the World Cup. Hardly surprising - overwork. He's not as young as he was - though still quite brilliant, of course, the mind remains as great as it ever was. But the World Cup was a fiasco for the whole Ministry, and then, Mr. Crouch suffered a huge personal shock with the misbehavior of that house-elf of his, Blinky, or whatever she was called. Naturally, he dismissed her immediately afterward, but - well, as I say, he's getting on, he needs looking after, and I think he's found a definite drop in his home comforts since she left. And then we had the tournament to arrange, and the aftermath of the Cup to deal with - that revolting Skeeter woman buzzing around - no, poor man, he's having a well earned, quiet Christmas. I'm just glad he knew he had someone he could rely upon to take his place."

Harry wanted very much to ask whether Mr. Crouch had stopped calling Percy "Weatherby" yet, but resisted the temptation.

There was no food as yet on the glittering golden plates, but small menus were lying in front of each of them. Harry picked his up uncertainly and looked around - there were no waiters. Dumbledore, however, looked carefully down at his own menu, then said very clearly to his plate, "Pork chops!"

And pork chops appeared. Getting the idea, the rest of the table placed their orders with their plates too. Harry glanced up at Hermione to see how she felt about this new and more complicated method of dining - surely it meant plenty of extra work for the house-elves? - but for once, Hermione didn't seem to be thinking about S.P.E.W. She was deep in talk with Viktor Krum and hardly seemed to notice what she was eating.

It now occurred to Harry that he had never actually heard Krum speak before, but he was certainly talking now, and very enthusiastically at that.

"Veil, ve have a castle also, not as big as this, nor as comfortable, I am thinking," he was telling Hermione. "Ve have just four floors, and the fires are lit only for magical purposes. But ve have grounds larger even than these - though in vinter, ve have very little daylight, so ve are not enjoying them. But in summer ve are flying every day, over the lakes and the mountains -"

"Now, now, Viktor!" said Karkaroff with a laugh that didn't reach his cold eyes, "don't go giving away anything else, now, or your charming friend will know exactly where to find us!"

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling. "Igor, all this secrecy . . . one would almost think you didn't want visitors."

"Well, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff, displaying his yellowing teeth to their fullest extent, "we are all protective of our private domains, are we not? Do we not jealously guard the halls of learning that have been entrusted to us? Are we not right to be proud that we alone know our school's secrets, and right to protect them?"

"Oh I would never dream of assuming I know all Hogwarts' secrets, Igor," said Dumbledore amicably. "Only this morning, for instance, I took a wrong turning on the way to the bathroom and found myself in a beautifully proportioned room I have never seen before, containing a really rather magnificent collection of chamber pots. When I went back to investigate more closely, I discovered that the room had vanished. But I must keep an eye out for it. Possibly it is only accessible at five-thirty in the morning. Or it may only appear at the quarter moon - or when the seeker has an exceptionally full bladder."

Harry snorted into his plate of goulash. Percy frowned, but Harry could have sworn Dumbledore had given him a very small wink.

Meanwhile Fleur Delacour was criticizing the Hogwarts decorations to Roger Davies.

"Zis is nothing," she said dismissively, looking around at the sparkling walls of the Great Hall. "At ze Palace of Beauxbatons, we 'ave ice

sculptures all around ze dining chamber at Chreestmas. Zey do not melt, of course . . . zey are like 'uge statues of diamond, glittering around ze place. And ze food is seemply superb. And we 'ave choirs of wood nymphs, 'oo serenade us as we eat. We 'ave none of zis ugly armor in ze 'alls, and eef a poltergeist ever entaired into Beauxbatons, 'e would be expelled like zat." She slapped her hand onto the table impatiently. Roger Davies was watching her talk with a very dazed look on his face, and he kept missing his mouth with his fork. Harry had the impression that Davies was too busy staring at Fleur to take in a word she was saying.

"Absolutely right," he said quickly, slapping his own hand down on the table in imitation of Fleur. "Like that. Yeah."

Harry looked around the Hall. Hagrid was sitting at one of the other staff tables; he was back in his horrible hairy brown suit and gazing up at the top table. Harry saw him give a small wave, and looking around, saw Madame Maxime return it, her opals glittering in the candlelight. Hermione was now teaching Krum to say her name properly; he kept calling her "Hermy-own."

"Her-my-oh-nee," she said slowly and clearly.

"Herm-own-ninny."

"Close enough," she said, catching Harry's eye and grinning.

When all the food had been consumed, Dumbledore stood up and asked the students to do the same. Then, with a wave of his wand, all the tables zoomed back along the walls leaving the floor clear, and then he conjured a raised platform into existence along the right wall. A set of drums, several guitars, a lute, a cello, and some bagpipes were set upon it. The "Weird Sisters now trooped up onto the stage to wildly enthusiastic applause; they were all extremely hairy and dressed in black robes that had been artfully ripped and torn. They picked up their instruments, and Harry, who had been so interested in watching them that he had almost forgotten what was coming, suddenly realized that the lanterns on all the other tables had gone out, and that the other champions and their partners were standing up.

"Come on!" Parvati hissed. "We're supposed to dance!"

Harry tripped over his dress robes as he stood up. The Weird Sisters struck up a slow, mournful tune; Harry walked onto the brightly lit dance floor, carefully avoiding catching anyone's eye (he could see Seamus and Dean waving at him and sniggering), and next moment, Parvati had seized his hands, placed one around her waist, and was holding the other tightly in hers.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been. Harry thought, revolving slowly on the spot (Parvati was steering). He kept his eyes fixed over the heads of the watching people, and very soon many of them too had come onto the dance floor, so that the champions were no longer the center of attention. Neville and Ginny were dancing nearby - he could see Ginny wincing frequently as Neville trod on her feet - and Dumbledore was waltzing with Madame Maxime. He was so dwarfed by her that the top of his pointed hat barely tickled her chin; however, she moved very gracefully for a woman so large. Mad-Eye Moody was doing an extremely ungainly two-step with Professor Sinistra, who was nervously avoiding his wooden leg.

"Nice socks. Potter," Moody growled as he passed, his magical eye staring through Harry's robes.

"Oh - yeah, Dobby the house-elf knitted them for me," said Harry, grinning.

"He is so creepy!" Parvati whispered as Moody clunked away. "I don't think that eye should be allowed."

Harry heard the final, quavering note from the bagpipe with relief. The Weird Sisters stopped playing, applause filled the hall once more, and Harry let go of Parvati at once.

"Let's sit down, shall we?"

"Oh - but - this is a really good one!" Parvati said as the Weird Sisters struck up a new song, which was much faster.

"No, I don't like it," Harry lied, and he led her away from the dance floor, past Fred and Angelina, who were dancing so exuberantly that people around them were backing away in fear of injury, and over to the table where Ron and Padma were sitting.

"How's it going?" Harry asked Ron, sitting down and opening a bottle of butterbeer.

Ron didn't answer. He was glaring at Hermione and Krum, who were dancing nearby. Padma was sitting with her arms and legs crossed, one foot jiggling in time to the music. Every now and then she threw a disgruntled look at Ron, who was completely ignoring her. Parvati sat down on Harry's other side, crossed her arms and legs too, and within minutes was asked to dance by a boy from Beauxbatons.

"You don't mind, do you, Harry?" Parvati said.

"What?" said Harry, who was now watching Cho and Cedric.

"Oh never mind," snapped Parvati, and she went off with the boy from Beauxbatons. When the song ended, she did not return.

Hermione came over and sat down in Parvati's empty chair. She was a bit pink in the face from dancing.

"Hi," said Harry. Ron didn't say anything.

"It's hot, isn't it?" said Hermione, fanning herself with her hand.

"Viktors just gone to get some drinks."

Ron gave her a withering look. "Viktor?" he said. "Hasn't he asked you to call him Vicky yet?"

Hermione looked at him in surprise. "What's up with you?" she said.

"If you don't know," said Ron scathingly, "I'm not going to tell you."

Hermione stared at him, then at Harry, who shrugged.

"Ron, what - ?"

"He's from Durmstrang!" spat Ron. "He's competing against Harry! Against Hogwarts! You - you're -" Ron was obviously casting around for words strong enough to describe Hermione's crime, "fraternizing with the enemy, that's what you're doing!"

Hermione's mouth fell open.

"Don't be so stupid!" she said after a moment. "The enemy! Honestly - who was the one who was all excited when they saw him arrive? Who was the one who wanted his autograph? Who's got a model of him up in their dormitory?"

Ron chose to ignore this. "I s'pose he asked you to come with him while you were both in the library?"

"Yes, he did," said Hermione, the pink patches on her cheeks glowing more brightly. "So what?"

"What happened - trying to get him to join spew, were you?"

"No, I wasn't! If you really want to know, he - he said he'd been coming up to the library every day to try and talk to me, but he hadn't been able to pluck up the courage!"

Hermione said this very quickly, and blushed so deeply that she was the same color as Parvati's robes.

"Yeah, well - that's his story," said Ron nastily.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Obvious, isn't it? He's Karkaroff's student, isn't he? He knows who you hang around with. . . . He's just trying to get closer to Harry - get inside information on him - or get near enough to jinx him -"

Hermione looked as though Ron had slapped her. When she spoke, her voice quivered.

"For your information, he hasn't asked me one single thing about Harry, not one -"

Ron changed tack at the speed of light.

"Then he's hoping you'll help him find out what his egg means! I suppose you've been putting your heads together during those cozy little library sessions -"

"I'd never help him work out that egg!" said Hermione, looking outraged. "Never. How could you say something like that - I want Harry to win the tournament. Harry knows that, don't you, Harry?"

"You've got a funny way of showing it," sneered Ron.

"This whole tournament's supposed to be about getting to know foreign wizards and making friends with them!" said Hermione hotly.

"No it isn't!" shouted Ron. "It's about winning!"

People were starting to stare at them.

"Ron," said Harry quietly, "I haven't got a problem with Hermione coming with Krum -"

But Ron ignored Harry too.

"Why don't you go and find Vicky, he'll be wondering where you are," said Ron.

"Don't call him Vicky!"

Hermione jumped to her feet and stormed off across the dance floor, disappearing into the crowd. Ron watched her go with a mixture of anger and satisfaction on his face.

"Are you going to ask me to dance at all?" Padma asked him.

"No," said Ron, still glaring after Hermione.

"Fine," snapped Padma, and she got up and went to join Parvati and the Beauxbatons boy, who conjured up one of his friends to join them so fast that Harry could have sworn he had zoomed him there by a Summoning Charm.

"Vare is Herm-own-ninny?" said a voice.

Krum had just arrived at their table clutching two butterbeers.

"No idea," said Ron mulishly, looking up at him. "Lost her, have you?"

Krum was looking surly again.

"Veil, if you see her, tell her I haff drinks," he said, and he slouched off.

"Made friends with Viktor Krum, have you, Ron?"

Percy had hustled over, rubbing his hands together and looking extremely pompous. "Excellent! That's the whole point, you know - international magical cooperation!"

To Harry's displeasure, Percy now took Padma's vacated seat. The top table was now empty; Professor Dumbledore was dancing with Professor Sprout, Ludo Bagman with Professor McGonagall; Madame Maxime and Hagrid were cutting a wide path around the dance floor as they waltzed through the students, and Karkaroff was nowhere to be seen. When the next song ended, everybody applauded once more, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman kiss Professor McGonagall's hand and make his way back through the crowds, at which point Fred and George accosted him.

"What do they think they're doing, annoying senior Ministry members?"

Percy hissed, watching Fred and George suspiciously. "No respect..."

Ludo Bagman shook off Fred and George fairly quickly, however, and, spotting Harry, waved and came over to their table.

"I hope my brothers weren't bothering you, Mr. Bagman?" said Percy at once.

"What? Oh not at all, not at all!" said Bagman. "No, they were just telling me a bit more about those fake wands of theirs. Wondering if I could advise them on the marketing. I've promised to put them in touch with a couple of contacts of mine at Zonko's Joke Shop. ..."

Percy didn't look happy about this at all, and Harry was prepared to bet he would be rushing to tell Mrs. Weasley about this the moment he got home. Apparently Fred and George's plans had grown even more ambitious lately, if they were hoping to sell to the public. Bagman opened his mouth to ask Harry something, but Percy diverted him.

"How do you feel the tournament's going, Mr. Bagman? Our department's quite satisfied - the hitch with the Goblet of Fire" - he glanced at

Harry - "was a little unfortunate, of course, but it seems to have gone very smoothly since, don't you think?"

"Oh yes," Bagman said cheerfully, "it's all been enormous fun. How's old Barty doing? Shame he couldn't come."

"Oh I'm sure Mr. Crouch will be up and about in no time," said Percy importantly, "but in the meantime, I'm more than willing to take up the slack. Of course, it's not all attending balls" - he laughed airily - "oh no, I've had to deal with all sorts of things that have cropped up in his absence - you heard Ali Bashir was caught smuggling a consignment of flying carpets into the country? And then we've been trying to persuade the Transylvanians to sign the International Ban on Dueling. I've got a meeting with their Head of Magical Cooperation in the new year -"

"Let's go for a walk," Ron muttered to Harry, "get away from Percy. . . ." Pretending they wanted more drinks. Harry and Ron left the table, edged around the dance floor, and slipped out into the entrance hall. The front doors stood open, and the fluttering fairy lights in the rose garden winked and twinkled as they went down the front steps, where they found themselves surrounded by bushes; winding, ornamental paths; and large stone statues. Harry could hear splashing water, which sounded like a fountain. Here and there, people were sitting on carved benches. He and Ron set off along one of the winding paths through the rosebushes, but they had gone only a short way when they heard an unpleasantly familiar voice.

"... don't see what there is to fuss about, Igor."

"Severus, you cannot pretend this isn't happening!" Karkaroffs voice sounded anxious and hushed, as though keen not to be overheard. "It's been getting clearer and clearer for months. I am becoming seriously concerned, I can't deny it _"

"Then flee," said Snapes voice curtly. "Flee - I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts."

Snape and Karkaroff came around the corner. Snape had his wand out and was blasting rosebushes apart, his expression most ill-natured. Squeals issued from many of the bushes, and dark shapes emerged from them.

"Ten points from Ravenclaw, Fawcett!" Snape snarled as a girl ran past him. "And ten points from Hufflepuff too, Stebbins!" as a boy went rushing after her. "And what are you two doing?" he added, catching sight of Harry and Ron on the path ahead. Karkaroff, Harry saw, looked slightly discomposed to see them standing there. His hand went nervously to his goatee, and he began winding it around his finger.

"We're walking," Ron told Snape shortly. "Not against the law, is it?"

"Keep walking, then!" Snape snarled, and he brushed past them, his long black cloak billowing out behind him. Karkaroff hurried away after Snape. Harry and Ron continued down the path.

"What's got Karkaroff all worried?" Ron muttered.

"And since when have he and Snape been on first-name terms?" said Harry slowly.

They had reached a large stone reindeer now, over which they could see the sparkling jets of a tall fountain. The shadowy outlines of two enormous people were visible on a stone bench, watching the water in the moonlight. And then Harry heard Hagrid speak.

"Momen' I saw yeh, I knew," he was saying, in an oddly husky voice. Harry and Ron froze. This didn't sound like the sort of scene they ought to walk in on, somehow. . . . Harry looked around, back up the path, and saw Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies standing half-concealed in a rosebush nearby. He tapped Ron on the shoulder and jerked his head toward them, meaning that they could easily sneak off that way without being noticed (Fleur and Davies looked very busy to Harry), but Ron, eyes widening in horror at the sight of Fleur, shook his head vigorously, and pulled Harry deeper into the shadows behind the reindeer.

"What did you know, 'Agrid?" said Madame Maxime, a purr in her low voice.

Harry definitely didn't want to listen to this; he knew Hagrid would hate to be overheard in a situation like this (he certainly would have) - if it had been possible he would have put his fingers in his ears and hummed loudly, but that wasn't really an option. Instead he tried to interest himself in a beetle crawling along the stone reindeer's back, but the beetle just wasn't interesting enough to block out Hagrid's next words. "I jus' knew . . . knew you were like me. . . . Was it yer mother or yer father?"

"I - I don't know what you mean, 'Agrid. . . ."

"It was my mother," said Hagrid quietly. "She was one o' the las' ones in Britain. 'Course, I can't remember her too well. . . . she left, see. When I was abou' three. She wasn't really the maternal sort. Well. . . . it's not in their natures, is it? Dunno what happened to her . . . might be dead fer all I know. . . ."

Madame Maxime didn't say anything. And Harry, in spite of himself, took his eyes off the beetle and looked over the top of the reindeer's antlers, listening. . . . He had never heard Hagrid talk about his childhood before.

"Me dad was broken-hearted when she wen'. Tiny little bloke, my dad was. By the time I was six I could lift him up an' put him on top o' the dresser if he annoyed me. Used ter make him laugh. . . ." Hagrid's deep voice broke. Madame Maxime was listening, motionless, apparently staring at the silvery fountain. "Dad raised me . . . but he died, o' course, jus' after I started school. Sorta had ter make me own way after that. Dumbledore was a real help, mind. Very kind ter me, he was. . . ."

Hagrid pulled out a large spotted silk handkerchief and blew his nose heavily.

"So . . . anyway . . . enough abou' me. What about you? Which side you got it on?"

But Madame Maxime had suddenly got to her feet.

"It is chilly," she said - but whatever the weather was doing, it was nowhere near as cold as her voice. "I think I will go in now."

"Eh?" said Hagrid blankly. "No, don go! I've - I've never met another one before!"

"Anuzzer what, precisely?" said Madame Maxime, her tone icy.

Harry could have told Hagrid it was best not to answer; he stood there in the shadows gritting his teeth, hoping against hope he wouldn't - but it was no good. "Another half-giant, o' course!" said Hagrid.

"'Ow dare you!" shrieked Madame Maxime. Her voice exploded through the peaceful night air like a foghorn; behind him. Harry heard Fleur and Roger fall out of their rosebush. "I 'ave nevair been more insulted in my life! 'Alf-giant? Moi? I 'ave - I 'ave big bones!"

She stormed away; great multicolored swarms of fairies rose into the air as she passed, angrily pushing aside bushes. Hagrid was still sitting on the bench, staring after her. It was much too dark to make out his expression. Then, after about a minute, he stood up and strode away, not back to the castle, but off out into the dark grounds in the direction of his cabin.

"C'mon," Harry said, very quietly to Ron. "Let's go. . . ."

But Ron didn't move.

"What's up?" said Harry, looking at him.

Ron looked around at Harry, his expression very serious indeed.

"Did you know?" he whispered. "About Hagrid being half-giant?"

"No," Harry said, shrugging. "So what?"

He knew immediately, from the look Ron was giving him, that he was once again revealing his ignorance of the wizarding world. Brought up by the Dursleys, there were many things that wizards took for granted that were revelations to Harry, but these surprises had become fewer with each successive year. Now, however, he could tell that most wizards would not

have said "So what?" upon finding out that one of their friends had a giantess for a mother.

"I'll explain inside," said Ron quietly, "c'mon. . . ."

Fleur and Roger Davies had disappeared, probably into a more private clump of bushes. Harry and Ron returned to the Great Hall. Parvati and Padma were now sitting at a distant table with a whole crowd of Beauxbatons boys, and Hermione was once more dancing with Krum. Harry and Ron sat down at a table far removed from the dance floor.

"So?" Harry prompted Ron. "What's the problem with giants?"

"Well, they're . . . they're . . ." Ron struggled for words. ". . . not very nice," he finished lamely.

"Who cares?" Harry said. "There's nothing wrong with Hagrid!"

"I know there isn't, but. . . blimey, no wonder he keeps it quiet," Ron said, shaking his head. "I always thought he'd got in the way of a bad Engorgement Charm when he was a kid or something. Didn't like to mention it. . . ."

"But what's it matter if his mother was a giantess?" said Harry.

"Well... no one who knows him will care, 'cos they'll know he's not dangerous," said Ron slowly. "But. . . Harry, they're just vicious, giants. It's like Hagrid said, it's in their natures, they're like trolls . . . they just like killing, everyone knows that. There aren't any left in Britain now, though."

"What happened to them?"

"Well, they were dying out anyway, and then loads got themselves killed by Aurors. There're supposed to be giants abroad, though. . . . They hide out in mountains mostly. . . ."

"I don't know who Maxime thinks she's kidding," Harry said, watching Madame Maxime sitting alone at the judges' table, looking very somber.

"If Hagrid's half-giant, she definitely is. Big bones . . . the only thing that's got bigger bones than her is a dinosaur."

Harry and Ron spent the rest of the ball discussing giants in their corner, neither of them having any inclination to dance. Harry tried not to watch Cho and Cedric too much; it gave him a strong desire to kick something.

When the Weird Sisters finished playing at midnight, everyone gave them a last, loud round of applause and started to wend their way into the entrance hall. Many people were expressing the wish that the ball could have gone on longer, but Harry was perfectly happy to be going to bed; as far as he was concerned, the evening hadn't been much fun.

Out in the entrance hall, Harry and Ron saw Hermione saying good night to Krum before he went back to the Durmstrang ship. She gave Ron a very cold look and swept past him up the marble staircase without speaking.

Harry and Ron followed her, but halfway up the staircase Harry heard someone calling him.

"Hey-Harry!"

It was Cedric Diggory. Harry could see Cho waiting for him in the entrance hall below.

"Yeah?" said Harry coldly as Cedric ran up the stairs toward him. Cedric looked as though he didn't want to say whatever it was in front of Ron, who shrugged, looking bad-tempered, and continued to climb the stairs.

"Listen . . ." Cedric lowered his voice as Ron disappeared. "I owe you one for telling me about the dragons. You know that golden egg? Does yours wail when you open it?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"Well... take a bath, okay?"

"What?"

"Take a bath, and - er - take the egg with you, and - er - just mull things over in the hot water. It'll help you think. . . . Trust me."

Harry stared at him.

"Tell you what," Cedric said, "use the prefects' bathroom. Fourth door to the left of that statue of Boris the Bewildered on the fifth floor. Password's 'pine fresh.' Gotta go ... want to say good night -" He grinned at Harry again and hurried back down the stairs to Cho. Harry walked back to Gryffindor Tower alone. That had been extremely strange advice. Why would a bath help him to work out what the wailing egg meant? Was Cedric pulling his leg? Was he trying to make Harry look like a fool, so Cho would like him even more by comparison? The Fat Lady and her friend Vi were snoozing in the picture over the portrait hole. Harry had to yell "Fairy lights!" before he woke them up, and when he did, they were extremely irritated. He climbed into the common room and found Ron and Hermione having a blazing row. Standing ten feet apart, they were bellowing at each other, each scarlet in the face.

"Well, if you don't like it, you know what the solution is, don't you?" yelled Hermione; her hair was coming down out of its elegant bun now, and her face was screwed up in anger.

"Oh yeah?" Ron yelled back. "What's that?"

"Next time there's a ball, ask me before someone else does, and not as a last resort!"

Ron mouthed soundlessly like a goldfish out of water as Hermione turned on her heel and stormed up the girls' staircase to bed. Ron turned to look at Harry.

"Well," he sputtered, looking thunderstruck, "well - that just proves - completely missed the point --"

Harry didn't say anything. He liked being back on speaking terms with Ron too much to speak his mind right now - but he somehow thought that Hermione had gotten the point much better than Ron had.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR - RITA SKEETER'S SCOOP

Everybody got up late on Boxing Day. The Gryffindor common room was much quieter than it had been lately, many yawns punctuating the lazy conversations. Hermione's hair was bushy again; she confessed to Harry that she had used liberal amounts of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion on it for the ball, "but it's way too much bother to do every day," she said matter-of-factly, scratching a purring Crookshanks behind the ears. Ron and Hermione seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement not to discuss their argument. They were being quite friendly to each other, though oddly formal. Ron and Harry wasted no time in telling Hermione about the conversation they had overheard between Madame Maxime and Hagrid, but Hermione didn't seem to find the news that Hagrid was a half-giant nearly as shocking as Ron did.

"Well, I thought he must be," she said, shrugging. "I knew he couldn't be pure giant because they're about twenty feet tall. But honestly, all this hysteria about giants. They can't all be horrible. . . . It's the same sort of prejudice that people have toward werewolves. . . . It's just bigotry, isn't it?"

Ron looked as though he would have liked to reply scathingly, but perhaps he didn't want another row, because he contented himself with shaking his head disbelievingly while Hermione wasn't looking.

It was time now to think of the homework they had neglected during the first week of the holidays. Everybody seemed to be feeling rather flat now that Christmas was over - everybody except Harry, that is, who was starting (once again) to feel slightly nervous.

The trouble was that February the twenty-fourth looked a lot closer from this side of Christmas, and he still hadn't done anything about working out the clue inside the golden egg. He therefore started taking the egg out of his trunk every time he went up to the dormitory, opening it, and listening intently, hoping that this time it would make some sense. He

strained to think what the sound reminded him of, apart from thirty musical saws, but he had never heard anything else like it. He closed the egg, shook it vigorously, and opened it again to see if the sound had changed, but it hadn't. He tried asking the egg questions, shouting over all the wailing, but nothing happened. He even threw the egg across the room - though he hadn't really expected that to help.

Harry had not forgotten the hint that Cedric had given him, but his less-than-friendly feelings toward Cedric just now meant that he was keen not to take his help if he could avoid it. In any case, it seemed to him that if Cedric had really wanted to give Harry a hand, he would have been a lot more explicit. He, Harry, had told Cedric exactly what was coming in the first task - and Cedric's idea of a fair exchange had been to tell Harry to take a bath. Well, he didn't need that sort of rubbishy help - not from someone who kept walking down corridors hand in hand with Cho, anyway. And so the first day of the new term arrived, and Harry set off to lessons, weighed down with books, parchment, and quills as usual, but also with the lurking worry of the egg heavy in his stomach, as though he were carrying that around with him too.

Snow was still thick upon the grounds, and the greenhouse windows were covered in condensation so thick that they couldn't see out of them in Herbology. Nobody was looking forward to Care of Magical Creatures much in this weather, though as Ron said, the skrewts would probably warm them up nicely, either by chasing them, or blasting off so forcefully that Hagrid's cabin would catch fire.

When they arrived at Hagrid 's cabin, however, they found an elderly witch with closely cropped gray hair and a very prominent chin standing before his front door.

"Hurry up, now, the bell rang five minutes ago," she barked at them as they struggled toward her through the snow.

"Who're you?" said Ron, staring at her. "Wheres Hagrid?"

"My name is Professor Grubbly-Plank," she said briskly. "I am your temporary Care of Magical Creatures teacher."

"Where's Hagrid?" Harry repeated loudly.

"He is indisposed," said Professor Grubbly-Plank shortly.

Soft and unpleasant laughter reached Harrys ears. He turned; Draco Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins were joining the class. All of them looked gleeful, and none of them looked surprised to see Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"This way, please," said Professor Grubbly-Plank, and she strode off around the paddock where the Beauxbatons horses were shivering. Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed her, looking back over their shoulders at Hagrid's cabin. All the curtains were closed. Was Hagrid in there, alone and ill?

"What's wrong with Hagrid?" Harry said, hurrying to catch up with Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"Never you mind," she said as though she thought he was being nosy.

"I do mind, though," said Harry hotly. "What's up with him?"

Professor Grubbly-Plank acted as though she couldn't hear him. She led them past the paddock where the huge Beauxbatons horses were standing, huddled against the cold, and toward a tree on the edge of the forest, where a large and beautiful unicorn was tethered.

Many of the girls "oooohed!" at the sight of the unicorn.

"Oh it's so beautiful!" whispered Lavender Brown. "How did she get it? They're supposed to be really hard to catch!"

The unicorn was so brightly white it made the snow all around look gray. It was pawing the ground nervously with its golden hooves and throwing back its horned head.

"Boys keep back!" barked Professor Grubbly-Plank, throwing out an arm and catching Harry hard in the chest. "They prefer the woman's touch,

unicorns. Girls to the front, and approach with care, come on, easy does it. . . ."

She and the girls walked slowly forward toward the unicorn, leaving the boys standing near the paddock fence, watching. The moment Professor Grubblly-Plank was out of earshot. Harry turned to Ron.

"What d'you reckons wrong with him? You don't think a skrewt - ?"

"Oh he hasn't been attacked, Potter, if that's what you're thinking," said Malfoy softly. "No, he's just too ashamed to show his big, ugly face."

"What d'you mean?" said Harry sharply.

Malfoy put his hand inside the pocket of his robes and pulled out a folded page of newsprint.

"There you go," he said. "Hate to break it to you. Potter. . . ."

He smirked as Harry snatched the page, unfolded it, and read it, with Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville looking over his shoulder. It was an article topped with a picture of Hagrid looking extremely shifty.

DUMBLEDORE'S GIANT MISTAKE

Albus Dumbledore, eccentric Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has never been afraid to make controversial staff appointments, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. In September of this year, he hired Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, the notoriously jinx-happy ex-Auror, to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, a decision that caused many raised eyebrows at the Ministry of Magic, given Moody's well-known habit of attacking anybody who makes a sudden movement in his presence. Mad-Eye Moody, however, looks responsible and kindly when set beside the part-human Dumbledore employs to teach Care of Magical Creatures.

Rubeus Hagrid, who admits to being expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, has enjoyed the position of gamekeeper at the school ever since, a job secured for him by Dumbledore. Last year, however, Hagrid used his mysterious influence over the headmaster to secure the additional post of Care of Magical Creatures teacher, over the heads of many better-qualified candidates.

An alarmingly large and ferocious-looking man, Hagrid has been using his newfound authority to terrify the students in his care with a succession of horrific creatures. While Dumbledore turns a blind eye, Hagrid has maimed several pupils during a series of lessons that many admit to being "very frightening."

"I was attacked by a hippogriff, and my friend Vincent Crabbe got a bad bite off a flobberworm," says Draco Malfoy, a fourth-year student. "We all hate Hagrid, but we're just too scared to say anything."

Hagrid has no intention of ceasing his campaign of intimidation, however. In conversation with a Daily Prophet reporter last month, he admitted breeding creatures he has dubbed "Blast-Ended Skrewts," highly dangerous crosses between manticores and fire-crabs. The creation of new breeds of magical creature is, of course, an activity usually closely observed by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Hagrid, however, considers himself to be above such petty restrictions. "I was just having some fun," he says, before hastily changing the subject.

As if this were not enough, the Daily Prophet has now unearthed evidence that Hagrid is not - as he has always pretended - a pure-blood wizard. He is not, in fact, even pure human. His mother, we can exclusively reveal, is none other than the giantess Fridwulfa, whose whereabouts are currently unknown.

Bloodthirsty and brutal, the giants brought themselves to the point of extinction by warring amongst themselves during the last century. The handful that remained joined the ranks of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and

were responsible for some of the worst mass Muggle killings of his reign of terror.

While many of the giants who served He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were killed by Aurors working against the Dark Side, Fridwulfa was not among them. It is possible she escaped to one of the giant communities still existing in foreign mountain ranges. If his antics during Care of Magical Creatures lessons are any guide, however, Frid-wulfa's son appears to have inherited her brutal nature.

In a bizarre twist, Hagrid is reputed to have developed a close friendship with the boy who brought around You-Know-Who's fall from power - thereby driving Hagrid's own mother, like the rest of You-Know-Who's supporters, into hiding. Perhaps Harry Potter is unaware of the unpleasant truth about his large friend - but Albus Dumbledore surely has a duty to ensure that Harry Potter, along with his fellow students, is warned about the dangers of associating with part-giants.

Harry finished reading and looked up at Ron, whose mouth was hanging open.

"How did she find out?" he whispered.

But that wasn't what was bothering Harry.

"What d'you mean, 'we all hate Hagrid'?" Harry spat at Malfoy. "What's this rubbish about him" - he pointed at Crabbe - "getting a bad bite off a flobberworm? They haven't even got teeth!"

Crabbe was sniggering, apparently very pleased with himself.

"Well, I think this should put an end to the oaf's teaching career," said Malfoy, his eyes glinting. "Half-giant. . . and there was me thinking he'd just swallowed a bottle of Skele-Gro when he was young. . . None of the mummies and daddies are going to like this at all. . . They'll be worried he'll eat their kids, ha, ha. . ."

"You-"

"Are you paying attention over there?"

Professor Grubbly-Planks voice carried over to the boys; the girls were all clustered around the unicorn now, stroking it. Harry was so angry that the Daily Prophet article shook in his hands as he turned to stare unseeingly at the unicorn, whose many magical properties Professor Grubbly-Plank was now enumerating in a loud voice, so that the boys could hear too.

"I hope she stays, that woman!" said Parvati Patil when the lesson had ended and they were all heading back to the castle for lunch. "That's more what I thought Care of Magical Creatures would be like . . . proper creatures like unicorns, not monsters. . . ."

"What about Hagrid?" Harry said angrily as they went up the steps.

"What about him?" said Parvati in a hard voice. "He can still be gamekeeper, can't he?"

Parvati had been very cool toward Harry since the ball. He supposed that he ought to have paid her a bit more attention, but she seemed to have had a good time all the same. She was certainly telling anybody who would listen that she had made arrangements to meet the boy from Beauxbatons in Hogsmeade on the next weekend trip.

"That was a really good lesson," said Hermione as they entered the Great Hall. "I didn't know half the things Professor Grubbly-Plank told us about uni -"

"Look at this!" Harry snarled, and he shoved the Daily Prophet article under Hermione's nose.

Hermione's mouth fell open as she read. Her reaction was exactly the same as Ron's.

"How did that horrible Skeeter woman find out? You don't think Hagrid told her?"

"No," said Harry, leading the way over to the Gryffindor table and throwing himself into a chair, furious. "He never even told us, did he?"

I reckon she was so mad he wouldn't give her loads of horrible stuff about me, she went ferreting around to get him back."

"Maybe she heard him telling Madame Maxime at the ball," said Hermione quietly.

"We'd have seen her in the garden!" said Ron. "Anyway, she's not supposed to come into school anymore, Hagrid said Dumbledore banned her. . . ."

"Maybe she's got an Invisibility Cloak," said Harry, ladling chicken casserole onto his plate and splashing it everywhere in his anger. "Sort of thing she'd do, isn't it, hide in bushes listening to people."

"Like you and Ron did, you mean," said Hermione.

"We weren't trying to hear him!" said Ron indignantly. "We didn't have any choice! The stupid prat, talking about his giantess mother where anyone could have heard him!"

"We've got to go and see him," said Harry. "This evening, after Divination. Tell him we want him back . . . you do want him back?" he shot at Hermione.

"I - well, I'm not going to pretend it didn't make a nice change, having a proper Care of Magical Creatures lesson for once - but I do want Hagrid back, of course I do!" Hermione added hastily, quailing under Harry's furious stare.

So that evening after dinner, the three of them left the castle once more and went down through the frozen grounds to Hagrid's cabin. They knocked, and Fang's booming barks answered.

"Hagrid, it's us!" Harry shouted, pounding on the door. "Open up!" Hagrid didn't answer. They could hear Fang scratching at the door, whining, but it didn't open. They hammered on it for ten more minutes; Ron even went and banged on one of the windows, but there was no response.

"What's he avoiding us for?" Hermione said when they had finally given up and were walking back to the school. "He surely doesn't think we'd care about him being half-giant?"

But it seemed that Hagrid did care. They didn't see a sign of him all week. He didn't appear at the staff table at mealtimes, they didn't see him going about his gamekeeper duties on the grounds, and Professor Grubbly-Plank continued to take the Care of Magical Creatures classes. Malfoy was gloating at every possible opportunity.

"Missing your half-breed pal?" he kept whispering to Harry whenever there was a teacher around, so that he was safe from Harry's retaliation.

"Missing the elephant-man?"

There was a Hogsmeade visit halfway through January. Hermione was very surprised that Harry was going to go.

"I just thought you'd want to take advantage of the common room being quiet," she said. "Really get to work on that egg."

"Oh I - I reckon I've got a pretty good idea what it's about now," Harry lied.

"Have you really?" said Hermione, looking impressed. "Well done!" Harry's insides gave a guilty squirm, but he ignored them. He still had five weeks to work out that egg clue, after all, and that was ages. . . whereas if he went into Hogsmeade, he might run into Hagrid, and get a chance to persuade him to come back.

He, Ron, and Hermione left the castle together on Saturday and set off through the cold, wet grounds toward the gates. As they passed the Durmstrang ship moored in the lake, they saw Viktor Krum emerge onto the deck, dressed in nothing but swimming trunks. He was very skinny indeed, but apparently a lot tougher than he looked, because he climbed up onto the side of the ship, stretched out his arms, and dived, right into the lake.

"He's mad!" said Harry, staring at Krum's dark head as it bobbed out into the middle of the lake. "It must be freezing, it's January!"

"It's a lot colder where he comes from," said Hermione. "I suppose it feels quite warm to him."

"Yeah, but there's still the giant squid," said Ron. He didn't sound anxious - if anything, he sounded hopeful. Hermione noticed his tone of voice and frowned.

"He's really nice, you know," she said. "He's not at all like you'd think, coming from Durmstrang. He likes it much better here, he told me."

Ron said nothing. He hadn't mentioned Viktor Krum since the ball, but Harry had found a miniature arm under his bed on Boxing Day, which had looked very much as though it had been snapped off a small model figure wearing Bulgarian Quidditch robes.

Harry kept his eyes skinned for a sign of Hagrid all the way down the slushy High Street, and suggested a visit to the Three Broomsticks once he had ascertained that Hagrid was not in any of the shops.

The pub was as crowded as ever, but one quick look around at all the tables told Harry that Hagrid wasn't there. Heart sinking, he went up to the bar with Ron and Hermione, ordered three butterbeers from Madam Rosmerta, and thought gloomily that he might just as well have stayed behind and listened to the egg wailing after all.

"Doesn't he ever go into the office?" Hermione whispered suddenly.

"Look!"

She pointed into the mirror behind the bar, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman reflected there, sitting in a shadowy corner with a bunch of goblins. Bagman was talking very fast in a low voice to the goblins, all of whom had their arms crossed and were looking rather menacing.

It was indeed odd. Harry thought, that Bagman was here at the Three Broomsticks on a weekend when there was no Triwizard event, and therefore no judging to be done. He watched Bagman in the mirror. He was looking strained again, quite as strained as he had that night in the forest before the Dark Mark had appeared. But just then Bagman glanced over at the bar, saw Harry, and stood up.

"In a moment, in a moment!" Harry heard him say brusquely to the goblins, and Bagman hurried through the pub toward Harry, his boyish grin back in place.

"Harry!" he said. "How are you? Been hoping to run into you! Everything going all right?"

"Fine, thanks," said Harry.

"Wonder if I could have a quick, private word, Harry?" said Bagman eagerly. "You couldn't give us a moment, you two, could you?"

"Er - okay," said Ron, and he and Hermione went off to find a table.

Bagman led Harry along the bar to the end furthest from Madam Rosmerta.

"Well, I just thought I'd congratulate you again on your splendid

performance against that Horntail, Harry," said Bagman. "Really superb."

"Thanks," said Harry, but he knew this couldn't be all that Bagman wanted to say, because he could have congratulated Harry in front of Ron and Hermione. Bagman didn't seem in any particular rush to spill the beans, though. Harry saw him glance into the mirror over the bar at the goblins, who were all watching him and Harry in silence through their dark, slanting eyes.

"Absolute nightmare," said Bagman to Harry in an undertone, noticing Harry watching the goblins too. "Their English isn't too good . . . it's like being back with all the Bulgarians at the Quidditch World Cup . . . but at least they used sign language another human could recognize. This lot keep gabbling in Gobblede-gook . . . and I only know one word of Gobbledegook. Bladvak. It means 'pickax.' I don't like to use it in case they think I'm threatening them."

He gave a short, booming laugh.

"What do they want?" Harry said, noticing how the goblins were still watching Bagman very closely.

"Er - well. . ." said Bagman, looking suddenly nervous. "They ... er ... they're looking for Barty Crouch."

"Why are they looking for him here?" said Harry. "He's at the Ministry in London, isn't he?"

"Er ... as a matter of fact, I've no idea where he is," said Bagman.

"He's sort of... stopped coming to work. Been absent for a couple of weeks now. Young Percy, his assistant, says he's ill. Apparently he's just been sending instructions in by owl. But would you mind not mentioning that to anyone. Harry? Because Rita Skeeter's still poking around everywhere she can, and I'm willing to bet she'd work up Barty's illness into something sinister. Probably say he's gone missing like Bertha Jorkins."

"Have you heard anything about Bertha Jorkins?" Harry asked.

"No," said Bagman, looking strained again. "I've got people looking, of course ..." (About time, thought Harry) "and it's all very strange. She definitely arrived in Albania, because she met her second cousin there. And then she left the cousin's house to go south and see an aunt. . . and she seems to have vanished without trace en route. Blowed if I can see where she's got to ... she doesn't seem the type to elope, for instance . . . but still. . . . What are we doing, talking about goblins and Bertha Jorkins? I really wanted to ask you" - he lowered his voice - "how are you getting on with your golden egg?"

"Er . . . not bad," Harry said untruthfully.

Bagman seemed to know he wasn't being honest.

"Listen, Harry," he said (still in a very low voice), "I feel very bad about all this . . . you were thrown into this tournament, you didn't volunteer for it... and if. . ." (his voice was so quiet now, Harry had to lean closer to listen) "if I can help at all... a prod in the right direction . . . I've taken a liking to you . . . the way you got past that dragon! . . . well, just say the word."

Harry stared up into Bagman's round, rosy face and his wide, baby-blue eyes.

"We're supposed to work out the clues alone, aren't we?" he said, careful to keep his voice casual and not sound as though he was accusing the head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports of breaking the rules.

"Well. . . well, yes," said Bagman impatiently, "but - come on. Harry - we all want a Hogwarts victory, don't we?"

"Have you offered Cedric help?" Harry said.

The smallest of frowns creased Bagman's smooth face. "No, I haven't," he said. "I - well, like I say, I've taken a liking to you. Just thought I'd offer . . ."

"Well, thanks," said Harry, "but I think I'm nearly there with the egg . . . couple more days should crack it."

He wasn't entirely sure why he was refusing Bagman's help, except that Bagman was almost a stranger to him, and accepting his assistance would feel somehow much more like cheating than asking advice from Ron, Hermione, or Sirius.

Bagman looked almost affronted, but couldn't say much more as Fred and George turned up at that point.

"Hello, Mr. Bagman," said Fred brightly. "Can we buy you a drink?"

"Er . . . no," said Bagman, with a last disappointed glance at Harry, "no, thank you, boys . . ."

Fred and George looked quite as disappointed as Bagman, who was surveying Harry as though he had let him down badly.

"Well, I must dash," he said. "Nice seeing you all. Good luck, Harry." He hurried out of the pub. The goblins all slid off their chairs and exited after him. Harry went to rejoin Ron and Hermione.

"What did he want?" Ron said, the moment Harry had sat down.

"He offered to help me with the golden egg," said Harry.

"He shouldn't be doing that!" said Hermione, looking very shocked. "He's one of the judges! And anyway, you've already worked it out - haven't you?"

"Er . . . nearly," said Harry.

"Well, I don't think Dumbledore would like it if he knew Bagman was trying to persuade you to cheat!" said Hermione, still looking deeply disapproving. "I hope he's trying to help Cedric as much!"

"He's not, I asked," said Harry.

"Who cares if Diggory's getting help?" said Ron. Harry privately agreed.

"Those goblins didn't look very friendly," said Hermione, sipping her butterbeer. "What were they doing here?"

"Looking for Crouch, according to Bagman," said Harry. "He's still ill. Hasn't been into work."

"Maybe Percys poisoning him," said Ron. "Probably thinks if Crouch snuffs it he'll be made head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation."

Hermione gave Ron a don't-joke-about-things-like-that look, and said, "Funny, goblins looking for Mr. Crouch. . . . They'd normally deal with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

"Crouch can speak loads of different languages, though," said Harry.

"Maybe they need an interpreter."

"Worrying about poor 'ickle goblins, now, are you?" Ron asked Hermione.

"Thinking of starting up S.P.U.G. or something? Society for the Protection of Ugly Goblins?"

"Ha, ha, ha," said Hermione sarcastically. "Goblins don't need protection. Haven't you been listening to what Professor Binns has been telling us about goblin rebellions?"

"No," said Harry and Ron together.

"Well, they're quite capable of dealing with wizards," said Hermione, taking another sip of butterbeer. "They're very clever. They're not like house-elves, who never stick up for themselves."

"Uh-oh," said Ron, staring at the door.

Rita Skeeter had just entered. She was wearing banana-yellow robes today; her long nails were painted shocking pink, and she was accompanied by her paunchy photographer. She bought drinks, and she and the photographer made their way through the crowds to a table nearby. Harry, Ron, and Hermione glaring at her as she approached. She was talking fast and looking very satisfied about something.

"... didn't seem very keen to talk to us, did he, Bozo? Now, why would that be, do you think? And what's he doing with a pack of goblins in tow anyway? Showing them the sights . . . what nonsense . . . he was always a bad liar. Reckon something's up? Think we should do a bit of digging?

'Disgraced Ex-Head of Magical Games and Sports, Ludo Bagman . . .' Snappy start to a sentence, Bozo - we just need to find a story to fit it -"

"Trying to ruin someone else's life?" said Harry loudly.

A few people looked around. Rita Skeeter's eyes widened behind her jeweled spectacles as she saw who had spoken.

"Harry!" she said, beaming. "How lovely! Why don't you come and join- ?"

"I wouldn't come near you with a ten-foot broomstick," said Harry furiously. "What did you do that to Hagrid for, eh?"

Rita Skeeter raised her heavily penciled eyebrows.

"Our readers have a right to the truth, Harry. I am merely doing my-"

"Who cares if he's half-giant?" Harry shouted. "There's nothing wrong with him!"

The whole pub had gone very quiet. Madam Rosmerta was staring over from behind the bar, apparently oblivious to the fact that the flagon she was filling with mead was overflowing.

Rita Skeeter's smile flickered very slightly, but she hitched it back almost at once; she snapped open her crocodile-skin handbag, pulled out her Quick-Quotes Quill, and said, "How about giving me an interview about

the Hagrid you know. Harry? The man behind the muscles? Your unlikely friendship and the reasons behind it. Would you call him a father substitute?"

Hermione stood up very abruptly, her butterbeer clutched in her hand as though it were a grenade.

"You horrible woman," she said, through gritted teeth, "you don't care, do you, anything for a story, and anyone will do, wont they? Even Ludo Bagman -"

"Sit down, you silly little girl, and don't talk about things you don't understand," said Rita Skeeter coldly, her eyes hardening as they fell on Hermione. "I know things about Ludo Bagman that would make your hair curl... not that it needs it -" she added, eyeing Hermione's bushy hair.

"Let's go," said Hermione, "c'mon. Harry - Ron . . ."

They left; many people were staring at them as they went. Harry glanced back as they reached the door. Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill was out; it was zooming backward and forward over a piece of parchment on the table.

"She'll be after you next, Hermione," said Ron in a low and worried voice as they walked quickly back up the street.

"Let her try!" said Hermione defiantly; she was shaking with rage. "I'll show her! Silly little girl, am I? Oh, I'll get her back for this.

First Harry, then Hagrid ..."

"You don't want to go upsetting Rita Skeeter," said Ron nervously. "I'm serious, Hermione, she'll dig up something on you -"

"My parents don't read the Daily Prophet. She can't scare me into hiding!" said Hermione, now striding along so fast that it was all Harry and Ron could do to keep up with her. The last time Harry had seen Hermione in a rage like this, she had hit Draco Malfoy around the face.

"And Hagrid isn't hiding anymore! He should never have let that excuse for a human being upset him! Come on!"

Breaking into a run, she led them all the way back up the road, through the gates flanked by winged boars, and up through the grounds to Hagrid's cabin.

The curtains were still drawn, and they could hear Fang barking as they approached.

"Hagrid!" Hermione shouted, pounding on his front door. "Hagrid, that's enough! We know you're in there! Nobody cares if your mum was a giantess, Hagrid! You can't let that foul Skeeter woman do this to you! Hagrid, get out here, you're just being -"

The door opened. Hermione said, "About t-!" and then stopped, very suddenly, because she had found herself face-to-face, not with Hagrid, but with Albus Dumbledore.

"Good afternoon," he said pleasantly, smiling down at them.

"We-er-we wanted to see Hagrid," said Hermione in a rather small voice.

"Yes, I surmised as much," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Why don't you come in?"

"Oh . . . um . . . okay," said Hermione.

She, Ron, and Harry went into the cabin; Fang launched himself upon Harry the moment he entered, barking madly and trying to lick his ears. Harry fended off Fang and looked around.

Hagrid was sitting at his table, where there were two large mugs of tea. He looked a real mess. His face was blotchy, his eyes swollen, and he had gone to the other extreme where his hair was concerned; far from trying to make it behave, it now looked like a wig of tangled wire.

"Hi, Hagrid," said Harry.

Hagrid looked up.

"'Lo," he said in a very hoarse voice.

"More tea, I think," said Dumbledore, closing the door behind Harry, Ron, and Hermione, drawing out his wand, and twiddling it; a revolving tea tray appeared in midair along with a plate of cakes. Dumbledore magicked

the tray onto the table, and everybody sat down. There was a slight pause, and then Dumbledore said, "Did you by any chance hear what Miss Granger was shouting, Hagrid?"

Hermione went slightly pink, but Dumbledore smiled at her and continued, "Hermione, Harry, and Ron still seem to want to know you, judging by the way they were attempting to break down the door."

"Of course we still want to know you!" Harry said, staring at Hagrid. "You don't think anything that Skeeter cow - sorry, Professor," he added quickly, looking at Dumbledore.

"I have gone temporarily deaf and haven't any idea what you said. Harry," said Dumbledore, twiddling his thumbs and staring at the ceiling.

"Er-right," said Harry sheepishly. "I just meant-Hagrid, how could you think we'd care what that-woman-wrote about you?"

Two fat tears leaked out of Hagrid's beetle-black eyes and fell slowly into his tangled beard.

"Living proof of what I've been telling you, Hagrid," said Dumbledore, still looking carefully up at the ceiling. "I have shown you the letters from the countless parents who remember you from their own days here, telling me in no uncertain terms that if I sacked you, they would have something to say about it -"

"Not all of 'em," said Hagrid hoarsely. "Not all of 'em wan me ter stay."

"Really, Hagrid, if you are holding out for universal popularity, I'm afraid you will be in this cabin for a very long time," said Dumbledore, now peering sternly over his half-moon spectacles. "Not a week has passed since I became headmaster of this school when I haven't had at least one owl complaining about the way I run it. But what should I do? Barricade myself in my study and refuse to talk to anybody?"

"Yeh - yeh're not half-giant!" said Hagrid croakily.

"Hagrid, look what I've got for relatives!" Harry said furiously. "Look at the Dursleys!"

"An excellent point," said Professor Dumbledore. "My own brother, Aberforth, was prosecuted for practicing inappropriate charms on a goat. It was all over the papers, but did Aberforth hide? No, he did not! He held his head high and went about his business as usual! Of course, I'm not entirely sure he can read, so that may not have been bravery. . . ."

"Come back and teach, Hagrid," said Hermione quietly, "please come back, we really miss you."

Hagrid gulped. More tears leaked out down his cheeks and into his tangled beard.

Dumbledore stood up. "I refuse to accept your resignation, Hagrid, and I expect you back at work on Monday," he said. "You will join me for breakfast at eight-thirty in the Great Hall. No excuses. Good afternoon to you all."

Dumbledore left the cabin, pausing only to scratch Fangs ears. When the door had shut behind him, Hagrid began to sob into his dustbin-lid-sized hands. Hermione kept patting his arm, and at last, Hagrid looked up, his eyes very red indeed, and said, "Great man, Dumbledore . . . great man . . ."

"Yeah, he is," said Ron. "Can I have one of these cakes, Hagrid?"

"Help yerself," said Hagrid, wiping his eyes on the back of his hand.

"Ar, he's righ', o' course - yeh're all righ' . . . I bin stupid . . . my ol' dad woulda bin ashamed o' the way I've bin behavin'...." More tears leaked out, but he wiped them away more forcefully, and said, "Never shown you a picture of my old dad, have I? Here..."

Hagrid got up, went over to his dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out a picture of a short wizard with Hagrid's crinkled black eyes, beaming as he sat on top of Hagrid's shoulder. Hagrid was a good seven or eight feet tall, judging by the apple tree beside him, but his face was beardless, young, round, and smooth - he looked hardly older than eleven.

"Tha was taken jus' after I got inter Hogwarts," Hagrid croaked. "Dad was dead chuffed ... thought I migh' not be a wizard, see, 'cos me mum ... well, anyway. 'Course, I never was great shakes at magic, really... but at least he never saw me expelled. Died, see, in me second year. . . ."

"Dumbledore was the one who stuck up for me after Dad went. Got me the gamekeeper job . . . trusts people, he does. Gives 'em second chances . . . tha's what sets him apar' from other heads, see. He'll accept anyone at Hogwarts, s'long as they've got the talent. Knows people can turn out okay even if their families weren' . . . well... all tha' respectable. But some don understand that. There's some who'd always hold it against yeh . . . there's some who'd even pretend they just had big bones rather than stand up an' say - I am what I am, an' I'm not ashamed. 'Never be ashamed,' my ol' dad used ter say, 'there's some who'll hold it against you, but they're not worth botherin' with.' An' he was right. I've bin an idiot. I'm not botherin' with her no more, I promise yeh that. Big bones . . . I'll give her big bones."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another nervously; Harry would rather have taken fifty Blast-Ended Skrewts for a walk than admit to Hagrid that he had overheard him talking to Madame Maxime, but Hagrid was still talking, apparently unaware that he had said anything odd.

"Yeh know wha, Harry?" he said, looking up from the photograph of his father, his eyes very bright, "when I firs' met you, you reminded me o' me a bit. Mum an' Dad gone, an' you was feelin' like yeh wouldn' fit in at Hogwarts, remember? Not sure yeh were really up to it... an' now look at yeh, Harry! School champion!"

He looked at Harry for a moment and then said, very seriously, "Yeh know what I'd love. Harry? I'd love yeh ter win, I really would. It'd show 'em all... yeh don' have ter be pureblood ter do it. Yeh don have ter be ashamed of what yeh are. It'd show 'em Dumbledore's the one who's got it righ', lettin' anyone in as long as they can do magic. How you doin' with that egg, Harry?"

"Great," said Harry. "Really great."

Hagrid's miserable face broke into a wide, watery smile.

"Tha's my boy. . . you show 'em, Harry, you show 'em. Beat 'em all." Lying to Hagrid wasn't quite like lying to anyone else. Harry went back to the castle later that afternoon with Ron and Hermione, unable to banish the image of the happy expression on Hagrid's whiskery face as he had imagined Harry winning the tournament. The incomprehensible egg weighed more heavily than ever on Harry's conscience that evening, and by the time he had got into bed, he had made up his mind - it was time to shelve his pride and see if Cedric's hint was worth anything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE - THE EGG AND THE EYE

Harry had no idea how long a bath he would need to work out the secret of the golden egg, he decided to do it at night, when he would be able to take as much time as he wanted. Reluctant though he was to accept more favors from Cedric, he also decided to use the prefects' bathroom; far fewer people were allowed in there, so it was much less likely that he would be disturbed.

Harry planned his excursion carefully, because he had been caught out of bed and out-of-bounds by Filch the caretaker in the middle of the night once before, and had no desire to repeat the experience. The Invisibility Cloak would, of course, be essential, and as an added precaution, Harry thought he would take the Marauders Map, which, next to the cloak, was the most useful aid to rule-breaking Harry owned. The map showed the whole of Hogwarts, including its many shortcuts and secret passageways and, most important of all, it revealed the people inside the castle as minuscule, labeled dots, moving around the corridors, so that Harry would be forewarned if somebody was approaching the bathroom.

On Thursday night, Harry sneaked up to bed, put on the cloak, crept back downstairs, and, just as he had done on the night when Hagrid had shown him the dragons, waited for the portrait hole to open. This time it was Ron who waited outside to give the Fat Lady the password ("banana fritters"), "Good luck," Ron muttered, climbing into the room as Harry crept out past him.

It was awkward moving under the cloak tonight, because Harry had the heavy egg under one arm and the map held in front of his nose with the other. However, the moonlit corridors were empty and silent, and by checking the map at strategic intervals, Harry was able to ensure that he wouldn't run into anyone he wanted to avoid. When he reached the statue of Boris the Bewildered, a lost-looking wizard with his gloves on the wrong hands, he located the right door, leaned close to it, and muttered the password, "Pine fresh," just as Cedric had told him.

The door creaked open. Harry slipped inside, bolted the door behind him, and pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, looking around.

His immediate reaction was that it would be worth becoming a prefect just to be able to use this bathroom. It was softly lit by a splendid candle-filled chandelier, and everything was made of white marble, including what looked like an empty, rectangular swimming pool sunk into the middle of the floor. About a hundred golden taps stood all around the pools edges, each with a differently colored Jewel set into its handle. There was also a diving board. Long white linen curtains hung at the windows; a large pile of fluffy white towels sat in a corner, and there was a single golden-framed painting on the wall. It featured a blonde mermaid who

was fast asleep on a rock, her long hair over her face. It fluttered every time she snored.

Harry moved forward, looking around, his footsteps echoing off the walls. Magnificent though the bathroom was - and quite keen though he was to try out a few of those taps - now he was here he couldn't quite suppress the feeling that Cedric might have been having him on. How on earth was this supposed to help solve the mystery of the egg? Nevertheless, he put one of the Huffy towels, the cloak, the map, and the egg at the side of the swimming-pool-sized bath, then knelt down and turned on a few of the taps.

He could tell at once that they carried different sorts of bubble bath mixed with the water, though it wasn't bubble bath as Harry had ever experienced it. One tap gushed pink and blue bubbles the size of footballs; another poured ice-white foam so thick that Harry thought it would have supported his weight if he'd cared to test it; a third sent heavily perfumed purple clouds hovering over the surface of the water. Harry amused himself for awhile turning the taps on and off, particularly enjoying the effect of one whose jet bounced off the surface of the water in large arcs. Then, when the deep pool was full of hot water, foam, and bubbles, which took a very short time considering its size, Harry turned off all the taps, pulled off his pajamas, slippers, and dressing gown, and slid into the water.

It was so deep that his feet barely touched the bottom, and he actually did a couple of lengths before swimming back to the side and treading water, staring at the egg. Highly enjoyable though it was to swim in hot and foamy water with clouds of different-colored steam wafting all around him, no stroke of brilliance came to him, no sudden burst of understanding.

Harry stretched out his arms, lifted the egg in his wet hands, and opened it. The wailing, screeching sound filled the bathroom, echoing and reverberating off the marble walls, but it sounded just as incomprehensible as ever, if not more so with all the echoes. He snapped it shut again, worried that the sound would attract Filch, wondering whether that hadn't been Cedric's plan - and then, making him jump so

badly that he dropped the egg, which clattered away across the bathroom floor, someone spoke.

"I'd try putting it in the water, if I were you."

Harry had swallowed a considerable amount of bubbles in shock. He stood up, sputtering, and saw the ghost of a very glum-looking girl sitting cross-legged on top of one of the taps. It was Moaning Myrtle, who was usually to be heard sobbing in the S-bend of a toilet three floors below.

"Myrtle!" Harry said in outrage, "I'm - I'm not wearing anything!"

The foam was so dense that this hardly mattered, but he had a nasty feeling that Myrtle had been spying on him from out of one of the taps ever since he had arrived.

"I closed my eyes when you got in," she said, blinking at him through her thick spectacles. "You haven't been to see me for ages."

"Yeah . . . well. . ." said Harry, bending his knees slightly, just to make absolutely sure Myrtle couldn't see anything but his head, "I'm not supposed to come into your bathroom, am I? It's a girls' one."

"You didn't used to care," said Myrtle miserably. "You used to be in there all the time."

This was true, though only because Harry, Ron, and Hermione had found Myrtle's out-of-order toilets a convenient place to brew Polyjuice Potion in secret - a forbidden potion that had turned him and Ron into living replicas of Crabbe and Goyle for an hour, so that they could sneak into the Slytherin common room.

"I got told off for going in there." said Harry, which was half-true; Percy had once caught him coming out of Myrtle's bathroom. "I thought I'd better not come back after that."

"Oh . . . I see . . ." said Myrtle, picking at a spot on her chin in a morose sort of way. "Well... anyway... I'd try the egg in the water. That's what Cedric Diggory did."

"Have you been spying on him too?" said Harry indignantly. "What d'you do, sneak up here in the evenings to watch the prefects take baths?"

"Sometimes," said Myrtle, rather slyly, "but I've never come out to speak to anyone before."

"I'm honored," said Harry darkly. "You keep your eyes shut!"

He made sure Myrtle had her glasses well covered before hoisting himself out of the bath, wrapping the towel firmly around his waist, and going to retrieve the egg. Once he was back in the water, Myrtle peered through her fingers and said, "Go on, then . . . open it under the water!"

Harry lowered the egg beneath the foamy surface and opened it... and this time, it did not wail. A gurgling song was coming out of it, a song whose words he couldn't distinguish through the water.

"You need to put your head under too," said Myrtle, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying bossing him around. "Go on!"

Harry took a great breath and slid under the surface - and now, sitting on the marble bottom of the bubble-filled bath, he heard a chorus of eerie voices singing to him from the open egg in his hands:

"Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you're searching, ponder this:
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour - the prospect's black,
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back"

Harry let himself float back upward and broke the bubbly surface, shaking his hair out of his eyes.

"Hear it?" said Myrtle.

"Yeah ... 'Come seek us where our voices sound . . .' and if I need persuading ... hang on, I need to listen again...."

He sank back beneath the water. It took three more underwater renditions of the egg's song before Harry had it memorized; then he trod water for a while, thinking hard, while Myrtle sat and watched him.

"I've got to go and look for people who can't use their voices above the ground. . . ." he said slowly. "Er . . . who could that be?"

"Slow, aren't you?"

He had never seen Moaning Myrtle so cheerful, apart from the day when a dose of PolyJuice Potion had given Hermione the hairy face and tail of a cat. Harry stared around the bathroom, thinking ... if the voices could only be heard underwater, then it made sense for them to belong to underwater creatures. He ran this theory past Myrtle, who smirked at him.

"Well, that's what Diggory thought," she said. "He lay there talking to himself for ages about it. Ages and ages . . . nearly all the bubbles had gone. . . ."

"Underwater ..." Harry said slowly. "Myrtle . . . what lives in the lake, apart from the giant squid?"

"Oh all sorts," she said. "I sometimes go down there . . . sometimes don't have any choice, if someone flushes my toilet when I'm not expecting it...."

Trying not to think about Moaning Myrtle zooming down a pipe to the lake with the contents of a toilet. Harry said, "Well, does anything in there have a human voice? Hang on -"

Harry's eyes had fallen on the picture of the snoozing mermaid on the wall.

"Myrtle, there aren't merpeople in there, are there?"

"Oooh, very good," she said, her thick glasses twinkling, "it took Diggory much longer than that! And that was with her awake too" - Myrtle jerked her head toward the mermaid with an expression of great dislike on her glum face - "giggling and showing off and flashing her fins. . . ."

"That's it, isn't it?" said Harry excitedly. "The second tasks to go and find the merpeople in the lake and . . . and . . ."

But he suddenly realized what he was saying, and he felt the excitement drain out of him as though someone had just pulled a plug in his stomach. He wasn't a very good swimmer; he'd never had much practice. Dudley had had lessons in his youth, but Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, no doubt hoping that Harry would drown one day, hadn't bothered to give him any. A couple of lengths of this bath were all very well, but that lake was very large, and very deep . . . and merpeople would surely live right at the bottom. . . .

"Myrtle," Harry said slowly, "how am I supposed to breathe?"

At this, Myrtle's eyes filled with sudden tears again.

"Tactless!" she muttered, groping in her robes for a handkerchief.

"What's tactless?" said Harry, bewildered.

"Talking about breathing in front of me!" she said shrilly, and her voice echoed loudly around the bathroom. "When I can't. . . when I haven't. . . not for ages . . ."

She buried her face in her handkerchief and sniffed loudly. Harry remembered how touchy Myrtle had always been about being dead, but none of the other ghosts he knew made such a fuss about it.

"Sorry," he said impatiently. "I didn't mean - I just forgot. . . ."

"Oh yes, very easy to forget Myrtle's dead," said Myrtle, gulping, looking at him out of swollen eyes. "Nobody missed me even when I was alive. Took them hours and hours to find my body - I know, I was sitting there waiting for them. Olive Hornby came into the bathroom - Are you in here again, sulking, Myrtle?' she said, 'because Professor Dippet asked me to look for you -' And then she saw my body . . . oooh, she didn't

forget it until her dying day, I made sure of that... followed her around and reminded her, I did. I remember at her brother's wedding --" But Harry wasn't listening; he was thinking about the merpeople's song again. "We've taken what you II sorely miss." That sounded as though they were going to steal something of his, something he had to get back. What were they going to take?

--and then, of course, she went to the Ministry of Magic to stop me stalking her, so I had to come back here and live in my toilet."

"Good," said Harry vaguely. "Well, I'm a lot further on than I was. . . . Shut your eyes again, will you? I'm getting out."

He retrieved the egg from the bottom of the bath, climbed out, dried himself, and pulled on his pajamas and dressing gown again.

"Will you come and visit me in my bathroom again sometime?" Moaning Myrtle asked mournfully as Harry picked up the Invisibility Cloak.

"Er . . . I'll try," Harry said, though privately thinking the only way he'd be visiting Myrtle's bathroom again was if every other toilet in the castle got blocked. "See you. Myrtle... thanks for your help."

"Bye, 'bye," she said gloomily, and as Harry put on the Invisibility Cloak he saw her zoom back up the tap.

Out in the dark corridor, Harry examined the Marauders Map to check that the coast was still clear. Yes, the dots belonging to Filch and his cat, Mrs. Norris, were safely in their office . . . nothing else seemed to be moving apart from Peeves, though he was bouncing around the trophy room on the floor above. . . . Harry had taken his first step back toward Gryffindor Tower when something else on the map caught his eye . . . something distinctly odd.

Peeves was not the only thing that was moving. A single dot was flitting around a room in the bottom left-hand corner - Snapes office. But the dot wasn't labeled "Severus Snape" . . . it was Bartemius Crouch.

Harry stared at the dot. Mr. Crouch was supposed to be too ill to go to work or to come to the Yule Ball - so what was he doing, sneaking into Hogwarts at one o'clock in the morning? Harry watched closely as the dot moved around and around the room, pausing here and there. . . .

Harry hesitated, thinking . . . and then his curiosity got the better of him. He turned and set off in the opposite direction toward the nearest staircase. He was going to see what Crouch was up to.

Harry walked down the stairs as quietly as possible, though the faces in some of the portraits still turned curiously at the squeak of a floorboard, the rustle of his pajamas. He crept along the corridor below, pushed aside a tapestry about halfway along, and proceeded down a narrower staircase, a shortcut that would take him down two floors. He kept glancing down at the map, wondering . . . It just didn't seem in character, somehow, for correct, law-abiding Mr. Crouch to be sneaking around somebody else's office this late at night....

And then, halfway down the staircase, not thinking about what he was doing, not concentrating on anything but the peculiar behavior of Mr. Crouch, Harrys leg suddenly sank right through the trick step Neville always forgot to jump. He gave an ungainly wobble, and the golden egg, still damp from the bath, slipped from under his arm. He lurched forward to try and catch it, but too late; the egg fell down the long staircase with a bang as loud as a bass drum on every step - the Invisibility Cloak slipped - Harry snatched at it, and the Marauder s Map fluttered out of his hand and slid down six stairs, where, sunk in the step to above his knee, he couldn't reach it.

The golden egg fell through the tapestry at the bottom of the staircase, burst open, and began wailing loudly in the corridor below. Harry pulled out his wand and struggled to touch the Marauder s Map, to wipe it blank, but it was too far away to reach -

Pulling the cloak back over himself Harry straightened up, listening hard with his eyes screwed up with fear. . . and, almost immediately -

"PEEVES!"

It was the unmistakable hunting cry of Filch the caretaker. Harry could hear his rapid, shuffling footsteps coming nearer and nearer, his wheezy voice raised in fury.

"What's this racket? Wake up the whole castle, will you? I'll have you, Peeves, I'll have you, you'll... and what is this?"

Filch's footsteps halted; there was a clink of metal on metal and the wailing stopped - Filch had picked up the egg and closed it. Harry stood very still, one leg still Jammed tightly in the magical step, listening. Any moment now, Filch was going to pull aside the tapestry, expecting to see Peeves . . . and there would be no Peeves ... but if he came up the stairs, he would spot the Marauder's Map . . . and Invisibility Cloak or not, the map would show "Harry Potter" standing exactly where he was.

"Egg?" Filch said quietly at the foot of the stairs. "My sweet!" - Mrs. Norris was obviously with him - "This is a Triwizard clue! This belongs to a school champion!"

Harry felt sick; his heart was hammering very fast -

"PEEVES!" Filch roared gleefully. "You've been stealing!"

He ripped back the tapestry below, and Harry saw his horrible, pouchy face and bulging, pale eyes staring up the dark and (to Filch) deserted staircase.

"Hiding, are you?" he said softly. "I'm coming to get you, Peeves. . . . You've gone and stolen a Triwizard clue, Peeves.... Dumbledore'll have you out of here for this, you filthy, pilfering poltergeist. . . ."

Filch started to climb the stairs, his scrawny, dust-colored cat at his heels. Mrs. Morris's lamp-like eyes, so very like her masters, were fixed directly upon Harry. He had had occasion before now to wonder whether the Invisibility Cloak worked on cats. . . . Sick with apprehension, he watched Filch drawing nearer and nearer in his old flannel dressing gown - he tried desperately to pull his trapped leg free, but it merely sank a few more inches - any second now, Filch was going to spot the map or walk right into him -

"Filch? What's going on?"

Filch stopped a few steps below Harry and turned. At the foot of the stairs stood the only person who could make Harry's situation worse: Snape. He was wearing a long gray nightshirt and he looked livid.

"Its Peeves, Professor," Filch whispered malevolently. "He threw this egg down the stairs."

Snape climbed up the stairs quickly and stopped beside Filch. Harry gritted his teeth, convinced his loudly thumping heart would give him away at any second. . . .

"Peeves?" said Snape softly, staring at the egg in Filch's hands. "But Peeves couldn't get into my office. . . ."

"This egg was in your office. Professor?"

"Of course not," Snape snapped. "I heard banging and wailing -"

"Yes, Professor, that was the egg -"

"- I was coming to investigate -"

"- Peeves threw it. Professor -"

"- and when I passed my office, I saw that the torches were lit and a cupboard door was ajar! Somebody has been searching it!"

But Peeves couldn't -"

"I know he couldn't, Filch!" Snape snapped again. "I seal my office with a spell none but a wizard could break!" Snape looked up the stairs, straight through Harry, and then down into the corridor below. "I want you to come and help me search for the intruder, Filch."

"I - yes, Professor - but -"

Filch looked yearningly up the stairs, right through Harry, who could see that he was very reluctant to forgo the chance of cornering Peeves. Go, Harry pleaded with him silently, go with Snape . . . go. . . . Mrs. Norris was peering around Filch's legs.... Harry had the distinct impression

that she could smell him... . Why had he filled that bath with so much perfumed foam?

"The thing is, Professor," said Filch plaintively, "the headmaster will have to listen to me this time. Peeves has been stealing from a student, it might be my chance to get him thrown out of the castle once and for all -"

"Filch, I don't give a damn about that wretched poltergeist; it's my office that's -"

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

Snape stopped talking very abruptly. He and Filch both looked down at the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Mad-Eye Moody limp into sight through the narrow gap between their heads. Moody was wearing his old traveling cloak over his nightshirt and leaning on his staff as usual.

"Pajama party, is it?" he growled up the stairs.

"Professor Snape and I heard noises, Professor," said Filch at once.

"Peeves the Poltergeist, throwing things around as usual - and then Professor Snape discovered that someone had broken into his off -"

"Shut up!" Snape hissed to Filch.

Moody took a step closer to the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Moodys magical eye travel over Snape, and then, unmistakably, onto himself.

Harrys heart gave a horrible jolt. Moody could see through Invisibility Cloaks... he alone could see the full strangeness of the scene:

Snape in his nightshirt, Filch clutching the egg, and he, Harry, trapped in the stairs behind them. Moody's lopsided gash of a mouth opened in surprise. For a few seconds, he and Harry stared straight into each other's eyes. Then Moody closed his mouth and turned his blue eye upon Snape again.

"Did I hear that correctly, Snape?" he asked slowly. "Someone broke into your office?"

"It is unimportant," said Snape coldly. "On the contrary," growled Moody, "it is very important. Who'd want to break into your office?"

"A student, I daresay," said Snape. Harry could see a vein flickering horribly on Snape's greasy temple. "It has happened before. Potion ingredients have gone missing from my private store cupboard ... students attempting illicit mixtures, no doubt...."

"Reckon they were after potion ingredients, eh?" said Moody. "Not hiding anything else in your office, are you?"

Harry saw the edge of Snapes sallow face turn a nasty brick color, the vein in his temple pulsing more rapidly.

"You know I'm hiding nothing, Moody," he said in a soft and dangerous voice, "as you've searched my office pretty thoroughly yourself."

Moodys face twisted into a smile. "Auror's privilege, Snape. Dumbledore told me to keep an eye -"

"Dumbledore happens to trust me," said Snape through clenched teeth. "I refuse to believe that he gave you orders to search my office!"

"Course Dumbledore trusts you," growled Moody. "Hes a trusting man, isn't he? Believes in second chances. But me - I say there are spots that don't come off, Snape. Spots that never come off, d'you know what I mean?"

Snape suddenly did something very strange. He seized his left forearm convulsively with his right hand, as though something on it had hurt him. Moody laughed. "Get back to bed, Snape."

"You don't have the authority to send me anywhere!" Snape hissed, letting go of his arm as though angry with himself. "I have as much right to prowl this school after dark as you do!"

"Prowl away," said Moody, but his voice was full of menace. "I look forward to meeting you in a dark corridor some time.... You've dropped something, by the way."

With a stab of horror. Harry saw Moody point at the Marauders Map, still lying on the staircase six steps below him. As Snape and Filch both

turned to look at it, Harry threw caution to the winds; he raised his arms under the cloak and waved furiously at Moody to attract his attention, mouthing "It's mine! Mine!"

Snape had reached out for it, a horrible expression of dawning comprehension on his face -

"Accio Parchment!"

The map flew up into the air, slipped through Snapes outstretched fingers, and soared down the stairs into Moodys hand.

"My mistake," Moody said calmly. "It's mine - must've dropped it earlier -"

But Snape's black eyes were darting from the egg in Filch's arms to the map in Moodys hand, and Harry could tell he was putting two and two together, as only Snape could. . . .

"Potter," he said quietly.

"What's that?" said Moody calmly, folding up the map and pocketing it.

"Potter!" Snape snarled, and he actually turned his head and stared right at the place where Harry was, as though he could suddenly see him. "That egg is Potters egg. That piece of parchment belongs to Potter. I have seen it before, I recognize it! Potter is here! Potter, in his Invisibility Cloak!"

Snape stretched out his hands like a blind man and began to move up the stairs; Harry could have sworn his over-large nostrils were dilating, trying to sniff Harry out - trapped. Harry leaned backward, trying to avoid Snapes fingertips, but any moment now-

"There's nothing there, Snape!" barked Moody, "but I'll be happy to tell the headmaster how quickly your mind jumped to Harry Potter!"

"Meaning what?" Snape turned again to look at Moody, his hands still outstretched, inches from Harry's chest.

"Meaning that Dumbledore's very interested to know who's got it in for that boy!" said Moody, limping nearer still to the foot of the stairs.

"And so am I, Snape . . . very interested...." The torchlight flickered across his mangled face, so that the scars, and the chunk missing from his nose, looked deeper and darker than ever.

Snape was looking down at Moody, and Harry couldn't see the expression on his face. For a moment, nobody moved or said anything. Then Snape slowly lowered his hands.

"I merely thought," said Snape, in a voice of forced calm, "that if Potter was wandering around after hours again ... it's an unfortunate habit of his ... he should be stopped. For - for his own safety."

"Ah, I see," said Moody softly. "Got Potter's best interests at heart, have you?"

There was a pause. Snape and Moody were still staring at each other, Mrs. Norris gave a loud meow, still peering around Filch's legs, looking for the source of Harry's bubble-bath smell.

"I think I will go back to bed," Snape said curtly.

"Best idea you've had all night," said Moody. "Now, Filch, if you'll just give me that egg-"

"No!" said Filch, clutching the egg as though it were his firstborn son.

"Professor Moody, this is evidence of Peeves' treachery!"

"It's the property of the champion he stole it from," said Moody. Hand it over, now."

Snape swept downstairs and passed Moody without another word. Filch made a chirruping noise to Mrs. Norris, who stared blankly at Harry for a few more seconds before turning and following her master. Still breathing very fast. Harry heard Snape walking away down the corridor; Filch handed Moody the egg and disappeared from view too, muttering to Mrs. Norris. "Never mind. my sweet... we'll see Dumbledore in the morning ... tell him what Peeves was up to...."

A door slammed. Harry was left staring down at Moody, who placed his staff on the bottommost stair and started to climb laboriously toward him, a dull clunk on every other step.

"Close shave. Potter," he muttered.

"Yeah ... I - er ... thanks," said Harry weakly.

"What is this thing?" said Moody, drawing the Marauder's Map out of his pocket and unfolding it.

"Map of Hogwarts," said Harry, hoping Moody was going to pull him out of the staircase soon; his leg was really hurting him.

"Merlins beard," Moody whispered, staring at the map, his magical eye going haywire. "This . . . this is some map. Potter!"

"Yeah, its . . . quite useful," Harry said. His eyes were starting to water from the pain. "Er - Professor Moody, d'you think you could help me - ?"

"What? Oh! Yes . . . yes, of course . . ."

Moody took hold of Harrys arms and pulled; Harrys leg came free of the trick step, and he climbed onto the one above it. Moody was still gazing at the map.

"Potter ..." he said slowly, "you didn't happen, by any chance, to see who broke into Snapes office, did you? On this map, I mean?"

"Er . . . yeah, I did . . ." Harry admitted. "It was Mr. Crouch."

Moodys magical eye whizzed over the entire surface of the map. He looked suddenly alarmed.

"Crouch?" he said. "You're - you're sure. Potter?"

"Positive," said Harry.

"Well, he's not here anymore," said Moody, his eye still whizzing over the map. "Crouch . . . that's very - very interesting... ."

He said nothing for almost a minute, still staring at the map. Harry could tell that this news meant something to Moody and very much wanted to know what it was. He wondered whether he dared ask. Moody scared him slightly. . . yet Moody had just helped him avoid an awful lot of trouble. . . .

"Er ... Professor Moody . . . why d'you reckon Mr. Crouch wanted to look around Snapes office?"

Moodys magical eye left the map and fixed, quivering, upon Harry. It was a penetrating glare, and Harry had the impression that Moody was sizing him up, wondering whether to answer or not, or how much to tell him.

"Put it this way. Potter," Moody muttered finally, "they say old Mad-Eye's obsessed with catching Dark wizards . . . but I'm nothing - nothing - compared to Barty Crouch."

He continued to stare at the map. Harry was burning to know more.

"Professor Moody?" he said again. "D'you think... could this have anything to do with . . . maybe Mr. Crouch thinks there's something going on. . . ."

"Like what?" said Moody sharply.

Harry wondered how much he dare say. He didn't want Moody to guess that he had a source of information outside Hogwarts; that might lead to tricky questions about Sirius.

"I don't know," Harry muttered, "odd stuffs been happening lately, hasn't it? It's been in the Daily Prophet... the Dark Mark at the World Cup, and the Death Eaters and everything...."

Both of Moody's mismatched eyes widened.

"You're a sharp boy. Potter," he said. His magical eye roved back to the Marauder's Map. "Crouch could be thinking along those lines," he said slowly. "Very possible. . . there have been some funny rumors flying around lately - helped along by Rita Skeeter, of course. It's making a lot of people nervous, I reckon." A grim smile twisted his lopsided mouth. "Oh if there's one thing I hate," he muttered, more to himself than to Harry, and his magical eye was fixed on the left-hand corner of the map, "its a Death Eater who walked free. . ."

Harry stared at him. Could Moody possibly mean what Harry thought he meant?

"And now I want to ask you a question. Potter," said Moody in a more businesslike tone.

Harry's heart sank; he had thought this was coming. Moody was going to ask where he had got this map, which was a very dubious magical object - and the story of how it had fallen into his hands incriminated not only him, but his own father, Fred and George Weasley, and Professor Lupin, their last Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Moody waved the map in front of Harry, who braced himself-

"Can I borrow this?"

"Oh!" said Harry.

He was very fond of his map, but on the other hand, he was extremely relieved that Moody wasn't asking where he'd got it, and there was no doubt that he owed Moody a favor.

"Yeah, okay."

"Good boy," growled Moody. "I can make good use of this . . . this might be exactly what I've been looking for. . . . Right, bed, Potter, come on, now. . . ."

They climbed to the top of the stairs together, Moody still examining the map as though it was a treasure the like of which he had never seen before. They walked in silence to the door of Moody's office, where he stopped and looked up at Harry.

"You ever thought of a career as an Auror, Potter?"

"No," said Harry, taken aback.

"You want to consider it," said Moody, nodding and looking at Harry thoughtfully. "Yes, indeed . . . and incidentally . . . I'm guessing you weren't just taking that egg for a walk tonight?"

"Er - no," said Harry, grinning. "I've been working out the clue." Moody winked at him, his magical eye going haywire again. "Nothing like a nighttime stroll to give you ideas, Potter. . . . See you in the morning...."

He went back into his office, staring down at the Marauders Map again, and closed the door behind him.

Harry walked slowly back to Gryffindor Tower, lost in thought about Snape, and Crouch, and what it all meant.... Why was Crouch pretending to be ill, if he could manage to get to Hogwarts when he wanted to? What did he think Snape was concealing in his office?

And Moody thought he. Harry, ought to be an Auror! Interesting idea... but somehow. Harry thought, as he got quietly into his four-poster ten minutes later, the egg and the cloak now safely back in his trunk, he thought he'd like to check how scarred the rest of them were before he chose it as a career.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX - THE SECOND TASK

You said you'd already worked out that egg clue!" said Hermione indignantly.

"Keep your voice down!" said Harry crossly. "I just need to - sort of fine-tune it, all right?"

He, Ron, and Hermione were sitting at the very back of the Charms class with a table to themselves. They were supposed to be practicing the opposite of the Summoning Charm today - the Banishing Charm. Owing to the potential for nasty accidents when objects kept flying across the room. Professor Flitwick had given each student a stack of cushions on which to practice, the theory being that these wouldn't hurt anyone if they went off target. It was a good theory, but it wasn't working very well. Neville's aim was so poor that he kept accidentally sending much heavier things flying across the room - Professor Flitwick, for instance.

"Just forget the egg for a minute, all right?" Harry hissed as Professor Flitwick went whizzing resignedly past them, landing on top of a large cabinet. "I'm trying to tell you about Snape and Moody. . ."

This class was an ideal cover for a private conversation, as everyone was having far too much fun to pay them any attention. Harry had been recounting his adventures of the previous night in whispered installments for the last half hour.

"Snape said Moody's searched his office as well?" Ron whispered, his eyes alight with interest as he Banished a cushion with a sweep of his wand (it soared into the air and knocked Parvati's hat off). "What. . . d'you reckon Moody's here to keep an eye on Snape as well as Karkaroff?"

"Well, I dunno if that's what Dumbledore asked him to do, but he's definitely doing it," said Harry, waving his wand without paying much attention, so that his cushion did an odd sort of belly flop off the desk. "Moody said Dumbledore only lets Snape stay here because he's giving him a second chance or something. . ."

"What?" said Ron, his eyes widening, his next cushion spinning high into the air, ricocheting off the chandelier, and dropping heavily onto Flitwick's desk. "Harry... maybe Moody thinks Snape put your name in the Goblet of Fire!"

"Oh Ron," said Hermione, shaking her head sceptically, "we thought Snape was trying to kill Harry before, and it turned out he was saving Harry's life, remember?"

She Banished a cushion and it flew across the room and landed in the box they were all supposed to be aiming at. Harry looked at Hermione, thinking... it was true that Snape had saved his life once, but the odd thing was, Snape definitely loathed him, just as he'd loathed Harry's father when they had been at school together. Snape loved taking points from Harry, and had certainly never missed an opportunity to give him punishments, or even to suggest that he should be suspended from the school.

"I don't care what Moody says," Hermione went on. "Dumbledore's not stupid. He was right to trust Hagrid and Professor Lupin, even though loads of people wouldn't have given them jobs, so why shouldn't he be right about Snape, even if Snape is a bit -"

"- evil," said Ron promptly. "Come on, Hermione, why are all these Dark wizard catchers searching his office, then?"

"Why has Mr. Crouch been pretending to be ill?" said Hermione, ignoring Ron. "It's a bit funny, isn't it, that he can't manage to come to the Yule Ball, but he can get up here in the middle of the night when he wants to?"

"You just don't like Crouch because of that elf, Winky," said Ron, sending a cushion soaring into the window.

"You just want to think Snapes up to something," said Hermione, sending her cushion zooming neatly into the box.

"I just want to know what Snape did with his first chance, if he's on his second one," said Harry grimly, and his cushion, to his very great surprise, flew straight across the room and landed neatly on top of Hermione's.

Obedient to Sirius's wish of hearing about anything odd at Hogwarts, Harry sent him a letter by brown owl that night, explaining all about Mr. Crouch breaking into Snape's office, and Moody and Snape's conversation. Then Harry turned his attention in earnest to the most urgent problem facing him: how to survive underwater for an hour on the twenty-fourth of February.

Ron quite liked the idea of using the Summoning Charm again - Harry had explained about Aqua-Lungs, and Ron couldn't see why Harry shouldn't Summon one from the nearest Muggle town. Hermione squashed this plan by pointing out that, in the unlikely event that Harry managed to learn how

to operate an Aqua-Lung within the set limit of an hour, he was sure to be disqualified for breaking the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy - it was too much to hope that no Muggles would spot an Aqua-Lung zooming across the countryside to Hogwarts.

"Of course, the ideal solution would be for you to Transfigure yourself into a submarine or something," Hermione said. "If only we'd done human Transfiguration already! But I don't think we start that until sixth year, and it can go badly wrong if you don't know what you're doing...." "Yeah, I don't fancy walking around with a periscope sticking out of my head," said Harry. "I s'pose I could always attack someone in front of Moody; he might do it for me...."

"I don't think he'd let you choose what you wanted to be turned into, though," said Hermione seriously. "No, I think your best chance is some sort of charm."

So Harry, thinking that he would soon have had enough of the library to last him a lifetime, buried himself once more among the dusty volumes, looking for any spell that might enable a human to survive without oxygen. However, though he, Ron, and Hermione searched through their lunchtimes, evenings, and whole weekends - though Harry asked Professor McGonagall for a note of permission to use the Restricted Section, and even asked the irritable, vulture-like librarian, Madam Pince, for help - they found nothing whatsoever that would enable Harry to spend an hour underwater and live to tell the tale.

Familiar flutterings of panic were starting to disturb Harry now, and he was finding it difficult to concentrate in class again. The lake, which Harry had always taken for granted as just another feature of the grounds, drew his eyes whenever he was near a classroom window, a great, iron-gray mass of chilly water, whose dark and icy depths were starting to seem as distant as the moon.

Just as it had before he faced the Horntail, time was slipping away as though somebody had bewitched the clocks to go extra-fast. There was a week to go before February the twenty-fourth (there was still time) . . . there were five days to go (he was bound to find something soon) . . . three days to go (please let me find something... please) . . .

With two days left. Harry started to go off food again. The only good thing about breakfast on Monday was the return of the brown owl he had sent to Sirius. He pulled off the parchment, unrolled it, and saw the shortest letter Sirius had ever written to him.

Send date of next Hogsmeade weekend by return owl.

Harry turned the parchment over and looked at the back, hoping to see something else, but it was blank.

"Weekend after next," whispered Hermione, who had read the note over Harry's shoulder. "Here - take my quill and send this owl back straight away."

Harry scribbled the dates down on the back of Sirius's letter, tied it onto the brown owl's leg, and watched it take flight again. What had he expected? Advice on how to survive underwater? He had been so intent on telling Sirius all about Snape and Moody he had completely forgotten to mention the eggs clue.

"What's he want to know about the next Hogsmeade weekend for?" said Ron. "Dunno," said Harry dully. The momentary happiness that had flared inside him at the sight of the owl had died. "Come on ...Care of Magical Creatures."

Whether Hagrid was trying to make up for the Blast-Ended Skrewts, or because there were now only two skrewts left, or because he was trying to prove he could do anything that Professor Grubbly-Plank could. Harry didn't know, but Hagrid had been continuing her lessons on unicorns ever since he'd returned to work. It turned out that Hagrid knew quite as

much about unicorns as he did about monsters, though it was clear that he found their lack of poisonous fangs disappointing.

Today he had managed to capture two unicorn foals. Unlike full-grown unicorns, they were pure gold. Parvati and Lavender went into transports of delight at the sight of them, and even Pansy Parkinson had to work hard to conceal how much she liked them.

"Easier ter spot than the adults," Hagrid told the class. "They turn silver when they're abou' two years old, an' they grow horns at aroun four. Don' go pure white till they're full grown, 'round about seven. They're a bit more trustin when they're babies . . . don mind boys so much.... C'mon, move in a bit, yeh can pat 'em if yeh want. . . give 'em a few o' these sugar lumps. . . .

"You okay. Harry?" Hagrid muttered, moving aside slightly, while most of the others swarmed around the baby unicorns.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Jus' nervous, eh?" said Hagrid.

"Bit," said Harry.

"Harry," said Hagrid, clapping a massive hand on his shoulder, so that Harry's knees buckled under its weight, "I'd've bin worried before I saw yeh take on tha Horntail, but I know now yeh can do anythin' yeh set yer mind ter. I'm not worried at all. Yeh're goin ter be fine. Got yer clue worked out, haven' yeh?"

Harry nodded, but even as he did so, an insane urge to confess that he didn't have any idea how to survive at the bottom of the lake for an hour came over him. He looked up at Hagrid - perhaps he had to go into the lake sometimes, to deal with the creatures in it? He looked after everything else on the grounds, after all-

"Yeh're goin' ter win," Hagrid growled, patting Harrys shoulder again, so that Harry actually felt himself sink a couple of inches into the soft ground. "I know it. I can feel it. Yeh're goin' ter win, Harry n Harry just couldn't bring himself to wipe the happy, confident smile off Hagrid's face. Pretending he was interested in the young unicorns, he forced a smile in return, and moved forward to pat them with the others.

By the evening before the second task. Harry felt as though he were trapped in a nightmare. He was fully aware that even if, by some miracle, he managed to find a suitable spell, he'd have a real job mastering it overnight. How could he have let this happen? Why hadn't he got to work on the egg's clue sooner? Why had he ever let his mind wander in class - what if a teacher had once mentioned how to breathe underwater?

He sat with Hermione and Ron in the library as the sun set outside, tearing feverishly through page after page of spells, hidden from one another by the massive piles of books on the desk in front of each of them. Harry s heart gave a huge leap every time he saw the word "water" on a page, but more often than not it was merely "Take two pints of water, half a pound of shredded mandrake leaves, and a newt..."

"I don't reckon it can be done," said Rons voice flatly from the other side of the table. "There's nothing. Nothing. Closest was that thing to dry up puddles and ponds, that Drought Charm, but that was nowhere near powerful enough to drain the lake."

"There must be something," Hermione muttered, moving a candle closer to her. Her eyes were so tired she was poring over the tiny print of Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes with her nose about an inch from the page. "They'd never have set a task that was undoable."

"They have," said Ron. "Harry, just go down to the lake tomorrow, right, stick your head in, yell at the merpeople to give back whatever they've nicked, and see if they chuck it out. Best you can do, mate."

"There's a way of doing it!" Hermione said crossly. "There Just has to be!"

She seemed to be taking the library's lack of useful information on the subject as a personal insult; it had never failed her before.

"I know what I should have done," said Harry, resting, face-down, on Saucy Tricks for Tricky Sorts. "I should've learned to be an Animagus like Sirius."

An Animagus was a wizard who could transform into an animal.

"Yeah, you could've turned into a goldfish any time you wanted!" said Ron.

"Or a frog," yawned Harry. He was exhausted. "It takes years to become an Animagus, and then you have to register yourself and everything," said Hermione vaguely, now squinting down the index of *Weird Wizarding Dilemmas and Their Solutions*. "Professor McGonagall told us, remember... you've got to register yourself with the Improper Use of Magic Office ...what animal you become, and your markings, so you can't abuse it..."

"Hermione, I was joking," said Harry wearily. "I know I haven't got a chance of turning into a frog by tomorrow morning...."

"Oh this is no use," Hermione said, snapping shut *Weird Wizarding Dilemmas*. "Who on earth wants to make their nose hair grow into ringlets?"

"I wouldn't mind," said Fred Weasleys voice. "Be a talking point, wouldn't it?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up. Fred and George had just emerged from behind some bookshelves.

"What're you two doing here?" Ron asked.

"Looking for you," said George. "McGonagall wants you, Ron. And you, Hermione."

"Why?" said Hermione, looking surprised.

"Dunno ... she was looking a bit grim, though," said Fred.

"We're supposed to take you down to her office," said George.

Ron and Hermione stared at Harry, who felt his stomach drop. Was Professor McGonagall about to tell Ron and Hermione off? Perhaps she'd noticed how much they were helping him, when he ought to be working out how to do the task alone?

"We'll meet you back in the common room," Hermione told Harry as she got up to go with Ron - both of them looked very anxious. "Bring as many of these books as you can, okay?"

"Right," said Harry uneasily.

By eight o'clock. Madam Pince had extinguished all the lamps and came to chivvy Harry out of the library. Staggering under the weight of as many books as he could carry, Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room, pulled a table into a corner, and continued to search. There was nothing in *Madcap Magic for Wacky Warlocks*. . . nothing in *A Guide to Medieval Sorcery* . . . not one mention of underwater exploits in *An Anthology of Eighteenth-Century Charms*, or in *Dreadful Denizens of the Deep*, or *Powers You Never Knew You Had and What to Do with Them Now You've Wised Up*.

Crookshanks crawled into Harrys lap and curled up, purring deeply. The common room emptied slowly around Harry. People kept wishing him luck for the next morning in cheery, confident voices like Hagrid s, all of them apparently convinced that he was about to pull off another stunning performance like the one he had managed in the first task. Harry couldn't answer them, he just nodded, feeling as though there were a golfball stuck in his throat. By ten to midnight, he was alone in the room with Crookshanks. He had searched all the remaining books, and Ron and Hermione had not come back.

It's over, he told himself. You can't do it. You'll just have to go down to the lake in the morning and tell the judges....

He imagined himself explaining that he couldn't do the task. He pictured Bagman's look of round-eyed surprise, Karkaroffs satisfied, yellow-toothed smile. He could almost hear Fleur Delacour saying "I knew it. . . 'e is too young, 'e is only a little boy." He saw Malfoy flashing his

POTTER STINKS badge at the front of the crowd, saw Hagrid's crestfallen, disbelieving face. . . .

Forgetting that Crookshanks was on his lap. Harry stood up very suddenly; Crookshanks hissed angrily as he landed on the floor, gave Harry a disgusted look, and stalked away with his bottlebrush tail in the air, but Harry was already hurrying up the spiral staircase to his dormitory. . . . He would grab the Invisibility Cloak and go back to the library, he'd stay there all night if he had to. . . .

"Lumos," Harry whispered fifteen minutes later as he opened the library door.

Wand tip alight, he crept along the bookshelves, pulling down more books - books of hexes and charms, books on merpeople and water monsters, books on famous witches and wizards, on magical inventions, on anything at all that might include one passing reference to underwater survival. He carried them over to a table, then set to work, searching them by the narrow beam of his wand, occasionally checking his watch. . . .

One in the morning. . . two in the morning . . . the only way he could keep going was to tell himself, over and over again, next book. . . . in the next one. . . . the next one. . . .

The mermaid in the painting in the prefects' bathroom was laughing. Harry was bobbing like a cork in bubbly water next to her rock, while she held his Firebolt over his head.

"Come and get it!" she giggled maliciously. "Come on, jump!"

"I can't," Harry panted, snatching at the Firebolt, and struggling not to sink. "Give it to me!"

But she just poked him painfully in the side with the end of the broomstick, laughing at him.

"That hurts - get off- ouch -"

"Harry Potter must wake up, sir!"

"Stop poking me -"

"Dobby must poke Harry Potter, sir, he must wake up!"

Harry opened his eyes. He was still in the library; the Invisibility Cloak had slipped off his head as he'd slept, and the side of his face was stuck to the pages of *Where There's a Wand, There's a Way*. He sat up, straightening his glasses, blinking in the bright daylight.

"Harry Potter needs to hurry!" squeaked Dobby. "The second task starts in ten minutes, and Harry Potter -"

"Ten minutes?" Harry croaked. "Ten - ten minutes?"

He looked down at his watch. Dobby was right. It was twenty past nine. A large, dead weight seemed to fall through Harry's chest into his stomach.

"Hurry, Harry Potter!" squeaked Dobby, plucking at Harry's sleeve. "You is supposed to be down by the lake with the other champions, sir!"

"It's too late, Dobby," Harry said hopelessly. "I'm not doing the task, I don't know how -"

"Harry Potter will do the task!" squeaked the elf. "Dobby knew Harry had not found the right book, so Dobby did it for him!"

"What?" said Harry. "But you don't know what the second task is -"

"Dobby knows, sir! Harry Potter has to go into the lake and find his Wheezy -"

"Find my what?"

"- and take his Wheezy back from the merpeople!"

"What's a Wheezy?"

"Your Wheezy, sir, your Wheezy-Wheezy who is giving Dobby his sweater!" Dobby plucked at the shrunken maroon sweater he was now wearing over his shorts.

"What?" Harry gasped. "They've got. . . they've got Ron?"

"The thing Harry Potter will miss most, sir!" squeaked Dobby. "'But past an hour -'"

"- 'the prospect's black,'" Harry recited, staring, horror-struck, at the elf. "'Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.' Dobby - what've I got to do?"

"You has to eat this, sir!" squeaked the elf, and he put his hand in the pocket of his shorts and drew out a ball of what looked like slimy, grayish-green rat tails. "Right before you go into the lake, sir - gillyweed!"

"What's it do?" said Harry, staring at the gillyweed.

"It will make Harry Potter breathe underwater, sir!"

"Dobby," said Harry frantically, "listen - are you sure about this?" He couldn't quite forget that the last time Dobby had tried to "help" him, he had ended up with no bones in his right arm.

"Dobby is quite sure, sir!" said the elf earnestly. "Dobby hears things, sir, he is a house-elf, he goes all over the castle as he lights the fires and mops the floors. Dobby heard Professor McGonagall and Professor Moody in the staffroom, talking about the next task. . . . Dobby cannot let Harry Potter lose his Wheezy!"

Harry's doubts vanished. Jumping to his feet he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, stuffed it into his bag, grabbed the gillyweed, and put it into his pocket, then tore out of the library with Dobby at his heels.

"Dobby is supposed to be in the kitchens, sir!" Dobby squealed as they burst into the corridor. "Dobby will be missed - good luck, Harry Potter, sir, good luck!"

"See you later, Dobby!" Harry shouted, and he sprinted along the corridor and down the stairs, three at a time.

The entrance hall contained a few last-minute stragglers, all leaving the Great Hall after breakfast and heading through the double oak doors to watch the second task. They stared as Harry flashed past, sending Colin and Dennis Creevey flying as he leapt down the stone steps and out onto the bright, chilly grounds.

As he pounded down the lawn he saw that the seats that had encircled the dragons' enclosure in November were now ranged along the opposite bank, rising in stands that were packed to the bursting point and reflected in the lake below. The excited babble of the crowd echoed strangely across the water as Harry ran flat-out around the other side of the lake toward the judges, who were sitting at another gold-draped table at the water's edge. Cedric, Fleur, and Krum were beside the judges' table, watching Harry sprint toward them.

"I'm . . . here . . ." Harry panted, skidding to a halt in the mud and accidentally splattering Fleur's robes.

"Where have you been?" said a bossy, disapproving voice. "The task's about to start!"

Harry looked around. Percy Weasley was sitting at the judges' table - Mr. Crouch had failed to turn up again.

"Now, now, Percy!" said Ludo Bagman, who was looking intensely relieved to see Harry. "Let him catch his breath!"

Dumbledore smiled at Harry, but Karkaroff and Madame Maxime didn't look at all pleased to see him. . . . It was obvious from the looks on their faces that they had thought he wasn't going to turn up.

Harry bent over, hands on his knees, gasping for breath; he had a stitch in his side that felt as though he had a knife between his ribs, but there was no time to get rid of it; Ludo Bagman was now moving among the champions, spacing them along the bank at intervals of ten feet. Harry was on the very end of the line, next to Krum, who was wearing swimming trunks and was holding his wand ready.

"All right. Harry?" Bagman whispered as he moved Harry a few feet farther away from Krum. "Know what you're going to do?"

"Yeah," Harry panted, massaging his ribs.

Bagman gave Harry's shoulder a quick squeeze and returned to the judges' table; he pointed his wand at his throat as he had done at the World Cup, said, "Sonorus!" and his voice boomed out across the dark water toward the stands.

"Well, all our champions are ready for the second task, which will start on my whistle. They have precisely an hour to recover what has been taken from them. On the count of three, then. One . . . two . . . three!" The whistle echoed shrilly in the cold, still air; the stands erupted with cheers and applause; without looking to see what the other champions were doing, Harry pulled off his shoes and socks, pulled the handful of gillyweed out of his pocket, stuffed it into his mouth, and waded out into the lake.

It was so cold he felt the skin on his legs searing as though this were fire, not icy water. His sodden robes weighed him down as he walked in deeper; now the water was over his knees, and his rapidly numbing feet were slipping over silt and flat, slimy stones. He was chewing the gillyweed as hard and fast as he could; it felt unpleasantly slimy and rubbery, like octopus tentacles. Waist-deep in the freezing water he stopped, swallowed, and waited for something to happen.

He could hear laughter in the crowd and knew he must look stupid, walking into the lake without showing any sign of magical power. The part of him that was still dry was covered in goose pimples; half immersed in the icy water, a cruel breeze lifting his hair, Harry started to shiver violently. He avoided looking at the stands; the laughter was becoming louder, and there were catcalls and jeering from the Slytherins. . . .

Then, quite suddenly, Harry felt as though an invisible pillow had been pressed over his mouth and nose. He tried to draw breath, but it made his head spin; his lungs were empty, and he suddenly felt a piercing pain on either side of his neck -

Harry clapped his hands around his throat and felt two large slits just below his ears, flapping in the cold air. . . . He had gills. Without pausing to think, he did the only thing that made sense - he flung himself forward into the water.

The first gulp of icy lake water felt like the breath of life. His head had stopped spinning; he took another great gulp of water and felt it pass smoothly through his gills, sending oxygen back to his brain. He stretched out his hands in front of him and stared at them. They looked green and ghostly under the water, and they had become webbed. He twisted around and looked at his bare feet - they had become elongated and the toes were webbed too:

It looked as though he had sprouted flippers.

The water didn't feel icy anymore either . . . on the contrary, he felt pleasantly cool and very light. . . . Harry struck out once more, marveling at how far and fast his flipper-like feet propelled him through the water, and noticing how clearly he could see, and how he no longer seemed to need to blink. He had soon swum so far into the lake that he could no longer see the bottom. He flipped over and dived into its depths.

Silence pressed upon his ears as he soared over a strange, dark, foggy landscape. He could only see ten feet around him, so that as he sped through the water new scenes seemed to loom suddenly out of the incoming darkness: forests of rippling, tangled black weed, wide plains of mud littered with dull, glimmering stones. He swam deeper and deeper, out toward the middle of the lake, his eyes wide, staring through the eerily gray-lit water around him to the shadow beyond, where the water became opaque.

Small fish flickered past him like silver darts. Once or twice he thought he saw something larger moving ahead of him, but when he got nearer, he discovered it to be nothing but a large, blackened log, or a

dense clump of weed. There was no sign of any of the other champions, merpeople, Ron - nor, thankfully, the giant squid.

Light green weed stretched ahead of him as far as he could see, two feet deep, like a meadow of very overgrown grass. Harry was staring unblinkingly ahead of him, trying to discern shapes through the gloom . . . and then, without warning, something grabbed hold of his ankle.

Harry twisted his body around and saw a grindylow, a small, horned water demon, poking out of the weed, its long fingers clutched tightly around Harry's leg, its pointed fangs bared - Harry stuck his webbed hand quickly inside his robes and fumbled for his wand. By the time he had grasped it, two more grindylows had risen out of the weed, had seized handfuls of Harry's robes, and were attempting to drag him down.

"Relashio!" Harry shouted, except that no sound came out. . . . A large bubble issued from his mouth, and his wand, instead of sending sparks at the grindylows, pelted them with what seemed to be a jet of boiling water, for where it struck them, angry red patches appeared on their green skin. Harry pulled his ankle out of the grindylows grip and swam, as fast as he could, occasionally sending more jets of hot water over his shoulder at random; every now and then he felt one of the grindylows snatch at his foot again, and he kicked out, hard; finally, he felt his foot connect with a horned skull, and looking back, saw the dazed grindylow floating away, cross-eyed, while its fellows shook their fists at Harry and sank back into the weed.

Harry slowed down a little, slipped his wand back inside his robes, and looked around, listening again. He turned full circle in the water, the silence pressing harder than ever against his eardrums. He knew he must be even deeper in the lake now, but nothing was moving but the rippling weed.

"How are you getting on?"

Harry thought he was having a heart attack. He whipped around and saw Moaning Myrtle floating hazily in front of him, gazing at him through her thick, pearly glasses.

"Myrtle!" Harry tried to shout - but once again, nothing came out of his mouth but a very large bubble. Moaning Myrtle actually giggled.

"You want to try over there!" she said, pointing. "I won't come with you. . . . I don't like them much, they always chase me when I get too close. . . ."

Harry gave her the thumbs-up to show his thanks and set off once more, careful to swim a bit higher over the weed to avoid any more grindylows that might be lurking there.

He swam on for what felt like at least twenty minutes. He was passing over vast expanses of black mud now, which swirled murkily as he disturbed the water. Then, at long last, he heard a snatch of haunting mersong.

"An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took..."

Harry swam faster and soon saw a large rock emerge out of the muddy water ahead. It had paintings of merpeople on it; they were carrying spears and chasing what looked like the giant squid. Harry swam on past the rock, following the mersong.

". . . your time's half gone, so tarry not
Lest what you seek stays here to rot. . . ."

A cluster of crude stone dwellings stained with algae loomed suddenly out of the gloom on all sides. Here and there at the dark windows, Harry saw faces . . . faces that bore no resemblance at all to the painting of the mermaid in the prefects' bathroom. . . .

The merpeople had grayish skin and long, wild, dark green hair. Their eyes were yellow, as were their broken teeth, and they wore thick ropes of pebbles around their necks. They leered at Harry as he swam past; one or two of them emerged from their caves to watch him better, their powerful, silver fish tails beating the water, spears clutched in their hands.

Harry sped on, staring around, and soon the dwellings became more numerous; there were gardens of weed around some of them, and he even saw a pet grindylow tied to a stake outside one door. Merpeople were emerging on all sides now, watching him eagerly, pointing at his webbed hands and gills, talking behind their hands to one another. Harry sped around a corner and a very strange sight met his eyes.

A whole crowd of merpeople was floating in front of the houses that lined what looked like a mer-version of a village square. A choir of merpeople was singing in the middle, calling the champions toward them, and behind them rose a crude sort of statue; a gigantic merperson hewn from a boulder. Four people were bound tightly to the tail of the stone merperson.

Ron was tied between Hermione and Cho Chang. There was also a girl who looked no older than eight, whose clouds of silvery hair made Harry feel sure that she was Fleur Delacour's sister. All four of them appeared to be in a very deep sleep. Their heads were lolling onto their shoulders, and fine streams of bubbles kept issuing from their mouths.

Harry sped toward the hostages, half expecting the merpeople to lower their spears and charge at him, but they did nothing. The ropes of weed tying the hostages to the statue were thick, slimy, and very strong. For a fleeting second he thought of the knife Sirius had bought him for Christmas - locked in his trunk in the castle a quarter of a mile away, no use to him whatsoever.

He looked around. Many of the merpeople surrounding them were carrying spears. He swam swiftly toward a seven-foot-tall merman with a long green beard and a choker of shark fangs and tried to mime a request to borrow the spear. The merman laughed and shook his head.

"We do not help," he said in a harsh, croaky voice.

"Come ON!" Harry said fiercely (but only bubbles issued from his mouth), and he tried to pull the spear away from the merman, but the merman yanked it back, still shaking his head and laughing.

Harry swirled around, staring about. Something sharp . . . anything . . . There were rocks littering the lake bottom. He dived and snatched up a particularly jagged one and returned to the statue. He began to hack at the ropes binding Ron, and after several minutes' hard work, they broke apart. Ron floated, unconscious, a few inches above the lake bottom, drifting a little in the ebb of the water.

Harry looked around. There was no sign of any of the other champions. What were they playing at? Why didn't they hurry up? He turned back to Hermione, raised the jagged rock, and began to hack at her bindings too - At once, several pairs of strong gray hands seized him. Half a dozen mermen were pulling him away from Hermione, shaking their green-haired heads, and laughing.

"You take your own hostage," one of them said to him. "Leave the others . . ."

"No way!" said Harry furiously - but only two large bubbles came out. Your task is to retrieve your own friend . . . leave the others ..." She's my friend too!" Harry yelled, gesturing toward Hermione, an enormous silver bubble emerging soundlessly from his lips. "And I don't want them to die either!"

Cho's head was on Hermione's shoulder; the small silver-haired girl was ghostly green and pale. Harry struggled to fight off the mermen, but they laughed harder than ever, holding him back. Harry looked wildly around. Where were the other champions? Would he have time to take Ron

to the surface and come back down for Hermione and the others? Would he be able to find them again? He looked down at his watch to see how much time was left - it had stopped working.

But then the merpeople around him pointed excitedly over his head. Harry looked up and saw Cedric swimming toward them. There was an enormous bubble around his head, which made his features look oddly wide and stretched.

"Got lost!" he mouthed, looking panic-stricken. "Fleur and Krum're coming now!"

Feeling enormously relieved, Harry watched Cedric pull a knife out of his pocket and cut Cho free. He pulled her upward and out of sight.

Harry looked around, waiting. Where were Fleur and Krum? Time was getting short, and according to the song, the hostages would be lost after an hour. . . .

The merpeople started screeching animatedly. Those holding Harry loosened their grip, staring behind them. Harry turned and saw something monstrous cutting through the water toward them: a human body in swimming trunks with the head of a shark. . . . It was Krum. He appeared to have transfigured himself- but badly.

The shark-man swam straight to Hermione and began snapping and biting at her ropes; the trouble was that Krum's new teeth were positioned very awkwardly for biting anything smaller than a dolphin, and Harry was quite sure that if Krum wasn't careful, he was going to rip Hermione in half. Darting forward. Harry hit Krum hard on the shoulder and held up the jagged stone. Krum seized it and began to cut Hermione free. Within seconds, he had done it; he grabbed Hermione around the waist, and without a backward glance, began to rise rapidly with her toward the surface.

Now what? Harry thought desperately. If he could be sure that Fleur was coming. . . . But still no sign. There was nothing to be done except. . .

He snatched up the stone, which Krum had dropped, but the mermen now closed in around Ron and the little girl, shaking their heads at him. Harry pulled out his wand.

"Get out of the way!"

Only bubbles flew out of his mouth, but he had the distinct impression that the mermen had understood him, because they suddenly stopped laughing. Their yellowish eyes were fixed upon Harry's wand, and they looked scared. There might be a lot more of them than there were of him, but Harry could tell, by the looks on their faces, that they knew no more magic than the giant squid did.

"You've got until three!" Harry shouted; a great stream of bubbles burst from him, but he held up three fingers to make sure they got the message.

"One . . ." (he put down a finger) "two . . ." (he put down a second one)

They scattered. Harry darted forward and began to hack at the ropes binding the small girl to the statue, and at last she was free. He seized the little girl around the waist, grabbed the neck of Rons robes, and kicked off from the bottom.

It was very slow work. He could no longer use his webbed hands to propel himself forward; he worked his flippers furiously, but Ron and Fleur's sister were like potato-filled sacks dragging him back down. . . . He fixed his eyes skyward, though he knew he must still be very deep, the water above him was so dark, . . .

Merpeople were rising with him. He could see them swirling around him with ease, watching him struggle through the water. . . . Would they pull him back down to the depths when the time was up? Did they perhaps eat humans? Harry's legs were seizing up with the effort to keep swimming; his shoulders were aching horribly with the effort of dragging Ron and the girl...

He was drawing breath with extreme difficulty. He could feel pain on the sides of his neck again ... he was becoming very aware of how wet the water was in his mouth ... yet the darkness was definitely thinning now... he could see daylight above him.. ..

He kicked hard with his flippers and discovered that they were nothing more than feet...water was flooding through his mouth into his lungs ... he was starting to feel dizzy, but he knew light and air were only ten feet above him ... he had to get there ... he had to ...

Harry kicked his legs so hard and fast it felt as though his muscles were screaming in protest; his very brain felt waterlogged, he couldn't breathe, he needed oxygen, he had to keep going, he could not stop - And then he felt his head break the surface of the lake; wonderful, cold, clear air was making his wet face sting; he gulped it down, feeling as though he had never breathed properly before, and, panting, pulled Ron and the little girl up with him. All around him, wild, green-haired heads were emerging out of the water with him, but they were smiling at him.

The crowd in the stands was making a great deal of noise; shouting and screaming, they all seemed to be on their feet; Harry had the impression they thought that Ron and the little girl might be dead, but they were wrong . . . both of them had opened their eyes; the girl looked scared and confused, but Ron merely expelled a great spout of water, blinked in the bright light, turned to Harry, and said, "Wet, this, isn't it?" Then he spotted Fleur's sister. "What did you bring her for?"

"Fleur didn't turn up, I couldn't leave her," Harry panted.

"Harry, you prat," said Ron, "you didn't take that song thing seriously, did you? Dumbledore wouldn't have let any of us drown!"

"The song said --"

"It was only to make sure you got back inside the time limit!" said Ron.

"I hope you didn't waste time down there acting the hero!"

Harry felt both stupid and annoyed. It was all very well for Ron; he'd been asleep, he hadn't felt how eerie it was down in the lake, surrounded by spear-carrying merpeople who'd looked more than capable of murder.

"C'mon," Harry said shortly, "help me with her, I don't think she can swim very well."

They pulled Fleur's sister through the water, back toward the bank where the judges stood watching, twenty merpeople accompanying them like a guard of honor, singing their horrible screechy songs.

Harry could see Madam Pomfrey fussing over Hermione, Krum, Cedric, and Cho, all of whom were wrapped in thick blankets.

Dumbledore and Ludo Bagman stood beaming at Harry and Ron from the bank as they swam nearer, but Percy, who looked very white and somehow much younger than usual, came splashing out to meet them. Meanwhile Madame Maxime was trying to restrain Fleur Delacour, who was quite hysterical, fighting tooth and nail to return to the water.

"Gabrielle! Gabrielle! Is she alive? Is she 'urt?"

"She's fine!" Harry tried to tell her, but he was so exhausted he could hardly talk, let alone shout.

Percy seized Ron and was dragging him back to the bank ("Gerroff, Percy, I'm all right!"); Dumbledore and Bagman were pulling Harry upright; Fleur had broken free of Madame Maxime and was hugging her sister.

"It was ze grindylows . . . zey attacked me ... oh Gabrielle, I thought... I thought..."

"Come here, you," said Madam Pomfrey. She seized Harry and pulled him over to Hermione and the others, wrapped him so tightly in a blanket that he felt as though he were in a straitjacket, and forced a measure of very hot potion down his throat. Steam gushed out of his ears.

"Harry, well done!" Hermione cried. "You did it, you found out how all by yourself!"

"Well -" said Harry. He would have told her about Dobby, but he had just noticed Karkaroff watching him. He was the only judge who had not left the table; the only judge not showing signs of pleasure and relief that Harry, Ron, and Fleur's sister had got back safely. "Yeah, that's right," said Harry, raising his voice slightly so that Karkaroff could hear him. "You haff a water beetle in your hair, Herm-own-ninny," said Krum. Harry had the impression that Krum was drawing her attention back onto himself; perhaps to remind her that he had just rescued her from the lake, but Hermione brushed away the beetle impatiently and said, "You're well outside the time limit, though, Harry. . . . Did it take you ages to find us?"

"No . . . I found you okay...."

Harry's feeling of stupidity was growing. Now he was out of the water, it seemed perfectly clear that Dumbledores safety precautions wouldn't have permitted the death of a hostage just because their champion hadn't turned up. Why hadn't he just grabbed Ron and gone? He would have been first back.... Cedric and Krum hadn't wasted time worrying about anyone else; they hadn't taken the mersong seriously. . . .

Dumbledore was crouching at the water's edge, deep in conversation with what seemed to be the chief merperson, a particularly wild and ferocious-looking female. He was making the same sort of screechy noises that the merpeople made when they were above water; clearly, Dumbledore could speak Mermish. Finally he straightened up, turned to his fellow judges, and said, "A conference before we give the marks, I think."

The judges went into a huddle. Madam Pomfrey had gone to rescue Ron from Percy's clutches; she led him over to Harry and the others, gave him a blanket and some Pepperup Potion, then went to fetch Fleur and her sister. Fleur had many cuts on her face and arms and her robes were torn, but she didn't seem to care, nor would she allow Madam Pomfrey to clean them.

"Look after Gabrielle," she told her, and then she turned to Harry. "You saved 'er," she said breathlessly. "Even though she was not your 'ostage."

"Yeah," said Harry, who was now heartily wishing he'd left all three girls tied to the statue.

Fleur bent down, kissed Harry twice on each cheek (he felt his face burn and wouldn't have been surprised if steam was coming out of his ears again), then said to Ron, "And you too-you 'elped -"

"Yeah," said Ron, looking extremely hopeful, "yeah, a bit -"

Fleur swooped down on him too and kissed him. Hermione looked simply furious, but just then, Ludo Bagman's magically magnified voice boomed out beside them, making them all jump, and causing the crowd in the stands to go very quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision. Merchieftainess Murcus has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have therefore decided to award marks out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows. . . .

"Fleur Delacour, though she demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm, was attacked by grindylows as she approached her goal, and failed to retrieve her hostage. We award her twenty-five points."

Applause from the stands.

"I deserved zero," said Fleur throatily, shaking her magnificent head.

"Cedric Diggory, who also used the Bubble-Head Charm, was first to return with his hostage, though he returned one minute outside the time limit of an hour." Enormous cheers from the Hufflepuffs in the crowd; Harry saw Cho give Cedric a glowing look. "We therefore award him forty-seven points."

Harrys heart sank. If Cedric had been outside the time limit, he most certainly had been.

"Viktor Krum used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was second to return with his hostage. We award him forty points."

Karkaroff clapped particularly hard, looking very superior.

"Harry Potter used gillyweed to great effect," Bagman continued. "He returned last, and well outside the time limit of an hour. However, the Merchieftainess informs us that Mr. Potter was first to reach the hostages, and that the delay in his return was due to his determination to return all hostages to safety, not merely his own."

Ron and Hermione both gave Harry half-exasperated, half-commiserating looks.

"Most of the judges," and here, Bagman gave Karkaroff a very nasty look, "feel that this shows moral fiber and merits full marks. However . . . Mr. Potter's score is forty-five points."

Harry's stomach leapt - he was now tying for first place with Cedric. Ron and Hermione, caught by surprise, stared at Harry, then laughed and started applauding hard with the rest of the crowd.

"There you go. Harry!" Ron shouted over the noise. "You weren't being thick after all - you were showing moral fiber!"

Fleur was clapping very hard too, but Krum didn't look happy at all. He attempted to engage Hermione in conversation again, but she was too busy cheering Harry to listen.

"The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June," continued Bagman. "The champions will be notified of what is coming precisely one month beforehand. Thank you all for your support of the champions."

It was over. Harry thought dazedly, as Madam Pomfrey began herding the champions and hostages back to the castle to get into dry clothes ... it was over, he had got through ... he didn't have to worry about anything now until June the twenty-fourth. . . .

Next time he was in Hogsmeade, Harry decided as he walked back up the stone steps into the castle, he was going to buy Dobby a pair of socks for every day of the year.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN - PADFOOT RETURNS

One of the best things about the aftermath of the second task was that everybody was very keen to hear details of what had happened down in the lake, which meant that Ron was getting to share Harry's limelight for once. Harry noticed that Ron's version of events changed subtly with every retelling. At first, he gave what seemed to be the truth; it tallied with Hermione's story, anyway - Dumbledore had put all the hostages into a bewitched sleep in Professor McGonagall's office, first assuring them that they would be quite safe, and would awake when they were back above the water. One week later, however, Ron was telling a thrilling tale of kidnap in which he struggled single-handedly against fifty heavily armed merpeople who had to beat him into submission before tying him up.

"But I had my wand hidden up my sleeve," he assured Padma Patil, who seemed to be a lot keener on Ron now that he was getting so much attention and was making a point of talking to him every time they passed in the corridors. "I could've taken those mer-idiots any time I wanted."

"What were you going to do, snore at them?" said Hermione waspishly. People had been teasing her so much about being the thing that Viktor Krum would most miss that she was in a rather tetchy mood.

Ron's ears went red, and thereafter, he reverted to the bewitched sleep version of events.

As they entered March the weather became drier, but cruel winds skinned their hands and faces every time they went out onto the grounds. There were delays in the post because the owls kept being blown off course. The brown owl that Harry had sent to Sirius with the dates of the Hogsmeade weekend turned up at breakfast on Friday morning with half its feathers sticking up the wrong way; Harry had no sooner torn off Sirius's reply than it took flight, clearly afraid it was going to be sent outside again.

Sirius's letter was almost as short as the previous one.

Be at stile at end of road out of Hogsmeade (past Dervish and Bangs) at two o'clock on Saturday afternoon. Bring as much food as you can.

"He hasn't come back to Hogsmeade?" said Ron incredulously.

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" said Hermione.

"I can't believe him," said Harry tensely, "if he's caught. . ."

"Made it so far, though, hasn't he?" said Ron. "And it's not like the place is swarming with dementors anymore."

Harry folded up the letter, thinking. If he was honest with himself, he really wanted to see Sirius again. He therefore approached the final lesson of the afternoon - double Potions - feeling considerably more cheerful than he usually did when descending the steps to the dungeons. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in a huddle outside the classroom door with Pansy Parkinson's gang of Slytherin girls. All of them were looking at something Harry couldn't see and sniggering heartily. Pansy's pug-like face peered excitedly around Goyle's broad back as Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached.

"There they are, there they are!" she giggled, and the knot of Slytherins broke apart. Harry saw that Pansy had a magazine in her hands - Witch Weekly. The moving picture on the front showed a curly-haired witch who was smiling toothily and pointing at a large sponge cake with her wand.

"You might find something to interest you in there, Granger!" Pansy said loudly, and she threw the magazine at Hermione, who caught it, looking startled. At that moment, the dungeon door opened, and Snape beckoned them all inside.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron headed for a table at the back of the dungeon as usual. Once Snape had turned his back on them to write up the ingredients of today's potion on the blackboard, Hermione hastily rifled through the magazine under the desk. At last, in the center pages, Hermione found what they were looking for. Harry and Ron leaned in closer. A color photograph of Harry headed a short piece entitled:

Harry Potter's Secret Heartache

A boy like no other, perhaps - yet a boy suffering all the usual pangs of adolescence, writes Rita Skeeter. Deprived of love since the tragic demise

of his parents, fourteen-year-old Harry Potter thought he had found solace in his steady girlfriend at Hogwarts, Muggle-born Hermione Granger. Little did he know that he would shortly be suffering yet another emotional blow in a life already littered with personal loss. Miss Granger, a plain but ambitious girl, seems to have a taste for famous wizards that Harry alone cannot satisfy. Since the arrival at Hogwarts of Viktor Krum, Bulgarian Seeker and hero of the last World Quidditch Cup, Miss Granger has been toying with both boys' affections. Krum, who is openly smitten with the devious Miss Granger, has already invited her to visit him in Bulgaria over the summer holidays, and insists that he has "never felt this way about any other girl."

However, it might not be Miss Granger's doubtful natural charms that have captured these unfortunate boys' interest.

"She's really ugly," says Pansy Parkinson, a pretty and vivacious fourth-year student, "but she'd be well up to making a Love Potion, she's quite brainy. I think that's how she's doing it."

Love Potions are, of course, banned at Hogwarts, and no doubt Albus Dumbledore will want to investigate these claims. In the meantime, Harry Potters well-wishers must hope that, next time, he bestows his heart on a worthier candidate.

"I told you!" Ron hissed at Hermione as she stared down at the article. "I told you not to annoy Rita Skeeter! She's made you out to be some sort of- of scarlet woman!"

Hermione stopped looking astonished and snorted with laughter. "Scarlet woman?" she repeated, shaking with suppressed giggles as she looked around at Ron.

"It's what my mum calls them," Ron muttered, his ears going red.

"If that's the best Rita can do, she's losing her touch," said Hermione, still giggling, as she threw Witch Weekly onto the empty chair beside her. "What a pile of old rubbish."

She looked over at the Slytherins, who were all watching her and Harry closely across the room to see if they had been upset by the article. Hermione gave them a sarcastic smile and a wave, and she, Harry, and Ron started unpacking the ingredients they would need for their Wit-Sharpening Potion.

"There's something funny, though," said Hermione ten minutes later, holding her pestle suspended over a bowl of scarab beetles. "How could Rita Skeeter have known . . . ?"

"Known what?" said Ron quickly. "You haven't been mixing up Love Potions, have you?"

"Don't be stupid," Hermione snapped, starting to pound up her beetles again. "No, it's just. . . how did she know Viktor asked me to visit him over the summer?"

Hermione blushed scarlet as she said this and determinedly avoided Ron's eyes.

"What?" said Ron, dropping his pestle with a loud clunk.

"He asked me right after he'd pulled me out of the lake," Hermione muttered. "After he'd got rid of his shark's head. Madam Pomfrey gave us both blankets and then he sort of pulled me away from the judges so they wouldn't hear, and he said, if I wasn't doing anything over the summer, would I like to -"

"And what did you say?" said Ron, who had picked up his pestle and was grinding it on the desk, a good six inches from his bowl, because he was looking at Hermione.

"And he did say he'd never felt the same way about anyone else," Hermione went on, going so red now that Harry could almost feel the heat coming from her, "but how could Rita Skeeter have heard him? She wasn't there . . . or was she? Maybe she has got an Invisibility Cloak; maybe she sneaked onto the grounds to watch the second task. . . ."

"And what did you say?" Ron repeated, pounding his pestle down so hard that it dented the desk.

"Well, I was too busy seeing whether you and Harry were okay to-

"Fascinating though your social life undoubtedly is. Miss Granger," said an icy voice right behind them, and all three of them jumped, "I must ask you not to discuss it in my class. Ten points from Gryffindor."

Snape had glided over to their desk while they were talking. The whole class was now looking around at them; Malfoy took the opportunity to flash POTTER STINKS across the dungeon at Harry.

"Ah . . . reading magazines under the table as well?" Snape added, snatching up the copy of Witch Weekly. "A further ten points from

Gryffindor ... oh but of course ..." Snapes black eyes glittered as they fell on Rita Skeeter's article. "Potter has to keep up with his press cuttings. . . ."

The dungeon rang with the Slytherins' laughter, and an unpleasant smile curled Snape's thin mouth. To Harry's fury, he began to read the article aloud.

"'Harry Potter's Secret Heartache. . . dear, dear. Potter, what's ailing you now? 'A boy like no other, perhaps. . .'"

Harry could feel his face burning. Snape was pausing at the end of every sentence to allow the Slytherins a hearty laugh. The article sounded ten times worse when read by Snape. Even Hermione was blushing scarlet now.

"'. . . Harry Potter's well-wishers must hope that, next time, he bestows his heart upon a worthier candidate.' How very touching," sneered Snape, rolling up the magazine to continued gales of laughter from the Slytherins. "Well, I think I had better separate the three of you, so you can keep your minds on your potions rather than on your tangled love lives. Weasley, you stay here. Miss Granger, over there, beside Miss Parkinson. Potter - that table in front of my desk. Move. Now."

Furious, Harry threw his ingredients and his bag into his cauldron and dragged it up to the front of the dungeon to the empty table. Snape followed, sat down at his desk and watched Harry unload his cauldron. Determined not to look at Snape, Harry resumed the mashing of his scarab beetles, imagining each one to have Snape's face.

"All this press attention seems to have inflated your already over-large head. Potter," said Snape quietly, once the rest of the class had settled down again.

Harry didn't answer. He knew Snape was trying to provoke him; he had done this before. No doubt he was hoping for an excuse to take a round fifty points from Gryffindor before the end of the class.

"You might be laboring under the delusion that the entire wizarding world is impressed with you," Snape went on, so quietly that no one else could hear him (Harry continued to pound his scarab beetles, even though he had already reduced them to a very fine powder), "but I don't care how many times your picture appears in the papers. To me. Potter, you are nothing but a nasty little boy who considers rules to be beneath him."

Harry tipped the powdered beetles into his cauldron and started cutting up his ginger roots. His hands were shaking slightly out of anger, but he kept his eyes down, as though he couldn't hear what Snape was saying to him.

"So I give you fair warning, Potter," Snape continued in a sorter and more dangerous voice, "pint-sized celebrity or not - if I catch you breaking into my office one more time -"

"I haven't been anywhere near your office!" said Harry angrily, forgetting his feigned deafness.

"Don't lie to me," Snape hissed, his fathomless black eyes boring into Harrys. "Boomslang skin. Gillyweed. Both come from my private stores, and I know who stole them."

Harry stared back at Snape, determined not to blink or to look guilty. In truth, he hadn't stolen either of these things from Snape. Hermione had taken the boomslang skin back in their second year - they had needed it for the Polyjuice Potion - and while Snape had suspected Harry at the time, he had never been able to prove it. Dobby, of course, had stolen the gillyweed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry lied coldly.

"You were out of bed on the night my office was broken into!" Snape hissed. "I know it. Potter! Now, Mad-Eye Moody might have joined your fan club, but I will not tolerate your behavior! One more nighttime stroll into my office, Potter, and you will pay!"

"Right," said Harry coolly, turning back to his ginger roots. "I'll bear that in mind if I ever get the urge to go in there."

Snape's eyes flashed. He plunged a hand into the inside of his black robes. For one wild moment. Harry thought Snape was about to pull out his wand and curse him - then he saw that Snape had drawn out a small crystal bottle of a completely clear potion. Harry stared at it.

"Do you know what this is. Potter?" Snape said, his eyes glittering dangerously again.

"No," said Harry, with complete honesty this time.

"It is Veritaserum - a Truth Potion so powerful that three drops would have you spilling your innermost secrets for this entire class to hear," said Snape viciously. "Now, the use of this potion is controlled by very strict Ministry guidelines. But unless you watch your step, you might just find that my hand slips" - he shook the crystal bottle slightly - "right over your evening pumpkin juice. And then. Potter . . . then we'll find out whether you've been in my office or not."

Harry said nothing. He turned back to his ginger roots once more, picked up his knife, and started slicing them again. He didn't like the sound of that Truth Potion at all, nor would he put it past Snape to slip him some. He repressed a shudder at the thought of what might come spilling out of his mouth if Snape did it... quite apart from landing a whole lot of people in trouble - Hermione and Dobby for a start - there were all the other things he was concealing . . . like the fact that he was in contact with Sirius . . . and - his insides squirmed at the thought - how he felt about Cho. . . . He tipped his ginger roots into the cauldron too, and wondered whether he ought to take a leaf out of Moody's book and start drinking only from a private hip flask.

There was a knock on the dungeon door.

"Enter," said Snape in his usual voice.

The class looked around as the door opened. Professor Karkaroff came in. Everyone watched him as he walked up toward Snape's desk. He was twisting his finger around his goatee and looking agitated.

"We need to talk," said Karkaroff abruptly when he had reached Snape. He seemed so determined that nobody should hear what he was saying that he was barely opening his lips; it was as though he were a rather poor ventriloquist. Harry kept his eyes on his ginger roots, listening hard.

"I'll talk to you after my lesson, Karkaroff," Snape muttered, but Karkaroff interrupted him.

"I want to talk now, while you can't slip off, Severus. You've been avoiding me."

"After the lesson," Snape snapped.

Under the pretext of holding up a measuring cup to see if he'd poured out enough armadillo bile, Harry sneaked a sidelong glance at the pair of them. Karkaroff looked extremely worried, and Snape looked angry.

Karkaroff hovered behind Snape's desk for the rest of the double period. He seemed intent on preventing Snape from slipping away at the end of class. Keen to hear what Karkaroff wanted to say, Harry deliberately knocked over his bottle of armadillo bile with two minutes to go to the bell, which gave him an excuse to duck down behind his cauldron and mop up while the rest of the class moved noisily toward the door.

"What's so urgent?" he heard Snape hiss at Karkaroff.

"This," said Karkaroff, and Harry, peering around the edge of his cauldron, saw Karkaroff pull up the left-hand sleeve of his robe and show Snape something on his inner forearm.

"Well?" said Karkaroff, still making every effort not to move his lips.

"Do you see? It's never been this clear, never since - "

"Put it away!" snarled Snape, his black eyes sweeping the classroom.

"But you must have noticed -" Karkaroff began in an agitated voice.

"We can talk later, Karkaroff!" spat Snape. "Potter! What are you doing?"

"Clearing up my armadillo bile, Professor," said Harry innocently, straightening up and showing Snape the sodden rag he was holding.

Karkaroff turned on his heel and strode out of the dungeon. He looked both worried and angry. Not wanting to remain alone with an exceptionally angry Snape, Harry threw his books and ingredients back into his bag and left at top speed to tell Ron and Hermione what he had just witnessed.

They left the castle at noon the next day to find a weak silver sun shining down upon the grounds. The weather was milder than it had been all year, and by the time they arrived in Hogsmeade, all three of them had taken off their cloaks and thrown them over their shoulders. The food Sirius had told them to bring was in Harry's bag; they had sneaked a dozen chicken legs, a loaf of bread, and a flask of pumpkin juice from the lunch table.

They went into Gladrags Wizardwear to buy a present for Dobby, where they had fun selecting the most lurid socks they could find, including a pair patterned with flashing gold and silver stars, and another that screamed loudly when they became too smelly. Then, at half past one, they made their way up the High Street, past Dervish and Bangs, and out toward the edge of the village.

Harry had never been in this direction before. The winding lane was leading them out into the wild countryside around Hogsmeade. The cottages were fewer here, and their gardens larger; they were walking toward the foot of the mountain in whose shadow Hogsmeade lay. Then they turned a corner and saw a stile at the end of the lane. Waiting for them, its front paws on the topmost bar, was a very large, shaggy black dog, which was carrying some newspapers in its mouth and looking very familiar. . . .

"Hello, Sirius," said Harry when they had reached him. The black dog sniffed Harry's bag eagerly, wagged its tail once, then turned and began to trot away from them across the scrubby patch of ground that rose to meet the rocky foot of the mountain. Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed over the stile and followed.

Sirius led them to the very foot of the mountain, where the ground was covered with boulders and rocks. It was easy for him, with his four paws, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione were soon out of breath. They followed Sirius higher, up onto the mountain itself. For nearly half an hour they climbed a steep, winding, and stony path, following Sirius's wagging tail, sweating in the sun, the shoulder straps of Harry's bag cutting into his shoulders.

Then, at last, Sirius slipped out of sight, and when they reached the place where he had vanished, they saw a narrow fissure in the rock. They squeezed into it and found themselves in a cool, dimly lit cave.

Tethered at the end of it, one end of his rope around a large rock, was Buckbeak the hippogriff. Half gray horse, half giant eagle, Buckbeak's fierce orange eye flashed at the sight of them. All three of them bowed low to him, and after regarding them imperiously for a moment, Buckbeak bent his scaly front knees and allowed Hermione to rush forward and stroke his feathery neck. Harry, however, was looking at the black dog, which had just turned into his godfather.

Sirius was wearing ragged gray robes; the same ones he had been wearing when he had left Azkaban. His black hair was longer than it had been when he had appeared in the fire, and it was untidy and matted once more. He looked very thin.

"Chicken!" he said hoarsely after removing the old Daily Prophets from his mouth and throwing them down onto the cave floor.

Harry pulled open his bag and handed over the bundle of chicken legs and bread.

"Thanks," said Sirius, opening it, grabbing a drumstick, sitting down on the cave floor, and tearing off a large chunk with his teeth. "I've been

living off rats mostly. Can't steal too much food from Hogsmeade; I'd draw attention to myself."

He grinned up at Harry, but Harry returned the grin only reluctantly.

"What're you doing here, Sirius?" he said.

"Fulfilling my duty as godfather," said Sirius, gnawing on the chicken bone in a very doglike way. "Don't worry about it, I'm pretending to be a lovable stray."

He was still grinning, but seeing the anxiety in Harry's face, said more seriously, "I want to be on the spot. Your last letter . . . well, let's just say things are getting fishier. I've been stealing the paper every time someone throws one out, and by the looks of things, I'm not the only one who's getting worried."

He nodded at the yellowing Daily Prophets on the cave floor, and Ron picked them up and unfolded them. Harry, however, continued to stare at Sirius.

"What if they catch you? What if you're seen?"

"You three and Dumbledore are the only ones around here who know I'm an Animagus," said Sirius, shrugging, and continuing to devour the chicken leg.

Ron nudged Harry and passed him the Daily Prophets. There were two: The first bore the headline Mystery Illness of Bartemius Crouch, the second, Ministry Witch Still Missing-Minister of Magic Now Personally Involved. Harry scanned the story about Crouch. Phrases jumped out at him: hasn't been seen in public since November. . . house appears deserted. . . St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries decline comment. . . Ministry refuses to confirm rumors of critical illness. . . .

"They're making it sound like he's dying," said Harry slowly. "But he can't be that ill if he managed to get up here. . . ."

"My brothers Crouch's personal assistant," Ron informed Sirius. "He says Crouch is suffering from overwork."

"Mind you, he did look ill, last time I saw him up close," said Harry slowly, still reading the story. "The night my name came out of the goblet. . . ."

"Getting his comeuppance for sacking Winky, isn't he?" said Hermione, an edge to her voice. She was stroking Buckbeak, who was crunching up Sirius's chicken bones. "I bet he wishes he hadn't done it now - bet he feels the difference now she's not there to look after him." "Hermione's obsessed with house-elves," Ron muttered to Sirius, casting Hermione a dark look. Sirius, however, looked interested.

"Crouch sacked his house-elf?"

"Yeah, at the Quidditch World Cup," said Harry, and he launched into the story of the Dark Mark's appearance, and Winky being found with Harry's wand clutched in her hand, and Mr. Crouch's fury. When Harry had finished, Sirius was on his feet again and had started pacing up and down the cave.

"Let me get this straight," he said after a while, brandishing a fresh chicken leg. "You first saw the elfin the Top Box. She was saving Crouch a seat, right?"

"Right," said Harry, Ron, and Hermione together.

"But Crouch didn't turn up for the match?"

"No," said Harry. "I think he said he'd been too busy."

Sirius paced all around the cave in silence. Then he said, "Harry, did you check your pockets for your wand after you'd left the Top Box?"

"Erm . . ." Harry thought hard. "No," he said finally. "I didn't need to use it before we got in the forest. And then I put my hand in my pocket, and all that was in there were my Omniculars." He stared at Sirius. "Are you saying whoever conjured the Mark stole my wand in the Top Box?"

"It's possible," said Sirius.

"Winky didn't steal that wand!" Hermione insisted.

"The elf wasn't the only one in that box," said Sirius, his brow furrowed as he continued to pace. "Who else was sitting behind you?"

"Loads of people," said Harry. "Some Bulgarian ministers . . . Cornelius Fudge . . . the Malfoys . . ."

"The Malfoys!" said Ron suddenly, so loudly that his voice echoed all around the cave, and Buckbeak tossed his head nervously. "I bet it was Lucius Malfoy!"

"Anyone else?" said Sirius.

"No one," said Harry.

"Yes, there was, there was Ludo Bagman," Hermione reminded him.

"Oh yeah . . ."

"I don't know anything about Bagman except that he used to be Beater for the Wimbourne Wasps," said Sirius, still pacing. "What's he like?"

"He's okay," said Harry. "He keeps offering to help me with the Triwizard Tournament."

"Does he, now?" said Sirius, frowning more deeply. "I wonder why he'd do that?"

"Says he's taken a liking to me," said Harry.

"Hmm," said Sirius, looking thoughtful.

"We saw him in the forest just before the Dark Mark appeared," Hermione told Sirius. "Remember?" she said to Harry and Ron.

"Yeah, but he didn't stay in the forest, did he?" said Ron. "The moment we told him about the riot, he went off to the campsite."

"How d'you know?" Hermione shot back. "How d'you know where he Disapparated to?"

"Come off it," said Ron incredulously. "Are you saying you reckon Ludo Bagman conjured the Dark Mark?"

"It's more likely he did it than Winky," said Hermione stubbornly.

"Told you," said Ron, looking meaningfully at Sirius, "told you she's obsessed with house -"

But Sirius held up a hand to silence Ron.

"When the Dark Mark had been conjured, and the elf had been discovered holding Harry's wand, what did Crouch do?"

"Went to look in the bushes," said Harry, "but there wasn't anyone else there."

"Of course," Sirius muttered, pacing up and down, "of course, he'd want to pin it on anyone but his own elf... and then he sacked her?"

"Yes," said Hermione in a heated voice, "he sacked her, just because she hadn't stayed in her tent and let herself get trampled -"

"Hermione, will you give it a rest with the elf!" said Ron.

Sirius shook his head and said, "She's got the measure of Crouch better than you have, Ron. If you want to know what a mans like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals."

He ran a hand over his unshaven face, evidently thinking hard.

"All these absences of Barty Crouch's . . . he goes to the trouble of making sure his house-elf saves him a seat at the Quidditch World Cup, but doesn't bother to turn up and watch. He works very hard to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament, and then stops coming to that too. . . . It's not like Crouch. If he's ever taken a day off work because of illness before this, I'll eat Buckbeak."

"D'you know Crouch, then?" said Harry.

Sirius's face darkened. He suddenly looked as menacing as he had the night when Harry first met him, the night when Harry still believed Sirius to be a murderer.

"Oh I know Crouch all right," he said quietly. "He was the one who gave the order for me to be sent to Azkaban - without a trial."

"What?" said Ron and Hermione together.

"You're kidding!" said Harry.

"No, I'm not," said Sirius, taking another great bite of chicken. "Crouch used to be Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, didn't you know?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione shook their heads.

"He was tipped for the next Minister of Magic," said Sirius. "He's a great wizard, Barty Crouch, powerfully magical - and power-hungry. Oh never a Voldemort supporter," he said, reading the look on Harry's face. "No, Barty Crouch was always very outspoken against the Dark Side. But then a lot of people who were against the Dark Side . . . well, you wouldn't understand . . . you're too young. . . ."

"That's what my dad said at the World Cup," said Ron, with a trace of irritation in his voice. "Try us, why don't you?"

A grin flashed across Sirius's thin face.

"All right, I'll try you. . . ." He walked once up the cave, back again, and then said, "Imagine that Voldemort's powerful now. You don't know who his supporters are, you don't know who's working for him and who isn't; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able to stop themselves. You're scared for yourself, and your family, and your friends. Every week, news comes of more deaths, more disappearances, more torturing . . . the Ministry of Magic's in disarray, they don't know what to do, they're trying to keep everything hidden from the Muggles, but meanwhile, Muggles are dying too. Terror everywhere . . . panic . . . confusion . . . that's how it used to be."

"Well, times like that bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. Crouch's principles might've been good in the beginning - I wouldn't know. He rose quickly through the Ministry, and he started ordering very harsh measures against Voldemort's supporters. The Aurors were given new powers - powers to kill rather than capture, for instance. And I wasn't the only one who was handed straight to the dementors without trial. Crouch fought violence with violence, and authorized the use of the Unforgivable Curses against suspects. I would say he became as ruthless and cruel as many on the Dark Side. He had his supporters, mind you - plenty of people thought he was going about things the right way, and there were a lot of witches and wizards clamoring for him to take over as Minister of Magic. When Voldemort disappeared, it looked like only a matter of time until Crouch got the top job. But then something rather unfortunate happened. . . ." Sirius smiled grimly.

"Crouch's own son was caught with a group of Death Eaters who'd managed to talk their way out of Azkaban. Apparently they were trying to find Voldemort and return him to power."

"Crouch's son was caught?" gasped Hermione.

"Yep," said Sirius, throwing his chicken bone to Buckbeak, flinging himself back down on the ground beside the loaf of bread, and tearing it in half. "Nasty little shock for old Barty, I'd imagine. Should have spent a bit more time at home with his family, shouldn't he? Ought to have left the office early once in a while . . . gotten to know his own son."

He began to wolf down large pieces of bread.

"Was his son a Death Eater?" said Harry.

"No idea," said Sirius, still stuffing down bread. "I was in Azkaban myself when he was brought in. This is mostly stuff I've found out since I got out. The boy was definitely caught in the company of people I'd bet my life were Death Eaters - but he might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, just like the house-elf."

"Did Crouch try and get his son off?" Hermione whispered.

Sirius let out a laugh that was much more like a bark.

"Crouch let his son off? I thought you had the measure of him, Hermione! Anything that threatened to tarnish his reputation had to go; he had dedicated his whole life to becoming Minister of Magic. You saw him dismiss a devoted house-elf because she associated him with the Dark Mark

again - doesn't that tell you what he's like? Crouch's fatherly affection stretched just far enough to give his son a trial, and by all accounts, it wasn't much more than an excuse for Crouch to show how much he hated the boy . . . then he sent him straight to Azkaban."

"He gave his own son to the dementors?" asked Harry quietly.

"That's right," said Sirius, and he didn't look remotely amused now. "I saw the dementors bringing him in, watched them through the bars in my cell door. He can't have been more than nineteen. They took him into a cell near mine. He was screaming for his mother by nightfall. He went quiet after a few days, though . . . they all went quiet in the end. . . except when they shrieked in their sleep. . ."

For a moment, the deadened look in Sirius's eyes became more pronounced than ever, as though shutters had closed behind them.

"So he's still in Azkaban?" Harry said.

"No," said Sirius dully. "No, he's not in there anymore. He died about a year after they brought him in."

"He died?"

"He wasn't the only one," said Sirius bitterly. "Most go mad in there, and plenty stop eating in the end. They lose the will to live. You could always tell when a death was coming, because the dementors could sense it, they got excited. That boy looked pretty sickly when he arrived. Crouch being an important Ministry member, he and his wife were allowed a deathbed visit. That was the last time I saw Barty Crouch, half carrying his wife past my cell. She died herself, apparently, shortly afterward. Grief. Wasted away just like the boy. Crouch never came for his sons body. The dementors buried him outside the fortress; I watched them do it."

Sirius threw aside the bread he had just lifted to his mouth and instead picked up the flask of pumpkin juice and drained it.

"So old Crouch lost it all, just when he thought he had it made," he continued, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "One moment, a hero, poised to become Minister of Magic...next, his son dead, his wife dead, the family name dishonored, and, so I've heard since I escaped, a big drop in popularity. Once the boy had died, people started feeling a bit more sympathetic toward the son and started asking how a nice young lad from a good family had gone so badly astray. The conclusion was that his father never cared much for him. So Cornelius Fudge got the top job, and Crouch was shunted sideways into the Department of International Magical Cooperation."

There was a long silence. Harry was thinking of the way Crouch's eyes had bulged as he'd looked down at his disobedient house-elf back in the wood at the Quidditch World Cup. This, then, must have been why Crouch had overreacted to Winky being found beneath the Dark Mark. It had brought back memories of his son, and the old scandal, and his fall from grace at the Ministry.

"Moody says Crouch is obsessed with catching Dark wizards," Harry told Sirius.

"Yeah, I've heard it's become a bit of a mania with him," said Sirius, nodding. "If you ask me, he still thinks he can bring back the old popularity by catching one more Death Eater."

"And he sneaked up here to search Snape's office!" said Ron triumphantly, looking at Hermione.

"Yes, and that doesn't make sense at all," said Sirius.

"Yeah, it does!" said Ron excitedly, but Sirius shook his head.

"Listen, if Crouch wants to investigate Snape, why hasn't he been coming to judge the tournament? It would be an ideal excuse to make regular visits to Hogwarts and keep an eye on him."

"So you think Snape could be up to something, then?" asked Harry, but Hermione broke in.

"Look, I don't care what you say, Dumbledore trusts Snape -"

"Oh give it a rest, Hermione," said Ron impatiently. "I know Dumbledores brilliant and everything, but that doesn't mean a really clever Dark wizard couldn't fool him -"

"Why did Snape save Harry's life in the first year, then? Why didn't he just let him die?"

"I dunno - maybe he thought Dumbledore would kick him out -"

"What d'you think, Sirius?" Harry said loudly, and Ron and Hermione stopped bickering to listen.

"I think they've both got a point," said Sirius, looking thoughtfully at Ron and Hermione. "Ever since I found out Snape was teaching here, I've wondered why Dumbledore hired him. Snape's always been fascinated by the Dark Arts, he was famous for it at school. Slimy, oily, greasy-haired kid, he was," Sirius added, and Harry and Ron grinned at each other.

"Snape knew more curses when he arrived at school than half the kids in seventh year, and he was part of a gang of Slytherins who nearly all turned out to be Death Eaters."

Sirius held up his fingers and began ticking off names.

"Rosier and Wilkes - they were both killed by Aurors the year before Voldemort fell. The Lestranges - they're a married couple - they're in Azkaban. Avery - from what I've heard he wormed his way out of trouble by saying he'd been acting under the Imperius Curse - he's still at large. But as far as I know, Snape was never even accused of being a Death Eater - not that that means much. Plenty of them were never caught. And Snape's certainly clever and cunning enough to keep himself out of trouble."

"Snape knows Karkaroff pretty well, but he wants to keep that quiet," said Ron.

"Yeah, you should've seen Snape's face when Karkaroff turned up in Potions yesterday!" said Harry quickly. "Karkaroff wanted to talk to Snape, he says Snape's been avoiding him. Karkaroff looked really worried. He showed Snape something on his arm, but I couldn't see what it was."

He showed Snape something on his arm?" said Sirius, looking frankly bewildered. He ran his fingers distractedly through his filthy hair, then shrugged again. "Well, I've no idea what that's about. . . but if Karkaroff's genuinely worried, and he's going to Snape for answers . . ." Sirius stared at the cave wall, then made a grimace of frustration.

"There's still the fact that Dumbledore trusts Snape, and I know Dumbledore trusts where a lot of other people wouldn't, but I just can't see him letting Snape teach at Hogwarts if he'd ever worked for Voldemort."

"Why are Moody and Crouch so keen to get into Snapes office then?" said Ron stubbornly.

"Well," said Sirius slowly, "I wouldn't put it past Mad-Eye to have searched every single teacher's office when he got to Hogwarts. He takes his Defense Against the Dark Arts seriously, Moody. I'm not sure he trusts anyone at all, and after the things he's seen, it's not surprising. I'll say this for Moody, though, he never killed if he could help it. Always brought people in alive where possible. He was tough, but he never descended to the level of the Death Eaters. Crouch, though . . . he's a different matter . . . is he really ill? If he is, why did he make the effort to drag himself up to Snape's office? And if he's not. . . what's he up to? What was he doing at the World Cup that was so important he didn't turn up in the Top Box? What's he been doing while he should have been judging the tournament?"

Sirius lapsed into silence, still staring at the cave wall. Buckbeak was ferreting around on the rocky floor, looking for bones he might have overlooked. Finally, Sirius looked up at Ron.

"You say your brother's Crouch's personal assistant? Any chance you could ask him if he's seen Crouch lately?"

"I can try," said Ron doubtfully. "Better not make it sound like I reckon Crouch is up to anything dodgy, though. Percy loves Crouch."

"And you might try and find out whether they've got any leads on Bertha Jorkins while you're at it," said Sirius, gesturing to the second copy of the Daily Prophet.

"Bagman told me they hadn't," said Harry.

"Yes, he's quoted in the article in there," said Sirius, nodding at the paper. "Blustering on about how bad Bertha's memory is. Well, maybe she's changed since I knew her, but the Bertha I knew wasn't forgetful at all - quite the reverse. She was a bit dim, but she had an excellent memory for gossip. It used to get her into a lot of trouble; she never knew when to keep her mouth shut. I can see her being a bit of a liability at the Ministry of Magic . . . maybe that's why Bagman didn't bother to look for her for so long. . . ."

Sirius heaved an enormous sigh and rubbed his shadowed eyes.

"What's the time?"

Harry checked his watch, then remembered it hadn't been working since it had spent over an hour in the lake.

"It's half past three," said Hermione.

"You'd better get back to school," Sirius said, getting to his feet.

"Now listen . . ." He looked particularly hard at Harry. "I don't want you lot sneaking out of school to see me, all right? Just send notes to me here. I still want to hear about anything odd. But you're not to go leaving Hogwarts without permission; it would be an ideal opportunity for someone to attack you."

"No one's tried to attack me so far, except a dragon and a couple of grindylows," Harry said, but Sirius scowled at him.

"I don't care . . . I'll breathe freely again when this tournament's over, and that's not until June. And don't forget, if you're talking about me among yourselves, call me Snuffles, okay?"

He handed Harry the empty napkin and flask and went to pat Buckbeak goodbye. "I'll walk to the edge of the village with you," said Sirius, "see if I can scrounge another paper."

He transformed into the great black dog before they left the cave, and they walked back down the mountainside with him, across the boulder-strewn ground, and back to the stile. Here he allowed each of them to pat him on the head, before turning and setting off at a run around the outskirts of the village. Harry, Ron, and Hermione made their way back into Hogsmeade and up toward Hogwarts.

"Wonder if Percy knows all that stuff about Crouch?" Ron said as they walked up the drive to the castle. "But maybe he doesn't care . . . It'd probably just make him admire Crouch even more. Yeah, Percy loves rules. He'd just say Crouch was refusing to break them for his own son."

"Percy would never throw any of his family to the dementors," said Hermione severely.

"I don't know," said Ron. "If he thought we were standing in the way of his career . . . Percy's really ambitious, you know. . . ."

They walked up the stone steps into the entrance hall, where the delicious smells of dinner wafted toward them from the Great Hall.

"Poor old Snuffles," said Ron, breathing deeply. "He must really like you. Harry. . . . Imagine having to live off rats."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT - THE MADNESS OF MR CROUCH

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery after breakfast on Sunday to send a letter to Percy, asking, as Sirius had suggested, whether he had seen Mr. Crouch lately. They used Hedwig, because it had been so long since she'd had a job. When they had watched her fly out of sight through the Owlery window, they proceeded down to the kitchen to give Dobby his new socks.

The house-elves gave them a very cheery welcome, bowing and curtsying and bustling around making tea again. Dobby was ecstatic about his present. "Harry Potter is too good to Dobby!" he squeaked, wiping large tears out of his enormous eyes.

"You saved my life with that gillyweed, Dobby, you really did," said Harry.

"No chance of more of those eclairs, is there?" said Ron, who was looking around at the beaming and bowing house-elves.

"You've just had breakfast!" said Hermione irritably, but a great silver platter of eclairs was already zooming toward them, supported by four elves.

"We should get some stuff to send up to Snuffles," Harry muttered.

"Good idea," said Ron. "Give Pig something to do. You couldn't give us a bit of extra food, could you?" he said to the surrounding elves, and they bowed delightedly and hurried off to get some more.

"Dobby, where's Winky?" said Hermione, who was looking around.

"Winky is over there by the fire, miss," said Dobby quietly, his ears drooping slightly.

"Oh dear," said Hermione as she spotted Winky.

Harry looked over at the fireplace too. Winky was sitting on the same stool as last time, but she had allowed herself to become so filthy that she was not immediately distinguishable from the smoke-blackened brick behind her. Her clothes were ragged and unwashed. She was clutching a bottle of butterbeer and swaying slightly on her stool, staring into the fire. As they watched her, she gave an enormous hiccup.

"Winky is getting through six bottles a day now," Dobby whispered to Harry.

"Well, it's not strong, that stuff," Harry said.

But Dobby shook his head. "'Tis strong for a house-elf, sir," he said.

Winky hiccuped again. The elves who had brought the eclairs gave her disapproving looks as they returned to work.

"Winky is pining, Harry Potter," Dobby whispered sadly. "Winky wants to go home. Winky still thinks Mr. Crouch is her master, sir, and nothing Dobby says will persuade her that Professor Dumbledore is her master now."

"Hey, Winky," said Harry, struck by a sudden inspiration, walking over to her, and bending down, "you don't know what Mr. Crouch might be up to, do you? Because he's stopped turning up to judge the Triwizard Tournament." Winky's eyes flickered. Her enormous pupils focused on Harry. She swayed slightly again and then said, "M - Master is stopped - hic - coming?"

"Yeah," said Harry, "we haven't seen him since the first task. The Daily Prophet's saying he's ill."

Winky swayed some more, staring blurrily at Harry.

"Master- hic- ill?"

Her bottom lip began to tremble.

"But we're not sure if that's true," said Hermione quickly.

"Master is needing his - hie - Winky!" whimpered the elf. "Master cannot - hic - manage - hic - all by himself. . . ."

"Other people manage to do their own housework, you know, Winky," Hermione said severely.

"Winky - hic - is not only - hic - doing housework for Mr. Crouch!"

Winky squeaked indignantly, swaying worse than ever and slopping butterbeer down her already heavily stained blouse. "Master is - hic - trusting Winky with - hic - the most important - hic - the most secret..."

"What?" said Harry.

But Winky shook her head very hard, spilling more butterbeer down herself.

"Winky keeps - hic - her master's secrets," she said mutinously, swaying very heavily now, frowning up at Harry with her eyes crossed. "You is - hic - nosing, you is."

"Winky must not talk like that to Harry Potter!" said Dobby angrily.

"Harry Potter is brave and noble and Harry Potter is not nosy!"

"He is nosing - hic - into my master's - hic - private and secret - hic - Winky is a good house-elf- hic - Winky keeps her silence - hic - people trying to - hic - pry and poke - hic -"

Winky's eyelids drooped and suddenly, without warning, she slid off her stool into the hearth, snoring loudly. The empty bottle of butterbeer rolled away across the stone-flagged floor. Half a dozen house-elves came hurrying forward, looking disgusted. One of them picked up the bottle; the others covered Winky with a large checked tablecloth and tucked the ends in neatly, hiding her from view.

"We is sorry you had to see that, sirs and miss!" squeaked a nearby elf, shaking his head and looking very ashamed. "We is hoping you will not judge us all by Winky, sirs and miss!"

"She's unhappy!" said Hermione, exasperated. "Why don't you try and cheer her up instead of covering her up?"

"Begging your pardon, miss," said the house-elf, bowing deeply again, "but house-elves has no right to be unhappy when there is work to be done and masters to be served."

"Oh for heavens sake!" Hermione cried. "Listen to me, all of you! You've got just as much right as wizards to be unhappy! You've got the right to wages and holidays and proper clothes, you don't have to do everything you're told - look at Dobby!"

"Miss will please keep Dobby out of this," Dobby mumbled, looking scared. The cheery smiles had vanished from the faces of the house-elves around the kitchen. They were suddenly looking at Hermione as though she were mad and dangerous.

"We has your extra food!" squeaked an elf at Harry's elbow, and he shoved a large ham, a dozen cakes, and some fruit into Harry's arms.

"Good-bye!"

The house-elves crowded around Harry, Ron, and Hermione and began shunting them out of the kitchen, many little hands pushing in the smalls of their backs.

"Thank you for the socks, Harry Potter!" Dobby called miserably from the hearth, where he was standing next to the lumpy tablecloth that was Winky.

"You couldn't keep your mouth shut, could you, Hermione?" said Ron angrily as the kitchen door slammed shut behind them. "They won't want us visiting them now! We could've tried to get more stuff out of Winky about Crouch!"

"Oh as if you care about that!" scoffed Hermione. "You only like coming down here for the food!"

It was an irritable sort of day after that. Harry got so tired of Ron and Hermione sniping at each other over their homework in the common room that he took Sirius's food up to the Owlery that evening on his own. Pigwidgeon was much too small to carry an entire ham up to the mountain by himself, so Harry enlisted the help of two school screech owls as well. When they had set off into the dusk, looking extremely odd carrying the large package between them. Harry leaned on the windowsill, looking out at the grounds, at the dark, rustling treetops of the Forbidden Forest, and the rippling sails of the Durmstrang ship. An eagle owl flew through the coil of smoke rising from Hagrid's chimney; it soared toward the castle, around the Owlery, and out of sight. Looking down, Harry saw Hagrid digging energetically in front of his cabin. Harry wondered what he was doing; it looked as though he were making a new vegetable patch. As he watched, Madame Maxime emerged from the Beauxbatons carriage and walked over to Hagrid. She appeared to be

trying to engage him in conversation. Hagrid leaned upon his spade, but did not seem keen to prolong their talk, because Madame Maxime returned to the carriage shortly afterward.

Unwilling to go back to Gryffindor Tower and listen to Ron and Hermione snarling at each other, Harry watched Hagrid digging until the darkness swallowed him and the owls around Harry began to awake, swooshing past him into the night.

By breakfast the next day Ron's and Hermione's bad moods had burnt out, and to Harry's relief, Ron's dark predictions that the house-elves would send substandard food up to the Gryffindor table because Hermione had insulted them proved false; the bacon, eggs, and kippers were quite as good as usual.

When the post owls arrived, Hermione looked up eagerly; she seemed to be expecting something.

"Percy won't've had time to answer yet," said Ron. "We only sent Hedwig yesterday."

"No, it's not that," said Hermione. "I've taken out a subscription to the Daily Prophet. I'm getting sick of finding everything out from the Slytherins."

"Good thinking!" said Harry, also looking up at the owls. "Hey, Hermione, I think you're in luck -"

A gray owl was soaring down toward Hermione.

"It hasn't got a newspaper, though," she said, looking disappointed.

"It's -"

But to her bewilderment, the gray owl landed in front of her plate, closely followed by four barn owls, a brown owl, and a tawny.

"How many subscriptions did you take out?" said Harry, seizing Hermione's goblet before it was knocked over by the cluster of owls, all of whom were jostling close to her, trying to deliver their own letter first.

"What on earth - ?" Hermione said, taking the letter from the gray owl, opening it, and starting to read. "Oh really!" she sputtered, going rather red.

"What's up?" said Ron.

"It's - oh how ridiculous -"

She thrust the letter at Harry, who saw that it was not handwritten, but composed from pasted letters that seemed to have been cut out of the Daily Prophet.

YOU ARE A WICKED GIRL. HARRY POTTER DESERVES BETTER. GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM MUGGLE.

"They're all like it!" said Hermione desperately, opening one letter after another. "'Harry Potter can do much better than the likes of you. . . .' You deserve to be boiled in frog spawn. . . .' Ouch!"

She had opened the last envelope, and yellowish-green liquid smelling strongly of petrol gushed over her hands, which began to erupt in large yellow boils.

"Undiluted bubotuber pus!" said Ron, picking up the envelope gingerly and sniffing it.

"Ow!" said Hermione, tears starting in her eyes as she tried to rub the pus off her hands with a napkin, but her fingers were now so thickly covered in painful sores that it looked as though she were wearing a pair of thick, knobbly gloves.

"You'd better get up to the hospital wing," said Harry as the owls around Hermione took flight. "We'll tell Professor Sprout where you've gone. . . ."

"I warned her!" said Ron as Hermione hurried out of the Great Hall, cradling her hands. "I warned her not to annoy Rita Skeeter! Look at this one . . ." He read out one of the letters Hermione had left behind:

"I read In Witch Weekly about how you are playing Harry Potter false and that boy has had enough hardship and I will be sending you a curse by next post as soon as I can find a big enough envelope.' Blimey, she'd better watch out for herself."

Hermione didn't turn up for Herbology. As Harry and Ron left the greenhouse for their Care of Magical Creatures class, they saw Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle descending the stone steps of the castle. Pansy Parkinson was whispering and giggling behind them with her gang of Slytherin girls. Catching sight of Harry, Pansy called, "Potter, have you split up with your girlfriend? Why was she so upset at breakfast?" Harry ignored her; he didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing how much trouble the Witch Weekly article had caused.

Hagrid, who had told them last lesson that they had finished with unicorns, was waiting for them outside his cabin with a fresh supply of open crates at his feet. Harry's heart sank at the sight of the crates - surely not another skrewt hatching? - but when he got near enough to see inside, he found himself looking at a number of flurry black creatures with long snouts. Their front paws were curiously flat, like spades, and they were blinking up at the class, looking politely puzzled at all the attention.

"These're nifflers," said Hagrid, when the class had gathered around. "Yeh find 'em down mines mostly. They like sparkly stuff. . . . There yeh go, look."

One of the nifflers had suddenly leapt up and attempted to bite Pansy Parkinson's watch off her wrist. She shrieked and jumped backward.

"Useful little treasure detectors," said Hagrid happily. "Thought we'd have some fun with 'em today. See over there?" He pointed at the large patch of freshly turned earth Harry had watched him digging from the Owlery window. "I've buried some gold coins. I've got a prize fer whoever picks the niffler that digs up most. Jus' take off all yer valuables, an' choose a niffler, an get ready ter set 'em loose."

Harry took off his watch, which he was only wearing out of habit, as it didn't work anymore, and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he picked up a niffler. It put its long snout in Harry's ear and sniffed enthusiastically. It was really quite cuddly.

"Hang on," said Hagrid, looking down into the crate, "there's a spare niffler here . . . who's missin? Where's Hermione?"

"She had to go to the hospital wing," said Ron.

"We'll explain later," Harry muttered; Pansy Parkinson was listening. It was easily the most fun they had ever had in Care of Magical Creatures. The nifflers dived in and out of the patch of earth as though it were water, each scurrying back to the student who had released it and spitting gold into their hands. Ron's was particularly efficient; it had soon filled his lap with coins.

"Can you buy these as pets, Hagrid?" he asked excitedly as his niffler dived back into the soil, splattering his robes.

"Yer mum wouldn't be happy, Ron," said Hagrid, grinning. "They wreck houses, nifflers. I reckon they've nearly got the lot, now," he added, pacing around the patch of earth while the nifflers continued to dive.

"I on'y buried a hundred coins. Oh there y'are, Hermione!"

Hermione was walking toward them across the lawn. Her hands were very heavily bandaged and she looked miserable. Pansy Parkinson was watching her beadily.

"Well, let's check how yeh've done!" said Hagrid. "Count yer coins! An' there's no point tryin' ter steal any, Goyle," he added, his beetle-black eyes narrowed. "It's leprechaun gold. Vanishes after a few hours."

Goyle emptied his pockets, looking extremely sulky. It turned out that Ron's niffler had been most successful, so Hagrid gave him an enormous slab of Honeydukes chocolate for a prize. The bell rang across the grounds for lunch; the rest of the class set off back to the castle, but

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stayed behind to help Hagrid put the nifflers back in their boxes. Harry noticed Madame Maxime watching them out other carriage window.

"What yeh done ter your hands, Hermione?" said Hagrid, looking concerned.

Hermione told him about the hate mail she had received that morning, and the envelope full of bubotuber pus.

"Aaah, don worry," said Hagrid gendy, looking down at her. "I got some o' those letters an all, after Rita Skeeter wrote abou me mum. 'Yeh're a monster an yeh should be put down.' 'Yer mother killed innocent people an if you had any decency you d jump in a lake.'"

"No!" said Hermione, looking shocked.

"Yeah," said Hagrid, heaving the niffler crates over by his cabin wall.

"They're jus' nutters, Hermione. Don' open 'em if yeh get any more.

Chuck 'em straigh' in the fire."

"You missed a really good lesson," Harry told Hermione as they headed back toward the castle. "They're good, nifflers, aren't they, Ron?" Ron, however, was frowning at the chocolate Hagrid had given him. He looked thoroughly put out about something.

"What's the matter?" said Harry. "Wrong flavor?"

"No," said Ron shortly. "Why didn't you tell me about the gold?"

"What gold?" said Harry.

"The gold I gave you at the Quidditch World Cup," said Ron. "The leprechaun gold I gave you for my Omnioculars. In the Top Box. Why didn't you tell me it disappeared?"

Harry had to think for a moment before he realized what Ron was talking about.

"Oh . . ." he said, the memory coming back to him at last. "I dunno ... I never noticed it had gone. I was more worried about my wand, wasn't I?"

They climbed the steps into the entrance hall and went into the Great Hall for lunch.

"Must be nice," Ron said abruptly, when they had sat down and started serving themselves roast beef and Yorkshire puddings. "To have so much money you don't notice if a pocketful of Galleons goes missing."

"Listen, I had other stuff on my mind that night!" said Harry impatiently. "We all did, remember?"

"I didn't know leprechaun gold vanishes," Ron muttered. "I thought I was paying you back. You shouldn't've given me that Chudley Cannon hat for Christmas."

"Forget it, all right?" said Harry.

Ron speared a roast potato on the end of his fork, glaring at it. Then he said, "I hate being poor."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Neither of them really knew what to say.

"It's rubbish," said Ron, still glaring down at his potato. "I don't blame Fred and George for trying to make some extra money. Wish I could. Wish I had a niffler."

"Well, we know what to get you next Christmas," said Hermione brightly. Then, when Ron continued to look gloomy, she said, "Come on, Ron, it could be worse. At least your fingers aren't full of pus." Hermione was having a lot of difficulty managing her knife and fork, her fingers were so stiff and swollen. "I hate that Skeeter woman!" she burst out savagely. "I'll get her back for this if it's the last thing I do!"

Hate mail continued to arrive for Hermione over the following week, and although she followed Hagrid's advice and stopped opening it, several of her ill-wishers sent Howlers, which exploded at the Gryffindor table and shrieked insults at her for the whole Hall to hear. Even those people who didn't read Witch Weekly knew all about the supposed Harry-Krum-

Hermione triangle now. Harry was getting sick of telling people that Hermione wasn't his girlfriend.

"It'll die down, though," he told Hermione, "if we just ignore it. ... People got bored with that stuff she wrote about me last time "I want to know how she's listening into private conversations when she's supposed to be banned from the grounds!" said Hermione angrily. Hermione hung back in their next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson to ask Professor Moody something. The rest of the class was very eager to leave; Moody had given them such a rigorous test of hex-deflection that many of them were nursing small injuries. Harry had such a bad case of Twitchy Ears, he had to hold his hands clamped over them as he walked away from the class.

"Well, Rita's definitely not using an Invisibility Cloak!" Hermione panted five minutes later, catching up with Harry and Ron in the entrance hall and pulling Harrys hand away from one of his wiggling ears so that he could hear her. "Moody says he didn't see her anywhere near the judges' table at the second task, or anywhere near the lake!"

"Hermione, is there any point in telling you to drop this?" said Ron. "No!" said Hermione stubbornly. "I want to know how she heard me talking to Viktor! And how she found out about Hagrids mum!"

"Maybe she had you bugged," said Harry.

"Bugged?" said Ron blankly. "What. . . put fleas on her or something?" Harry started explaining about hidden microphones and recording equipment. Ron was fascinated, but Hermione interrupted them.

"Aren't you two ever going to read Hogwarts, A History^"

"What's the point?" said Ron. "You know it by heart, we can just ask you."

"All those substitutes for magic Muggles use - electricity, computers, and radar, and all those things - they all go haywire around Hogwarts, there's too much magic in the air. No, Rita's using magic to eavesdrop, she must be. ... If I could just find out what it is ... ooh, if it's illegal, I'll have her ..."

"Haven't we got enough to worry about?" Ron asked her. "Do we have to start a vendetta against Rita Skeeter as well?"

"I'm not asking you to help!" Hermione snapped. "I'll do it on my own!" She marched back up the marble staircase without a backward glance. Harry was quite sure she was going to the library.

"What's the betting she comes back with a box of / Hate Rita Skeeter badges?" said Ron.

Hermione, however, did not ask Harry and Ron to help her pursue vengeance against Rita Skeeter, for which they were both grateful, because their workload was mounting ever higher in the days before the Easter holidays. Harry frankly marveled at the fact that Hermione could research magical methods of eavesdropping as well as everything else they had to do. He was working flat-out just to get through all their homework, though he made a point of sending regular food packages up to the cave in the mountain for Sirius; after last summer, Harry had not forgotten what it felt like to be continually hungry. He enclosed notes to Sirius, telling him that nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and that they were still waiting for an answer from Percy.

Hedwig didn't return until the end of the Easter holidays. Percy's letter was enclosed in a package of Easter eggs that Mrs. Weasley had sent. Both Harrys and Ron's were the size of dragon eggs and full of homemade toffee. Hermiones, however, was smaller than a chicken egg. Her face fell when she saw it.

"Your mum doesn't read Witch Weekly, by any chance, does she, Ron?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah," said Ron, whose mouth was full of toffee. "Gets it for the recipes."

Hermione looked sadly at her tiny egg.

"Don't you want to see what Percy's written?" Harry asked her hastily. Percy's letter was short and irritated.

As I am constantly telling the Daily Prophet, Mr. Crouch is taking a well-deserved break. He is sending in regular owls with instructions. No, I haven't actually seen him, but I think I can be trusted to know my own superior's handwriting. I have quite enough to do at the moment without trying to quash these ridiculous rumors. Please don't bother me again unless it's something important. Happy Easter.

The start of the summer term would normally have meant that Harry was training hard for the last Quidditch match of the season. This year, however, it was the third and final task in the Triwizard Tournament for which he needed to prepare, but he still didn't know what he would have to do. Finally, in the last week of May, Professor McGonagall held him back in Transfiguration.

"You are to go down to the Quidditch field tonight at nine o'clock. Potter," she told him. "Mr. Bagman will be there to tell the champions about the third task."

So at half past eight that night. Harry left Ron and Hermione in Gryffindor Tower and went downstairs. As he crossed the entrance hall, Cedric came up from the Hufflepuff common room.

"What d'you reckon it's going to be?" he asked Harry as they went together down the stone steps, out into the cloudy night. "Fleur keeps going on about underground tunnels; she reckons we've got to find treasure."

"That wouldn't be too bad," said Harry, thinking that he would simply ask Hagrid for a niffler to do the job for him.

They walked down the dark lawn to the Quidditch stadium, turned through a gap in the stands, and walked out onto the field.

"What've they done to it?" Cedric said indignantly, stopping dead.

The Quidditch field was no longer smooth and flat. It looked as though somebody had been building long, low walls all over it that twisted and crisscrossed in every direction.

"They're hedges!" said Harry, bending to examine the nearest one.

"Hello there!" called a cheery voice.

Ludo Bagman was standing in the middle of the field with Krum and Fleur. Harry and Cedric made their way toward them, climbing over the hedges. Fleur beamed at Harry as he came nearer. Her attitude toward him had changed completely since he had saved her sister from the lake.

"Well, what d'you think?" said Bagman happily as Harry and Cedric climbed over the last hedge. "Growing nicely, aren't they? Give them a month and Hagrid'll have them twenty feet high. Don't worry," he added, grinning, spotting the less-than-happy expressions on Harry's and Cedric's faces, "you'll have your Quidditch field back to normal once the task is over! Now, I imagine you can guess what we're making here?"

No one spoke for a moment. Then -

"Maze," grunted Krum.

"That's right!" said Bagman. "A maze. The third task's really very straightforward. The Triwizard Cup will be placed in the center of the maze. The first champion to touch it will receive full marks."

"We seemly 'ave to get through the maze?" said Fleur.

"There will be obstacles," said Bagman happily, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Hagrid is providing a number of creatures . . . then there will be spells that must be broken . . . all that sort of thing, you know. Now, the champions who are leading on points will get a head start into the maze." Bagman grinned at Harry and Cedric. "Then Mr. Krum will enter . . . then Miss Delacour. But you'll all be in with a fighting chance, depending how well you get past the obstacles. Should be fun, eh?"

Harry, who knew only too well the kind of creatures that Hagrid was likely to provide for an event like this, thought it was unlikely to be any fun at all. However, he nodded politely like the other champions. "Very well. . . if you haven't got any questions, we'll go back up to the castle, shall we, it's a bit chilly. . ."

Bagman hurried alongside Harry as they began to wend their way out of the growing maze. Harry had the feeling that Bagman was going to start offering to help him again, but just then, Krum tapped Harry on the shoulder.

"Could I haff a vord?"

"Yeah, all right," said Harry, slightly surprised.

"Vill you valk vith me?"

"Okay," said Harry curiously.

Bagman looked slightly perturbed.

"I'll wait for you. Harry, shall I?"

"No, it's okay, Mr. Bagman," said Harry, suppressing a smile, "I think I can find the castle on my own, thanks."

Harry and Krum left the stadium together, but Krum did not set a course for the Durmstrang ship. Instead, he walked toward the forest.

"What're we going this way for?" said Harry as they passed Hagrid's cabin and the illuminated Beauxbatons carriage.

"Don't vont to be overheard," said Krum shortly.

When at last they had reached a quiet stretch of ground a short way from the Beauxbatons horses' paddock, Krum stopped in the shade of the trees and turned to face Harry.

"I vant to know," he said, glowering, "vot there is between you and Hermy-own-ninny."

Harry, who from Krum's secretive manner had expected something much more serious than this, stared up at Krum in amazement.

"Nothing," he said. But Krum glowered at him, and Harry, somehow struck anew by how tall Krum was, elaborated. "We're friends. She's not my girlfriend and she never has been. It's just that Skeeter woman making things up."

"Hermy-own-ninny talks about you very often," said Krum, looking suspiciously at Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry, "because were friends."

He couldn't quite believe he was having this conversation with Viktor Krum, the famous International Quidditch player. It was as though the eighteen-year-old Krum thought he. Harry, was an equal - a real rival - "You haff never . . . you haff not..."

"No," said Harry very firmly.

Krum looked slightly happier. He stared at Harry for a few seconds, then said, "You fly very veil. I vos votching at the first task."

"Thanks," said Harry, grinning broadly and suddenly feeling much taller himself. "I saw you at the Quidditch World Cup. The Wronski Feint, you really -"

But something moved behind Krum in the trees, and Harry, who had some experience of the sort of thing that lurked in the forest, instinctively grabbed Krum's arm and pulled him around.

"Vot is it?"

Harry shook his head, staring at the place where he'd seen movement. He slipped his hand inside his robes, reaching for his wand.

Suddenly a man staggered out from behind a tall oak. For a moment, Harry didn't recognize him . . . then he realized it was Mr. Crouch.

He looked as though he had been traveling for days. The knees of his robes were ripped and bloody, his face scratched; he was unshaven and gray with exhaustion. His neat hair and mustache were both in need of a wash and a trim. His strange appearance, however, was nothing to the way he was behaving. Muttering and gesticulating, Mr. Crouch appeared to be talking to someone that he alone could see. He reminded Harry vividly of

an old tramp he had seen once when out shopping with the Dursleys. That man too had been conversing wildly with thin air; Aunt Petunia had seized Dudley's hand and pulled him across the road to avoid him; Uncle Vernon had then treated the family to a long rant about what he would like to do with beggars and vagrants.

"Vosn't he a judge?" said Krum, staring at Mr. Crouch. "Isn't he with your Ministry?"

Harry nodded, hesitated for a moment, then walked slowly toward Mr. Crouch, who did not look at him, but continued to talk to a nearby tree. "... and when you've done that, Weatherby, send an owl to Dumbledore confirming the number of Durmstrang students who will be attending the tournament, Karkaroff has just sent word there will be twelve. . . ."

"Mr. Crouch?" said Harry cautiously.

"... and then send another owl to Madame Maxime, because she might want to up the number of students she's bringing, now Karkaroff's made it a round dozen ... do that, Weatherby, will you? Will you? Will..."

Mr. Crouch's eyes were bulging. He stood staring at the tree, muttering soundlessly at it. Then he staggered sideways and fell to his knees.

"Mr. Crouch?" Harry said loudly. "Are you all right?"

Crouch's eyes were rolling in his head. Harry looked around at Krum, who had followed him into the trees, and was looking down at Crouch in alarm.

"Vot is wrong with him?"

"No idea," Harry muttered. "Listen, you'd better go and get someone -"

"Dumbledore!" gasped Mr. Crouch. He reached out and seized a handful of Harry's robes, dragging him closer, though his eyes were staring over Harry's head. "I need... see ... Dumbledore. . . ."

"Okay," said Harry, "if you get up, Mr. Crouch, we can go up to the-"

"I've done . . . stupid . . . thing . . ." Mr. Crouch breathed. He looked utterly mad. His eyes were rolling and bulging, and a trickle of spittle was sliding down his chin. Every word he spoke seemed to cost him a terrible effort. "Must. . . tell. . . Dumbledore . . ."

"Get up, Mr. Crouch," said Harry loudly and clearly. "Get up, I'll take you to Dumbledore!"

Mr. Crouch's eyes rolled forward onto Harry.

"Who . . . you?" he whispered.

"I'm a student at the school," said Harry, looking around at Krum for some help, but Krum was hanging back, looking extremely nervous.

"You're not... his?" whispered Crouch, his mouth sagging.

"No," said Harry, without the faintest idea what Crouch was talking about.

"Dumbledore's?"

"That's right," said Harry.

Crouch was pulling him closer; Harry tried to loosen Crouch's grip on his robes, but it was too powerful.

"Warn . . . Dumbledore . . ."

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let go of me," said Harry. "Just let go, Mr. Crouch, and I'll get him. . . ."

"Thank you, Weatherby, and when you have done that, I would like a cup of tea. My wife and son will be arriving shortly, we are attending a concert tonight with Mr. and Mrs. Fudge."

Crouch was now talking fluently to a tree again, and seemed completely unaware that Harry was there, which surprised Harry so much he didn't notice that Crouch had released him.

"Yes, my son has recently gained twelve O.W.L.S, most satisfactory, yes, thank you, yes, very proud indeed. Now, if you could bring me that memo from the Andorran Minister of Magic, I think I will have time to draft a response. . . ."

"You stay here with him!" Harry said to Krum. "I'll get Dumbledore, I'll be quicker, I know where his office is -"

"He is mad," said Krum doubtfully, staring down at Crouch, who was still gabbling to the tree, apparently convinced it was Percy.

"Just stay with him," said Harry, starting to get up, but his movement seemed to trigger another abrupt change in Mr. Crouch, who seized him hard around the knees and pulled Harry back to the ground.

"Don't . . . leave . . . me!" he whispered, his eyes bulging again. "I... escaped . . . must warn . . . must tell... see Dumbledore . . . my fault... all my fault. . . Bertha . . . dead ... all my fault. . . my son . . . my fault... tell Dumbledore ... Harry Potter ... the Dark Lord . . . stronger . . . Harry Potter . . ."

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let me go, Mr. Crouch!" said Harry. He looked furiously around at Krum. "Help me, will you?"

Looking extremely apprehensive, Krum moved forward and squatted down next to Mr. Crouch.

"Just keep him here," said Harry, pulling himself free of Mr. Crouch.

"I'll be back with Dumbledore."

"Hurry, von't you?" Krum called after him as Harry sprinted away from the forest and up through the dark grounds. They were deserted; Bagman, Cedric, and Fleur had disappeared. Harry tore up the stone steps, through the oak front doors, and off up the marble staircase, toward the second floor.

Five minutes later he was hurtling toward a stone gargoyle standing halfway along an empty corridor.

"Sher - sherbet lemon!" he panted at it.

This was the password to the hidden staircase to Dumbledore's office - or at least, it had been two years ago. The password had evidently changed, however, for the stone gargoyle did not spring to life and jump aside, but stood frozen, glaring at Harry malevolently.

"Move!" Harry shouted at it. "C'mon!"

But nothing at Hogwarts had ever moved just because he shouted at it; he knew it was no good. He looked up and down the dark corridor. Perhaps Dumbledore was in the staffroom? He started running as fast as he could toward the staircase -

"POTTER!"

Harry skidded to a halt and looked around. Snape had just emerged from the hidden staircase behind the stone gargoyle. The wall was sliding shut behind him even as he beckoned Harry back toward him.

"What are you doing here, Potter?"

"I need to see Professor Dumbledore!" said Harry, running back up the corridor and skidding to a standstill in front of Snape instead. "It's Mr. Crouch . . . he's just turned up . . . he's in the forest... he's asking -"

"What is this rubbish?" said Snape, his black eyes glittering. "What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Crouch!" Harry shouted. "From the Ministry! He's ill or something - he's in the forest, he wants to see Dumbledore! Just give me the password up to -"

"The headmaster is busy. Potter," said Snape, his thin mouth curling into an unpleasant smile.

"I've got to tell Dumbledore!" Harry yelled.

"Didn't you hear me. Potter?"

Harry could tell Snape was thoroughly enjoying himself, denying Harry the thing he wanted when he was so panicky.

"Look," said Harry angrily, "Crouch isn't right - he's - he's out of his mind - he says he wants to warn -"

The stone wall behind Snape slid open. Dumbledore was standing there, wearing long green robes and a mildly curious expression. "Is there a problem?" he said, looking between Harry and Snape.

"Professor!" Harry said, sidestepping Snape before Snape could speak,

"Mr. Crouch is here - he's down in the forest, he wants to speak to you!"

Harry expected Dumbledore to ask questions, but to his relief, Dumbledore did nothing of the sort.

"Lead the way," he said promptly, and he swept off along the corridor behind Harry, leaving Snape standing next to the gargoyle and looking twice as ugly.

"What did Mr. Crouch say. Harry?" said Dumbledore as they walked swiftly down the marble staircase.

"Said he wants to warn you . . . said he's done something terrible . . . he mentioned his son . . . and Bertha Jorkins . . . and - and Voldemort. . . something about Voldemort getting stronger. . ."

"Indeed," said Dumbledore, and he quickened his pace as they hurried out into the pitch-darkness.

"He's not acting normally," Harry said, hurrying along beside Dumbledore.

"He doesn't seem to know where he is. He keeps talking like he thinks Percy Weasley's there, and then he changes, and says he needs to see you. . . I left him with Viktor Krum."

"You did?" said Dumbledore sharply, and he began to take longer strides still, so that Harry was running to keep up. "Do you know if anybody else saw Mr. Crouch?"

"No," said Harry. "Krum and I were talking, Mr. Bagman had just finished telling us about the third task, we stayed behind, and then we saw Mr. Crouch coming out of the forest -"

"Where are they?" said Dumbledore as the Beauxbatons carriage emerged from the darkness.

"Over here," said Harry, moving in front of Dumbledore, leading the way through the trees. He couldn't hear Crouch's voice anymore, but he knew where he was going; it hadn't been much past the Beauxbatons carriage . . . somewhere around here. . . .

"Viktor?" Harry shouted.

No one answered.

"They were here," Harry said to Dumbledore. "They were definitely somewhere around here. . ."

"Lumos," Dumbledore said, lighting his wand and holding it up. Its narrow beam traveled from black trunk to black trunk, illuminating the ground. And then it fell upon a pair of feet.

Harry and Dumbledore hurried forward. Krum was sprawled on the forest floor. He seemed to be unconscious. There was no sign at all of Mr. Crouch. Dumbledore bent over Krum and gently lifted one of his eyelids.

"Stunned," he said softly. His half-moon glasses glittered in the wandlight as he peered around at the surrounding trees.

"Should I go and get someone?" said Harry. "Madam Pomfrey?"

"No," said Dumbledore swiftly. "Stay here."

He raised his wand into the air and pointed it in the direction of Hagrid's cabin. Harry saw something silvery dart out of it and streak away through the trees like a ghostly bird. Then Dumbledore bent over Krum again, pointed his wand at him, and muttered, "Ennervate."

Krum opened his eyes. He looked dazed. When he saw Dumbledore, he tried to sit up, but Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder and made him lie still.

"He attacked me!" Krum muttered, putting a hand up to his head. "The old madman attacked me! I vos looking around to see vare Potter had gone and he attacked from behind!"

"Lie still for a moment," Dumbledore said.

The sound of thunderous footfalls reached them, and Hagrid came panting into sight with Fang at his heels. He was carrying his crossbow.

"Professor Dumbledore!" he said, his eyes widening. "Harry - what the - ?"

"Hagrid, I need you to fetch Professor Karkaroff," said Dumbledore. "His student has been attacked. When you've done that, kindly alert Professor Moody -"

"No need, Dumbledore," said a wheezy growl. "I'm here." Moody was limping toward them, leaning on his staff, his wand lit. "Damn leg," he said furiously. "Would've been here quicker . . . what's happened? Snape said something about Crouch -" "Crouch?" said Hagrid blankly. "Karkaroff, please, Hagrid!" said Dumbledore sharply. "Oh yeah . . . right y'are, Professor. . ." said Hagrid, and he turned and disappeared into the dark trees, Fang trotting after him. "I don't know where Barty Crouch is," Dumbledore told Moody, "but it is essential that we find him." "I'm onto it," growled Moody, and he pulled out his wand and limped off into the forest.

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke again until they heard the unmistakable sounds of Hagrid and Fang returning. Karkaroff was hurrying along behind them. He was wearing his sleek silver furs, and he looked pale and agitated.

"What is this?" he cried when he saw Krum on the ground and Dumbledore and Harry beside him. "What's going on?"

"I vos attacked!" said Krum, sitting up now and rubbing his head. "Mr. Crouch or votever his name -"

"Crouch attacked you? Crouch attacked you? The Triwizard judge?"

"Igor," Dumbledore began, but Karkaroff had drawn himself up, clutching his furs around him, looking livid.

"Treachery!" he bellowed, pointing at Dumbledore. "It is a plot! You and your Ministry of Magic have lured me here under false pretenses, Dumbledore! This is not an equal competition! First you sneak Potter into the tournament, though he is underage! Now one of your Ministry friends attempts to put my champion out of action! I smell double-dealing and corruption in this whole affair, and you, Dumbledore, you, with your talk of closer international wizarding links, of rebuilding old ties, of forgetting old differences - here's what I think of you!"

Karkaroff spat onto the ground at Dumbledore's feet. In one swift movement, Hagrid seized the front of Karkaroff's furs, lifted him into the air, and slammed him against a nearby tree.

"Apologize!" Hagrid snarled as Karkaroff gasped for breath, Hagrid's massive fist at his throat, his feet dangling in midair.

"Hagrid, no!" Dumbledore shouted, his eyes flashing.

Hagrid removed the hand pinning Karkaroff to the tree, and Karkaroff slid all the way down the trunk and slumped in a huddle at its roots; a few twigs and leaves showered down upon his head.

"Kindly escort Harry back up to the castle, Hagrid," said Dumbledore sharply.

Breathing heavily, Hagrid gave Karkaroff a glowering look.

"Maybe I'd better stay here. Headmaster. . . ."

"You will take Harry back to school, Hagrid," Dumbledore repeated firmly. "Take him right up to Gryffindor Tower. And Harry - I want you to stay there. Anything you might want to do - any owls you might want to send - they can wait until morning, do you understand me?"

"Er - yes," said Harry, staring at him. How had Dumbledore known that, at that very moment, he had been thinking about sending Pigwidgeon straight to Sirius, to tell him what had happened?

"I'll leave Fang with yeh. Headmaster," Hagrid said, staring menacingly at Karkaroff, who was still sprawled at the foot of the tree, tangled in furs and tree roots. "Stay, Fang. C'mon, Harry."

They marched in silence past the Beauxbatons carriage and up toward the castle.

"How dare he," Hagrid growled as they strode past the lake. "How dare he accuse Dumbledore. Like Dumbledore'd do anythin' like that. Like Dumbledore wanted you in the tournament in the firs' place. Worried! I

dunno when I seen Dumbledore more worried than he's bin lately. An' you!" Hagrid suddenly said angrily to Harry, who looked up at him, taken aback. "What were yeh doin', wanderin' off with ruddy Krum? He's from Durmstrang, Harry! Coulda jinxed yeh right there, couldn he? Hasn' Moody taught yeh nothin'? 'Magine lettin him lure yeh off on yer own -" "Krum's all right!" said Harry as they climbed the steps into the entrance hall. "He wasn't trying to jinx me, he just wanted to talk about Hermione --"

"I'll be havin' a few words with her, an' all," said Hagrid grimly, stomping up the stairs. "The less you lot 'ave ter do with these foreigners, the happier yeh'll be. Yeh can trust any of 'em." "You were getting on all right with Madame Maxime," Harry said, annoyed. "Don' you talk ter me abou' her!" said Hagrid, and he looked quite frightening for a moment. "I've got her number now! Tryin' ter get back in me good books, tryin' ter get me ter tell her what's comin in the third task. Ha! You can't trust any of'em!"

Hagrid was in such a bad mood, Harry was quite glad to say good-bye to him in front of the Fat Lady. He clambered through the portrait hole into the common room and hurried straight for the corner where Ron and Hermione were sitting, to tell them what had happened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE - THE DREAM

It comes down to this," said Hermione, rubbing her forehead. "Either Mr. Crouch attacked Viktor, or somebody else attacked both of them when Viktor wasn't looking."

"It must've been Crouch," said Ron at once. "That's why he was gone when Harry and Dumbledore got there. He'd done a runner."

"I don't think so," said Harry, shaking his head. "He seemed really weak - I don't reckon he was up to Disapparating or anything."

"You can't Disapparate on the Hogwarts grounds, haven't I told you enough times?" said Hermione.

"Okay. . . hows this for a theory," said Ron excitedly. "Krum attacked Crouch - no, wait for it - and then Stunned himself!"

"And Mr. Crouch evaporated, did he?" said Hermione coldly.

"Oh yeah . . ."

It was daybreak. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had crept out of their dormitories very early and hurried up to the Owlery together to send a note to Sirius. Now they were standing looking out at the misty grounds. All three of them were puffy-eyed and pale because they had been talking late into the night about Mr. Crouch.

"Just go through it again, Harry," said Hermione. "What did Mr. Crouch actually say?"

"I've told you, he wasn't making much sense," said Harry. "He said he wanted to warn Dumbledore about something. He definitely mentioned Bertha Jorkins, and he seemed to think she was dead. He kept saying stuff was his fault. . . . He mentioned his son."

"Well, that was his fault," said Hermione testily.

"He was out of his mind," said Harry. "Half the time he seemed to think his wife and son were still alive, and he kept talking to Percy about work and giving him instructions."

"And . . . remind me what he said about You-Know-Who?" said Ron tentatively.

"I've told you," Harry repeated dully. "He said he's getting stronger." There was a pause. Then Ron said in a falsely confident voice, "But he was out of his mind, like you said, so half of it was probably just raving. . . ."

"He was sanest when he was trying to talk about Voldemort," said Harry, and Ron winced at the sound of the name. "He was having real trouble stringing two words together, but that was when he seemed to know where

he was, and know what he wanted to do. He just kept saying he had to see Dumbledore."

Harry turned away from the window and stared up into the rafters. The many perches were half-empty; every now and then, another owl would swoop in through one of the windows, returning from its night's hunting with a mouse in its beak.

"If Snape hadn't held me up," Harry said bitterly, "we might've got there in time. 'The headmaster is busy. Potter . . . what's this rubbish, Potter?' Why couldn't he have just got out of the way?"

"Maybe he didn't want you to get there!" said Ron quickly. "Maybe - hang on - how fast d'you reckon he could've gotten down to the forest? D'you reckon he could've beaten you and Dumbledore there?"

"Not unless he can turn himself into a bat or something," said Harry.

"Wouldn't put it past him," Ron muttered.

"We need to see Professor Moody," said Hermione. "We need to find out whether he found Mr. Crouch,"

"If he had the Marauder's Map on him, it would've been easy," said Harry. "Unless Crouch was already outside the grounds," said Ron, "because it only shows up to the boundaries, doesn't -"

"Shh!" said Hermione suddenly.

Somebody was climbing the steps up to the Owlery. Harry could hear two voices arguing, coming closer and closer.

"- that's blackmail, that is, we could get into a lot of trouble for that -"

"- we've tried being polite; it's time to play dirty, like him. He wouldn't like the Ministry of Magic knowing what he did -"

"I'm telling you, if you put that in writing, it's blackmail!"

"Yeah, and you won't be complaining if we get a nice fat payoff, will you?"

The Owlery door banged open. Fred and George came over the threshold, then froze at the sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"What're you doing here?" Ron and Fred said at the same time.

"Sending a letter," said Harry and George in unison.

"What, at this time?" said Hermione and Fred.

Fred grinned.

"Fine - we won't ask you what you're doing, if you don't ask us," he said.

He was holding a sealed envelope in his hands. Harry glanced at it, but Fred, whether accidentally or on purpose, shifted his hand so that the name on it was covered.

"Well, don't let us hold you up," Fred said, making a mock bow and pointing at the door.

Ron didn't move. "Who're you blackmailing?" he said.

The grin vanished from Fred's face. Harry saw George half glance at Fred, before smiling at Ron.

"Don't be stupid, I was only joking," he said easily.

"Didn't sound like that," said Ron.

Fred and George looked at each other. Then Fred said abruptly, "I've told you before, Ron, keep your nose out if you like it the shape it is. Can't see why you would, but -"

"It's my business if you're blackmailing someone," said Ron. "George's right, you could end up in serious trouble for that."

"Told you, I was joking," said George. He walked over to Fred, pulled the letter out of his hands, and began attaching it to the leg of the nearest barn owl. "You're starting to sound a bit like our dear older brother, you are, Ron. Carry on like this and you'll be made a prefect."

"No, I won't!" said Ron hotly.

George carried the barn owl over to the window and it took off. George turned around and grinned at Ron.

"Well, stop telling people what to do then. See you later."

He and Fred left the Owlery. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another.

"You don't think they know something about all this, do you?" Hermione whispered. "About Crouch and everything?"

"No," said Harry. "If it was something that serious, they'd tell someone. They'd tell Dumbledore."

Ron, however, was looking uncomfortable.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked him.

"Well. . ." said Ron slowly, "I dunno if they would. They're . . . they're obsessed with making money lately, I noticed it when I was hanging around with them - when - you know -"

"We weren't talking." Harry finished the sentence for him. "Yeah, but blackmail..."

"It's this joke shop idea they've got," said Ron. "I thought they were only saying it to annoy Mum, but they really mean it, they want to start one. They've only got a year left at Hogwarts, they keep going on about how it's time to think about their future, and Dad can't help them, and they need gold to get started."

Hermione was looking uncomfortable now.

"Yes, but. . . they wouldn't do anything against the law to get gold."

"Wouldn't they?" said Ron, looking skeptical. "I dunno . . . they don't exactly mind breaking rules, do they?"

"Yes, but this is the law" said Hermione, looking scared. "This isn't some silly school rule. . . . They'll get a lot more than detention for blackmail! Ron. . . maybe you'd better tell Percy. . . ."

"Are you mad?" said Ron. "Tell Percy? He'd probably do a Crouch and turn them in." He stared at the window through which Fred and George's owl had departed, then said, "Come on, let's get some breakfast."

"D'you think it's too early to go and see Professor Moody?" Hermione said as they went down the spiral staircase.

"Yes," said Harry. "He'd probably blast us through the door if we wake him at the crack of dawn; he'll think we're trying to attack him while he's asleep. Let's give it till break."

History of Magic had rarely gone so slowly. Harry kept checking Ron's watch, having finally discarded his own, but Ron's was moving so slowly he could have sworn it had stopped working too. All three of them were so tired they could happily have put their heads down on the desks and slept; even Hermione wasn't taking her usual notes, but was sitting with her head on her hand, gazing at Professor Binns with her eyes out of focus.

When the bell finally rang, they hurried out into the corridors toward the Dark Arts classroom and found Professor Moody leaving it. He looked as tired as they felt. The eyelid of his normal eye was drooping, giving his face an even more lopsided appearance than usual.

"Professor Moody?" Harry called as they made their way toward him through the crowd.

"Hello, Potter," growled Moody. His magical eye followed a couple of passing first years, who sped up, looking nervous; it rolled into the back of Moody's head and watched them around the corner before he spoke again.

"Come in here."

He stood back to let them into his empty classroom, limped in after them, and closed the door.

"Did you find him?" Harry asked without preamble. "Mr. Crouch?"

"No," said Moody. He moved over to his desk, sat down, stretched out his wooden leg with a slight groan, and pulled out his hip flask.

"Did you use the map?" Harry said.

"Of course," said Moody, taking a swig from his flask. "Took a leaf out of your book, Potter. Summoned it from my office into the forest. He wasn't anywhere on there."

"So he did Disapparate?" said Ron.

"You can't Disapparate on the grounds, Ron!" said Hermione. "There are other ways he could have disappeared, aren't there, Professor?"

Moody's magical eye quivered as it rested on Hermione. "You're another one who might think about a career as an Auror," he told her. "Mind works the right way. Granger."

Hermione flushed pink with pleasure.

"Well, he wasn't invisible," said Harry. "The map shows invisible people. He must've left the grounds, then."

"But under his own steam?" said Hermione eagerly, "or because someone made him?"

"Yeah, someone could've - could've pulled him onto a broom and flown off with him, couldn't they?" said Ron quickly, looking hopefully at Moody as if he too wanted to be told he had the makings of an Auror.

"We can't rule out kidnap," growled Moody.

"So," said Ron, "d'you reckon he's somewhere in Hogsmeade?"

"Could be anywhere," said Moody, shaking his head. "Only thing we know for sure is that he's not here."

He yawned widely, so that his scars stretched, and his lopsided mouth revealed a number of missing teeth. Then he said, "Now, Dumbledore's told me you three fancy yourselves as investigators, but there's nothing you can do for Crouch. The Ministry'll be looking for him now, Dumbledore's notified them. Potter, you just keep your mind on the third task."

"What?" said Harry. "Oh yeah . . ."

He hadn't given the maze a single thought since he'd left it with Krum the previous night.

"Should be right up your street, this one," said Moody, looking up at Harry and scratching his scarred and stubbly chin. "From what Dumbledore's said, you've managed to get through stuff like this plenty of times. Broke your way through a series of obstacles guarding the Sorcerers Stone in your first year, didn't you?"

"We helped," Ron said quickly. "Me and Hermione helped."

Moody grinned.

"Well, help him practice for this one, and I'll be very surprised if he doesn't win," said Moody. "In the meantime . . . constant vigilance, Potter. Constant vigilance." He took another long draw from his hip flask, and his magical eye swiveled onto the window. The topmost sail of the Durmstrang ship was visible through it.

"You two," counseled Moody, his normal eye on Ron and Hermione, "you stick close to Potter, all right? I'm keeping an eye on things, but all the same . . . you can never have too many eyes out."

Sirius sent their owl back the very next morning. It fluttered down beside Harry at the same moment that a tawny owl landed in front of Hermione, clutching a copy of the Daily Prophet in its beak. She took the newspaper, scanned the first few pages, said, "Ha! She hasn't got wind of Crouch!" then joined Ron and Harry in reading what Sirius had to say on the mysterious events of the night before last.

Harry - what do you think you are playing at, walking off into the forest with Viktor Krum? I want you to swear, by return owl, that you are not going to go walking with anyone else at night. There is somebody highly dangerous at Hogwarts. It is clear to me that they wanted to stop Crouch from seeing Dumbledore and you were probably feet away from them in the dark. You could have been killed.

Your name didn't get into the Goblet of Fire by accident. If someone's trying to attack you, they're on their last chance. Stay close to Ron and Hermione, do not leave Gryffindor Tower after hours, and arm yourself for the third task. Practice Stunning and Disarming. A few hexes

wouldn't go amiss either. There's nothing you can do about Crouch. Keep your head down and look after yourself. I'm waiting for your letter giving me your word you won't stray out-of-bounds again.

Sirius

"Who's he, to lecture me about being out-of-bounds?" said Harry in mild indignation as he folded up Sirius's letter and put it inside his robes.

"After all the stuff he did at school!"

"He's worried about you!" said Hermione sharply. "Just like Moody and Hagrid! So listen to them!"

"No one's tried to attack me all year," said Harry. "No one's done anything to me at all!"

"Except put your name in the Goblet of Fire," said Hermione. "And they must've done that for a reason. Harry. Snuffles is right. Maybe they've been biding their time. Maybe this is the task they're going to get you."

"Look," said Harry impatiently, "let's say Sirius is right, and someone Stunned Krum to kidnap Crouch. Well, they would've been in the trees near us, wouldn't they? But they waited till I was out of the way until they acted, didn't they? So it doesn't look like I'm their target, does it?"

"They couldn't have made it look like an accident if they'd murdered you in the forest!" said Hermione. "But if you die during a task—"

"They didn't care about attacking Krum, did they?" said Harry. "Why didn't they just polish me off at the same time? They could've made it look like Krum and I had a duel or something."

"Harry, I don't understand it either," said Hermione desperately. "I just know there are a lot of odd things going on, and I don't like it. ... Moody's right - Sirius is right - you've got to get in training for the third task, straight away. And you make sure you write back to Sirius and promise him you're not going to go sneaking off alone again."

The Hogwarts grounds never looked more inviting than when Harry had to stay indoors. For the next few days he spent all of his free time either in the library with Hermione and Ron, looking up hexes, or else in empty classrooms, which they sneaked into to practice. Harry was concentrating on the Stunning Spell, which he had never used before. The trouble was that practicing it involved certain sacrifices on Ron's and Hermione's part.

"Can't we kidnap Mrs. Norris?" Ron suggested on Monday lunchtime as he lay flat on his back in the middle of their Charms classroom, having just been Stunned and reawoken by Harry for the fifth time in a row. "Let's Stun her for a bit. Or you could use Dobby, Harry, I bet he'd do anything to help you. I'm not complaining or anything" - he got gingerly to his feet, rubbing his backside - "but I'm aching all over. . . ."

"Well, you keep missing the cushions, don't you!" said Hermione impatiently, rearranging the pile of cushions they had used for the Banishing Spell, which Flitwick had left in a cabinet. "Just try and fall backward!"

"Once you're Stunned, you can't aim too well, Hermione!" said Ron angrily. "Why don't you take a turn?"

"Well, I think Harry's got it now, anyway," said Hermione hastily. "And we don't have to worry about Disarming, because he's been able to do that for ages. ... I think we ought to start on some of these hexes this evening."

She looked down the list they had made in the library.

"I like the look of this one," she said, "this Impediment Curse. Should slow down anything that's trying to attack you. Harry. We'll start with that one."

The bell rang. They hastily shoved the cushions back into Flitwicks cupboard and slipped out of the classroom.

"See you at dinner!" said Hermione, and she set off for Arithmancy, while Harry and Ron headed toward North Tower, and Divination. Broad strips of dazzling gold sunlight tell across the corridor from the high windows. The sky outside was so brightly blue it looked as though it had been enameled.

"It's going to be boiling in Trelawney's room, she never puts out that fire," said Ron as they started up the staircase toward the silver ladder and the trapdoor.

He was quite right. The dimly lit room was swelteringly hot. The fumes from the perfumed fire were heavier than ever. Harrys head swam as he made his way over to one of the curtained windows. While Professor Trelawney was looking the other way, disentangling her shawl from a lamp, he opened it an inch or so and settled back in his chintz armchair, so that a soft breeze played across his face. It was extremely comfortable. "My dears," said Professor Trelawney, sitting down in her winged armchair in front of the class and peering around at them all with her strangely enlarged eyes, "we have almost finished our work on planetary divination. Today, however, will be an excellent opportunity to examine the effects of Mars, for he is placed most interestingly at the present time. If you will all look this way, I will dim the lights. . . ."

She waved her wand and the lamps went out. The fire was the only source of light now. Professor Trelawney bent down and lifted, from under her chair, a miniature model of the solar system, contained within a glass dome. It was a beautiful thing; each of the moons glimmered in place around the nine planets and the fiery sun, all of them hanging in thin air beneath the glass. Harry watched lazily as Professor Trelawney began to point out the fascinating angle Mars was making to Neptune. The heavily perfumed fumes washed over him, and the breeze from the window played across his face. He could hear an insect humming gently somewhere behind the curtain. His eyelids began to droop. . . .

He was riding on the back of an eagle owl, soaring through the clear blue sky toward an old, ivy-covered house set high on a hillside. Lower and lower they flew, the wind blowing pleasantly in Harry's face, until they reached a dark and broken window in the upper story of the house and entered. Now they were flying along a gloomy passageway, to a room at the very end . . . through the door they went, into a dark room whose windows were boarded up....

Harry had left the owl's back... he was watching, now, as it fluttered across the room, into a chair with its back to him. . . . There were two dark shapes on the floor beside the chair . . . both of them were stirring. . . .

One was a huge snake . . . the other was a man ... a short, balding man, a man with watery eyes and a pointed nose ... he was wheezing and sobbing on the hearth rug. . . .

"You are in luck, Wormtail," said a cold, high-pitched voice from the depths of the chair in which the owl had landed. "You are very fortunate indeed. Your blunder has not ruined everything. He is dead."

"My Lord!" gasped the man on the floor. "My Lord, I am ... I am so pleased . . . and so sorry. . . ."

"Nagini," said the cold voice, "you are out of luck. I will not be feeding Wormtail to you, after all... but never mind, never mind . . . there is still Harry Potter. . . ."

The snake hissed. Harry could see its tongue fluttering.

"Now, Wormtail," said the cold voice, "perhaps one more little reminder why I will not tolerate another blunder from you. . . ."

"My Lord ... no ... I beg you . . ."

The tip of a wand emerged from around the back of the chair. It was pointing at Wormtail.

"Crucio!" said the cold voice.

Wormtail screamed, screamed as though every nerve in his body were on fire, the screaming filled Harry's ears as the scar on his forehead seared with pain; he was yelling too...Voldemort would hear him, would know he was there. . . .

"Harry! Harry!"

Harry opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of Professor Trelawney's room with his hands over his face. His scar was still burning so badly that his eyes were watering. The pain had been real. The whole class was standing around him, and Ron was kneeling next to him, looking terrified.

"You all right?" he said.

"Of course he isn't!" said Professor Trelawney, looking thoroughly excited. Her great eyes loomed over Harry, gazing at him. "What was it. Potter? A premonition? An apparition? What did you see?"

"Nothing," Harry lied. He sat up. He could feel himself shaking. He couldn't stop himself from looking around, into the shadows behind him; Voldemort's voice had sounded so close. . . .

"You were clutching your scar!" said Professor Trelawney. "You were rolling on the floor, clutching your scar! Come now. Potter, I have experience in these matters!"

Harry looked up at her.

"I need to go to the hospital wing, I think," he said. "Bad headache."

"My dear, you were undoubtedly stimulated by the extraordinary clairvoyant vibrations of my room!" said Professor Trelawney. "If you leave now, you may lose the opportunity to see further than you have ever -"

"I don't want to see anything except a headache cure," said Harry.

He stood up. The class backed away. They all looked unnerved.

"See you later," Harry muttered to Ron, and he picked up his bag and headed for the trapdoor, ignoring Professor Trelawney, who was wearing an expression of great frustration, as though she had just been denied a real treat.

When Harry reached the bottom of her stepladder, however, he did not set off for the hospital wing. He had no intention whatsoever of going there. Sirius had told him what to do if his scar hurt him again, and Harry was going to follow his advice: He was going straight to Dumbledore's office. He marched down the corridors, thinking about what he had seen in the dream . . . it had been as vivid as the one that had awoken him on Privet Drive. . . . He ran over the details in his mind, trying to make sure he could remember them. . . . He had heard Voldemort accusing Wormtail of making a blunder . . . but the owl had brought good news, the blunder had been repaired, somebody was dead . . . so Wormtail was not going to be fed to the snake . . . he, Harry, was going to be fed to it instead. . . .

Harry had walked right past the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore's office without noticing. He blinked, looked around, realized what he had done, and retraced his steps, stopping in front of it. Then he remembered that he didn't know the password.

"Sherbet lemon?" he tried tentatively.

The gargoyle did not move.

"Okay," said Harry, staring at it, "Pear Drop. Er - Licorice Wand. Fizzing Whizbee. Drooble's Best Blowing Gum. Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans . . . oh no, he doesn't like them, does he? . . . oh just open, can't you?" he said angrily. "I really need to see him, its urgent!"

The gargoyle remained immovable.

Harry kicked it, achieving nothing but an excruciating pain in his big toe.

"Chocolate Frog!" he yelled angrily, standing on one leg. "Sugar Quill! Cockroach Cluster!"

The gargoyle sprang to life and jumped aside. Harry blinked.
"Cockroach Cluster?" he said, amazed. "I was only joking. . ."
He hurried through the gap in the walls and stepped onto the foot of a spiral stone staircase, which moved slowly upward as the doors closed behind him, taking him up to a polished oak door with a brass door knocker.

He could hear voices from inside the office. He stepped off the moving staircase and hesitated, listening.

"Dumbledore, I'm afraid I don't see the connection, don't see it at all!" It was the voice of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. "Ludo says Bertha perfectly capable of getting herself lost. I agree we would have expected to have found her by now, but all the same, we've no evidence of foul play, Dumbledore, none at all. As for her disappearance being linked with Barty Crouch's!"

"And what do you think happened to Barty Crouch, Minister?" said Moody's growling voice.

"I see two possibilities, Alastor," said Fudge. "Either Crouch has finally cracked - more than likely, I'm sure you'll agree, given his personal history - lost his mind, and gone wandering off somewhere -"

"He wandered extremely quickly, if that is the case, Cornelius," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Or else - well..." Fudge sounded embarrassed. "Well, I'll reserve judgment until after I've seen the place where he was found, but you say it was just past the Beauxbatons carriage? Dumbledore, you know what that woman is?"

"I consider her to be a very able headmistress - and an excellent dancer," said Dumbledore quietly.

"Dumbledore, come!" said Fudge angrily. "Don't you think you might be prejudiced in her favor because of Hagrid? They don't all turn out harmless - if, indeed, you can call Hagrid harmless, with that monster fixation he's got -"

"I no more suspect Madame Maxime than Hagrid," said Dumbledore, just as calmly. "I think it possible that it is you who are prejudiced, Cornelius."

"Can we wrap up this discussion?" growled Moody.

"Yes, yes, let's go down to the grounds, then," said Fudge impatiently.

"No, it's not that," said Moody, "it's just that Potter wants a word with you, Dumbledore. He's just outside the door."

CHAPTER THIRTY - THE PENSIEVE

The door of the office opened.

"Hello, Potter," said Moody. "Come in, then."

Harry walked inside. He had been inside Dumbledore's office once before; it was a very beautiful, circular room, lined with pictures of previous headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts, all of whom were fast asleep, their chests rising and falling gently.

Cornelius Fudge was standing beside Dumbledore's desk, wearing his usual pinstriped cloak and holding his lime-green bowler hat.

"Harry!" said Fudge jovially, moving forward. "How are you?"

"Fine," Harry lied.

"We were just talking about the night when Mr. Crouch turned up on the grounds," said Fudge. "It was you who found him, was it not?"

"Yes," said Harry. Then, feeling it was pointless to pretend that he hadn't overheard what they had been saying, he added, "I didn't see Madame Maxime anywhere, though, and she'd have a job hiding, wouldn't she?"

Dumbledore smiled at Harry behind Fudge's back, his eyes twinkling.

"Yes, well," said Fudge, looking embarrassed, "we're about to go for a short walk on the grounds, Harry, if you'll excuse us ... perhaps if you just go back to your class -"

"I wanted to talk to you. Professor," Harry said quickly, looking at Dumbledore, who gave him a swift, searching look.

"Wait here for me, Harry," he said. "Our examination of the grounds will not take long."

They trooped out in silence past him and closed the door. After a minute or so, Harry heard the clunks of Moody's wooden leg growing fainter in the corridor below. He looked around.

"Hello, Fawkes," he said.

Fawkes, Professor Dumbledore's phoenix, was standing on his golden perch beside the door. The size of a swan, with magnificent scarlet-and-gold plumage, he swished his long tail and blinked benignly at Harry.

Harry sat down in a chair in front of Dumbledore's desk. For several minutes, he sat and watched the old headmasters and headmistresses snoozing in their frames, thinking about what he had just heard, and running his fingers over his scar. It had stopped hurting now.

He felt much calmer, somehow, now that he was in Dumbledore's office, knowing he would shortly be telling him about the dream. Harry looked up at the walls behind the desk. The patched and ragged Sorting Hat was standing on a shelf. A glass case next to it held a magnificent silver sword with large rubies set into the hilt, which Harry recognized as the one he himself had pulled out of the Sorting Hat in his second year. The sword had once belonged to Godric Gryffindor, founder of Harry's House. He was gazing at it, remembering how it had come to his aid when he had thought all hope was lost, when he noticed a patch of silvery light, dancing and shimmering on the glass case. He looked around for the source of the light and saw a sliver of silver-white shining brightly from within a black cabinet behind him, whose door had not been closed properly. Harry hesitated, glanced at Fawkes, then got up, walked across the office, and pulled open the cabinet door.

A shallow stone basin lay there, with odd carvings around the edge: runes and symbols that Harry did not recognize. The silvery light was coming from the basin's contents, which were like nothing Harry had ever seen before. He could not tell whether the substance was liquid or gas. It was a bright, whitish silver, and it was moving ceaselessly; the surface of it became ruffled like water beneath wind, and then, like clouds, separated and swirled smoothly. It looked like light made liquid - or like wind made solid - Harry couldn't make up his mind.

He wanted to touch it, to find out what it felt like, but nearly four years' experience of the magical world told him that sticking his hand into a bowl full of some unknown substance was a very stupid thing to do. He therefore pulled his wand out of the inside of his robes, cast a nervous look around the office, looked back at the contents of the basin, and prodded them.

The surface of the silvery stuff inside the basin began to swirl very fast.

Harry bent closer, his head right inside the cabinet. The silvery substance had become transparent; it looked like glass. He looked down into it expecting to see the stone bottom of the basin - and saw instead an enormous room below the surface of the mysterious substance, a room into which he seemed to be looking through a circular window in the ceiling.

The room was dimly lit; he thought it might even be underground, for there were no windows, merely torches in brackets such as the ones that illuminated the walls of Hogwarts. Lowering his face so that his nose was a mere inch away from the glassy substance, Harry saw that rows and rows of witches and wizards were seated around every wall on what seemed to be benches rising in levels. An empty chair stood in the very center of the

room. There was something about the chair that gave Harry an ominous feeling. Chains encircled the arms of it, as though its occupants were usually tied to it.

Where was this place? It surely wasn't Hogwarts; he had never seen a room like that here in the castle. Moreover, the crowd in the mysterious room at the bottom of the basin was comprised of adults, and Harry knew there were not nearly that many teachers at Hogwarts. They seemed, he thought, to be waiting for something; even though he could only see the tops of their hats, all of their faces seemed to be pointing in one direction, and none of them were talking to one another.

The basin being circular, and the room he was observing square, Harry could not make out what was going on in the corners of it. He leaned even closer, tilting his head, trying to see...

The tip of his nose touched the strange substance into which he was staring.

Dumbledore's office gave an almighty lurch - Harry was thrown forward and pitched headfirst into the substance inside the basin -

But his head did not hit the stone bottom. He was falling through something icy-cold and black; it was like being sucked into a dark whirlpool -

And suddenly, Harry found himself sitting on a bench at the end of the room inside the basin, a bench raised high above the others. He looked up at the high stone ceiling, expecting to see the circular window through which he had just been staring, but there was nothing there but dark, solid stone.

Breathing hard and fast. Harry looked around him. Not one of the witches and wizards in the room (and there were at least two hundred of them) was looking at him. Not one of them seemed to have noticed that a fourteen-year-old boy had just dropped from the ceiling into their midst. Harry turned to the wizard next to him on the bench and uttered a loud cry of surprise that reverberated around the silent room.

He was sitting right next to Albus Dumbledore.

"Professor!" Harry said in a kind of strangled whisper. "I'm sorry - I didn't mean to - I was just looking at that basin in your cabinet - I - where are we?"

But Dumbledore didn't move or speak. He ignored Harry completely. Like every other wizard on the benches, he was staring into the far corner of the room, where there was a door.

Harry gazed, nonplussed, at Dumbledore, then around at the silently watchful crowd, then back at Dumbledore. And then it dawned on him. . .

Once before. Harry had found himself somewhere that nobody could see or hear him. That time, he had fallen through a page in an enchanted diary, right into somebody else's memory . . . and unless he was very much mistaken, something of the sort had happened again...

Harry raised his right hand, hesitated, and then waved it energetically in front of Dumbledore's face. Dumbledore did not blink, look around at Harry, or indeed move at all. And that, in Harry's opinion, settled the matter. Dumbledore wouldn't ignore him like that. He was inside a memory, and this was not the present-day Dumbledore. Yet it couldn't be that long ago . . . the Dumbledore sitting next to him now was silver-haired, just like the present-day Dumbledore. But what was this place? What were all these wizards waiting for?

Harry looked around more carefully. The room, as he had suspected when observing it from above, was almost certainly underground - more of a dungeon than a room, he thought. There was a bleak and forbidding air about the place; there were no pictures on the walls, no decorations at all; just these serried rows of benches, rising in levels all around the room, all positioned so that they had a clear view of that chair with the chains on its arms.

Before Harry could reach any conclusions about the place in which they were, he heard footsteps. The door in the corner of the dungeon opened and three people entered - or at least one man, flanked by two dementors. Harry's insides went cold. The dementors - tall, hooded creatures whose faces were concealed - were gliding slowly toward the chair in the center of the room, each grasping one of the man's arms with their dead and rotten-looking hands. The man between them looked as though he was about to faint, and Harry couldn't blame him ... he knew the dementors could not touch him inside a memory, but he remembered their power only too well. The watching crowd recoiled slightly as the dementors placed the man in the chained chair and glided back out of the room. The door swung shut behind them.

Harry looked down at the man now sitting in the chair and saw that it was Karkaroff.

Unlike Dumbledore, Karkaroff looked much younger; his hair and goatee were black. He was not dressed in sleek furs, but in thin and ragged robes. He was shaking. Even as Harry watched, the chains on the arms of the chair glowed suddenly gold and snaked their way up Karkaroff's arms, binding him there.

"Igor Karkaroff," said a curt voice to Harry's left. Harry looked around and saw Mr. Crouch standing up in the middle of the bench beside him. Crouch's hair was dark, his face was much less lined, he looked fit and alert. "You have been brought from Azkaban to present evidence to the Ministry of Magic. You have given us to understand that you have important information for us."

Karkaroff straightened himself as best he could, tightly bound to the chair.

"I have, sir," he said, and although his voice was very scared, Harry could still hear the familiar unctuous note in it. "I wish to be of use to the Ministry. I wish to help. I - I know that the Ministry is trying to - to round up the last of the Dark Lords supporters. I am eager to assist in any way I can."

There was a murmur around the benches. Some of the wizards and witches were surveying Karkaroff with interest, others with pronounced mistrust. Then Harry heard, quite distinctly, from Dumbledores other side, a familiar, growling voice saying, "Filth."

Harry leaned forward so that he could see past Dumbledore. Mad-Eye Moody was sitting there - except that there was a very noticeable difference in his appearance. He did not have his magical eye, but two normal ones. Both were looking down upon Karkaroff, and both were narrowed in intense dislike.

"Crouch is going to let him out," Moody breathed quietly to Dumbledore. "He's done a deal with him. Took me six months to track him down, and Crouch is going to let him go if he's got enough new names. Let's hear his information, I say, and throw him straight back to the dementors." Dumbledore made a small noise of dissent through his long, crooked nose. "Ah, I was forgetting . . . you don't like the dementors, do you, Albus?" said Moody with a sardonic smile.

"No," said Dumbledore calmly, "I'm afraid I don't. I have long felt the Ministry is wrong to ally itself with such creatures."

"But for filth like this . . ." Moody said softly.

"You say you have names for us, Karkaroff," said Mr. Crouch. "Let us hear them, please."

"You must understand," said Karkaroff hurriedly, "that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named operated always in the greatest secrecy. . . . He preferred that we - I mean to say, his supporters - and I regret now, very deeply, that I ever counted myself among them -"

"Get on with it," sneered Moody.

"- we never knew the names of every one of our fellows - He alone knew exactly who we all were -"

"Which was a wise move, wasn't it, as it prevented someone like you, Karkaroff, from turning all of them in," muttered Moody.

"Yet you say you have some names for us?" said Mr. Crouch.

"I - I do," said Karkaroff breathlessly. "And these were important supporters, mark you. People I saw with my own eyes doing his bidding. I give this information as a sign that I fully and totally renounce him, and am filled with a remorse so deep I can barely -"

"These names are?" said Mr. Crouch sharply.

Karkaroff drew a deep breath.

"There was Antonin Dolohov," he said. "I - I saw him torture countless Muggles and - and non-supporters of the Dark Lord."

"And helped him do it," murmured Moody.

"We have already apprehended Dolohov," said Crouch. "He was caught shortly after yourself."

"Indeed?" said Karkaroff, his eyes widening. "I - I am delighted to hear it!"

But he didn't look it. Harry could tell that this news had come as a real blow to him. One of his names was worthless.

"Any others?" said Crouch coldly.

"Why, yes ... there was Rosier," said Karkaroff hurriedly. "Evan Rosier."

"Rosier is dead," said Crouch. "He was caught shortly after you were too. He preferred to fight rather than come quietly and was killed in the struggle."

"Took a bit of me with him, though," whispered Moody to Harry's right. Harry looked around at him once more, and saw him indicating the large chunk out of his nose to Dumbledore.

"No - no more than Rosier deserved!" said Karkaroff, a real note of panic in his voice now. Harry could see that he was starting to worry that none of his information would be of any use to the Ministry.

Karkaroff's eyes darted toward the door in the corner, behind which the dementors undoubtedly still stood, waiting.

"Any more?" said Crouch.

"Yes!" said Karkaroff. "There was Travers - he helped murder the McKinnons! Mulciber - he specialized in the Imperius Curse, forced countless people to do horrific things! Rookwood, who was a spy, and passed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named useful information from inside the Ministry itself!"

Harry could tell that, this time, Karkaroff had struck gold. The watching crowd was all murmuring together.

"Rookwood?" said Mr. Crouch, nodding to a witch sitting in front of him, who began scribbling upon her piece of parchment. "Augustus Rookwood of the Department of Mysteries?"

"The very same," said Karkaroff eagerly. "I believe he used a network of well-placed wizards, both inside the Ministry and out, to collect information -"

"But Travers and Mulciber we have," said Mr. Crouch. "Very well, Karkaroff, if that is all, you will be returned to Azkaban while we decide -"

"Not yet!" cried Karkaroff, looking quite desperate. "Wait, I have more!" Harry could see him sweating in the torchlight, his white skin contrasting strongly with the black of his hair and beard.

"Snape!" he shouted. "Severus Snape!"

"Snape has been cleared by this council," said Crouch disdainfully. "He has been vouched for by Albus Dumbledore."

"No!" shouted Karkaroff, straining at the chains that bound him to the chair. "I assure you! Severus Snape is a Death Eater!"

Dumbledore had gotten to his feet.

"I have given evidence already on this matter," he said calmly. "Severus Snape was indeed a Death Eater. However, he rejoined our side before Lord

Voldemort's downfall and turned spy for us, at great personal risk. He is now no more a Death Eater than I am."

Harry turned to look at Mad-Eye Moody. He was wearing a look of deep skepticism behind Dumbledore's back.

"Very well, Karkaroff," Crouch said coldly, "you have been of assistance. I shall review your case. You will return to Azkaban in the meantime.

..."

Mr. Crouch's voice faded. Harry looked around; the dungeon was dissolving as though it were made of smoke; everything was fading; he could see only his own body - all else was swirling darkness. . . . And then, the dungeon returned. Harry was sitting in a different seat, still on the highest bench, but now to the left side of Mr. Crouch. The atmosphere seemed quite different: relaxed, even cheerful. The witches and wizards all around the walls were talking to one another, almost as though they were at some sort of sporting event. Harry noticed a witch halfway up the rows of benches opposite. She had short blonde hair, was wearing magenta robes, and was sucking the end of an acid-green quill. It was, unmistakably, a younger Rita Skeeter. Harry looked around; Dumbledore was sitting beside him again, wearing different robes. Mr. Crouch looked more tired and somehow fiercer, gaunter. . . . Harry understood. It was a different memory, a different day . . . a different trial.

The door in the corner opened, and Ludo Bagman walked into the room. This was not, however, a Ludo Bagman gone to seed, but a Ludo Bagman who was clearly at the height of his Quidditch-playing fitness. His nose wasn't broken now; he was tall and lean and muscular. Bagman looked nervous as he sat down in the chained chair, but it did not bind him there as it had bound Karkaroff, and Bagman, perhaps taking heart from this, glanced around at the watching crowd, waved at a couple of them, and managed a small smile.

"Ludo Bagman, you have been brought here in front of the Council of Magical Law to answer charges relating to the activities of the Death Eaters," said Mr. Crouch. "We have heard the evidence against you, and are about to reach our verdict. Do you have anything to add to your testimony before we pronounce judgment?"

Harry couldn't believe his ears. Ludo Bagman, a Death Eater?

"Only," said Bagman, smiling awkwardly, "well - I know I've been a bit of an idiot -"

One or two wizards and witches in the surrounding seats smiled indulgently. Mr. Crouch did not appear to share their feelings. He was staring down at Ludo Bagman with an expression of the utmost severity and dislike.

"You never spoke a truer word, boy," someone muttered dryly to Dumbledore behind Harry. He looked around and saw Moody sitting there again. "If I didn't know he'd always been dim, I'd have said some of those Bludgers had permanently affected his brain. . . ."

"Ludovic Bagman, you were caught passing information to Lord Voldemort's supporters," said Mr. Crouch. "For this, I suggest a term of imprisonment in Azkaban lasting no less than -"

But there was an angry outcry from the surrounding benches. Several of the witches and wizards around the walls stood up, shaking their heads, and even their fists, at Mr. Crouch.

"But I've told you, I had no idea!" Bagman called earnestly over the crowd's babble, his round blue eyes widening. "None at all! Old Rookwood was a friend of my dad's . . . never crossed my mind he was in with You-Know-Who! I thought I was collecting information for our side! And Rookwood kept talking about getting me a job in the Ministry later on . . . once my Quidditch days are over, you know . . . I mean, I can't keep getting hit by Bludgers for the rest of my life, can I?"

There were titters from the crowd.

"It will be put to the vote," said Mr. Crouch coldly. He turned to the right-hand side of the dungeon. "The jury will please raise their hands . . . those in favor of imprisonment..."

Harry looked toward the right-hand side of the dungeon. Not one person raised their hand. Many of the witches and wizards around the walls began to clap. One of the witches on the jury stood up.

"Yes?" barked Crouch.

"We'd just like to congratulate Mr. Bagman on his splendid performance for England in the Quidditch match against Turkey last Saturday," the witch said breathlessly.

Mr. Crouch looked furious. The dungeon was ringing with applause now. Bagman got to his feet and bowed, beaming.

"Despicable," Mr. Crouch spat at Dumbledore, sitting down as Bagman walked out of the dungeon. "Rookwood get him a job indeed. . . . The day Ludo Bagman joins us will be a sad day indeed for the Ministry. . . ." And the dungeon dissolved again. When it had returned, Harry looked around. He and Dumbledore were still sitting beside Mr. Crouch, but the atmosphere could not have been more different. There was total silence, broken only by the dry sobs of a frail, wispy-looking witch in the seat next to Mr. Crouch. She was clutching a handkerchief to her mouth with trembling hands.

Harry looked up at Crouch and saw that he looked gaunter and grayer than ever before. A nerve was twitching in his temple.

"Bring them in," he said, and his voice echoed through the silent dungeon.

The door in the corner opened yet again. Six dementors entered this time, flanking a group of four people. Harry saw the people in the crowd turn to look up at Mr. Crouch. A few of them whispered to one another. The dementors placed each of the four people in the four chairs with chained arms that now stood on the dungeon floor. There was a thickset man who stared blankly up at Crouch; a thinner and more nervous-looking man, whose eyes were darting around the crowd; a woman with thick, shining dark hair and heavily hooded eyes, who was sitting in the chained chair as though it were a throne; and a boy in his late teens, who looked nothing short of petrified. He was shivering, his straw-colored hair all over his face, his freckled skin milk-white. The wispy little witch beside Crouch began to rock backward and forward in her seat, whimpering into her handkerchief.

Crouch stood up. He looked down upon the four in front of him, and there was pure hatred in his face.

"You have been brought here before the Council of Magical Law," he said clearly, "so that we may pass judgment on you, for a crime so heinous -"

"Father," said the boy with the straw-colored hair. "Father. . . please .

. .

"- that we have rarely heard the like of it within this court," said Crouch, speaking more loudly, drowning out his son's voice.

"We have heard the evidence against you. The four of you stand accused of capturing an Auror - Frank Longbottom - and subjecting him to the Cruciatus Curse, believing him to have knowledge of the present whereabouts of your exiled master, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named -"

"Father, I didn't!" shrieked the boy in chains below. "I didn't, I swear it. Father, don't send me back to the dementors -"

"You are further accused," bellowed Mr. Crouch, "of using the Cruciatus Curse on Frank Longbottom's wife, when he would not give you information. You planned to restore He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to power, and to resume the lives of violence you presumably led while he was strong. I now ask the jury -"

"Mother!" screamed the boy below, and the wispy little witch beside Crouch began to sob, rocking backward and forward. "Mother, stop him. Mother, I didn't do it, it wasn't me!"

"I now ask the jury," shouted Mr. Crouch, "to raise their hands if they believe, as I do, that these crimes deserve a life sentence in Azkaban!" In unison, the witches and wizards along the right-hand side of the dungeon raised their hands. The crowd around the walls began to clap as it had for Bagman, their faces full of savage triumph. The boy began to scream.

"No! Mother, no! I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't know! Don't send me there, don't let him!"

The dementors were gliding back into the room. The boys' three companions rose quietly from their seats; the woman with the heavy-lidded eyes looked up at Crouch and called, "The Dark Lord will rise again, Crouch! Throw us into Azkaban; we will wait! He will rise again and will come for us, he will reward us beyond any of his other supporters! We alone were faithful! We alone tried to find him!" But the boy was trying to fight off the dementors, even though Harry could see their cold, draining power starting to affect him. The crowd was jeering, some of them on their feet, as the woman swept out of the dungeon, and the boy continued to struggle.

"I'm your son!" he screamed up at Crouch. "I'm your son!"

"You are no son of mine!" bellowed Mr. Crouch, his eyes bulging suddenly.

"I have no son!"

The wispy witch beside him gave a great gasp and slumped in her seat. She had fainted. Crouch appeared not to have noticed.

"Take them away!" Crouch roared at the dementors, spit flying from his mouth. "Take them away, and may they rot there!"

"Father! Father, I wasn't involved! No! No! Father, please!"

"I think. Harry, it is time to return to my office," said a quiet voice in Harry's ear.

Harry started. He looked around. Then he looked on his other side. There was an Albus Dumbledore sitting on his right, watching Crouch's son being dragged away by the dementors - and there was an Albus Dumbledore on his left, looking right at him.

"Come," said the Dumbledore on his left, and he put his hand under Harry's elbow. Harry felt himself rising into the air; the dungeon dissolved around him; for a moment, all was blackness, and then he felt as though he had done a slow-motion somersault, suddenly landing flat on his feet, in what seemed like the dazzling light of Dumbledore's sunlit office. The stone basin was shimmering in the cabinet in front of him, and Albus Dumbledore was standing beside him.

"Professor," Harry gasped, "I know I shouldn't've - I didn't mean - the cabinet door was sort of open and -"

"I quite understand," said Dumbledore. He lifted the basin, carried it over to his desk, placed it upon the polished top, and sat down in the chair behind it. He motioned for Harry to sit down opposite him.

Harry did so, staring at the stone basin. The contents had returned to their original, silvery-white state, swirling and rippling beneath his gaze.

"What is it?" Harry asked shakily.

"This? It is called a Pensieve," said Dumbledore. "I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind."

"Er," said Harry, who couldn't truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

"At these times," said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, "I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form."

"You mean . . . that stuff's your thoughts?" Harry said, staring at the swirling white substance in the basin.

"Certainly," said Dumbledore. "Let me show you."

Dumbledore drew his wand out of the inside of his robes and placed the tip into his own silvery hair, near his temple. When he took the wand away, hair seemed to be clinging to it - but then Harry saw that it was in fact a glistening strand of the same strange silvery-white substance that filled the Pensieve. Dumbledore added this fresh thought to the basin, and Harry, astonished, saw his own face swimming around the surface of the bowl. Dumbledore placed his long hands on either side of the Pensieve and swirled it, rather as a gold prospector would pan for fragments of gold.... and Harry saw his own face change smoothly into Snape's, who opened his mouth and spoke to the ceiling, his voice echoing slightly.

"It's coming back . . . Karkaroff's too . . . stronger and clearer than ever..."

"A connection I could have made without assistance," Dumbledore sighed, "but never mind." He peered over the top of his half-moon spectacles at Harry, who was gaping at Snape's face, which was continuing to swirl around the bowl. "I was using the Pensieve when Mr. Fudge arrived for our meeting and put it away rather hastily. Undoubtedly I did not fasten the cabinet door properly. Naturally, it would have attracted your attention."

"I'm sorry," Harry mumbled.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Curiosity is not a sin," he said. "But we should exercise caution with our curiosity. . . yes, indeed . . ."

Frowning slightly, he prodded the thoughts within the basin with the tip of his wand. Instantly, a figure rose out of it, a plump, scowling girl of about sixteen, who began to revolve slowly, with her feet still in the basin. She took no notice whatsoever of Harry or Professor Dumbledore. When she spoke, her voice echoed as Snape's had done, as though it were coming from the depths of the stone basin. "He put a hex on me, Professor Dumbledore, and I

was only teasing him, sir, I only said I'd seen him kissing Florence behind the greenhouses last Thursday. . . ."

"But why. Bertha," said Dumbledore sadly, looking up at the now silently revolving girl, "why did you have to follow him in the first place?"

"Bertha?" Harry whispered, looking up at her. "Is that - was that Bertha Jorkins?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, prodding the thoughts in the basin again; Bertha sank back into them, and they became silvery and opaque once more. "That was Bertha as I remember her at school."

The silvery light from the Pensieve illuminated Dumbledore's face, and it struck Harry suddenly how very old he was looking. He knew, of course, that Dumbledore was getting on in years, but somehow he never really thought of Dumbledore as an old man.

"So, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "Before you got lost in my thoughts, you wanted to tell me something."

"Yes," said Harry. "Professor - I was in Divination just now, and - er - I fell asleep."

He hesitated here, wondering if a reprimand was coming, but Dumbledore merely said, "Quite understandable. Continue."

"Well, I had a dream," said Harry. "A dream about Lord Voldemort. He was torturing Wormtail . . . you know who Wormtail -"

"I do know," said Dumbledore promptly. "Please continue."

"Voldemort got a letter from an owl. He said something like, Wormtail's blunder had been repaired. He said someone was dead. Then he said, Wormtail wouldn't be fed to the snake - there was a snake beside his chair. He said - he said he'd be feeding me to it, instead. Then he did the Cruciatus Curse on Wormtail - and my scar hurt," Harry said. "It woke me up, it hurt so badly."

Dumbledore merely looked at him.

"Er - that's all," said Harry.

"I see," said Dumbledore quietly. "I see. Now, has your scar hurt at any other time this year, excepting the time it woke you up over the summer?"

"No, I - how did you know it woke me up over the summer?" said Harry, astonished.

"You are not Sirius's only correspondent," said Dumbledore. "I have also been in contact with him ever since he left Hogwarts last year. It was I who suggested the mountainside cave as the safest place for him to stay." Dumbledore got up and began walking up and down behind his desk. Every now and then, he placed his wand tip to his temple, removed another shining silver thought, and added it to the Pensieve. The thoughts inside began to swirl so fast that Harry couldn't make out anything clearly: It was merely a blur of color.

"Professor?" he said quietly, after a couple of minutes.

Dumbledore stopped pacing and looked at Harry.

"My apologies," he said quietly. He sat back down at his desk.

"D'you - d'you know why my scar's hurting me?"

Dumbledore looked very intently at Harry for a moment, and then said, "I have a theory, no more than that. ... It is my belief that your scar hurts both when Lord Voldemort is near you, and when he is feeling a particularly strong surge of hatred."

"But. . . why?"

"Because you and he are connected by the curse that failed," said Dumbledore. "That is no ordinary scar."

"So you think . . . that dream . . . did it really happen?"

"It is possible," said Dumbledore. "I would say - probable. Harry - did you see Voldemort?"

"No," said Harry. "Just the back of his chair. But - there wouldn't have been anything to see, would there? I mean, he hasn't got a body, has he? But. . . but then how could he have held the wand?" Harry said slowly.

"How indeed?" muttered Dumbledore. "How indeed . . ."

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke for a while. Dumbledore was gazing across the room, and, every now and then, placing his wand tip to his temple and adding another shining silver thought to the seething mass within the Pensieve.

"Professor," Harry said at last, "do you think he's getting stronger?"

"Voldemort?" said Dumbledore, looking at Harry over the Pensieve. It was the characteristic, piercing look Dumbledore had given him on other occasions, and always made Harry feel as though Dumbledore were seeing right through him in a way that even Moody's magical eye could not.

"Once again. Harry, I can only give you my suspicions."

Dumbledore sighed again, and he looked older, and wearier, than ever.

"The years of Voldemort's ascent to power," he said, "were marked with disappearances. Bertha Jorkins has vanished without a trace in the place where Voldemort was certainly known to be last. Mr. Crouch too has disappeared . . . within these very grounds. And there was a third disappearance, one which the Ministry, I regret to say, do not consider of any importance, for it concerns a Muggle. His name was Frank Bryce, he lived in the village where Voldemort's father grew up, and he has not been seen since last August. You see, I read the Muggle newspapers, unlike most of my Ministry friends."

Dumbledore looked very seriously at Harry.

"These disappearances seem to me to be linked. The Ministry disagrees - as you may have heard, while waiting outside my office."

Harry nodded. Silence fell between them again, Dumbledore extracting thoughts every now and then. Harry felt as though he ought to go, but his curiosity held him in his chair.

"Professor?" he said again.

"Yes, Harry?" said Dumbledore.

"Er . . . could I ask you about. . . that court thing I was in . . . in the Pensieve?"

"You could," said Dumbledore heavily. "I attended it many times, but some trials come back to me more clearly than others . . . particularly now. . . ."

"You know - you know the trial you found me in? The one with Crouch's son? Well....were they talking about Neville's parents?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a very sharp look. "Has Neville never told you why he has been brought up by his grandmother?" he said.

Harry shook his head, wondering, as he did so, how he could have failed to ask Neville this, in almost four years of knowing him.

"Yes, they were talking about Nevilles parents," said Dumbledore. "His father, Frank, was an Auror just like Professor Moody. He and his wife were tortured for information about Voldemort's whereabouts after he lost his powers, as you heard."

"So they're dead?" said Harry quietly.

"No," said Dumbledore, his voice full of a bitterness Harry had never heard there before. "They are insane. They are both in St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. I believe Neville visits them, with his grandmother, during the holidays. They do not recognize him."

Harry sat there, horror-struck. He had never known . . . never, in four years, bothered to find out. . . .

"The Longbottoms were very popular," said Dumbledore. "The attacks on them came after Voldemort's fall from power, just when everyone thought they were safe. Those attacks caused a wave of fury such as I have never known. The Ministry was under great pressure to catch those who had done it. Unfortunately, the Longbottoms' evidence was - given their condition - none too reliable."

"Then Mr. Crouch's son might not have been involved?" said Harry slowly.

Dumbledore shook his head.

"As to that, I have no idea."

Harry sat in silence once more, watching the contents of the Pensieve swirl. There were two more questions he was burning to ask . . . but they concerned the guilt of living people. . . .

"Er," he said, "Mr. Bagman . . ."

"... has never been accused of any Dark activity since," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Right," said Harry hastily, staring at the contents of the Pensieve again, which were swirling more slowly now that Dumbledore had stopped adding thoughts. "And . . . er . . ."

But the Pensieve seemed to be asking his question for him.

Snape's face was swimming on the surface again. Dumbledore glanced down into it, and then up at Harry.

"No more has Professor Snape," he said.

Harry looked into Dumbledore's light blue eyes, and the thing he really wanted to know spilled out of his mouth before he could stop it.

"What made you think he'd really stopped supporting Voldemort, Professor?"

Dumbledore held Harrys gaze for a few seconds, and then said, "That, Harry, is a matter between Professor Snape and myself."

Harry knew that the interview was over; Dumbledore did not look angry, yet there was a finality in his tone that told Harry it was time to go. He stood up, and so did Dumbledore.

"Harry," he said as Harry reached the door. "Please do not speak about Neville's parents to anybody else. He has the right to let people know, when he is ready."

"Yes, Professor," said Harry, turning to go.

"And-"

Harry looked back. Dumbledore was standing over the Pensieve, his face lit from beneath by its silvery spots of light, looking older than ever. He stared at Harry for a moment, and then said, "Good luck with the third task."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE - THE THIRD TASK

Dumbledore reckons You-Know-Who's getting stronger again as well?" Ron whispered.

Everything Harry had seen in the Pensieve, nearly everything Dumbledore had told and shown him afterward, he had now shared with Ron and Hermione - and, of course, with Sirius, to whom Harry had sent an owl the moment he had left Dumbledore's office. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat up late in the common room once again that night, talking it all over until Harry's mind was reeling, until he understood what Dumbledore had meant about a head becoming so full of thoughts that it would have been a relief to siphon them off.

Ron stared into the common room fire. Harry thought he saw Ron shiver slightly, even though the evening was warm.

"And he trusts Snape?" Ron said. "He really trusts Snape, even though he knows he was a Death Eater?"

"Yes," said Harry.

Hermione had not spoken for ten minutes. She was sitting with her forehead in her hands, staring at her knees. Harry thought she too looked as though she could have done with a Pensieve.

"Rita Skeeter," she muttered finally.

"How can you be worrying about her now?" said Ron, in utter disbelief. "I'm not worrying about her," Hermione said to her knees. "I'm just thinking. . . remember what she said to me in the Three Broomsticks? 'I know things about Ludo Bagman that would make your hair curl.' This is what she meant, isn't it? She reported his trial, she knew he'd passed information to the Death Eaters. And Winky too, remember . . .'Ludo Bagman's a bad wizard.' Mr. Crouch would have been furious he got off, he would have talked about it at home."

"Yeah, but Bagman didn't pass information on purpose, did he?"

Hermione shrugged.

"And Fudge reckons Madame Maxime attacked Crouch?" Ron said, turning back to Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry, "but he's only saying that because Crouch disappeared near the Beauxbatons carriage."

"We never thought of her, did we?" said Ron slowly. "Mind you, she's definitely got giant blood, and she doesn't want to admit it—"

"Of course she doesn't," said Hermione sharply, looking up. "Look what happened to Hagrid when Rita found out about his mother. Look at Fudge, jumping to conclusions about her, just because she's part giant. Who needs that sort of prejudice? I'd probably say I had big bones if I knew that's what I'd get for telling the truth."

Hermione looked at her watch. "We haven't done any practicing!" she said, looking shocked. "We were going to do the Impediment Curse! We'll have to really get down to it tomorrow! Come on. Harry, you need to get some sleep."

Harry and Ron went slowly upstairs to their dormitory. As Harry pulled on his pajamas, he looked over at Neville's bed. True to his word to Dumbledore, he had not told Ron and Hermione about Neville's parents. As Harry took off his glasses and climbed into his four-poster, he imagined how it must feel to have parents still living but unable to recognize you. He often got sympathy from strangers for being an orphan, but as he listened to Neville's snores, he thought that Neville deserved it more than he did. Lying in the darkness, Harry felt a rush of anger and hate toward the people who had tortured Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. . . . He

remembered the jeers of the crowd as Crouch's son and his companions had been dragged from the court by the dementors. . . . He understood how they had felt. . . . Then he remembered the milk-white face of the screaming boy and realized with a jolt that he had died a year later. . . .

It was Voldemort, Harry thought, staring up at the canopy of his bed in the darkness, it all came back to Voldemort. . . . He was the one who had torn these families apart, who had ruined all these lives. . . .

Ron and Hermione were supposed to be studying for their exams, which would finish on the day of the third task, but they were putting most of their efforts into helping Harry prepare.

"Don't worry about it," Hermione said shortly when Harry pointed this out to them and said he didn't mind practicing on his own for a while, "at least we'll get top marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts. We'd never have found out about all these hexes in class."

"Good training for when we're all Aurors," said Ron excitedly, attempting the Impediment Curse on a wasp that had buzzed into the room and making it stop dead in midair.

The mood in the castle as they entered June became excited and tense again. Everyone was looking forward to the third task, which would take place a week before the end of term. Harry was practicing hexes at every available moment. He felt more confident about this task than either of the others. Difficult and dangerous though it would undoubtedly be, Moody was right: Harry had managed to find his way past monstrous creatures and enchanted barriers before now, and this time he had some notice, some chance to prepare himself for what lay ahead.

Tired of walking in on Harry, Hermione, and Ron all over the school.

Professor McGonagall had given them permission to use the empty Transfiguration classroom at lunchtimes. Harry had soon mastered the Impediment Curse, a spell to slow down and obstruct attackers; the Reductor Curse, which would enable him to blast solid objects out of his way; and the Four-Point Spell, a useful discovery of Hermiones that would make his wand point due north, therefore enabling him to check whether he was going in the right direction within the maze. He was still having trouble with the Shield Charm, though. This was supposed to cast a temporary, invisible wall around himself that deflected minor curses; Hermione managed to shatter it with a well-placed Jelly-Legs Jinx, and Harry wobbled around the room for ten minutes afterward before she had looked up the counter-jinx.

"You're still doing really well, though," Hermione said encouragingly, looking down her list and crossing off those spells they had already learned. "Some of these are bound to come in handy."

"Come and look at this," said Ron, who was standing by the window. He was staring down onto the grounds. "What's Malfoy doing?"

Harry and Hermione went to see. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in the shadow of a tree below. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be keeping a lookout; both were smirking. Malfoy was holding his hand up to his mouth and speaking into it.

"He looks like he's using a walkie-talkie," said Harry curiously.

"He can't be," said Hermione, "I've told you, those sorts of things don't work around Hogwarts. Come on, Harry," she added briskly, turning away from the window and moving back into the middle of the room, "let's try that Shield Charm again."

Sirius was sending daily owls now. Like Hermione, he seemed to want to concentrate on getting Harry through the last task before they concerned themselves with anything else. He reminded Harry in every letter that whatever might be going on outside the walls of Hogwarts was not Harry's responsibility, nor was it within his power to influence it.

If Voldemort is really getting stronger again, he wrote, my priority is to ensure your safety. He cannot hope to lay hands on you while you are

under Dumbledore's protection, but all the same, take no risks: Concentrate on getting through that maze safely, and then we can turn our attention to other matters.

Harry's nerves mounted as June the twenty-fourth drew closer, but they were not as bad as those he had felt before the first and second tasks. For one thing, he was confident that, this time, he had done everything in his power to prepare for the task. For another, this was the final hurdle, and however well or badly he did, the tournament would at last be over, which would be an enormous relief.

Breakfast was a very noisy affair at the Gryffindor table on the morning of the third task. The post owls appeared, bringing Harry a good-luck card from Sirius. It was only a piece of parchment, folded over and bearing a muddy paw print on its front, but Harry appreciated it all the same. A screech owl arrived for Hermione, carrying her morning copy of the Daily Prophet as usual. She unfolded the paper, glanced at the front page, and spat out a mouthful of pumpkin juice all over it.

"What?" said Harry and Ron together, staring at her. "Nothing," said Hermione quickly, trying to shove the paper out of sight, but Ron grabbed it. He stared at the headline and said, "No way. Not today. That old cow."

"What?" said Harry. "Rita Skeeter again?"

"No," said Ron, and just like Hermione, he attempted to push the paper out of sight.

"It's about me, isn't it?" said Harry.

"No," said Ron, in an entirely unconvincing tone. But before Harry could demand to see the paper. Draco Malfoy shouted across the Great Hall from the Slytherin table.

"Hey, Potter! Potter! How's your head? You feeling all right? Sure you're not going to go berserk on us?"

Malfoy was holding a copy of the Daily Prophet too. Slytherins up and down the table were sniggering, twisting in their seats to see Harry's reaction.

"Let me see it," Harry said to Ron. "Give it here."

Very reluctantly, Ron handed over the newspaper. Harry turned it over and found himself staring at his own picture, beneath the banner headline:

"HARRY POTTER "DISTURBED AND DANGEROUS"

The boy who defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is unstable and possibly dangerous, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Alarming evidence has recently come to light about Harry Potter's strange behavior, which casts doubts upon his suitability to compete in a demanding competition like the Triwizard Tournament, or even to attend Hogwarts School.

Potter, the Daily Prophet can exclusively reveal, regularly collapses at school, and is often heard to complain of pain in the scar on his forehead (relic of the curse with which You-Know-Who attempted to kill him). On Monday last, midway through a Divination lesson, your Daily Prophet reporter witnessed Potter storming from the class, claiming that his scar was hurting too badly to continue studying.

It is possible, say top experts at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, that Potters brain was affected by the attack inflicted upon him by You-Know-Who, and that his insistence that the scar is still hurting is an expression of his deep-seated confusion.

"He might even be pretending," said one specialist. "This could be a plea for attention."

The Daily Prophet, however, has unearthed worrying facts about Harry Potter that Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, has carefully concealed from the wizarding public.

"Potter can speak Parseltongue," reveals Draco Malfoy, a Hogwarts fourth year. "There were a lot of attacks on students a couple of years ago, and most people thought Potter was behind them after they saw him lose his temper at a dueling club and set a snake on another boy. It was all hushed up, though. But he's made friends with werewolves and giants too. We think he'd do anything for a bit of power."

Parseltongue, the ability to converse with snakes, has long been considered a Dark Art. Indeed, the most famous Parselmouth of our times is none other than You-Know-Who himself. A member of the Dark Force Defense League, who wished to remain unnamed, stated that he would regard any wizard who could speak Parseltongue "as worthy of investigation. Personally, I would be highly suspicious of anybody who could converse with snakes, as serpents are often used in the worst kinds of Dark Magic, and are historically associated with evildoers." Similarly, "anyone who seeks out the company of such vicious creatures as werewolves and giants would appear to have a fondness for violence."

Albus Dumbledore should surely consider whether a boy such as this should be allowed to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. Some fear that Potter might resort to the Dark Arts in his desperation to win the tournament, the third task of which takes place this evening.

"Gone off me a bit, hasn't she?" said Harry lightly, folding up the paper.

Over at the Slytherin table, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were laughing at him, tapping their heads with their fingers, pulling grotesquely mad faces, and waggling their tongues like snakes.

"How did she know your scar hurt in Divination?" Ron said. "There's no way she was there, there's no way she could've heard -"

"The window was open," said Harry. "I opened it to breathe."

"You were at the top of North Tower!" Hermione said. "Your voice couldn't have carried all the way down to the grounds!"

"Well, you're the one who's supposed to be researching magical methods of bugging!" said Harry. "You tell me how she did it!"

"I've been trying!" said Hermione. "But I... but. . ."

An odd, dreamy expression suddenly came over Hermione's face. She slowly raised a hand and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Are you all right?" said Ron, frowning at her.

"Yes," said Hermione breathlessly. She ran her fingers through her hair again, and then held her hand up to her mouth, as though speaking into an invisible walkie-talkie. Harry and Ron stared at each other.

"I've had an idea," Hermione said, gazing into space. "I think I know. . . because then no one would be able to see ... even Moody. . . and she'd have been able to get onto the window ledge . . . but she's not allowed . . . she's definitely not allowed ... I think we've got her! Just give me two seconds in the library - just to make sure!"

With that, Hermione seized her school bag and dashed out of the Great Hall.

"Oi!" Ron called after her. "We've got our History of Magic exam in ten minutes! Blimey," he said, turning back to Harry, "she must really hate that Skeeter woman to risk missing the start of an exam. What're you going to do in Binns's class - read again?"

Exempt from the end-of-term tests as a Triwizard champion, Harry had been sitting in the back of every exam class so far, looking up fresh hexes for the third task.

"S'pose so," Harry said to Ron; but just then. Professor McGonagall came walking alongside the Gryffindor table toward him.

"Potter, the champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast," she said.

"But the task's not till tonight!" said Harry, accidentally spilling scrambled eggs down his front, afraid he had mistaken the time.

"I'm aware of that, Potter," she said. "The champions' families are invited to watch the final task, you know. This is simply a chance for you to greet them."

She moved away. Harry gaped after her.

"She doesn't expect the Dursleys to turn up, does she?" he asked Ron blankly.

"Dunno," said Ron. "Harry, I'd better hurry, I'm going to be late for Binns. See you later."

Harry finished his breakfast in the emptying Great Hall. He saw Fleur Delacour get up from the Ravenclaw table and join Cedric as he crossed to the side chamber and entered. Krum slouched off to join them shortly afterward. Harry stayed where he was. He really didn't want to go into the chamber. He had no family - no family who would turn up to see him risk his life, anyway. But just as he was getting up, thinking that he might as well go up to the library and do a spot more hex research, the door of the side chamber opened, and Cedric stuck his head out.

"Harry, come on, they're waiting for you!"

Utterly perplexed. Harry got up. The Dursleys couldn't possibly be here, could they? He walked across the Hall and opened the door into the chamber.

Cedric and his parents were just inside the door. Viktor Krum was over in a corner, conversing with his dark-haired mother and father in rapid Bulgarian. He had inherited his fathers hooked nose. On the other side of the room, Fleur was jabbering away in French to her mother. Fleur's little sister, Gabrielle, was holding her mother's hand. She waved at Harry, who waved back, grinning. Then he saw Mrs. Weasley and Bill standing in front of the fireplace, beaming at him.

"Surprise!" Mrs. Weasley said excitedly as he smiled broadly and walked over to them. "Thought we'd come and watch you. Harry!" She bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

"You all right?" said Bill, grinning at Harry and shaking his hand.

"Charlie wanted to come, but he couldn't get time off. He said you were incredible against the Horntail."

Fleur Delacour, Harry noticed, was eyeing Bill with great interest over her mother's shoulder. Harry could tell she had no objection whatsoever to long hair or earrings with fangs on them.

"This is really nice of you," Harry muttered to Mrs. Weasley. "I thought for a moment - the Dursleys -"

"Hmm," said Mrs. Weasley, pursing her lips. She had always refrained from criticizing the Dursleys in front of Harry, but her eyes flashed every time they were mentioned.

"It's great being back here," said Bill, looking around the chamber (Violet, the Fat Lady's friend, winked at him from her frame). "Haven't seen this place for five years. Is that picture of the mad knight still around? Sir Cadogan?"

"Oh yeah," said Harry, who had met Sir Cadogan the previous year.

"And the Fat Lady?" said Bill.

"She was here in my time," said Mrs. Weasley. "She gave me such a telling off one night when I got back to the dormitory at four in the morning -"

"What were you doing out of your dormitory at four in the morning?" said Bill, surveying his mother with amazement.

Mrs. Weasley grinned, her eyes twinkling.

"Your father and I had been for a nighttime stroll," she said. "He got caught by Apollyon Pringle - he was the caretaker in those days - your father's still got the marks."

"Fancy giving us a tour, Harry?" said Bill.

"Yeah, okay," said Harry, and they made their way back toward the door into the Great Hall. As they passed Amos Diggory, he looked around.

"There you are, are you?" he said, looking Harry up and down.

"Bet you're not feeling quite as full of yourself now Cedrics caught you up on points, are you?"

"What?" said Harry.

"Ignore him," said Cedric in a low voice to Harry, frowning after his father. "He's been angry ever since Rita Skeeters article about the Triwizard Tournament - you know, when she made out you were the only Hogwarts champion."

"Didn't bother to correct her, though, did he?" said Amos Diggory, loudly enough for Harry to hear as he started to walk out of the door with Mrs. Weasley and Bill. "Still, . . . you'll show him, Ced. Beaten him once before, haven't you?"

"Rita Skeeter goes out of her way to cause trouble, Amos!" Mrs. Weasley said angrily. "I would have thought you'd know that, working at the Ministry!"

Mr. Diggory looked as though he was going to say something angry, but his wife laid a hand on his arm, and he merely shrugged and turned away. Harry had a very enjoyable morning walking over the sunny grounds with Bill and Mrs. Weasley, showing them the Beauxbatons carriage and the Durmstrang ship. Mrs. Weasley was intrigued by the Whomping Willow, which had been planted after she had left school, and reminisced at length about the gamekeeper before Hagrid, a man called Ogg.

"How's Percy?" Harry asked as they walked around the greenhouses.

"Not good," said Bill.

"He's very upset," said Mrs. Weasley, lowering her voice and glancing around. "The Ministry wants to keep Mr. Crouch's disappearance quiet, but Percy's been hauled in for questioning about the instructions Mr. Crouch has been sending in. They seem to think there's a chance they weren't genuinely written by him. Percy's been under a lot of strain. They're not letting him fill in for Mr. Crouch as the fifth judge tonight. Cornelius Fudge is going to be doing it."

They returned to the castle for lunch.

"Mum - Bill!" said Ron, looking stunned, as he joined the Gryffindor table. "What're you doing here?"

"Come to watch Harry in the last task!" said Mrs. Weasley brightly. "I must say, it makes a lovely change, not having to cook. How was your exam?"

"Oh . . . okay," said Ron. "Couldn't remember all the goblin rebels' names, so I invented a few. It's all right," he said, helping himself to a Cornish pasty, while Mrs. Weasley looked stern, "they're all called stuff like Bodrod the Bearded and Urg the Unclean; it wasn't hard." Fred, George, and Ginny came to sit next to them too, and Harry was having such a good time he felt almost as though he were back at the Burrow; he had forgotten to worry about that evening's task, and not until Hermione turned up, halfway through lunch, did he remember that she had had a brainwave about Rita Skeeter.

"Are you going to tell us - ?"

Hermione shook her head warily and glanced at Mrs. Weasley.

"Hello, Hermione," said Mrs. Weasley, much more stiffly than usual.

"Hello," said Hermione, her smile faltering at the cold expression on Mrs. Weasley's face.

Harry looked between them, then said, "Mrs. Weasley, you didn't believe that rubbish Rita Skeeter wrote in Witch Weekly, did you? Because Hermione's not my girlfriend."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Weasley "No - of course I didn't!"

But she became considerably warmer toward Hermione after that.

Harry, Bill, and Mrs. Weasley whiled away the afternoon with a long walk around the castle, and then returned to the Great Hall for the evening feast. Ludo Bagman and Cornelius Fudge had joined the staff table now. Bagman looked quite cheerful, but Cornelius Fudge, who was sitting next to Madame Maxime, looked stern and was not talking. Madame Maxime was

concentrating on her plate, and Harry thought her eyes looked red. Hagrid kept glancing along the table at her,

There were more courses than usual, but Harry, who was starting to feel really nervous now, didn't eat much. As the enchanted ceiling overhead began to fade from blue to a dusky purple, Dumbledore rose to his feet at the staff table, and silence fell.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes' time, I will be asking you to make your way down to the Quidditch field for the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament. Will the champions please follow Mr. Bagman down to the stadium now."

Harry got up. The Gryffindors all along the table were applauding him; the Weasleys and Hermione all wished him good luck, and he headed off out of the Great Hall with Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor.

"Feeling all right, Harry?" Bagman asked as they went down the stone steps onto the grounds. "Confident?"

"I'm okay," said Harry. It was sort of true; he was nervous, but he kept running over all the hexes and spells he had been practicing in his mind as they walked, and the knowledge that he could remember them all made him feel better.

They walked onto the Quidditch field, which was now completely unrecognizable. A twenty-foot-high hedge ran all the way around the edge of it. There was a gap right in front of them: the entrance to the vast maze. The passage beyond it looked dark and creepy.

Five minutes later, the stands had begun to fill; the air was full of excited voices and the rumbling of feet as the hundreds of students filed into their seats. The sky was a deep, clear blue now, and the first stars were starting to appear. Hagrid, Professor Moody, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick came walking into the stadium and approached Bagman and the champions. They were wearing large, red, luminous stars on their hats, all except Hagrid, who had his on the back of his moleskin vest.

"We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze," said Professor McGonagall to the champions. "If you get into difficulty, and wish to be rescued, send red sparks into the air, and one of us will come and get you, do you understand?"

The champions nodded.

"Off you go, then!" said Bagman brightly to the four patrollers.

"Good luck, Harry," Hagrid whispered, and the four of them walked away in different directions, to station themselves around the maze. Bagman now pointed his wand at his throat, muttered, "Sonorus," and his magically magnified voice echoed into the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! Tied in first place, with eighty-five points each - Mr. Cedric Diggory and Mr. Harry Potter, both of Hogwarts School!" The cheers and applause sent birds from the Forbidden Forest fluttering into the darkening sky. "In second place, with eighty points - Mr. Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute!" More applause. "And in third place - Miss Fleur Delacour, of Beauxbatons Academy!"

Harry could just make out Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermione applauding Fleur politely, halfway up the stands. He waved up at them, and they waved back, beaming at him.

"So ... on my whistle, Harry and Cedric!" said Bagman. "Three - two - one -"

He gave a short blast on his whistle, and Harry and Cedric hurried forward into the maze.

The towering hedges cast black shadows across the path, and, whether because they were so tall and thick or because they had been enchanted, the sound of the surrounding crowd was silenced the moment they entered the maze. Harry felt almost as though he were underwater again. He

pulled out his wand, muttered, "Lumos," and heard Cedric do the same just behind him.

After about fifty yards, they reached a fork. They looked at each other. "See you," Harry said, and he took the left one, while Cedric took the right.

Harry heard Bagman's whistle for the second time. Krum had entered the maze. Harry sped up. His chosen path seemed completely deserted. He turned right, and hurried on, holding his wand high over his head, trying to see as far ahead as possible. Still, there was nothing in sight.

Bagman's whistle blew in the distance for the third time. All of the champions were now inside.

Harry kept looking behind him. The old feeling that he was being watched was upon him. The maze was growing darker with every passing minute as the sky overhead deepened to navy. He reached a second fork.

"Point Me," he whispered to his wand, holding it flat in his palm.

The wand spun around once and pointed toward his right, into solid hedge. That way was north, and he knew that he needed to go northwest for the center of the maze. The best he could do was to take the left fork and go right again as soon as possible.

The path ahead was empty too, and when Harry reached a right turn and took it, he again found his way unblocked. Harry didn't know why, but the lack of obstacles was unnerving him. Surely he should have met something by now? It felt as though the maze were luring him into a false sense of security. Then he heard movement right behind him. He held out his wand, ready to attack, but its beam fell only upon Cedric, who had just hurried out of a path on the right-hand side. Cedric looked severely shaken. The sleeve of his robe was smoking.

"Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts!" he hissed. "They're enormous - I only just got away!"

He shook his head and dived out of sight, along another path. Keen to put plenty of distance between himself and the skrewts, Harry hurried off again. Then, as he turned a corner, he saw ... a dementor gliding toward him. Twelve feet tall, its face hidden by its hood, its rotting, scabbed hands outstretched, it advanced, sensing its way blindly toward him.

Harry could hear its rattling breath; he felt clammy coldness stealing over him, but knew what he had to do....

He summoned the happiest thought he could, concentrated with all his might on the thought of getting out of the maze and celebrating with Ron and Hermione, raised his wand, and cried, "Expecto Patronum!"

A silver stag erupted from the end of Harry's wand and galloped toward the dementor, which fell back and tripped over the hem of its robes. . . . Harry had never seen a dementor stumble.

"Hang on!" he shouted, advancing in the wake of his silver Patronus, "You're a boggart! Riddikulus!"

There was a loud crack, and the shape-shifter exploded in a wisp of smoke. The silver stag faded from sight. Harry wished it could have stayed, he could have used some company...but he moved on, quickly and quietly as possible, listening hard, his wand held high once more.

Left ... right... left again . . . Twice he found himself facing dead ends. He did the Four-Point Spell again and found that he was going too far east. He turned back, took a right turn, and saw an odd golden mist floating ahead of him.

Harry approached it cautiously, pointing the wand's beam at it. This looked like some kind of enchantment. He wondered whether he might be able to blast it out of the way.

"Reducio!" he said.

The spell shot straight through the mist, leaving it intact. He supposed he should have known better; the Reductor Curse was for solid objects.

What would happen if he walked through the mist? Was it worth chancing it, or should he double back?

He was still hesitating when a scream shattered the silence.

"Fleur?" Harry yelled.

There was silence. He stared all around him. What had happened to her? Her scream seemed to have come from somewhere ahead. He took a deep breath and ran through the enchanted mist.

The world turned upside down. Harry was hanging from the ground, with his hair on end, his glasses dangling off his nose, threatening to fall into the bottomless sky. He clutched them to the end of his nose and hung there, terrified. It felt as though his feet were glued to the grass, which had now become the ceiling. Below him the dark, star-spangled heavens stretched endlessly. He felt as though if he tried to move one of his feet, he would fall away from the earth completely.

Think, he told himself, as all the blood rushed to his head, think. . . . But not one of the spells he had practiced had been designed to combat a sudden reversal of ground and sky. Did he dare move his foot? He could hear the blood pounding in his ears. He had two choices - try and move, or send up red sparks, and get rescued and disqualified from the task. He shut his eyes, so he wouldn't be able to see the view of endless space below him, and pulled his right foot as hard as he could away from the grassy ceiling.

Immediately, the world righted itself. Harry fell forward onto his knees onto the wonderfully solid ground. He felt temporarily limp with shock. He took a deep, steadyng breath, then got up again and hurried forward, looking back over his shoulder as he ran away from the golden mist, which twinkled innocently at him in the moonlight.

He paused at a junction of two paths and looked around for some sign of Fleur. He was sure it had been she who had screamed. What had she met? Was she all right? There was no sign of red sparks - did that mean she had got herself out of trouble, or was she in such trouble that she couldn't reach her wand? Harry took the right fork with a feeling of increasing unease . . . but at the same time, he couldn't help thinking. One champion down. . . .

The cup was somewhere close by, and it sounded as though Fleur was no longer in the running. He'd got this far, hadn't he? What if he actually managed to win? Fleetingly, and for the first time since he'd found himself champion, he saw again that image of himself, raising the Triwizard Cup in front of the rest of the school. . . .

He met nothing for ten minutes, but kept running into dead ends. Twice he took the same wrong turning. Finally, he found a new route and started to jog along it, his wandlight waving, making his shadow flicker and distort on the hedge walls. Then he rounded another corner and found himself facing a Blast-Ended Skrewt.

Cedric was right - it was enormous. Ten feet long, it looked more like a giant scorpion than anything. Its long sting was curled over its back. Its thick armor glinted in the light from Harry's wand, which he pointed at it.

"Stupefy!"

The spell hit the skrewt's armor and rebounded; Harry ducked just in time, but could smell burning hair; it had singed the top of his head. The skrewt issued a blast of fire from its end and flew forward toward him.

"Impedimenta!" Harry yelled. The spell hit the skrewt's armor again and ricocheted off; Harry staggered back a few paces and fell over.

"IMPEDIMENTA!"

The skrewt was inches from him when it froze - he had managed to hit it on its fleshy, shell-less underside. Panting, Harry pushed himself away from it and ran, hard, in the opposite direction - the Impediment Curse was not permanent; the skrewt would be regaining the use of its legs at any moment.

He took a left path and hit a dead end, a right, and hit another; forcing himself to stop, heart hammering, he performed the Four-Point Spell again, backtracked, and chose a path that would take him northwest.

He had been hurrying along the new path for a few minutes, when he heard something in the path running parallel to his own that made him stop dead.

"What are you doing?" yelled Cedric's voice. "What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

And then Harry heard Krum's voice.

"Crucio!"

The air was suddenly full of Cedric's yells. Horrified, Harry began sprinting up his path, trying to find a way into Cedric's. When none appeared, he tried the Reductor Curse again. It wasn't very effective, but it burned a small hole in the hedge through which Harry forced his leg, kicking at the thick brambles and branches until they broke and made an opening; he struggled through it, tearing his robes, and looking to his right, saw Cedric jerking and twitching on the ground, Krum standing over him.

Harry pulled himself up and pointed his wand at Krum just as Krum looked up. Krum turned and began to run.

"Stupefy!" Harry yelled.

The spell hit Krum in the back; he stopped dead in his tracks, fell forward, and lay motionless, facedown in the grass. Harry dashed over to Cedric, who had stopped twitching and was lying there panting, his hands over his face.

"Are you all right?" Harry said roughly, grabbing Cedric's arm.

"Yeah," panted Cedric. "Yeah ... I don't believe it... he crept up behind me. ... I heard him, I turned around, and he had his wand on me. . . ."

Cedric got up. He was still shaking. He and Harry looked down at Krum.

"I can't believe this ... I thought he was all right," Harry said, staring at Krum.

"So did I," said Cedric.

"Did you hear Fleur scream earlier?" said Harry.

"Yeah," said Cedric. "You don't think Krum got her too?"

"I don't know," said Harry slowly.

"Should we leave him here?" Cedric muttered.

"No," said Harry. "I reckon we should send up red sparks. Someone'll come and collect him . . . otherwise he'll probably be eaten by a skrewt."

"He'd deserve it," Cedric muttered, but all the same, he raised his wand and shot a shower of red sparks into the air, which hovered high above Krum, marking the spot where he lay.

Harry and Cedric stood there in the darkness for a moment, looking around them. Then Cedric said, "Well... I s'pose we'd better go on. . . ."

"What?" said Harry. "Oh . . . yeah . . . right. . . ."

It was an odd moment. He and Cedric had been briefly united against Krum - now the fact that they were opponents came back to Harry. The two of them proceeded up the dark path without speaking, then Harry turned left, and Cedric right. Cedric's footsteps soon died away.

Harry moved on, continuing to use the Four-Point Spell, making sure he was moving in the right direction. It was between him and Cedric now. His desire to reach the cup first was now burning stronger than ever, but he could hardly believe what he'd just seen Krum do. The use of an Unforgivable Curse on a fellow human being meant a life term in Azkaban, that was what Moody had told them. Krum surely couldn't have wanted the Triwizard Cup that badly....Harry sped up.

Every so often he hit more dead ends, but the increasing darkness made him feel sure he was getting near the heart of the maze. Then, as he strode down a long, straight path, he saw movement once again, and his

beam of wandlight hit an extraordinary creature, one which he had only seen in picture form, in his Monster Book of Monsters.

It was a sphinx. It had the body of an over-large lion: great clawed paws and a long yellowish tail ending in a brown tuft. Its head, however, was that of a woman. She turned her long, almond-shaped eyes upon Harry as he approached. He raised his wand, hesitating. She was not crouching as if to spring, but pacing from side to side of the path, blocking his progress. Then she spoke, in a deep, hoarse voice.

"You are very near your goal. The quickest way is past me."

"So ... so will you move, please?" said Harry, knowing what the answer was going to be.

"No," she said, continuing to pace. "Not unless you can answer my riddle. Answer on your first guess - I let you pass. Answer wrongly - I attack. Remain silent - I will let you walk away from me unscathed." Harry's stomach slipped several notches. It was Hermione who was good at this sort of thing, not him. He weighed his chances. If the riddle was too hard, he could keep silent, get away from the sphinx unharmed, and try and find an alternative route to the center.

"Okay," he said. "Can I hear the riddle?"

The sphinx sat down upon her hind legs, in the very middle of the path, and recited:

"First think of the person who lives in disguise,
Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.
Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,
The middle of middle and end of the end?
And finally give me the sound often heard
During the search for a hard-to-find word.
Now string them together, and answer me this,
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"

Harry gaped at her.

"Could I have it again . . . more slowly?" he asked tentatively. She blinked at him, smiled, and repeated the poem. "All the clues add up to a creature I wouldn't want to kiss?" Harry asked.

She merely smiled her mysterious smile. Harry took that for a "yes." Harry cast his mind around. There were plenty of animals he wouldn't want to kiss; his immediate thought was a Blast-Ended Skrewt, but something told him that wasn't the answer. He'd have to try and work out the clues. . . .

"A person in disguise," Harry muttered, staring at her, "who lies . . . er . . . that'd be a - an impostor. No, that's not my guess! A - a spy? I'll come back to that. . . could you give me the next clue again, please?"

She repeated the next lines of the poem.

"'The last thing to mend,'" Harry repeated. "Er . . . no idea . . . 'middle of middle' . . . could I have the last bit again?"

She gave him the last four lines.

"'The sound often heard during the search for a hard-to-find word,'" said Harry. "Er . . . that'd be . . . er . . . hang on - 'er'! Er's a sound!" The sphinx smiled at him.

"Spy . . . er . . . spy . . . er . . ." said Harry, pacing up and down. "A creature I wouldn't want to kiss . . . a spider!"

The sphinx smiled more broadly. She got up, stretched her front legs, and then moved aside for him to pass.

"Thanks!" said Harry, and, amazed at his own brilliance, he dashed forward.

He had to be close now, he had to be. . . His wand was telling him he was bang on course; as long as he didn't meet anything too horrible, he might have a chance. . . .

Harry broke into a run. He had a choice of paths up ahead. "Point Me!" he whispered again to his wand, and it spun around and pointed him to the right-hand one. He dashed up this one and saw light ahead.

The Triwizard Cup was gleaming on a plinth a hundred yards away.

Suddenly a dark figure hurtled out onto the path in front of him.

Cedric was going to get there first. Cedric was sprinting as fast as he could toward the cup, and Harry knew he would never catch up, Cedric was much taller, had much longer legs -

Then Harry saw something immense over a hedge to his left, moving quickly along a path that intersected with his own; it was moving so fast Cedric was about to run into it, and Cedric, his eyes on the cup, had not seen it -

"Cedric!" Harry bellowed. "On your left!"

Cedric looked around just in time to hurl himself past the thing and avoid colliding with it, but in his haste, he tripped. Harry saw Cedric's wand fly out of his hand as a gigantic spider stepped into the path and began to bear down upon Cedric.

"Stupefy!" Harry yelled; the spell hit the spider's gigantic, hairy black body, but for all the good it did, he might as well have thrown a stone at it; the spider jerked, scuttled around, and ran at Harry instead.

"Stupefy! Impedimenta! Stupefy!"

But it was no use - the spider was either so large, or so magical, that the spells were doing no more than aggravating it. Harry had one horrifying glimpse of eight shining black eyes and razor-sharp pincers before it was upon him.

He was lifted into the air in its front legs; struggling madly, he tried to kick it; his leg connected with the pincers and next moment he was in excruciating pain. He could hear Cedric yelling "Stupefy!" too, but his spell had no more effect than Harry's - Harry raised his wand as the spider opened its pincers once more and shouted "Expelliarmus!"

It worked - the Disarming Spell made the spider drop him, but that meant that Harry fell twelve feet onto his already injured leg, which crumpled beneath him. Without pausing to think, he aimed high at the spider's underbelly, as he had done with the skrewt, and shouted "Stupefy!" just as Cedric yelled the same thing.

The two spells combined did what one alone had not: The spider keeled over sideways, flattening a nearby hedge, and strewing the path with a tangle of hairy legs.

"Harry!" he heard Cedric shouting. "You all right? Did it fall on you?"

"No," Harry called back, panting. He looked down at his leg. It was bleeding freely. He could see some sort of thick, gluey secretion from the spider's pincers on his torn robes. He tried to get up, but his leg was shaking badly and did not want to support his weight. He leaned against the hedge, gasping for breath, and looked around.

Cedric was standing feet from the Triwizard Cup, which was gleaming behind him.

"Take it, then," Harry panted to Cedric. "Go on, take it. You're there." But Cedric didn't move. He merely stood there, looking at Harry. Then he turned to stare at the cup. Harry saw the longing expression on his face in its golden light. Cedric looked around at Harry again, who was now holding onto the hedge to support himself. Cedric took a deep breath.

"You take it. You should win. That's twice you've saved my neck in here."

"That's not how it's supposed to work," Harry said. He felt angry; his leg was very painful, he was aching all over from trying to throw off the spider, and after all his efforts, Cedric had beaten him to it, just as he'd beaten Harry to ask Cho to the ball. "The one who reaches the cup first gets the points. That's you. I'm telling you, I'm not going to win any races on this leg."

Cedric took a few paces nearer to the Stunned spider, away from the cup, shaking his head.

"No," he said.

"Stop being noble," said Harry irritably. "Just take it, then we can get out of here."

Cedric watched Harry steadyng himself, holding tight to the hedge.

"You told me about the dragons," Cedric said. "I would've gone down in the first task if you hadn't told me what was coming."

"I had help on that too," Harry snapped, trying to mop up his bloody leg with his robes. "You helped me with the egg - we're square."

"I had help on the egg in the first place," said Cedric.

"We're still square," said Harry, testing his leg gingerly; it shook violently as he put weight on it; he had sprained his ankle when the spider had dropped him.

"You should've got more points on the second task," said Cedric mulishly.

"You stayed behind to get all the hostages. I should've done that."

"I was the only one who was thick enough to take that song seriously!" said Harry bitterly. "Just take the cup!"

"No," said Cedric.

He stepped over the spider's tangled legs to join Harry, who stared at him. Cedric was serious. He was walking away from the sort of glory Hufflepuff House hadn't had in centuries.

"Go on," Cedric said. He looked as though this was costing him every ounce of resolution he had, but his face was set, his arms were folded, he seemed decided.

Harry looked from Cedric to the cup. For one shining moment, he saw himself emerging from the maze, holding it. He saw himself holding the Triwizard Cup aloft, heard the roar of the crowd, saw Cho's face shining with admiration, more clearly than he had ever seen it before . . . and then the picture faded, and he found himself staring at Cedric's shadowy, stubborn face.

"Both of us," Harry said.

"What?"

"We'll take it at the same time. It's still a Hogwarts victory. We'll tie for it."

Cedric stared at Harry. He unfolded his arms.

"You - you sure?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah . . . we've helped each other out, haven't we? We both got here. Let's just take it together."

For a moment, Cedric looked as though he couldn't believe his ears; then his face split in a grin.

"You're on," he said. "Come here."

He grabbed Harrys arm below the shoulder and helped Harry limp toward the plinth where the cup stood. When they had reached it, they both held a hand out over one of the cup's gleaming handles.

"On three, right?" said Harry. "One - two - three -"

He and Cedric both grasped a handle.

Instantly, Harry felt a jerk somewhere behind his navel. His feet had left the ground. He could not unclench the hand holding the Triwizard Cup; it was pulling him onward in a howl of wind and swirling color, Cedric at his side.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO - FLESH, BLOOD, AND BONE

Harry felt his feet slam into the ground; his injured leg gave way, and he fell forward; his hand let go of the Triwizard Cup at last. He raised his head.

"Where are we?" he said.

Cedric shook his head. He got up, pulled Harry to his feet, and they looked around.

They had left the Hogwarts grounds completely; they had obviously traveled miles - perhaps hundreds of miles - for even the mountains surrounding the castle were gone. They were standing instead in a dark and overgrown graveyard; the black outline of a small church was visible beyond a large yew tree to their right. A hill rose above them to their left. Harry could just make out the outline of a fine old house on the hillside.

Cedric looked down at the Triwizard Cup and then up at Harry.

"Did anyone tell you the cup was a Portkey?" he asked.

"Nope," said Harry. He was looking around the graveyard. It was completely silent and slightly eerie. "Is this supposed to be part of the task?"

"I dunno," said Cedric. He sounded slightly nervous. "Wands out, d'you reckon?"

"Yeah," said Harry, glad that Cedric had made the suggestion rather than him.

They pulled out their wands. Harry kept looking around him. He had, yet again, the strange feeling that they were being watched.

"Someone's coming," he said suddenly.

Squinting tensely through the darkness, they watched the figure drawing nearer, walking steadily toward them between the graves. Harry couldn't make out a face, but from the way it was walking and holding its arms, he could tell that it was carrying something. Whoever it was, he was short, and wearing a hooded cloak pulled up over his head to obscure his face. And - several paces nearer, the gap between them closing all the time - Harry saw that the thing in the persons arms looked like a baby ... or was it merely a bundle of robes?

Harry lowered his wand slightly and glanced sideways at Cedric. Cedric shot him a quizzical look. They both turned back to watch the approaching figure.

It stopped beside a towering marble headstone, only six feet from them. For a second. Harry and Cedric and the short figure simply looked at one another.

And then, without warning, Harry's scar exploded with pain. It was agony such as he had never felt in all his life; his wand slipped from his fingers as he put his hands over his face; his knees buckled; he was on the ground and he could see nothing at all; his head was about to split open.

From far away, above his head, he heard a high, cold voice say, "Kill the spare."

A swishing noise and a second voice, which screeched the words to the night: "Avada Kedavra!"

A blast of green light blazed through Harry's eyelids, and he heard something heavy fall to the ground beside him; the pain in his scar reached such a pitch that he retched, and then it diminished; terrified of what he was about to see, he opened his stinging eyes.

Cedric was lying spread-eagled on the ground beside him. He was dead. For a second that contained an eternity, Harry stared into Cedric's face, at his open gray eyes, blank and expressionless as the windows of a deserted house, at his half-open mouth, which looked slightly surprised. And then, before Harry's mind had accepted what he was seeing, before he could feel anything but numb disbelief, he felt himself being pulled to his feet.

The short man in the cloak had put down his bundle, lit his wand, and was dragging Harry toward the marble headstone. Harry saw the name upon it flickering in the wandlight before he was forced around and slammed against it.

TOM RIDDLE

The cloaked man was now conjuring tight cords around Harry, tying him from neck to ankles to the headstone. Harry could hear shallow, fast breathing from the depths of the hood; he struggled, and the man hit him - hit him with a hand that had a finger missing. And Harry realized who was under the hood. It was Wormtail.

"You!" he gasped.

But Wormtail, who had finished conjuring the ropes, did not reply; he was busy checking the tightness of the cords, his fingers trembling uncontrollably, rumbling over the knots. Once sure that Harry was bound so tightly to the headstone that he couldn't move an inch, Wormtail drew a length of some black material from the inside of his cloak and stuffed it roughly into Harry's mouth; then, without a word, he turned from Harry and hurried away. Harry couldn't make a sound, nor could he see where Wormtail had gone; he couldn't turn his head to see beyond the headstone; he could see only what was right in front of him.

Cedric's body was lying some twenty feet away. Some way beyond him, glinting in the starlight, lay the Triwizard Cup. Harry's wand was on the ground at Cedric's feet. The bundle of robes that Harry had thought was a baby was close by, at the foot of the grave. It seemed to be stirring fretfully. Harry watched it, and his scar seared with pain again . . . and he suddenly knew that he didn't want to see what was in those robes . . . he didn't want that bundle opened....

He could hear noises at his feet. He looked down and saw a gigantic snake slithering through the grass, circling the headstone where he was tied. Wormtail's fast, wheezy breathing was growing louder again. It sounded as though he was forcing something heavy across the ground. Then he came back within Harry's range of vision, and Harry saw him pushing a stone cauldron to the foot of the grave. It was full of what seemed to be water - Harry could hear it slopping around - and it was larger than any cauldron Harry had ever used; a great stone belly large enough for a full-grown man to sit in.

The thing inside the bundle of robes on the ground was stirring more persistently, as though it was trying to free itself. Now Wormtail was busying himself at the bottom of the cauldron with a wand. Suddenly there were crackling names beneath it. The large snake slithered away into the darkness.

The liquid in the cauldron seemed to heat very fast. The surface began not only to bubble, but to send out fiery sparks, as though it were on fire. Steam was thickening, blurring the outline of Wormtail tending the fire. The movements beneath the robes became more agitated. And Harry heard the high, cold voice again.

"Hurry!"

The whole surface of the water was alight with sparks now. It might have been encrusted with diamonds.

"It is ready. Master."

"Now ..." said the cold voice.

Wormtail pulled open the robes on the ground, revealing what was inside them, and Harry let out a yell that was strangled in the wad of material blocking his mouth.

It was as though Wormtail had flipped over a stone and revealed something ugly, slimy, and blind - but worse, a hundred times worse. The thing Wormtail had been carrying had the shape of a crouched human child, except that Harry had never seen anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly-looking, a dark, raw, reddish black. Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face - no child alive ever had a face like that - flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes.

The thing seemed almost helpless; it raised its thin arms, put them around Wormtail's neck, and Wormtail lifted it. As he did so, his hood fell back, and Harry saw the look of revulsion on Wormtail's weak, pale face in the firelight as he carried the creature to the rim of the

cauldron. For one moment, Harry saw the evil, flat face illuminated in the sparks dancing on the surface of the potion. And then Wormtail lowered the creature into the cauldron; there was a hiss, and it vanished below the surface; Harry heard its frail body hit the bottom with a soft thud.

Let it drown, Harry thought, his scar burning almost past endurance, please. . . let it drown. . . .

Wormtail was speaking. His voice shook; he seemed frightened beyond his wits. He raised his wand, closed his eyes, and spoke to the night.

"Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

The surface of the grave at Harry's feet cracked. Horrified, Harry watched as a fine trickle of dust rose into the air at Wormtail's command and fell softly into the cauldron. The diamond surface of the water broke and hissed; it sent sparks in all directions and turned a vivid, poisonous-looking blue.

And now Wormtail was whimpering. He pulled a long, thin, shining silver dagger from inside his cloak. His voice broke into petrified sobs.

"Flesh - of the servant - w-willingly given - you will - revive - your master. "

He stretched his right hand out in front of him - the hand with the missing finger. He gripped the dagger very tightly in his left hand and swung it upward.

Harry realized what Wormtail was about to do a second before it happened - he closed his eyes as tightly as he could, but he could not block the scream that pierced the night, that went through Harry as though he had been stabbed with the dagger too. He heard something fall to the ground, heard Wormtail's anguished panting, then a sickening splash, as something was dropped into the cauldron. Harry couldn't stand to look . . . but the potion had turned a burning red; the light of it shone through Harry's closed eyelids. . . .

Wormtail was gasping and moaning with agony. Not until Harry felt Wormtail's anguished breath on his face did he realize that Wormtail was right in front of him.

"B-blood of the enemy . . . forcibly taken . . . you will. . . resurrect your foe."

Harry could do nothing to prevent it, he was tied too tightly. . . .

Squinting down, struggling hopelessly at the ropes binding him, he saw the shining silver dagger shaking in Wormtail's remaining hand. He felt its point penetrate the crook of his right arm and blood seeping down the sleeve of his torn robes. Wormtail, still panting with pain, rummled in his pocket for a glass vial and held it to Harry's cut, so that a dribble of blood fell into it.

He staggered back to the cauldron with Harry's blood. He poured it inside. The liquid within turned, instantly, a blinding white.

Wormtail, his job done, dropped to his knees beside the cauldron, then slumped sideways and lay on the ground, cradling the bleeding stump of his arm, gasping and sobbing.

The cauldron was simmering, sending its diamond sparks in all directions, so blindingly bright that it turned all else to velvety blackness.

Nothing happened. . . .

Let it have drowned. Harry thought, let it have gone wrong. . . .

And then, suddenly, the sparks emanating from the cauldron were extinguished. A surge of white steam billowed thickly from the cauldron instead, obliterating everything in front of Harry, so that he couldn't see Wormtail or Cedric or anything but vapor hanging in the air. . . . It's gone wrong, he thought. . . . it's drowned. . . please . . . please let it be dead. . . .

But then, through the mist in front of him, he saw, with an icy surge of terror, the dark outline of a man, tall and skeletally thin, rising slowly from inside the cauldron.

"Robe me," said the high, cold voice from behind the steam, and Wormtail, sobbing and moaning, still cradling his mutilated arm, scrambled to pick up the black robes from the ground, got to his feet, reached up, and pulled them one-handed over his master's head.

The thin man stepped out of the cauldron, staring at Harry . . . and Harry stared back into the face that had haunted his nightmares for three years. Whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes and a nose that was flat as a snakes with slits for nostrils . . . Lord Voldemort had risen again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE - THE DEATH EATERS

Voldemort looked away from Harry and began examining his own body. His hands were like large, pale spiders; his long white fingers caressed his own chest, his arms, his face; the red eyes, whose pupils were slits, like a cats, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. He held up his hands and flexed the fingers, his expression rapt and exultant. He took not the slightest notice of Wormtail, who lay twitching and bleeding on the ground, nor of the great snake, which had slithered back into sight and was circling Harry again, hissing. Voldemort slipped one of those unnaturally long-fingered hands into a deep pocket and drew out a wand. He caressed it gently too; and then he raised it, and pointed it at Wormtail, who was lifted off the ground and thrown against the headstone where Harry was tied; he fell to the foot of it and lay there, crumpled up and crying. Voldemort turned his scarlet eyes upon Harry, laughing a high, cold, mirthless laugh.

Wormtail's robes were shining with blood now; he had wrapped the stump of his arm in them.

"My Lord . . ." he choked, "my Lord . . . you promised . . . you did promise . . ."

"Hold out your arm," said Voldemort lazily.

"Oh Master . . . thank you, Master . . ."

He extended the bleeding stump, but Voldemort laughed again.

"The other arm, Wormtail."

"Master, please . . . please . . ."

Voldemort bent down and pulled out Wormtail's left arm; he forced the sleeve of Wormtail's robes up past his elbow, and Harry saw something upon the skin there, something like a vivid red tattoo - a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth - the image that had appeared in the sky at the Quidditch World Cup: the Dark Mark. Voldemort examined it carefully, ignoring Wormtail's uncontrollable weeping.

"It is back," he said softly, "they will all have noticed it... and now, we shall see . . . now we shall know . . ."

He pressed his long white forefinger to the brand on Wormtail's arm.

The scar on Harry's forehead seared with a sharp pain again, and Wormtail let out a fresh howl; Voldemort removed his fingers from Wormtail's mark, and Harry saw that it had turned jet black.

A look of cruel satisfaction on his face, Voldemort straightened up, threw back his head, and stared around at the dark graveyard.

"How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it?" he whispered, his gleaming red eyes fixed upon the stars. "And how many will be foolish enough to stay away?"

He began to pace up and down before Harry and Wormtail, eyes sweeping the graveyard all the while. After a minute or so, he looked down at Harry again, a cruel smile twisting his snakelike face.

"You stand, Harry Potter, upon the remains of my late father," he hissed softly. "A Muggle and a fool. . . very like your dear mother. But they both had their uses, did they not? Your mother died to defend you as a child . . . and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death. . ."

Voldemort laughed again. Up and down he paced, looking all around him as he walked, and the snake continued to circle in the grass.

"You see that house upon the hillside, Potter? My father lived there. My mother, a witch who lived here in this village, fell in love with him. But he abandoned her when she told him what she was. ... He didn't like magic, my father . . .

"He left her and returned to his Muggle parents before I was even born. Potter, and she died giving birth to me, leaving me to be raised in a Muggle orphanage . . . but I vowed to find him ... I revenged myself upon him, that fool who gave me his name . . . Tom Riddle. . . ."

Still he paced, his red eyes darting from grave to grave.

"Listen to me, reliving family history . . ." he said quietly, "why, I am growing quite sentimental. . . . But look, Harry! My true family returns. . . ."

The air was suddenly full of the swishing of cloaks. Between graves, behind the yew tree, in every shadowy space, wizards were Apparating. All of them were hooded and masked. And one by one they moved forward . . . slowly, cautiously, as though they could hardly believe their eyes. Voldemort stood in silence, waiting for them. Then one of the Death Eaters fell to his knees, crawled toward Voldemort and kissed the hem of his black robes.

Master . . . Master " he murmured.

The Death Eaters behind him did the same; each of them approaching Voldemort on his knees and kissing his robes, before backing away and standing up, forming a silent circle, which enclosed Tom Riddle's grave, Harry, Voldemort, and the sobbing and twitching heap that was Wormtail. Yet they left gaps in the circle, as though waiting for more people. Voldemort, however, did not seem to expect more. He looked around at the hooded faces, and though there was no wind rustling seemed to run around the circle, as though it had shivered.

"Welcome, Death Eaters," said Voldemort quietly. "Thirteen years. . . thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday, we are still united under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?"

He put back his terrible face and sniffed, his slit-like nostrils widening.

"I smell guilt," he said. "There is a stench or guilt upon the air. A second shiver ran around the circle, as though each member of it longed, but did not dare to step back from him.

"I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact - such prompt appearances! and I ask myself . . . why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?" No one spoke. No one moved except Wormtail, who was upon the ground, still sobbing over his bleeding arm.

"And I answer myself," whispered Voldemort, "they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped back among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, and ignorance, and bewitchment. . . .

"And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proofs of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?

"And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort. . . perhaps they now pay allegiance to another . . . perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?"

At the mention of Dumbledore's name, the members of the circle stirred, and some muttered and shook their heads. Voldemort ignored them.

"It is a disappointment to me . . . I confess myself disappointed. . . ."

One of the men suddenly flung himself forward, breaking the circle.

Trembling from head to foot, he collapsed at Voldemort's feet.

"Master!" he shrieked, "Master, forgive me! Forgive us all!" Voldemort began to laugh. He raised his wand.

"Crucio!"

The Death Eater on the ground writhed and shrieked; Harry was sure the sound must carry to the houses around. . . . Let the police come, he thought desperately . . . anyone . . . anything. . .

Voldemort raised his wand. The tortured Death Eater lay flat upon the ground, gasping.

"Get up, Avery," said Voldemort softly. "Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years . . . I want thirteen years' repayment before I forgive you. Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, have you not, Wormtail?"

He looked down at Wormtail, who continued to sob.

"You returned to me, not out of loyalty, but out of fear of your old friends. You deserve this pain, Wormtail. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Master," moaned Wormtail, "please. Master . . . please . . ."

"Yet you helped return me to my body," said Voldemort coolly, watching Wormtail sob on the ground. "Worthless and traitorous as you are, you helped me . . . and Lord Voldemort rewards his helpers. . . ."

Voldemort raised his wand again and whirled it through the air. A streak of what looked like molten silver hung shining in the wand's wake.

Momentarily shapeless, it writhed and then formed itself into a gleaming replica of a human hand, bright as moonlight, which soared downward and fixed itself upon Wormtail's bleeding wrist.

Wormtail's sobbing stopped abruptly. His breathing harsh and ragged, he raised his head and stared in disbelief at the silver hand, now attached seamlessly to his arm, as though he were wearing a dazzling glove. He flexed the shining fingers, then, trembling, picked up a small twig on the ground and crushed it into powder.

"My Lord," he whispered. "Master . . . it is beautiful. . . thank you... thank you. . ."

He scrambled forward on his knees and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes.

"May your loyalty never waver again, Wormtail," said Voldemort.

"No, my Lord . . . never, my Lord . . ."

Wormtail stood up and took his place in the circle, staring at his powerful new hand, his face still shining with tears. Voldemort now approached the man on Wormtail's right.

"Lucius, my slippery friend," he whispered, halting before him. "I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present a respectable face. You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius. . . . Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay. . . but might not your energies have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?"

"My Lord, I was constantly on the alert," came Lucius Malfoy's voice swiftly from beneath the hood. "Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me -"

"And yet you ran from my Mark, when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer?" said Voldemort lazily, and Mr. Malfoy stopped talking abruptly. "Yes, I know all about that, Lucius. . . . You have disappointed me. . . I expect more faithful service in the future."

"Of course, my Lord, of course. . . . You are merciful, thank you. . . ." Voldemort moved on, and stopped, staring at the space - large enough for two people - that separated Malfoy and the next man.

"The Lestranges should stand here," said Voldemort quietly. "But they are entombed in Azkaban. They were faithful. They went to Azkaban rather than renounce me. . . . When Azkaban is broken open, the Lestranges will be honored beyond their dreams. The dementors will join

us . . . they are our natural allies . . . we will recall the banished giants . . . I shall have all my devoted servants returned to me, and an army of creatures whom all fear. . . ."

He walked on. Some of the Death Eaters he passed in silence, but he paused before others and spoke to them.

"Macnair . . . destroying dangerous beasts for the Ministry of Magic now, Wormtail tells me? You shall have better victims than that soon, Macnair. Lord Voldemort will provide. . . ."

"Thank you, Master . . . thank you," murmured Macnair.

"And here" - Voldemort moved on to the two largest hooded figures - "we have Crabbe . . . you will do better this time, will you not, Crabbe? And you, Goyle?"

They bowed clumsily, muttering dully.

"Yes, Master . . ."

"We will, Master...."

"The same goes for you, Nott," said Voldemort quietly as he walked past a stooped figure in Mr. Goyles shadow.

"My Lord, I prostrate myself before you, I am your most faithful -"

"That will do," said Voldemort.

He had reached the largest gap of all, and he stood surveying it with his blank, red eyes, as though he could see people standing there.

"And here we have six missing Death Eaters . . . three dead in my service. One, too cowardly to return . . . he will pay. One, who I believe has left me forever . . . he will be killed, of course . . . and one, who remains my most faithful servant, and who has already reentered my service."

The Death Eaters stirred, and Harry saw their eyes dart sideways at one another through their masks.

"He is at Hogwarts, that faithful servant, and it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived here tonight. . . .

"Yes," said Voldemort, a grin curling his lipless mouth as the eyes of the circle flashed in Harry's direction. "Harry Potter has kindly joined us for my rebirthing party. One might go so far as to call him my guest of honor."

There was a silence. Then the Death Eater to the right of Wormtail stepped forward, and Lucius Malfoy's voice spoke from under the mask.

"Master, we crave to know . . . we beg you to tell us . . . how you have achieved this . . . this miracle . . . how you managed to return to us. . . ."

"Ah, what a story it is, Lucius," said Voldemort. "And it begins - and ends - with my young friend here."

He walked lazily over to stand next to Harry, so that the eyes of the whole circle were upon the two of them. The snake continued to circle.

"You know, of course, that they have called this boy my downfall?"

Voldemort said softly, his red eyes upon Harry, whose scar began to burn so fiercely that he almost screamed in agony. "You all know that on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill him. His mother died in the attempt to save him - and unwittingly provided him with a protection I admit I had not foreseen. . . . I could not touch the boy."

Voldemort raised one of his long white fingers and put it very close to Harry's cheek.

"His mother left upon him the traces other sacrifice. . . . This is old magic, I should have remembered it, I was foolish to overlook it... but no matter. I can touch him now."

Harry felt the cold tip of the long white finger touch him, and thought his head would burst with the pain. Voldemort laughed softly in his ear, then took the finger away and continued addressing the Death Eaters.

"I miscalculated, my friends, I admit it. My curse was deflected by the woman's foolish sacrifice, and it rebounded upon myself. Aaah . . . pain beyond pain, my friends; nothing could have prepared me for it. I was

ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost. . . but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know... I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal - to conquer death. And now, I was tested, and it appeared that one or more of my experiments had worked ... for I had not been killed, though the curse should have done it. Nevertheless, I was as powerless as the weakest creature alive, and without the means to help myself... for I had no body, and every spell that might have helped me required the use of a wand. . . .

"I remember only forcing myself, sleeplessly, endlessly, second by second, to exist. . . . I settled in a faraway place, in a forest, and I waited. . . . Surely, one of my faithful Death Eaters would try and find me. . . . one of them would come and perform the magic I could not, to restore me to a body . . . , but I waited in vain. . . ."

The shiver ran once more around the circle of listening Death Eaters. Voldemort let the silence spiral horribly before continuing.

"Only one power remained to me. I could possess the bodies of others. But I dared not go where other humans were plentiful, for I knew that the Aurors were still abroad and searching for me.

I sometimes inhabited animals - snakes, of course, being my preference - but I was little better off inside them than as pure spirit, for their bodies were ill adapted to perform magic . . . and my possession of them shortened their lives; none of them lasted long. . . .

"Then . . . four years ago . . . the means for my return seemed assured. A wizard - young, foolish, and gullible - wandered across my path in the forest I had made my home. Oh, he seemed the very chance I had been dreaming of... for he was a teacher at Dumbledore's school... he was easy to bend to my will... he brought me back to this country, and after a while, I took possession of his body, to supervise him closely as he carried out my orders. But my plan failed. I did not manage to steal the Sorcerer's Stone. I was not to be assured immortal life. I was thwarted . . . thwarted, once again, by Harry Potter. . . ."

Silence once more; nothing was stirring, not even the leaves on the yew tree. The Death Eaters were quite motionless, the glittering eyes in their masks fixed upon Voldemort, and upon Harry.

"The servant died when I left his body, and I was left as weak as ever I had been," Voldemort continued. "I returned to my hiding place far away, and I will not pretend to you that I didn't then fear that I might never regain my powers. . . . Yes, that was perhaps my darkest hour... I could not hope that I would be sent another wizard to possess . . . and I had given up hope, now, that any of my Death Eaters cared what had become of me. . . ."

One or two of the masked wizards in the circle moved uncomfortably, but Voldemort took no notice.

"And then, not even a year ago, when I had almost abandoned hope, it happened at last... a servant returned to me. Wormtail here, who had faked his own death to escape justice, was driven out of hiding by those he had once counted friends, and decided to return to his master. He sought me in the country where it had long been rumored I was hiding . . . helped, of course, by the rats he met along the way. Wormtail has a curious affinity with rats, do you not, Wormtail? His filthy little friends told him there was a place, deep in an Albanian forest, that they avoided, where small animals like themselves had met their deaths by a dark shadow that possessed them. . . .

"But his journey back to me was not smooth, was it, Wormtail? For, hungry one night, on the edge of the very forest where he had hoped to find me, he foolishly stopped at an inn for some food . . . and who should he meet there, but one Bertha Jorkins, a witch from the Ministry of Magic.

"Now see the way that fate favors Lord Voldemort. This might have been the end of Wormtail, and of my last hope for regeneration. But Wormtail - displaying a presence of mind I would never have expected from him - convinced Bertha Jorkins to accompany him on a nighttime stroll. He overpowered her ... he brought her to me. And Bertha Jorkins, who might have ruined all, proved instead to be a gift beyond my wildest dreams ... for - with a little persuasion - she became a veritable mine of information.

"She told me that the Triwizard Tournament would be played at Hogwarts this year. She told me that she knew of a faithful Death Eater who would be only too willing to help me, if I could only contact him. She told me many things. . . but the means I used to break the Memory Charm upon her were powerful, and when I had extracted all useful information from her, her mind and body were both damaged beyond repair. She had now served her purpose. I could not possess her. I disposed of her."

Voldemort smiled his terrible smile, his red eyes blank and pitiless. "Wormtail's body, of course, was ill adapted for possession, as all assumed him dead, and would attract far too much attention if noticed. However, he was the able-bodied servant I needed, and, poor wizard though he is, Wormtail was able to follow the instructions I gave him, which would return me to a rudimentary, weak body of my own, a body I would be able to inhabit while awaiting the essential ingredients for true rebirth ... a spell or two of my own invention ... a little help from my dear Nagini," Voldemort's red eyes fell upon the continually circling snake, "a potion concocted from unicorn blood, and the snake venom Nagini provided ... I was soon returned to an almost human form, and strong enough to travel.

"There was no hope of stealing the Sorcerer's Stone anymore, for I knew that Dumbledore would have seen to it that it was destroyed. But I was willing to embrace mortal life again, before chasing immortality. I set my sights lower ... I would settle for my old body back again, and my old strength.

"I knew that to achieve this - it is an old piece of Dark Magic, the potion that revived me tonight - I would need three powerful ingredients. Well, one of them was already at hand, was it not, Wormtail? Flesh given by a servant. . . .

"My father's bone, naturally, meant that we would have to come here, where he was buried. But the blood of a foe ... Wormtail would have had me use any wizard, would you not, Wormtail? Any wizard who had hated me ... as so many of them still do. But I knew the one I must use, if I was to rise again, more powerful than I had been when I had fallen. I wanted Harry Potter's blood. I wanted the blood of the one who had stripped me of power thirteen years ago . . . for the lingering protection his mother once gave him would then reside in my veins too. . . .

"But how to get at Harry Potter? For he has been better protected than I think even he knows, protected in ways devised by Dumbledore long ago, when it fell to him to arrange the boy's future. Dumbledore invoked an ancient magic, to ensure the boy's protection as long as he is in his relations' care. Not even I can touch him there. . . . Then, of course, there was the Quidditch World Cup. . . . I thought his protection might be weaker there, away from his relations and Dumbledore, but I was not yet strong enough to attempt kidnap in the midst of a horde of Ministry wizards. And then, the boy would return to Hogwarts, where he is under the crooked nose of that Muggle-loving fool from morning until night. So how could I take him?

"Why ... by using Bertha Jorkins's information, of course. Use my one faithful Death Eater, stationed at Hogwarts, to ensure that the boy's name was entered into the Goblet of Fire. Use my Death Eater to ensure that the boy won the tournament - that he touched the Triwizard Cup first - the cup which my Death Eater had turned into a Portkey, which would

bring him here, beyond the reach of Dumbledore's help and protection, and into my waiting arms. And here he is ... the boy you all believed had been my downfall. . . ."

Voldemort moved slowly forward and turned to face Harry. He raised his wand.

"Crucio!"

It was pain beyond anything Harry had ever experienced; his very bones were on fire; his head was surely splitting along his scar; his eyes were rolling madly in his head; he wanted it to end ... to black out... to die . . .

And then it was gone. He was hanging limply in the ropes binding him to the headstone of Voldemort's father, looking up into those bright red eyes through a kind of mist. The night was ringing with the sound of the Death Eaters' laughter.

"You see, I think, how foolish it was to suppose that this boy could ever have been stronger than me," said Voldemort. "But I want there to be no mistake in anybody's mind. Harry Potter escaped me by a lucky chance. And I am now going to prove my power by killing him, here and now, in front of you all, when there is no Dumbledore to help him, and no mother to die for him. I will give him his chance. He will be allowed to fight, and you will be left in no doubt which of us is the stronger. Just a little longer, Nagini," he whispered, and the snake glided away through the grass to where the Death Eaters stood watching.

"Now untie him, Wormtail, and give him back his wand."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR - PRIORI INCANTATEM

Wormtail approached Harry, who scrambled to find his feet, to support his own weight before the ropes were untied. Wormtail raised his new silver hand, pulled out the wad of material gagging Harry, and then, with one swipe, cut through the bonds tying Harry to the gravestone.

There was a split second, perhaps, when Harry might have considered running for it, but his injured leg shook under him as he stood on the overgrown grave, as the Death Eaters closed ranks, forming a tighter circle around him and Voldemort, so that the gaps where the missing Death Eaters should have stood were filled. Wormtail walked out of the circle to the place where Cedric's body lay and returned with Harry's wand, which he thrust roughly into Harry's hand without looking at him. Then Wormtail resumed his place in the circle of watching Death Eaters.

"You have been taught how to duel. Harry Potter?" said Voldemort softly, his red eyes glinting through the darkness.

At these words Harry remembered, as though from a former life, the dueling club at Hogwarts he had attended briefly two years ago. . . . All he had learned there was the Disarming Spell, "Expelliarmus". . . and what use would it be to deprive Voldemort of his wand, even if he could, when he was surrounded by Death Eaters, outnumbered by at least thirty to one? He had never learned anything that could possibly fit him for this. He knew he was facing the thing against which Moody had always warned . . . the unblockable Avada Kedavra curse - and Voldemort was right - his mother was not here to die for him this time. . . . He was quite unprotected. . . .

"We bow to each other. Harry," said Voldemort, bending a little, but keeping his snakelike face upturned to Harry. "Come, the niceties must be observed. . . . Dumbledore would like you to show manners. . . . Bow to death, Harry. . . ."

The Death Eaters were laughing again. Voldemort's lipless mouth was smiling. Harry did not bow. He was not going to let Voldemort play with him before killing him . . . he was not going to give him that satisfaction. . . .

"I said, bow," Voldemort said, raising his wand - and Harry felt his spine curve as though a huge, invisible hand were bending him ruthlessly forward, and the Death Eaters laughed harder than ever.

"Very good," said Voldemort softly, and as he raised his wand the pressure bearing down upon Harry lifted too. "And now you face me, like a man . . . straight-backed and proud, the way your father died. . . . "And now - we duel."

Voldemort raised his wand, and before Harry could do anything to defend himself, before he could even move, he had been hit again by the Cruciatus Curse. The pain was so intense, so all-consuming, that he no longer knew where he was. . . . White-hot knives were piercing every inch of his skin, his head was surely going to burst with pain, he was screaming more loudly than he'd ever screamed in his life - And then it stopped. Harry rolled over and scrambled to his feet; he was shaking as uncontrollably as Wormtail had done when his hand had been cut off; he staggered sideways into the wall of watching Death Eaters, and they pushed him away, back toward Voldemort.

"A little break," said Voldemort, the slit-like nostrils dilating with excitement, "a little pause . . . That hurt, didn't it. Harry? You don't want me to do that again, do you?"

Harry didn't answer. He was going to die like Cedric, those pitiless red eyes were telling him so ... he was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it... but he wasn't going to play along. He wasn't going to obey Voldemort... he wasn't going to beg. . . .

"I asked you whether you want me to do that again," said Voldemort softly. "Answer me! Imperial"

And Harry felt, for the third time in his life, the sensation that his mind had been wiped of all thought. . . . Ah, it was bliss, not to think, it was as though he were floating, dreaming ...just answer no ... say no ... just answer no. . . .

I will not, said a stronger voice, in the back of his head, I won't answer. . . .

Just answer no. . . .

I won't do it, I won't say it. . . .

Just answer no. . . .

"I WON'T!"

And these words burst from Harry's mouth; they echoed through the graveyard, and the dream state was lifted as suddenly as though cold water had been thrown over him - back rushed the aches that the Cruciatus Curse had left all over his body - back rushed the realization of where he was, and what he was facing. . . .

"You won't?" said Voldemort quietly, and the Death Eaters were not laughing now. "You won't say no? Harry, obedience is a virtue I need to teach you before you die. . . . Perhaps another little dose of pain?" Voldemort raised his wand, but this time Harry was ready; with the reflexes born of his Quidditch training, he flung himself sideways onto the ground; he rolled behind the marble headstone of Voldemort's father, and he heard it crack as the curse missed him.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Harry," said Voldemort's soft, cold voice, drawing nearer, as the Death Eaters laughed. "You cannot hide from me. Does this mean you are tired of our duel? Does this mean that you would prefer me to finish it now, Harry? Come out, Harry . . . come out and play, then . . . it will be quick . . . it might even be painless . . . I would not know... I have never died. . . ."

Harry crouched behind the headstone and knew the end had come. There was no hope ... no help to be had. And as he heard Voldemort draw nearer still, he knew one thing only, and it was beyond fear or reason: He was not going to die crouching here like a child playing hide-and-seek; he was not going to die kneeling at Voldemort's feet... he was going to die

upright like his father, and he was going to die trying to defend himself, even if no defense was possible. . . .

Before Voldemort could stick his snakelike face around the headstone.

Harry stood up . . . he gripped his wand tightly in his hand, thrust it out in front of him, and threw himself around the headstone, facing Voldemort.

Voldemort was ready. As Harry shouted, "Expelliarmus!" Voldemort cried, "Avada Kedavra!"

A jet of green light issued from Voldemorts wand just as a jet of red light blasted from Harry's - they met in midair - and suddenly Harry's wand was vibrating as though an electric charge were surging through it; his hand seized up around it; he couldn't have released it if he'd wanted to - and a narrow beam of light connected the two wands, neither red nor green, but bright, deep gold. Harry, following the beam with his astonished gaze, saw that Voldemort's long white fingers too were gripping a wand that was shaking and vibrating.

And then - nothing could have prepared Harry for this - he felt his feet lift from the ground. He and Voldemort were both being raised into the air, their wands still connected by that thread of shimmering golden light. They glided away from the tombstone of Voldemort's father and then came to rest on a patch of ground that was clear and free of graves.

. . . The Death Eaters were shouting; they were asking Voldemort for instructions; they were closing in, reforming the circle around Harry and Voldemort, the snake slithering at their heels, some of them drawing their wands -

The golden thread connecting Harry and Voldemort splintered; though the wands remained connected, a thousand more beams arced high over Harry and Voldemort, crisscrossing all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a

cage of light, beyond which the Death Eaters circled like jackals, their cries strangely muffled now. . . .

"Do nothing!" Voldemort shrieked to the Death Eaters, and Harry saw his red eyes wide with astonishment at what was happening, saw him fighting to break the thread of light still connecting his wand with Harry's; Harry held onto his wand more tightly, with both hands, and the golden thread remained unbroken. "Do nothing unless I command you!" Voldemort shouted to the Death Eaters.

And then an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air. . . . It was coming from every thread of the light-spun web vibrating around Harry and Voldemort. It was a sound Harry recognized, though he had heard it only once before in his life: phoenix song.

It was the sound of hope to Harry. . . . the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life. . . . He felt as though the song were inside him instead of just around him. . . . It was the sound he connected with Dumbledore, and it was almost as though a friend were speaking in his ear. . . .

Don't break the connection.

I know. Harry told the music, I know I mustn't. . . . but no sooner had he thought it, than the thing became much harder to do. His wand began to vibrate more powerfully than ever . . . and now the beam between him and Voldemort changed too . . . it was as though large beads of light were sliding up and down the thread connecting the wands - Harry felt his wand give a shudder under his hand as the light beads began to slide slowly and steadily his way. . . . The direction of the beams movement was now toward him, from Voldemort, and he felt his wand shudder angrily. . . . As the closest bead of light moved nearer to Harrys wand tip, the wood beneath his fingers grew so hot he feared it would burst into flame. The closer that bead moved, the harder Harry's wand vibrated; he was sure his wand would not survive contact with it; it felt as though it was about to shatter under his fingers -

He concentrated every last particle of his mind upon forcing the bead back toward Voldemort, his ears full of phoenix song, his eyes furious, fixed . . . and slowly, very slowly, the beads quivered to a halt, and then, just as slowly, they began to move the other way . . . and it was Voldemort's wand that was vibrating extra-hard now . . . Voldemort who looked astonished, and almost fearful. . . .

One of the beads of light was quivering, inches from the tip of Voldemort's wand. Harry didn't understand why he was doing it, didn't know what it might achieve . . . but he now concentrated as he had never done in his life on forcing that bead of light right back into Voldemort's wand . . . and slowly . . . very slowly . . . it moved along the golden thread . . . it trembled for a moment. . . . and then it connected. . . . At once, Voldemort's wand began to emit echoing screams of pain . . . then - Voldemort's red eyes widened with shock - a dense, smoky hand flew out of the tip of it and vanished . . . the ghost of the hand he had made Wormtail. . . more shouts of pain . . . and then something much larger began to blossom from Voldemort's wand tip, a great, grayish something, that looked as though it were made of the solidest, densest smoke. . . It was a head . . . now a chest and arms . . . the torso of Cedric Diggory. If ever Harry might have released his wand from shock, it would have been then, but instinct kept him clutching his wand tightly, so that the thread of golden light remained unbroken, even though the thick gray ghost of Cedric Diggory (was it a ghost? it looked so solid) emerged in its entirety from the end of Voldemort's wand, as though it were squeezing itself out of a very narrow tunnel. . . and this shade of Cedric stood up, and looked up and down the golden thread of light, and spoke.

"Hold on. Harry," it said.

Its voice was distant and echoing. Harry looked at Voldemort . . . his wide red eyes were still shocked . . . he had no more expected this than Harry had . . . and, very dimly, Harry heard the frightened yells of the Death Eaters, prowling around the edges of the golden dome. . .

More screams of pain from the wand . . . and then something else emerged from its tip . . . the dense shadow of a second head, quickly followed by arms and torso . . . an old man Harry had seen only in a dream was now pushing himself out of the end of the wand just as Cedric had done . . . and his ghost, or his shadow, or whatever it was, fell next to Cedric's, and surveyed Harry and Voldemort, and the golden web, and the connected wands, with mild surprise, leaning on his walking stick. . . .

"He was a real wizard, then?" the old man said, his eyes on Voldemort.

"Killed me, that one did. . . . You fight him, boy. . . ."

But already, yet another head was emerging . . . and this head, gray as a smoky statue, was a woman's. . . . Harry, both arms shaking now as he fought to keep his wand still, saw her drop to the ground and straighten up like the others, staring. . . .

The shadow of Bertha Jorkins surveyed the battle before her with wide eyes.

"Don't let go, now!" she cried, and her voice echoed like Cedrics as though from very far away. "Don't let him get you, Harry - don't let go!"

She and the other two shadowy figures began to pace around the inner walls of the golden web, while the Death Eaters flitted around the outside of it... and Voldemort's dead victims whispered as they circled the duelers, whispered words of encouragement to Harry, and hissed words Harry couldn't hear to Voldemort.

And now another head was emerging from the tip of Voldemort's wand . . . and Harry knew when he saw it who it would be . . . he knew, as though he had expected it from the moment when Cedric had appeared from the wand . . . knew, because the man appearing was the one he'd thought of more than any other tonight. . . .

The smoky shadow of a tall man with untidy hair fell to the ground as Bertha had done, straightened up, and looked at him . . . and Harry, his arms shaking madly now, looked back into the ghostly face of his father. "Your mother's coming . . ." he said quietly. "She wants to see you . . . it will be all right . . . hold on . . ."

And she came. . . first her head, then her body... a young woman with long hair, the smoky, shadowy form of Lily Potter blossomed from the end of Voldemort's wand, fell to the ground, and straightened like her husband. She walked close to Harry, looking down at him, and she spoke in the same distant, echoing voice as the others, but quietly, so that Voldemort, his face now livid with fear as his victims prowled around him, could not hear. . .

"When the connection is broken, we will linger for only moments . . . but we will give you time. . . you must get to the Portkey, it will return you to Hogwarts . . . do you understand, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry gasped, fighting now to keep a hold on his wand, which was slipping and sliding beneath his fingers.

"Harry . . ." whispered the figure of Cedric, "take my body back, will you? Take my body back to my parents, . . ."

"I will," said Harry, his face screwed up with the effort of holding the wand.

"Do it now," whispered his father's voice, "be ready to run . . . do it now. . ."

"NOW!" Harry yelled; he didn't think he could have held on for another moment anyway - he pulled his wand upward with an almighty wrench, and the golden thread broke; the cage of light vanished, the phoenix song died - but the shadowy figures of Voldemort's victims did not disappear - they were closing in upon Voldemort, shielding Harry from his gaze - And Harry ran as he had never run in his life, knocking two stunned Death Eaters aside as he passed; he zigzagged behind headstones, feeling their curses following him, hearing them hit the headstones - he was dodging curses and graves, pelting toward Cedric's body, no longer aware of the pain in his leg, his whole being concentrated on what he had to do -

"Stun him!" he heard Voldemort scream.

Ten feet from Cedric, Harry dived behind a marble angel to avoid the jets of red light and saw the tip of its wing shatter as the spells hit it.

Gripping his wand more tightly, he dashed out from behind the angel -

"Impedimenta!" he bellowed, pointing his wand wildly over his shoulder at the Death Eaters running at him.

From a muffled yell, he thought he had stopped at least one of them, but there was no time to stop and look; he jumped over the cup and dived as he heard more wand blasts behind him; more jets of light flew over his head as he fell, stretching out his hand to grab Cedric's arm...

"Stand aside! I will kill him! He is mine!" shrieked Voldemort.

Harry's hand had closed on Cedric's wrist; one tombstone stood between him and Voldemort, but Cedric was too heavy to carry, and the cup was out of reach -

Voldemort's red eyes flamed in the darkness. Harry saw his mouth curl into a smile, saw him raise his wand.

"Accio!" Harry yelled, pointing his wand at the Triwizard Cup. It flew into the air and soared toward him. Harry caught it by the handle - He heard Voldemort's scream of fury at the same moment that he felt the jerk behind his navel that meant the Portkey had worked - it was speeding him away in a whirl of wind and color, and Cedric along with him. . . . They were going back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE - VERITASERUM

Harry felt himself slam flat into the ground; his face was pressed into grass; the smell of it filled his nostrils. He had closed his eyes while

the Portkey transported him, and he kept them closed now. He did not move. All the breath seemed to have been knocked out of him; his head was swimming so badly he felt as though the ground beneath him were swaying like the deck of a ship. To hold himself steady, he tightened his hold on the two things he was still clutching: the smooth, cold handle of the Triwizard Cup and Cedric's body. He felt as though he would slide away into the blackness gathering at the edges of his brain if he let go of either of them. Shock and exhaustion kept him on the ground, breathing in the smell of the grass, waiting . . . waiting for someone to do something . . . something to happen . . . and all the while, his scar burned dully on his forehead. . . .

A torrent of sound deafened and confused him; there were voices everywhere, footsteps, screams. . . . He remained where he was, his face screwed up against the noise, as though it were a nightmare that would pass. . . .

Then a pair of hands seized him roughly and turned him over.

"Harry! Harry!"

He opened his eyes.

He was looking up at the starry sky, and Albus Dumbledore was crouched over him. The dark shadows of a crowd of people pressed in around them, pushing nearer; Harry felt the ground beneath his head reverberating with their footsteps.

He had come back to the edge of the maze. He could see the stands rising above him, the shapes of people moving in them, the stars above.

Harry let go of the cup, but he clutched Cedric to him even more tightly. He raised his free hand and seized Dumbledore's wrist, while Dumbledore's face swam in and out of focus.

"He's back," Harry whispered. "He's back. Voldemort."

"What's going on? What's happened?"

The face of Cornelius Fudge appeared upside down over Harry; it looked white, appalled.

"My God - Diggory!" it whispered. "Dumbledore - he's dead!"

The words were repeated, the shadowy figures pressing in on them gasped it to those around them . . . and then others shouted it - screeched it - into the night - "He's dead!" "He's dead!" "Cedric Diggory! Dead!"

"Harry, let go of him," he heard Fudge's voice say, and he felt fingers trying to pry him from Cedric's limp body, but Harry wouldn't let him go. Then Dumbledore's face, which was still blurred and misted, came closer.

"Harry, you can't help him now. It's over. Let go."

"He wanted me to bring him back," Harry muttered - it seemed important to explain this. "He wanted me to bring him back to his parents. . . ."

"That's right. Harry . . . just let go now. . . ."

Dumbledore bent down, and with extraordinary strength for a man so old and thin, raised Harry from the ground and set him on his feet. Harry swayed. His head was pounding. His injured leg would no longer support his weight. The crowd around them jostled, fighting to get closer, pressing darkly in on him - "What's happened?" "What's wrong with him?"

"Diggory's dead!"

"He'll need to go to the hospital wing!" Fudge was saying loudly. "He's ill, he's injured - Dumbledore, Diggory's parents, they're here, they're in the stands. . . ."

"I'll take Harry, Dumbledore, I'll take him -"

"No, I would prefer -"

"Dumbledore, Amos Diggory's running . . . he's coming over. . . . Don't you think you should tell him - before he sees - ?"

"Harry, stay here -"

Girls were screaming, sobbing hysterically.... The scene flickered oddly before Harry's eyes. . . .

"It's all right, son, I've got you . . . come on . . . hospital wing . . ."

"Dumbledore said stay," said Harry thickly, the pounding in his scar making him feel as though he was about to throw up; his vision was blurring worse than ever.

"You need to lie down. . . . Come on now...."

Someone larger and stronger than he was was half pulling, half carrying him through the frightened crowd. Harry heard people gasping, screaming, and shouting as the man supporting him pushed a path through them, taking him back to the castle. Across the lawn, past the lake and the Durmstrang ship, Harry heard nothing but the heavy breathing of the man helping him walk.

"What happened. Harry?" the man asked at last as he lifted Harry up the stone steps. Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. It was Mad-Eye Moody.

"Cup was a Portkey," said Harry as they crossed the entrance hall. "Took me and Cedric to a graveyard . . . and Voldemort was there . . . Lord Voldemort..."

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Up the marble stairs . . .

"The Dark Lord was there? What happened then?"

"Killed Cedric . . . they killed Cedric. . . ."

"And then?"

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Along the corridor . . .

"Made a potion . . . got his body back. . . ."

"The Dark Lord got his body back? He's returned?"

"And the Death Eaters came . . . and then we dueled. . . ."

"You dueled with the Dark Lord?"

"Got away . . . my wand . . . did something funny. . . . I saw my mum and dad . . . they came out of his wand. . . ."

"In here. Harry . . . in here, and sit down. . . . You'll be all right now . . . drink this. . . ."

Harry heard a key scrape in a lock and felt a cup being pushed into his hands.

"Drink it... you'll feel better . . . come on, now. Harry, I need to know exactly what happened. . . ."

Moody helped tip the stuff down Harrys throat; he coughed, a peppery taste burning his throat. Moody's office came into sharper focus, and so did Moody himself. . . . He looked as white as Fudge had looked, and both eyes were fixed unblinkingly upon Harry's face.

"Voldemort's back, Harry? You're sure he's back? How did he do it?"

"He took stuff from his father's grave, and from Wormtail, and me," said Harry. His head felt clearer; his scar wasn't hurting so badly; he could now see Moodys face distinctly, even though the office was dark. He could still hear screaming and shouting from the distant Quidditch field.

"What did the Dark Lord take from you?" said Moody.

"Blood," said Harry, raising his arm. His sleeve was ripped where Wormtail's dagger had torn it.

Moody let out his breath in a long, low hiss.

"And the Death Eaters? They returned?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Loads of them . . ."

"How did he treat them?" Moody asked quietly. "Did he forgive them?" But Harry had suddenly remembered. He should have told Dumbledore, he should have said it straightaway -

"There's a Death Eater at Hogwarts! There's a Death Eater here - they put my name in the Goblet of Fire, they made sure I got through to the end -"

Harry tried to get up, but Moody pushed him back down.

"I know who the Death Eater is," he said quietly.

"Karkaroff?" said Harry wildly. "Where is he? Have you got him? Is he locked up?"

"Karkaroff?" said Moody with an odd laugh. "Karkaroff fled tonight, when he felt the Dark Mark burn upon his arm. He betrayed too many faithful

supporters of the Dark Lord to wish to meet them . . . but I doubt he will get far. The Dark Lord has ways of tracking his enemies."

"Karkaroff's gone? He ran away? But then - he didn't put my name in the goblet?"

"No," said Moody slowly. "No, he didn't. It was I who did that." Harry heard, but didn't believe.

"No, you didn't," he said. "You didn't do that. . . you can't have done..."

"I assure you I did," said Moody, and his magical eye swung around and fixed upon the door, and Harry knew he was making sure that there was no one outside it. At the same time, Moody drew out his wand and pointed it at Harry.

"He forgave them, then?" he said. "The Death Eaters who went free? The ones who escaped Azkaban?"

"What?" said Harry.

He was looking at the wand Moody was pointing at him. This was a bad joke, it had to be.

"I asked you," said Moody quietly, "whether he forgave the scum who never even went to look for him. Those treacherous cowards who wouldn't even brave Azkaban for him. The faithless, worthless bits of filth who were brave enough to cavort in masks at the Quidditch World Cup, but fled at the sight of the Dark Mark when I fired it into the sky."

"You fired . . . What are you talking about. . . ?"

"I told you. Harry . . . I told you. If there's one thing I hate more than any other, it's a Death Eater who walked free. They turned their backs on my master when he needed them most. I expected him to punish them. I expected him to torture them. Tell me he hurt them, Harry. . . ." Moody's face was suddenly lit with an insane smile. "Tell me he told them that I, I alone remained faithful... prepared to risk everything to deliver to him the one thing he wanted above all... you"

"You didn't... it - it can't be you. . . "

"Who put your name in the Goblet of Fire, under the name of a different school? I did. Who frightened off every person I thought might try to hurt you or prevent you from winning the tournament? I did. Who nudged Hagrid into showing you the dragons? I did. Who helped you see the only way you could beat the dragon? I did"

Moody's magical eye had now left the door. It was fixed upon Harry. His lopsided mouth leered more widely than ever.

"It hasn't been easy, Harry, guiding you through these tasks without arousing suspicion. I have had to use every ounce of cunning I possess, so that my hand would not be detectable in your success. Dumbledore would have been very suspicious if you had managed everything too easily. As long as you got into that maze, preferably with a decent head start - then, I knew, I would have a chance of getting rid of the other champions and leaving your way clear. But I also had to contend with your stupidity. The second task . . . that was when I was most afraid we would fail. I was keeping watch on you, Potter. I knew you hadn't worked out the egg's clue, so I had to give you another hint -"

"You didn't," Harry said hoarsely. "Cedric gave me the clue -"

"Who told Cedric to open it underwater? I did. I trusted that he would pass the information on to you. Decent people are so easy to manipulate, Potter. I was sure Cedric would want to repay you for telling him about the dragons, and so he did. But even then,

Potter, even then you seemed likely to fail. I was watching all the time . . . all those hours in the library. Didn't you realize that the book you needed was in your dormitory all along? I planted it there early on, I gave it to the Longbottom boy, don't you remember? Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean. It would have told you all you needed to know about gillyweed. I expected you to ask everyone and anyone you could for

help. Longbottom would have told you in an instant. But you did not. . . you did not. . . . You have a streak of pride and independence that might have ruined all.

"So what could I do? Feed you information from another innocent source. You told me at the Yule Ball a house-elf called Dobby had given you a Christmas present. I called the elf to the staffroom to collect some robes for cleaning. I staged a loud conversation with Professor McGonagall about the hostages who had been taken, and whether Potter would think to use gillyweed. And your little elf friend ran straight to Snape's office and then hurried to find you..."

Moody's wand was still pointing directly at Harry's heart. Over his shoulder, foggy shapes were moving in the Foe-Glass on the wall.

"You were so long in that lake, Potter, I thought you had drowned. But luckily, Dumbledore took your idiocy for nobility, and marked you high for it. I breathed again.

"You had an easier time of it than you should have in that maze tonight, of course," said Moody. "I was patrolling around it, able to see through the outer hedges, able to curse many obstacles out of your way. I Stunned Fleur Delacour as she passed. I put the Imperius Curse on Krum, so that he would finish Diggory and leave your path to the cup clear."

Harry stared at Moody. He just didn't see how this could be. . . .

Dumbledore's friend, the famous Auror. . . . the one who had caught so many Death Eaters ... It made no sense ... no sense at all. . . .

The foggy shapes in the Foe-Glass were sharpening, had become more distinct. Harry could see the outlines of three people over Moody's shoulder, moving closer and closer. But Moody wasn't watching them. His magical eye was upon Harry.

"The Dark Lord didn't manage to kill you. Potter, and he so wanted to," whispered Moody. "Imagine how he will reward me when he finds I have done it for him. I gave you to him - the thing he needed above all to regenerate - and then I killed you for him. I will be honored beyond all other Death Eaters. I will be his dearest, his closest supporter . . . closer than a son. . . ."

Moody's normal eye was bulging, the magical eye fixed upon Harry. The door was barred, and Harry knew he would never reach his own wand in time. . . .

"The Dark Lord and I," said Moody, and he looked completely insane now, towering over Harry, leering down at him, "have much in common. Both of us, for instance, had very disappointing fathers . . . very disappointing indeed. Both of us suffered the indignity, Harry, of being named after those fathers. And both of us had the pleasure . . . the very great pleasure . . . of killing our fathers to ensure the continued rise of the Dark Order!"

"You're mad," Harry said - he couldn't stop himself- "you're mad!"

"Mad, am I?" said Moody, his voice rising uncontrollably. "We'll see! We'll see who's mad, now that the Dark Lord has returned, with me at his side! He is back, Harry Potter, you did not conquer him - and now - I conquer you!"

Moody raised his wand, he opened his mouth; Harry plunged his own hand into his robes -

"Stupefy!" There was a blinding flash of red light, and with a great splintering and crashing, the door of Moody's office was blasted apart - Moody was thrown backward onto the office floor. Harry, still staring at the place where Moody's face had been, saw Albus Dumbledore, Professor Snape, and Professor McGonagall looking back at him out of the Foe-Glass. He looked around and saw the three of them standing in the doorway, Dumbledore in front, his wand outstretched.

At that moment, Harry fully understood for the first time why people said Dumbledore was the only wizard Voldemort had ever feared. The look upon Dumbledore's face as he stared down at the unconscious form of Mad-Eye

Moody was more terrible than Harry could have ever imagined. There was no benign smile upon Dumbledore's face, no twinkle in the eyes behind the spectacles. There was cold fury in every line of the ancient face; a sense of power radiated from Dumbledore as though he were giving off burning heat.

He stepped into the office, placed a foot underneath Moody's unconscious body, and kicked him over onto his back, so that his face was visible. Snape followed him, looking into the Foe-Glass, where his own face was still visible, glaring into the room. Professor McGonagall went straight to Harry.

"Come along, Potter," she whispered. The thin line of her mouth was twitching as though she was about to cry. "Come along . . . hospital wing . . ."

"No," said Dumbledore sharply.

"Dumbledore, he ought to - look at him - he's been through enough tonight -"

"He will stay, Minerva, because he needs to understand," said Dumbledore curtly. "Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery. He needs to know who has put him through the ordeal he has suffered tonight, and why,"

"Moody," Harry said. He was still in a state of complete disbelief.

"How can it have been Moody?"

"This is not Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore quietly. "You have never known Alastor Moody. The real Moody would not have removed you from my sight after what happened tonight. The moment he took you, I knew - and I followed."

Dumbledore bent down over Moody's limp form and put a hand inside his robes. He pulled out Moody's hip flask and a set of keys on a ring.

Then he turned to Professors McGonagall and Snape.

"Severus, please fetch me the strongest Truth Potion you possess, and then go down to the kitchens and bring up the house-elf called Winky. Minerva, kindly go down to Hagrid's house, where you will find a large black dog sitting in the pumpkin patch. Take the dog up to my office, tell him I will be with him shortly, then come back here."

If either Snape or McGonagall found these instructions peculiar, they hid their confusion. Both turned at once and left the office. Dumbledore walked over to the trunk with seven locks, fitted the first key in the lock, and opened it. It contained a mass of spell-books. Dumbledore closed the trunk, placed a second key in the second lock, and opened the trunk again. The spellbooks had vanished; this time it contained an assortment of broken Sneako-scopes, some parchment and quills, and what looked like a silvery Invisibility Cloak. Harry watched, astounded, as Dumbledore placed the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth keys in their respective locks, reopening the trunk each time, and revealing different contents each time. Then he placed the seventh key in the lock, threw open the lid, and Harry let out a cry of amazement.

He was looking down into a kind of pit, an underground room, and lying on the floor some ten feet below, apparently fast asleep, thin and starved in appearance, was the real Mad-Eye Moody. His wooden leg was gone, the socket that should have held the magical eye looked empty beneath its lid, and chunks of his grizzled hair were missing. Harry stared, thunderstruck, between the sleeping Moody in the trunk and the unconscious Moody lying on the floor of the office.

Dumbledore climbed into the trunk, lowered himself, and fell lightly onto the floor beside the sleeping Moody. He bent over him.

"Stunned - controlled by the Imperius Curse - very weak," he said. "Of course, they would have needed to keep him alive. Harry, throw down the imposter's cloak - he's freezing. Madam Pomfrey will need to see him, but he seems in no immediate danger."

Harry did as he was told; Dumbledore covered Moody in the cloak, tucked it around him, and clambered out of the trunk again. Then he picked up the hip flask that stood upon the desk, unscrewed it, and turned it over. A thick glutinous liquid splattered onto the office floor.

"Polyjuice Potion, Harry," said Dumbledore. "You see the simplicity of it, and the brilliance. For Moody never does drink except from his hip flask, he's well known for it. The imposter needed, of course, to keep the real Moody close by, so that he could continue making the potion. You see his hair ..." Dumbledore looked down on the Moody in the trunk. "The imposter has been cutting it off all year, see where it is uneven? But I think, in the excitement of tonight, our fake Moody might have forgotten to take it as frequendy as he should have done ... on the hour . . . every hour. . . . We shall see."

Dumbledore pulled out the chair at the desk and sat down upon it, his eyes fixed upon the unconscious Moody on the floor. Harry stared at him too. Minutes passed in silence....

Then, before Harry's very eyes, the face of the man on the floor began to change. The scars were disappearing, the skin was becoming smooth; the mangled nose became whole and started to shrink. The long mane of grizzled gray hair was withdrawing into the scalp and turning the color of straw. Suddenly, with a loud clunk, the wooden leg fell away as a normal leg regrew in its place; next moment, the magical eyeball had popped out of the man's face as a real eye replaced it; it rolled away across the floor and continued to swivel in every direction.

Harry saw a man lying before him, pale-skinned, slightly freckled, with a mop of fair hair. He knew who he was. He had seen him in Dumbledore's Pensieve, had watched him being led away from court by the dementors, trying to convince Mr. Crouch that he was innocent. . . but he was lined around the eyes now and looked much older. . . .

There were hurried footsteps outside in the corridor. Snape had returned with Winky at his heels. Professor McGonagall was right behind them.

"Crouch!" Snape said, stopping dead in the doorway. "Barty Crouch!"

"Good heavens," said Professor McGonagall, stopping dead and staring down at the man on the floor.

Filthy, disheveled, Winky peered around Snape's legs. Her mouth opened wide and she let out a piercing shriek.

"Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you doing here?"

She flung herself forward onto the young man's chest.

"You is killed him! You is killed him! You is killed Master's son!"

"He is simply Stunned, Winky," said Dumbledore. "Step aside, please. Severus, you have the potion?"

Snape handed Dumbledore a small glass bottle of completely clear liquid: the Veritaserum with which he had threatened Harry in class. Dumbledore got up, bent over the man on the floor, and pulled him into a sitting position against the wall beneath the Foe-Glass, in which the reflections of Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall were still glaring down upon them all. Winky remained on her knees, trembling, her hands over her face. Dumbledore forced the mans mouth open and poured three drops inside it. Then he pointed his wand at the mans chest and said, "Ennervate."

Crouch's son opened his eyes. His face was slack, his gaze unfocused.

Dumbledore knelt before him, so that their faces were level.

"Can you hear me?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

The man's eyelids flickered.

"Yes," he muttered.

"I would like you to tell us," said Dumbledore softly, "how you came to be here. How did you escape from Azkaban?"

Crouch took a deep, shuddering breath, then began to speak in a flat, expressionless voice.

"My mother saved me. She knew she was dying. She persuaded my father to rescue me as a last favor to her. He loved her as he had never loved me.

He agreed. They came to visit me. They gave me a draft of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my mother's hairs. She took a draft of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my hairs. We took on each other's appearance."

Winky was shaking her head, trembling.

"Say no more. Master Barty, say no more, you is getting your father into trouble!"

But Crouch took another deep breath and continued in the same flat voice. "The dementors are blind. They sensed one healthy, one dying person entering Azkaban. They sensed one healthy, one dying person leaving it. My father smuggled me out, disguised as my mother, in case any prisoners were watching through their doors.

"My mother died a short while afterward in Azkaban. She was careful to drink Polyjuice Potion until the end. She was buried under my name and bearing my appearance. Everyone believed her to be me."

The man's eyelids flickered.

"And what did your father do with you, when he had got you home?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Staged my mother's death. A quiet, private funeral. That grave is empty. The house-elf nursed me back to health. Then I had to be concealed. I had to be controlled. My father had to use a number of spells to subdue me. When I had recovered my strength, I thought only of finding my master . . . of returning to his service."

"How did your father subdue you?" said Dumbledore.

"The Imperius Curse," Moody said. "I was under my fathers control. I was forced to wear an Invisibility Cloak day and night. I was always with the house-elf. She was my keeper and caretaker. She pitied me. She persuaded my father to give me occasional treats. Rewards for my good behavior."

"Master Barty, Master Barty," sobbed Winky through her hands. "You isn't ought to tell them, we is getting in trouble."

"Did anybody ever discover that you were still alive?" said Dumbledore softly. "Did anyone know except your father and the house-elf?"

"Yes," said Crouch, his eyelids flickering again. "A witch in my father's office. Bertha Jorkins. She came to the house with papers for my father s signature. He was not at home. Winky showed her inside and returned to the kitchen, to me. But Bertha Jorkins heard Winky talking to me. She came to investigate. She heard enough to guess who was hiding under the Invisibility Cloak. My father arrived home. She confronted him. He put a very powerful Memory Charm on her to make her forget what she'd found out. Too powerful. He said it damaged her memory permanently."

"Why is she coming to nose into my masters private business?" sobbed Winky. "Why isn't she leaving us be?"

"Tell me about the Quidditch World Cup," said Dumbledore.

"Winky talked my father into it," said Crouch, still in the same monotonous voice. "She spent months persuading him. I had not left the house for years. I had loved Quidditch. Let him go, she said. He will be in his Invisibility Cloak. He can watch. Let him smell fresh air for once. She said my mother would have wanted it. She told my father that my mother had died to give me freedom. She had not saved me for a life of imprisonment. He agreed in the end.

"It was carefully planned. My father led me and Winky up to the Top Box early in the day. Winky was to say that she was saving a seat for my father. I was to sit there, invisible. When everyone had left the box, we would emerge. Winky would appear to be alone. Nobody would ever know.

"But Winky didn't know that I was growing stronger. I was starting to fight my father's Imperius Curse. There were times when I was almost myself again. There were brief periods when I seemed outside his

control. It happened, there, in the Top Box. It was like waking from a deep sleep. I found myself out in public, in the middle of the match, and I saw, in front of me, a wand sticking out of a boy's pocket. I had not been allowed a wand since before Azkaban. I stole it. Winky didn't know. Winky is frightened of heights. She had her face hidden."

"Master Barty, you bad boy!" whispered Winky, tears trickling between her fingers.

"So you took the wand," said Dumbledore, "and what did you do with it?" "We went back to the tent," said Crouch. "Then we heard them. We heard the Death Eaters. The ones who had never been to Azkaban. The ones who had never suffered for my master. They had turned their backs on him. They were not enslaved, as I was. They were free to seek him, but they did not. They were merely making sport of Muggles. The sound of their voices awoke me. My mind was clearer than it had been in years. I was angry. I had the wand.

I wanted to attack them for their disloyalty to my master. My father had left the tent; he had gone to free the Muggles. Winky was afraid to see me so angry. She used her own brand of magic to bind me to her. She pulled me from the tent, pulled me into the forest, away from the Death Eaters. I tried to hold her back. I wanted to return to the campsite. I wanted to show those Death Eaters what loyalty to the Dark Lord meant, and to punish them for their lack of it. I used the stolen wand to cast the Dark Mark into the sky.

"Ministry wizards arrived. They shot Stunning Spells everywhere. One of the spells came through the trees where Winky and I stood. The bond connecting us was broken. We were both Stunned.

"When Winky was discovered, my father knew I must be nearby. He searched the bushes where she had been found and felt me lying there. He waited until the other Ministry members had left the forest. He put me back under the Imperius Curse and took me home. He dismissed Winky. She had failed him. She had let me acquire a wand. She had almost let me escape."

Winky let out a wail of despair.

"Now it was just Father and I, alone in the house. And then . . . and then . . ." Crouch's head rolled on his neck, and an insane grin spread across his face. "My master came for me.

"He arrived at our house late one night in the arms of his servant Wormtail. My master had found out that I was still alive. He had captured Bertha Jorkins in Albania. He had tortured her. She told him a great deal. She told him about the Triwizard Tournament. She told him the old Auror, Moody, was going to teach at Hogwarts. He tortured her until he broke through the Memory Charm my father had placed upon her. She told him I had escaped from Azkaban. She told him my father kept me imprisoned to prevent me from seeking my master. And so my master knew that I was still his faithful servant - perhaps the most faithful of all. My master conceived a plan, based upon the information Bertha had given him. He needed me. He arrived at our house near midnight. My father answered the door."

The smile spread wider over Crouch's face, as though recalling the sweetest memory of his life. Winky's petrified brown eyes were visible through her fingers. She seemed too appalled to speak.

"It was very quick. My father was placed under the Imperius Curse by my master. Now my father was the one imprisoned, controlled. My master forced him to go about his business as usual, to act as though nothing was wrong. And I was released. I awoke. I was myself again, alive as I hadn't been in years.

"And what did Lord Voldemort ask you to do?" said Dumbledore.

"He asked me whether I was ready to risk everything for him. I was ready. It was my dream, my greatest ambition, to serve him, to prove myself to him. He told me he needed to place a faithful servant at

Hogwarts. A servant who would guide Harry Potter through the Triwizard Tournament without appearing to do so. A servant who would watch over Harry Potter. Ensure he reached the Triwizard Cup. Turn the cup into a Portkey, which would take the first person to touch it to my master. But first -"

"You needed Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore. His blue eyes were blazing, though his voice remained calm.

"Wormtail and I did it. We had prepared the Polyjuice Potion beforehand. We journeyed to his house. Moody put up a struggle. There was a commotion. We managed to subdue him just in time. Forced him into a compartment of his own magical trunk. Took some of his hair and added it to the potion. I drank it; I became Moody's double. I took his leg and his eye. I was ready to face Arthur Weasley when he arrived to sort out the Muggles who had heard a disturbance. I made the dustbins move around the yard. I told Arthur Weasley I had heard intruders in my yard, who had set off the dustbins. Then I packed up Moody's clothes and Dark detectors, put them in the trunk with Moody, and set off for Hogwarts. I kept him alive, under the Imperius Curse. I wanted to be able to question him. To find out about his past, learn his habits, so that I could fool even Dumbledore. I also needed his hair to make the Polyjuice Potion. The other ingredients were easy. I stole boom-slang skin from the dungeons. When the Potions master found me in his office, I said I was under orders to search it."

"And what became of Wormtail after you attacked Moody?" said Dumbledore.

"Wormtail returned to care for my master, in my father's house, and to keep watch over my father."

"But your father escaped," said Dumbledore.

"Yes. After a while he began to fight the Imperius Curse just as I had done. There were periods when he knew what was happening. My master decided it was no longer safe for my father to leave the house. He forced him to send letters to the Ministry instead. He made him write and say he was ill. But Wormtail neglected his duty. He was not watchful enough. My father escaped. My master guessed that he was heading for Hogwarts. My father was going to tell Dumbledore everything, to confess. He was going to admit that he had smuggled me from Azkaban. "My master sent me word of my father's escape. He told me to stop him at all costs. So I waited and watched. I used the map I had taken from Harry Potter. The map that had almost ruined everything."

"Map?" said Dumbledore quickly. "What map is this?"

"Potter's map of Hogwarts. Potter saw me on it. Potter saw me stealing more ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion from Snape's office one night. He thought I was my father. We have the same first name. I took the map from Potter that night. I told him my father hated Dark wizards. Potter believed my father was after Snape.

"For a week I waited for my father to arrive at Hogwarts. At last, one evening, the map showed my father entering the grounds. I pulled on my Invisibility Cloak and went down to meet him. He was walking around the edge of the forest. Then Potter came, and Krum. I waited. I could not hurt Potter; my master needed him. Potter ran to get Dumbledore. I Stunned Krum. I killed my father."

"Noooo!" wailed Winky. "Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you saying?"

"You killed your father," Dumbledore said, in the same soft voice. "What did you do with the body?"

"Carried it into the forest. Covered it with the Invisibility Cloak. I had the map with me. I watched Potter run into the castle. He met Snape. Dumbledore joined them. I watched Potter bringing Dumbledore out of the castle. I walked back out of the forest, doubled around behind them, went to meet them. I told Dumbledore Snape had told me where to come.

"Dumbledore told me to go and look for my father. I went back to my father's body. Watched the map. When everyone was gone, I Transfigured my father's body. He became a bone ... I buried it, while wearing the Invisibility Cloak, in the freshly dug earth in front of Hagrid's cabin." There was complete silence now, except for Winky's continued sobs. Then Dumbledore said, "And tonight. . ."

"I offered to carry the Triwizard Cup into the maze before dinner," whispered Barty Crouch. "Turned it into a Portkey. My master's plan worked. He is returned to power and I will be honored by him beyond the dreams of wizards."

The insane smile lit his features once more, and his head drooped onto his shoulder as Winky wailed and sobbed at his side.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX - THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

Dumbledore stood up. He stared down at Barty Crouch for a moment with disgust on his face. Then he raised his wand once more and ropes flew out of it, ropes that twisted themselves around Barty Crouch, binding him tightly. He turned to Professor McGonagall.

"Minerva, could I ask you to stand guard here while I take Harry upstairs?"

"Of course," said Professor McGonagall. She looked slightly nauseous, as though she had just watched someone being sick. However, when she drew out her wand and pointed it at Barty Crouch, her hand was quite steady.

"Severus" - Dumbledore turned to Snape - "please tell Madam Pomfrey to come down here; we need to get Alastor Moody into the hospital wing. Then go down into the grounds, find Cornelius Fudge, and bring him up to this office. He will undoubtedly want to question Crouch himself. Tell him I will be in the hospital wing in half an hour's time if he needs me."

Snape nodded silently and swept out of the room.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said gently.

Harry got up and swayed again; the pain in his leg, which he had not noticed all the time he had been listening to Crouch, now returned in full measure. He also realized that he was shaking. Dumbledore gripped his arm and helped him out into the dark corridor.

"I want you to come up to my office first. Harry," he said quiedy as they headed up the passageway. "Sirius is waiting for us there."

Harry nodded. A kind of numbness and a sense of complete unreality were upon him, but he did not care; he was even glad of it. He didn't want to have to think about anything that had happened since he had first touched the Triwizard Cup. He didn't want to have to examine the memories, fresh and sharp as photographs, which kept flashing across his mind. Mad-Eye Moody, inside the trunk. Wormtail, slumped on the ground, cradling his stump of an arm. Voldemort, rising from the steaming cauldron. Cedric. . . dead . . . Cedric, asking to be returned to his parents. . . .

"Professor," Harry mumbled, "where are Mr. and Mrs. Diggory?"

"They are with Professor Sprout," said Dumbledore. His voice, which had been so calm throughout the interrogation of Barty Crouch, shook very slightly for the first time. "She was Head of Cedric's house, and knew him best."

They had reached the stone gargoyle. Dumbledore gave the password, it sprang aside, and he and Harry went up the moving spiral staircase to the oak door. Dumbledore pushed it open. Sirius was standing there. His face was white and gaunt as it had been when he had escaped Azkaban. In one swift moment, he had crossed the room.

"Harry, are you all right? I knew it - I knew something like this - what happened?"

His hands shook as he helped Harry into a chair in front of the desk.

"What happened?" he asked more urgently.

Dumbledore began to tell Sirius everything Barty Crouch had said. Harry was only half listening. So tired every bone in his body was aching, he wanted nothing more than to sit here, undisturbed, for hours and hours, until he fell asleep and didn't have to think or feel anymore.

There was a soft rush of wings. Fawkes the phoenix had left his perch, flown across the office, and landed on Harry's knee.

"'Lo, Fawkes," said Harry quietly. He stroked the phoenix's beautiful scarlet-and-gold plumage. Fawkes blinked peacefully up at him. There was something comforting about his warm weight.

Dumbledore stopped talking. He sat down opposite Harry, behind his desk. He was looking at Harry, who avoided his eyes. Dumbledore was going to question him. He was going to make Harry relive everything.

"I need to know what happened after you touched the Portkey in the maze. Harry," said Dumbledore.

"We can leave that till morning, can't we, Dumbledore?" said Sirius harshly. He had put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Let him have a sleep. Let him rest."

Harry felt a rush of gratitude toward Sirius, but Dumbledore took no notice of Sirius's words. He leaned forward toward Harry.

Very unwillingly, Harry raised his head and looked into those blue eyes. "If I thought I could help you," Dumbledore said gently, "by putting you into an enchanted sleep and allowing you to postpone the moment when you would have to think about what has happened tonight, I would do it. But I know better. Numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you finally feel it. You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you. I ask you to demonstrate your courage one more time. I ask you to tell us what happened."

The phoenix let out one soft, quavering note. It shivered in the air, and Harry felt as though a drop of hot liquid had slipped down his throat into his stomach, warming him, and strengthening him.

He took a deep breath and began to tell them. As he spoke, visions of everything that had passed that night seemed to rise before his eyes; he saw the sparkling surface of the potion that had revived Voldemort; he saw the Death Eaters Apparating between the graves around them; he saw Cedric's body, lying on the ground beside the cup.

Once or twice, Sirius made a noise as though about to say something, his hand still tight on Harry's shoulder, but Dumbledore raised his hand to stop him, and Harry was glad of this, because it was easier to keep going now he had started. It was even a relief; he felt almost as though something poisonous were being extracted from him. It was costing him every bit of determination he had to keep talking, yet he sensed that once he had finished, he would feel better.

When Harry told of Wormtail piercing his arm with the dagger, however, Sirius let out a vehement exclamation and Dumbledore stood up so quickly that Harry started. Dumbledore walked around the desk and told Harry to stretch out his arm. Harry showed them both the place where his robes were torn and the cut beneath them.

"He said my blood would make him stronger than if he'd used someone else's," Harry told Dumbledore. "He said the protection my - my mother left in me - he'd have it too. And he was right - he could touch me without hurting himself, he touched my face."

For a fleeting instant, Harry thought he saw a gleam of something like triumph in Dumbledore's eyes. But next second. Harry was sure he had imagined it, for when Dumbledore had returned to his seat behind the desk, he looked as old and weary as Harry had ever seen him.

"Very well," he said, sitting down again. "Voldemort has overcome that particular barrier. Harry, continue, please."

Harry went on; he explained how Voldemort had emerged from the cauldron, and told them all he could remember of Voldemort's speech to the Death

Eaters. Then he told how Voldemort had untied him, returned his wand to him, and prepared to duel.

But when he reached the part where the golden beam of light had connected his and Voldemort's wands, he found his throat obstructed. He tried to keep talking, but the memories of what had come out of Voldemort's wand were flooding into his mind. He could see Cedric emerging, see the old man, Bertha Jorkins ... his father . . . his mother . . .

He was glad when Sirius broke the silence.

"The wands connected?" he said, looking from Harry to Dumbledore.

"Why?"

Harry looked up at Dumbledore again, on whose face there was an arrested look.

"Priori Incantatem," he muttered.

His eyes gazed into Harry's and it was almost as though an invisible beam of understanding shot between them.

"The Reverse Spell effect?" said Sirius sharply.

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "Harry's wand and Voldemort's wand share cores. Each of them contains a feather from the tail of the same phoenix. This phoenix, in fact," he added, and he pointed at the scarlet-and-gold bird, perching peacefully on Harry's knee.

"My wand's feather came from Fawkes?" Harry said, amazed.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Mr. Ollivander wrote to tell me you had bought the second wand, the moment you left his shop four years ago."

"So what happens when a wand meets its brother?" said Sirius.

"They will not work properly against each other," said Dumbledore. "If, however, the owners of the wands force the wands to do battle . . . a very rare effect will take place. One of the wands will force the other to regurgitate spells it has performed - in reverse. The most recent first. . . and then those which preceded it. . . ."

He looked interrogatively at Harry, and Harry nodded.

"Which means," said Dumbledore slowly, his eyes upon Harry's face, "that some form of Cedric must have reappeared."

Harry nodded again.

"Diggory came back to life?" said Sirius sharply.

"No spell can reawaken the dead," said Dumbledore heavily. "All that would have happened is a kind of reverse echo. A shadow of the living Cedric would have emerged from the wand . . . am I correct, Harry?"

"He spoke to me," Harry said. He was suddenly shaking again. "The . . . the ghost Cedric, or whatever he was, spoke."

"An echo," said Dumbledore, "which retained Cedric's appearance and character. I am guessing other such forms appeared . . . less recent victims of Voldemort's wand...."

"An old man," Harry said, his throat still constricted. "Bertha Jorkins. And . . ."

"Your parents?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Yes," said Harry.

Sirius's grip on Harry's shoulder was now so tight it was painful.

"The last murders the wand performed," said Dumbledore, nodding. "In reverse order. More would have appeared, of course, had you maintained the connection. Very well, Harry, these echoes, these shadows . . . what did they do?"

Harry described how the figures that had emerged from the wand had prowled the edges of the golden web, how Voldemort had seemed to fear them, how the shadow of Harry's mother had told him what to do, how Cedric's had made its final request.

At this point. Harry found he could not continue. He looked around at Sirius and saw that he had his face in his hands.

Harry suddenly became aware that Fawkes had left his knee. The phoenix had fluttered to the floor. It was resting its beautiful head against Harry's injured leg, and thick, pearly tears were falling from its eyes

onto the wound left by the spider. The pain vanished. The skin mended. His leg was repaired.

"I will say it again," said Dumbledore as the phoenix rose into the air and resettled itself upon the perch beside the door. "You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you tonight. Harry. You have shown bravery equal to those who died fighting Voldemort at the height of his powers. You have shouldered a grown wizard's burden and found yourself equal to it - and you have now given us all we have a right to expect. You will come with me to the hospital wing. I do not want you returning to the dormitory tonight. A Sleeping Potion, and some peace . . . Sirius, would you like to stay with him?"

Sirius nodded and stood up. He transformed back into the great black dog and walked with Harry and Dumbledore out of the office, accompanying them down a flight of stairs to the hospital wing.

When Dumbledore pushed open the door. Harry saw Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermione grouped around a harassed-looking Madam Pomfrey. They appeared to be demanding to know where Harry was and what had happened to him. All of them whipped around as Harry, Dumbledore, and the black dog entered, and Mrs. Weasley let out a kind of muffled scream.

"Harry! Oh Harry!"

She started to hurry toward him, but Dumbledore moved between them.

"Molly," he said, holding up a hand, "please listen to me for a moment. Harry has been through a terrible ordeal tonight. He has just had to relive it for me. What he needs now is sleep, and peace, and quiet. If he would like you all to stay with him," he added, looking around at Ron, Hermione, and Bill too, "you may do so. But I do not want you questioning him until he is ready to answer, and certainly not this evening."

Mrs. Weasley nodded. She was very white. She rounded on Ron, Hermione, and Bill as though they were being noisy, and hissed, "Did you hear? He needs quiet!"

"Headmaster," said Madam Pomfrey, staring at the great black dog that was Sirius, "may I ask what - ?"

"This dog will be remaining with Harry for a while," said Dumbledore simply. "I assure you, he is extremely well trained. Harry - I will wait while you get into bed."

Harry felt an inexpressible sense of gratitude to Dumbledore for asking the others not to question him. It wasn't as though he didn't want them there; but the thought of explaining it all over again, the idea of reliving it one more time, was more than he could stand.

"I will be back to see you as soon as I have met with Fudge, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I would like you to remain here tomorrow until I have spoken to the school." He left.

As Madam Pomfrey led Harry to a nearby bed, he caught sight of the real Moody lying motionless in a bed at the far end of the room. His wooden leg and magical eye were lying on the bedside table.

"Is he okay?" Harry asked.

"He'll be fine," said Madam Pomfrey, giving Harry some pajamas and pulling screens around him. He took off his robes, pulled on the pajamas, and got into bed. Ron, Hermione, Bill, Mrs. Weasley, and the black dog came around the screen and settled themselves in chairs on either side of him. Ron and Hermione were looking at him almost cautiously, as though scared of him.

"I'm all right," he told them. "Just tired."

Mrs. Weasleys eyes filled with tears as she smoothed his bed-covers unnecessarily.

Madam Pomfrey, who had hustled off to her office, returned holding a small bottle of some purple potion and a goblet.

"You'll need to drink all of this. Harry," she said. "It's a potion for dreamless sleep."

Harry took the goblet and drank a few mouthfuls. He felt himself becoming drowsy at once. Everything around him became hazy; the lamps around the hospital wing seemed to be winking at him in a friendly way through the screen around his bed; his body felt as though it was sinking deeper into the warmth of the feather matress. Before he could finish the potion, before he could say another word, his exhaustion had carried him off to sleep.

Harry woke up, so warm, so very sleepy, that he didn't open his eyes, wanting to drop off again. The room was still dimly lit; he was sure it was still nighttime and had a feeling that he couldn't have been asleep very long.

Then he heard whispering around him.

"They'll wake him if they don't shut up!"

"What are they shouting about? Nothing else can have happened, can it?"

Harry opened his eyes blearily. Someone had removed his glasses. He could see the fuzzy outlines of Mrs. Weasley and Bill close by. Mrs. Weasley was on her feet.

"That's Fudge's voice," she whispered. "And that's Minerva McGonagall's, isn't it? But what are they arguing about?"

Now Harry could hear them too: people shouting and running toward the hospital wing.

"Regrettable, but all the same, Minerva -" Cornelius Fudge was saying loudly.

"You should never have brought it inside the castle!" yelled Professor McGonagall. "When Dumbledore finds out -"

Harry heard the hospital doors burst open. Unnoticed by any of the people around his bed, all of whom were staring at the door as Bill pulled back the screens, Harry sat up and put his glasses back on.

Fudge came striding up the ward. Professors McGonagall and Snape were at his heels.

"Where's Dumbledore?" Fudge demanded of Mrs. Weasley.

"He's not here," said Mrs. Weasley angrily. "This is a hospital wing. Minister, don't you think you'd do better to -"

But the door opened, and Dumbledore came sweeping up the ward.

"What has happened?" said Dumbledore sharply, looking from Fudge to Professor McGonagall. "Why are you disturbing these people? Minerva, I'm surprised at you - I asked you to stand guard over Barty Crouch -"

"There is no need to stand guard over him anymore, Dumble-dore!" she shrieked. "The Minister has seen to that!"

Harry had never seen Professor McGonagall lose control like this. There were angry blotches of color in her cheeks, and a hands were balled into fists; she was trembling with fury.-

"When we told Mr. Fudge that we had caught the Death Eater responsible for tonight's events," said Snape, in a low voice; he seemed to feel his personal safety was in question. He insisted on summoning a dementor to accompany him into the castle. He brought it up to the office where Barty Crouch -"

"I told him you would not agree, Dumbledore!" McGonagall fumed. "I told him you would never allow dementors to set foot inside the castle, but -" "My dear woman!" roared Fudge, who likewise looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him, "as Minister of Magic, it is my decision whether I wish to bring protection with me when interviewing a possibly dangerous -"

But Professor McGonagall's voice drowned Fudge's.

"The moment that - that thing entered the room," she screamed, pointing at Fudge, trembling all over, "it swooped down on Crouch and - and -" Harry felt a chill in his stomach as Professor McGonagall struggled to find words to describe what had happened. He did not need her to finish her sentence. He knew what the dementor must have done. It had

administered its fatal kiss to Barty Crouch. It had sucked his soul out through his mouth. He was worse than dead.

"By all accounts, he is no loss!" blustered Fudge. "It seems he has been responsible for several deaths'."

"But he cannot now give testimony, Cornelius," said Dumbledore. He was staring hard at Fudge, as though seeing him plainly for the first time.

"He cannot give evidence about why he killed those people."

"Why he killed them? Well, that's no mystery, is it?" blustered Fudge.

"He was a raving lunatic! From what Minerva and Severus have told me, he seems to have thought he was doing it all on You-Know-Who's instructions!"

"Lord Voldemort was giving him instructions, Cornelius," Dumbledore said.

"Those peoples deaths were mere by-products of a plan to restore Voldemort to full strength again. The plan succeeded. Voldemort has been restored to his body."

Fudge looked as though someone had just swung a heavy weight into his face. Dazed and blinking, he stared back at Dumbledore as if he couldn't quite believe what he had just heard. He began to sputter, still goggling at Dumbledore.

"You-Know-Who . . . returned? Preposterous. Come now, Dumbledore . . ."

"As Minerva and Severus have doubtless told you," said Dumbledore, "we heard Barty Crouch confess. Under the influence of Veritaserum, he told us how he was smuggled out of Azkaban, and how Voldemort - learning of his continued existence from Bertha Jorkins - went to free him from his father and used him to capture Harry. The plan worked, I tell you. Crouch has helped Voldemort to return."

"See here, Dumbledore," said Fudge, and Harry was astonished to see a slight smile dawning on his face, "you - you can't seriously believe that You-Know-Who - back? Come now, come now . . . certainly, Crouch may have believed himself to be acting upon You-Know-Who's orders - but to take the word of a lunatic like that, Dumbledore . . ."

"When Harry touched the Triwizard Cup tonight, he was transported straight to Voldemort," said Dumbledore steadily. "He witnessed Lord Voldemort's rebirth. I will explain it all to you if you will step up to my office."

Dumbledore glanced around at Harry and saw that he was awake, but shook his head and said, "I am afraid I cannot permit you to question Harry tonight."

Fudge's curious smile lingered. He too glanced at Harry, then looked back at Dumbledore, and said, "You are - er - prepared to take Harry's word on this, are you, Dumbledore?"

There was a moment's silence, which was broken by Sirius growling. His hackles were raised, and he was baring his teeth at Fudge.

"Certainly, I believe Harry," said Dumbledore. His eyes were blazing now. "I heard Crouch's confession, and I heard Harry's account of what happened after he touched the Triwizard Cup; the two stories make sense, they explain everything that has happened since Bertha Jorkins disappeared last summer."

Fudge still had that strange smile on his face. Once again, he glanced at Harry before answering.

"You are prepared to believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, on the word of a lunatic murderer, and a boy who . . . well..."

Fudge shot Harry another look, and Harry suddenly understood.

"You've been reading Rita Skeeter, Mr. Fudge," he said quietly.

Ron, Hermione, Mrs. Weasley, and Bill all jumped. None of them had realized that Harry was awake.

Fudge reddened slightly, but a defiant and obstinate look came over his face.

"And if I have?" he said, looking at Dumbledore. "If I have discovered that you've been keeping certain facts about the boy very quiet? A Parselmouth, eh? And having funny turns all over the place -" "I assume that you are referring to the pains Harry has been experiencing in his scar?" said Dumbledore coolly.

"You admit that he has been having these pains, then?" said Fudge quickly. "Headaches? Nightmares? Possibly - hallucinations?"

"Listen to me, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, taking a step toward Fudge, and once again, he seemed to radiate that indefinable sense of power that Harry had felt after Dumbledore had Stunned young Crouch. "Harry is as sane as you or I. That scar upon his forehead has not addled his brains. I believe it hurts him when Lord Voldemort is close by, or feeling particularly murderous."

Fudge had taken half a step back from Dumbledore, but he looked no less stubborn.

"You'll forgive me, Dumbledore, but I've never heard of a curse scar acting as an alarm bell before. . ."

"Look, I saw Voldemort come back!" Harry shouted. He tried to get out of bed again, but Mrs. Weasley forced him back. "I saw the Death Eaters! I can give you their names! Lucius Malfoy -"

Snape made a sudden movement, but as Harry looked at him, Snape's eyes flew back to Fudge.

"Malfoy was cleared!" said Fudge, visibly affronted. "A very old family - donations to excellent causes -"

"Macnair!" Harry continued.

"Also cleared! Now working for the Ministry!"

"Avery - Nott - Crabbe - Goyle -"

"You are merely repeating the names of those who were acquitted of being Death Eaters thirteen years ago!" said Fudge angrily. "You could have found those names in old reports of the trials! For heavens sake, Dumbledore - the boy was full of some crackpot story at the end of last year too - his tales are getting taller, and you're still swallowing them - the boy can talk to snakes. Dumbledore, and you still think he's trustworthy?"

"You fool!" Professor McGonagall cried. "Cedric Diggory! Mr. Crouch! These deaths were not the random work of a lunatic!"

"I see no evidence to the contrary!" shouted Fudge, now matching her anger, his face purpling. "It seems to me that you are all determined to start a panic that will destabilize everything we have worked for these last thirteen years!"

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had always thought of Fudge as a kindly figure, a little blustering, a little pompous, but essentially good-natured. But now a short, angry wizard stood before him, refusing, point-blank, to accept the prospect of disruption in his comfortable and ordered world - to believe that Voldemort could have risen.

"Voldemort has returned," Dumbledore repeated. "If you accept that fact straightforwardly. Fudge, and take the necessary measures, we may still be able to save the situation. The first and most essential step is to remove Azkaban from the control of the dementors -"

"Preposterous!" shouted Fudge again. "Remove the dementors? I'd be kicked out of office for suggesting it! Half of us only feel safe in our beds at night because we know the dementors are standing guard at Azkaban!"

"The rest of us sleep less soundly in our beds, Cornelius, knowing that you have put Lord Voldemort's most dangerous supporters in the care of creatures who will join him the instant he asks them!" said Dumbledore. "They will not remain loyal to you, Fudge! Voldemort can offer them much more scope for their powers and their pleasures than you can! With the dementors behind him, and his old supporters returned to him, you will be

hard-pressed to stop him regaining the sort of power he had thirteen years ago!"

Fudge was opening and closing his mouth as though no words could express his outrage.

"The second step you must take - and at once," Dumbledore pressed on, "is to send envoys to the giants."

"Envoy to the giants?" Fudge shrieked, finding his tongue again. "What madness is this?"

"Extend them the hand of friendship, now, before it is too late," said Dumbledore, "or Voldemort will persuade them, as he did before, that he alone among wizards will give them their rights and their freedom!"

"You - you cannot be serious!" Fudge gasped, shaking his head and retreating further from Dumbledore. "If the magical community got wind that I had approached the giants - people hate them, Dumbledore - end of my career -"

"You are blinded," said Dumbledore, his voice rising now, the aura of power around him palpable, his eyes blazing once more, "by the love of the office you hold, Cornelius! You place too much importance, and you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood! You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be! Your dementor has just destroyed the last remaining member of a pure-blood family as old as any - and see what that man chose to make of his life! I tell you now- take the steps I have suggested, and you will be remembered, in office or out, as one of the bravest and greatest Ministers of Magic we have ever known. Fail to act - and history will remember you as the man who stepped aside and allowed Voldemort a second chance to destroy the world we have tried to rebuild!"

"Insane," whispered Fudge, still backing away. "Mad . . ."

And then there was silence. Madam Pomfrey was standing frozen at the foot of Harry's bed, her hands over her mouth. Mrs. Weasley was still standing over Harry, her hand on his shoulder to prevent him from rising. Bill, Ron, and Hermione were staring at Fudge.

"If your determination to shut your eyes will carry you as far as this, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, "we have reached a parting of the ways. You must act as you see fit. And I - I shall act as I see fit."

Dumbledore's voice carried no hint of a threat; it sounded like a mere statement, but Fudge bristled as though Dumbledore were advancing upon him with a wand.

"Now, see here, Dumbledore," he said, waving a threatening finger. "I've given you free rein, always. I've had a lot of respect for you. I might not have agreed with some of your decisions, but I've kept quiet. There aren't many who'd have let you hire werewolves, or keep Hagrid, or decide what to teach your students without reference to the Ministry. But if you're going to work against me -"

"The only one against whom I intend to work," said Dumbledore, "is Lord Voldemort. If you are against him, then we remain, Cornelius, on the same side."

It seemed Fudge could think of no answer to this. He rocked backward and forward on his small feet for a moment and spun his bowler hat in his hands. Finally, he said, with a hint of a plea in his voice, "He can't be back, Dumbledore, he just can't be . . ."

Snape strode forward, past Dumbledore, pulling up the left sleeve of his robes as he went. He stuck out his forearm and showed it to Fudge, who recoiled.

"There," said Snape harshly. "There. The Dark Mark. It is not as clear as it was an hour or so ago, when it burned black, but you can still see it. Every Death Eater had the sign burned into him by the Dark Lord. It was a means of distinguishing one another, and his means of summoning us to him. When he touched the Mark of any Death Eater, we were to Disapparate, and Apparate, instantly, at his side. This Mark has been

growing clearer all year. Karkaroff's too. Why do you think Karkaroff fled tonight? We both felt the Mark burn. We both knew he had returned. Karkaroff fears the Dark Lord's vengeance. He betrayed too many of his fellow Death Eaters to be sure of a welcome back into the fold."

Fudge stepped back from Snape too. He was shaking his head. He did not seem to have taken in a word Snape had said. He stared, apparently repelled by the ugly mark on Snape's arm, then looked up at Dumbledore and whispered, "I don't know what you and your staff are playing at, Dumbledore, but I have heard enough. I have no more to add. I will be in touch with you tomorrow, Dumbledore, to discuss the running of this school. I must return to the Ministry."

He had almost reached the door when he paused. He turned around, strode back down the dormitory, and stopped at Harry's bed.

"Your winnings," he said shortly, taking a large bag of gold out of his pocket and dropping it onto Harry's bedside table. "One thousand Galleons. There should have been a presentation ceremony, but under the circumstances . . ."

He crammed his bowler hat onto his head and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The moment he had disappeared, Dumbledore turned to look at the group around Harry's bed.

"There is work to be done," he said. "Molly... am I right in thinking that I can count on you and Arthur?"

"Of course you can," said Mrs. Weasley. She was white to the lips, but she looked resolute. "We know what Fudge is. It's Arthur's fondness for Muggles that has held him back at the Ministry all these years. Fudge thinks he lacks proper wizarding pride."

"Then I need to send a message to Arthur," said Dumbledore. "All those that we can persuade of the truth must be notified immediately, and he is well placed to contact those at the Ministry who are not as shortsighted as Cornelius."

"I'll go to Dad," said Bill, standing up. "I'll go now."

"Excellent," said Dumbledore. "Tell him what has happened. Tell him I will be in direct contact with him shortly. He will need to be discreet, however. If Fudge thinks I am interfering at the Ministry -"

"Leave it to me," said Bill.

He clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder, kissed his mother on the cheek, pulled on his cloak, and strode quickly from the room.

"Minerva," said Dumbledore, turning to Professor McGonagall, "I want to see Hagrid in my office as soon as possible. Also - if she will consent to come - Madame Maxime."

Professor McGonagall nodded and left without a word.

"Poppy," Dumbledore said to Madam Pomfrey, "would you be very kind and go down to Professor Moody's office, where I think you will find a house-elf called Winky in considerable distress? Do what you can for her, and take her back to the kitchens. I think Dobby will look after her for us."

"Very - very well," said Madam Pomfrey, looking startled, and she too left.

Dumbledore made sure that the door was closed, and that Madam Pomfrey's footsteps had died away, before he spoke again.

"And now," he said, "it is time for two of our number to recognize each other for what they are. Sirius... if you could resume your usual form."

The great black dog looked up at Dumbledore, then, in an instant, turned back into a man.

Mrs. Weasley screamed and leapt back from the bed.

"Sirius Black!" she shrieked, pointing at him.

"Mum, shut up!" Ron yelled. "It's okay!"

Snape had not yelled or jumped backward, but the look on his face was one of mingled fury and horror.

"Him!" he snarled, staring at Sirius, whose face showed equal dislike.
"What is he doing here?"

"He is here at my invitation," said Dumbledore, looking between them, "as are you, Severus. I trust you both. It is time for you to lay aside your old differences and trust each other."

Harry thought Dumbledore was asking for a near miracle. Sirius and Snape were eyeing each other with the utmost loathing.

"I will settle, in the short term," said Dumbledore, with a bite of impatience in his voice, "for a lack of open hostility. You will shake hands. You are on the same side now. Time is short, and unless the few of us who know the truth do not stand united, there is no hope for any us."

Very slowly - but still glaring at each other as though each wished the other nothing but ill - Sirius and Snape moved toward each other and shook hands. They let go extremely quickly.

"That will do to be going on with," said Dumbledore, stepping between them once more. "Now I have work for each of you. Fudge's attitude, though not unexpected, changes everything. Sirius, I need you to set off at once. You are to alert Remus Lupin, Arabella Figg, Mundungus Fletcher - the old crowd. Lie low at Lupin's for a while; I will contact you there."

"But -" said Harry.

He wanted Sirius to stay. He did not want to have to say goodbye again so quickly.

"You'll see me very soon. Harry," said Sirius, turning to him. "I promise you. But I must do what I can, you understand, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah . . . of course I do."

Sirius grasped his hand briefly, nodded to Dumbledore, transformed again into the black dog, and ran the length of the room to the door, whose handle he turned with a paw. Then he was gone.

"Severus," said Dumbledore, turning to Snape, "you know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready . . . if you are prepared . . ."

"I am," said Snape.

He looked slightly paler than usual, and his cold, black eyes glittered strangely.

"Then good luck," said Dumbledore, and he watched, with a trace of apprehension on his face, as Snape swept wordlessly after Sirius.

It was several minutes before Dumbledore spoke again.

"I must go downstairs," he said finally. "I must see the Diggorys. Harry - take the rest of your potion. I will see all of you later."

Harry slumped back against his pillows as Dumbledore disappeared.

Hermione, Ron, and Mrs. Weasley were all looking at him. None of them spoke for a very long time.

"You've got to take the rest of your potion. Harry," Mrs. Weasley said at last. Her hand nudged the sack of gold on his bedside cabinet as she reached for the bottle and the goblet. "You have a good long sleep. Try and think about something else for a while . . . think about what you're going to buy with your winnings!"

"I don't want that gold," said Harry in an expressionless voice. "You have it. Anyone can have it. I shouldn't have won it. It should've been Cedric's."

The thing against which he had been fighting on and off ever since he had come out of the maze was threatening to overpower him. He could feel a burning, prickling feeling in the inner corners of his eyes. He blinked and stared up at the ceiling.

"It wasn't your fault. Harry," Mrs. Weasley whispered.

"I told him to take the cup with me," said Harry.

Now the burning feeling was in his throat too. He wished Ron would look away.

Mrs. Weasley set the potion down on the bedside cabinet, bent down, and put her arms around Harry. He had no memory of ever being hugged like this, as though by a mother. The full weight of everything he had seen that night seemed to fall in upon him as Mrs. Weasley held him to her. His mother's face, his father's voice, the sight of Cedric, dead on the ground all started spinning in his head until he could hardly bear it, until he was screwing up his face against the howl of misery fighting to get out of him.

There was a loud slamming noise, and Mrs. Weasley and Harry broke apart. Hermione was standing by the window. She was holding something tight in her hand.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"Your potion, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley quickly, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand.

Harry drank it in one gulp. The effect was instantaneous. Heavy, irresistible waves of dreamless sleep broke over him; he fell back onto his pillows and thought no more.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN - THE BEGINNING

When he looked back, even a month later, Harry found he had only scattered memories of the next few days. It was as though he had been through too much to take in any more. The recollections he did have were very painful. The worst, perhaps, was the meeting with the Diggorys that took place the following morning.

They did not blame him for what had happened; on the contrary, both thanked him for returning Cedric's body to them. Mr. Diggory sobbed through most of the interview. Mrs. Diggory's grief seemed to be beyond tears.

"He suffered very little then," she said, when Harry had told her how Cedric had died. "And after all, Amos ... he died just when he'd won the tournament. He must have been happy."

When they got to their feet, she looked down at Harry and said, "You look after yourself, now."

Harry seized the sack of gold on the bedside table.

"You take this," he muttered to her. "It should've been Cedric's, he got there first, you take it -"

But she backed away from him.

"Oh no, it's yours, dear, I couldn't. . . you keep it."

Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower the following evening. From what Hermione and Ron told him, Dumbledore had spoken to the school that morning at breakfast. He had merely requested that they leave Harry alone, that nobody ask him questions or badger him to tell the story of what had happened in the maze. Most people, he noticed, were skirting him in the corridors, avoiding his eyes. Some whispered behind their hands as he passed. He guessed that many of them had believed Rita Skeeter's article about how disturbed and possibly dangerous he was. Perhaps they were formulating their own theories about how Cedric had died. He found he didn't care very much. He liked it best when he was with Ron and Hermione and they were talking about other things, or else letting him sit in silence while they played chess. He felt as though all three of them had reached an understanding they didn't need to put into words; that each was waiting for some sign, some word, of what was going on outside Hogwarts - and that it was useless to speculate about what might be coming until they knew anything for certain. The only time they touched upon the subject was when Ron told Harry about a meeting Mrs. Weasley had had with Dumbledore before going home.

"She went to ask him if you could come straight to us this summer," he said. "But he wants you to go back to the Dursleys, at least at first."

"Why?" said Harry.

"She said Dumbledore's got his reasons," said Ron, shaking his head darkly. "I suppose we've got to trust him, haven't we?"

The only person apart from Ron and Hermione that Harry felt able to talk to was Hagrid. As there was no longer a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, they had those lessons free. They used the one on Thursday afternoon to go down and visit Hagrid in his cabin. It was a bright and sunny day; Fang bounded out of the open door as they approached, barking and wagging his tail madly.

"Who's that?" called Hagrid, coming to the door. "Harry!"

He strode out to meet them, pulled Harry into a one-armed hug, ruffled his hair, and said, "Good ter see yeh, mate. Good ter see yeh."

They saw two bucket-size cups and saucers on the wooden table in front of the fireplace when they entered Hagrid's cabin.

"Bin havin' a cuppa with Olympe," Hagrid said. "She's jus' left."

"Who?" said Ron curiously.

"Madame Maxime, o' course!" said Hagrid.

"You two made up, have you?" said Ron.

"Dunno what yeh're talkin' about," said Hagrid airily, fetching more cups from the dresser. When he had made tea and offered around a plate of doughy cookies, he leaned back in his chair and surveyed Harry closely through his beetle-black eyes.

"You all righ'?" he said gruffly

"Yeah," said Harry.

"No, yeh're not," said Hagrid. "Course yeh're not. But yeh will be."

Harry said nothing.

"Knew he was goin' ter come back," said Hagrid, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up at him, shocked. "Known it fer years. Harry. Knew he was out there, bidin' his time. It had ter happen. Well, now it has, an' we'll jus' have ter get on with it. We'll fight. Migh' be able ter stop him before he gets a good hold. That's Dumbledores plan, anyway. Great man, Dumbledore. 'S long as we've got him, I'm not too worried." Hagrid raised his bushy eyebrows at the disbelieving expressions on their faces.

"No good sittin' worryin' abou' it," he said. "What's comin' will come, an' we'll meet it when it does. Dumbledore told me wha' you did. Harry." Hagrid's chest swelled as he looked at Harry.

"Yeh did as much as yer father would've done, an' I can' give yeh no higher praise than that."

Harry smiled back at him. It was the first time he'd smiled in days.

"What's Dumbledore asked you to do, Hagrid?" he asked. "He sent Professor McGonagall to ask you and Madame Maxime to meet him - that night."

"Got a little job fer me over the summer," said Hagrid. "Secret, though. I'm not s'posed ter talk abou' it, no, not even ter you lot. Olympe - Madame Maxime ter you - might be comin' with me. I think she will. Think I got her persuaded."

"Is it to do with Voldemort?"

Hagrid flinched at the sound of the name.

"Migh' be," he said evasively. "Now . . . who'd like ter come an' visit the las' skrewt with me? I was jokin' - jokin'!" he added hastily, seeing the looks on their faces.

It was with a heavy heart that Harry packed his trunk up in the dormitory on the night before his return to Privet Drive. He was dreading the Leaving Feast, which was usually a cause for celebration, when the winner of the Inter-House Championship would be announced. He had avoided being in the Great Hall when it was full ever since he had left the hospital wing, preferring to eat when it was nearly empty to avoid the stares of his fellow students.

When he, Ron, and Hermione entered the Hall, they saw at once that the usual decorations were missing. The Great Hall was normally decorated with the winning House's colors for the Leaving Feast. Tonight, however, there were black drapes on the wall behind the teachers' table. Harry knew instantly that they were there as a mark of respect to Cedric. The real Mad-Eye Moody was at the staff table now, his wooden leg and his magical eye back in place. He was extremely twitchy, jumping every time someone spoke to him. Harry couldn't blame him; Moodys fear of attack was bound to have been increased by his ten-month imprisonment in his own trunk. Professor Karkaroff's chair was empty. Harry wondered, as he sat down with the other Gryffindors, where Karkaroff was now, and whether Voldemort had caught up with him.

Madame Maxime was still there. She was sitting next to Hagrid. They were talking quietly together. Further along the table, sitting next to Professor McGonagall, was Snape. His eyes lingered on Harry for a moment as Harry looked at him. His expression was difficult to read. He looked as sour and unpleasant as ever. Harry continued to watch him, long after Snape had looked away.

What was it that Snape had done on Dumbledores orders, the night that Voldemort had returned? And why. . . why . . . was Dumbledore so convinced that Snape was truly on their side? He had been their spy, Dumbledore had said so in the Pensieve. Snape had turned spy against Voldemort, "at great personal risk." Was that the job he had taken up again? Had he made contact with the Death Eaters, perhaps? Pretended that he had never really gone over to Dumbledore, that he had been, like Voldemort himself, biding his time?

Harry's musings were ended by Professor Dumbledore, who stood up at the staff table. The Great Hall, which in any case had been less noisy than it usually was at the Leaving Feast, became very quiet.

"The end," said Dumbledore, looking around at them all, "of another year."

He paused, and his eyes fell upon the Hufflepuff table. Theirs had been the most subdued table before he had gotten to his feet, and theirs were still the saddest and palest faces in the Hall.

"There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight," said Dumbledore, "but I must first acknowledge the loss of a very fine person, who should be sitting here," he gestured toward the Hufflepuffs, "enjoying our feast with us. I would like you all, please, to stand, and raise your glasses, to Cedric Diggory."

They did it, all of them; the benches scraped as everyone in the Hall stood, and raised their goblets, and echoed, in one loud, low, rumbling voice, "Cedric Diggory."

Harry caught a glimpse of Cho through the crowd. There were tears pouring silently down her face. He looked down at the table as they all sat down again.

"Cedric was a person who exemplified many of the qualities that distinguish Hufflepuff house," Dumbledore continued. "He was a good and loyal friend, a hard worker, he valued fair play. His death has affected you all, whether you knew him well or not. I think that you have the right, therefore, to know exactly how it came about."

Harry raised his head and stared at Dumbledore.

"Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort."

A panicked whisper swept the Great Hall. People were staring at Dumbledore in disbelief, in horror. He looked perfectly calm as he watched them mutter themselves into silence.

"The Ministry of Magic," Dumbledore continued, "does not wish me to tell you this. It is possible that some of your parents will be horrified that I have done so - either because they will not believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, or because they think I should not tell you so, young as you are. It is my belief, however, that the truth is generally

preferable to lies, and that any attempt to pretend that Cedric died as the result of an accident, or some sort of blunder of his own, is an insult to his memory."

Stunned and frightened, every face in the Hall was turned toward Dumbledore now... or almost every face. Over at the Slytherin table. Harry saw Draco Malfoy muttering something to Crabbe and Goyle. Harry felt a hot, sick swoop of anger in his stomach. He forced himself to look back at Dumbledore.

"There is somebody else who must be mentioned in connection with Cedrics death," Dumbledore went on. "I am talking, of course, about Harry Potter."

A kind of ripple crossed the Great Hall as a few heads turned in Harry's direction before flicking back to face Dumbledore.

"Harry Potter managed to escape Lord Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "He risked his own life to return Cedric's body to Hogwarts. He showed, in every respect, the sort of bravery that few wizards have ever shown in facing Lord Voldemort, and for this, I honor him."

Dumbledore turned gravely to Harry and raised his goblet once more.

Nearly everyone in the Great Hall followed suit. They murmured his name, as they had murmured Cedric's, and drank to him. But through a gap in the standing figures. Harry saw that Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and many of the other Slytherins had remained defiantly in their seats, their goblets untouched. Dumbledore, who after all possessed no magical eye, did not see them.

When everyone had once again resumed their seats, Dumbledore continued, "The Triwizard Tournament's aim was to further and promote magical understanding. In the light of what has happened - of Lord Voldemort's return - such ties are more important than ever before."

Dumbledore looked from Madame Maxime and Hagrid, to Fleur Delacour and her fellow Beauxbatons students, to Viktor Krum and the Durmstrangs at the Slytherin table. Krum, Harry saw, looked wary, almost frightened, as though he expected Dumbledore to say something harsh.

"Every guest in this Hall," said Dumbledore, and his eyes lingered upon the Durmstrang students, "will be welcomed back here at any time, should they wish to come. I say to you all, once again - in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.

"It is my belief- and never have I so hoped that I am mistaken - that we are all facing dark and difficult times. Some of you in this Hall have already suffered directly at the hands of Lord Voldemort. Many of your families have been torn asunder. A week ago, a student was taken from our midst.

"Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory."

Harry's trunk was packed; Hedwig was back in her cage on top of it. He, Ron, and Hermione were waiting in the crowded entrance hall with the rest of the fourth years for the carriages that would take them back to Hogsmeade station. It was another beautiful summer's day. He supposed that Privet Drive would be hot and leafy, its flower beds a riot of color, when he arrived there that evening. The thought gave him no pleasure at all.

"'Arry!"

He looked around. Fleur Delacour was hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Beyond her, far across the grounds. Harry could see Hagrid

helping Madame Maxime to back two of the giant horses into their harness. The Beauxbatons carriage was about to take off.

"We will see each uzzer again, I 'ope," said Fleur as she reached him, holding out her hand. "I am 'oping to get a job 'ere, to improve my Eenglish."

"It's very good already," said Ron in a strangled sort of voice. Fleur smiled at him; Hermione scowled.

"Good-bye, 'Arry," said Fleur, turning to go. "It 'az been a pleasure meeting you!"

Harry's spirits couldn't help but lift slightly as he watched Fleur hurry back across the lawns to Madame Maxime, her silvery hair rippling in the sunlight.

Wonder how the Durmstrang students are getting back," said Ron. "D' you reckon they can steer that ship without Karkaroff?"

"Karkaroff did not steer," said a gruff voice. "He stayed in his cabin and let us do the vork."

Krum had come to say good-bye to Hermione. "Could I have a vord?" he asked her.

"Oh . . . yes . . . all right," said Hermione, looking slightly flustered, and following Krum through the crowd and out of sight.

"You'd better hurry up!" Ron called loudly after her. "The carriages'll be here in a minute!"

He let Harry keep a watch for the carriages, however, and spent the next few minutes craning his neck over the crowd to try and see what Krum and Hermione might be up to. They returned quite soon. Ron stared at Hermione, but her face was quite impassive.

"I liked Diggory," said Krum abruptly to Harry. "He vos alvays polite to me. Alvays. Even though I vos from Durmstrang - with Karkaroff," he added, scowling.

"Have you got a new headmaster yet?" said Harry

Krum shrugged. He held out his hand as Fleur had done, shook Harry's hand, and then Ron's. Ron looked as though he was suffering some sort of painful internal struggle. Krum had already started walking away when Ron burst out, "Can I have your autograph?"

Hermione turned away, smiling at the horseless carriages that were now trundling toward them up the drive, as Krum, looking surprised but gratified, signed a fragment of parchment for Ron.

The weather could not have been more different on the journey back to King's Cross than it had been on their way to Hogwarts the previous September. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had managed to get a compartment to themselves. Pigwidgeon was once again hidden under Rons dress robes to stop him from hooting continually; Hedwig was dozing, her head under her wing, and Crookshanks was curled up in a spare seat like a large, furry ginger cushion. Harry, Ron, and Hermione talked more fully and freely than they had all week as the train sped them southward. Harry felt as though Dumbledore's speech at the Leaving Feast had unblocked him, somehow. It was less painful to discuss what had happened now. They broke off their conversation about what action Dumbledore might be taking, even now, to stop Voldemort only when the lunch trolley arrived.

When Hermione returned from the trolley and put her money back into her schoolbag, she dislodged a copy of the Daily Prophet that she had been carrying in there. Harry looked at it, unsure whether he really wanted to know what it might say, but Hermione, seeing him looking at it, said calmly, "There's nothing in there. You can look for yourself, but there's nothing at all. I've been checking every day. Just a small piece the day after the third task saying you won the tournament. They didn't even mention Cedric. Nothing about any of it. If you ask me. Fudge is forcing them to keep quiet."

"He'll never keep Rita quiet," said Harry. "Not on a story like this." "Oh, Rita hasn't written anything at all since the third task," said Hermione in an oddly constrained voice. "As a matter of fact," she added, her voice now trembling slightly, "Rita Skeeter isn't going to be writing anything at all for a while. Not unless she wants me to spill the beans on her."

"What are you talking about?" said Ron.

"I found out how she was listening in on private conversations when she wasn't supposed to be coming onto the grounds," said Hermione in a rush. Harry had the impression that Hermione had been dying to tell them this for days, but that she had restrained herself in light of everything else that had happened.

"How was she doing it?" said Harry at once.

"How did you find out?" said Ron, staring at her.

"Well, it was you, really, who gave me the idea. Harry," she said.

"Did I?" said Harry, perplexed. "How?"

"Bugging," said Hermione happily.

"But you said they didn't work -"

"Oh not electronic bugs," said Hermione. "No, you see ... Rita Skeeter" - Hermione's voice trembled with quiet triumph - "is an unregistered Animagus. She can turn -"

Hermione pulled a small sealed glass jar out other bag.

"- into a beetle."

"You're kidding," said Ron. "You haven't... . she's not..."

"Oh yes she is," said Hermione happily, brandishing the jar at them. Inside were a few twigs and leaves and one large, fat beetle.

"That's never - you're kidding -" Ron whispered, lifting the jar to his eyes.

"No, I'm not," said Hermione, beaming. "I caught her on the windowsill in the hospital wing. Look very closely, and you'll notice the markings around her antennae are exactly like those foul glasses she wears." Harry looked and saw that she was quite right. He also remembered something.

"There was a beetle on the statue the night we heard Hagrid telling Madame Maxime about his mum!"

"Exactly," said Hermione. "And Viktor pulled a beetle out of my hair after we'd had our conversation by the lake. And unless I'm very much mistaken, Rita was perched on the windowsill of the Divination class the day your scar hurt. She's been buzzing around for stories all year."

"When we saw Malfoy under that tree ..." said Ron slowly.

"He was talking to her, in his hand," said Hermione. "He knew, of course. That's how she's been getting all those nice little interviews with the Slytherins. They wouldn't care that she was doing something illegal, as long as they were giving her horrible stuff about us and Hagrid."

Hermione took the glass jar back from Ron and smiled at the beetle, which buzzed angrily against the glass.

"I've told her I'll let her out when we get back to London," said Hermione. "I've put an Unbreakable Charm on the jar, you see, so she can't transform. And I've told her she's to keep her quill to herself for a whole year. See if she can't break the habit of writing horrible lies about people."

Smiling serenely, Hermione placed the beetle back inside her schoolbag. The door of the compartment slid open.

"Very clever. Granger," said Draco Malfoy.

Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him. All three of them looked more pleased with themselves, more arrogant and more menacing, than Harry had ever seen them.

"So," said Malfoy slowly, advancing slightly into the compartment and looking slowly around at them, a smirk quivering on his lips. "You

caught some pathetic reporter, and Potter's Dumbledore's favorite boy again. Big deal."

His smirk widened. Crabbe and Goyle leered.

"Trying not to think about it, are we?" said Malfoy softly, looking around at all three of them. "Trying to pretend it hasn't happened?"

"Get out," said Harry.

He had not been this close to Malfoy since he had watched him muttering to Crabbe and Goyle during Dumbledores speech about Cedric. He could feel a kind of ringing in his ears. His hand gripped his wand under his robes.

"You've picked the losing side, Potter! I warned you! I told you you ought to choose your company more carefully, remember? When we met on the train, first day at Hogwarts? I told you not to hang around with riffraff like this!" He jerked his head at Ron and Hermione. "Too late now. Potter! They'll be the first to go, now the Dark Lord's back! Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers first! Well - second - Diggory was the f-" It was as though someone had exploded a box of fireworks within the compartment. Blinded by the blaze of the spells that had blasted from every direction, deafened by a series of bangs, Harry blinked and looked down at the floor.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were all lying unconscious in the doorway. He, Ron, and Hermione were on their feet, all three of them having used a different hex. Nor were they the only ones to have done so.

"Thought we'd see what those three were up to," said Fred matter-of-factly, stepping onto Goyle and into the compartment. He had his wand out, and so did George, who was careful to tread on Malfoy as he followed Fred inside.

"Interesting effect," said George, looking down at Crabbe. "Who used the Furnunculus Curse?"

"Me," said Harry.

"Odd," said George lightly. "I used Jelly-Legs. Looks as though those two shouldn't be mixed. He seems to have sprouted little tentacles all over his face. Well, let's not leave them here, they don't add much to the decor."

Ron, Harry, and George kicked, rolled, and pushed the unconscious Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle - each of whom looked distinctly the worse for the jumble of jinxes with which they had been hit - out into the corridor, then came back into the compartment and rolled the door shut.

"Exploding Snap, anyone?" said Fred, pulling out a pack of cards.

They were halfway through their fifth game when Harry decided to ask them.

"You going to tell us, then?" he said to George. "Who you were blackmailing?"

"Oh," said George darkly. "That."

"It doesn't matter," said Fred, shaking his head impatiently. "It wasn't anything important. Not now, anyway."

"We've given up," said George, shrugging.

But Harry, Ron, and Hermione kept on asking, and finally, Fred said, "All right, all right, if you really want to know ... it was Ludo Bagman."

"Bagman?" said Harry sharply. "Are you saying he was involved in -"

"Nah," said George gloomily. "Nothing like that. Stupid git. He wouldn't have the brains."

"Well, what, then?" said Ron.

Fred hesitated, then said, "You remember that bet we had with him at the Quidditch World Cup? About how Ireland would win, but Krum would get the Snitch?"

"Yeah," said Harry and Ron slowly.

"Well, the git paid us in leprechaun gold he'd caught from the Irish mascots."

"So?"

"So," said Fred impatiently, "it vanished, didn't it? By next morning, it had gone!"

"But - it must've been an accident, mustn't it?" said Hermione. George laughed very bitterly.

"Yeah, that's what we thought, at first. We thought if we just wrote to him, and told him he'd made a mistake, he'd cough up. But nothing doing. Ignored our letter. We kept trying to talk to him about it at Hogwarts, but he was always making some excuse to get away from us."

"In the end, he turned pretty nasty," said Fred. "Told us we were too young to gamble, and he wasn't giving us anything."

"So we asked for our money back," said George glowering.

"He didn't refuse!" gasped Hermione.

"Right in one," said Fred.

"But that was all your savings!" said Ron.

"Tell me about it," said George. "'Course, we found out what was going on in the end. Lee Jordan's dad had had a bit of trouble getting money off Bagman as well. Turns out he's in big trouble with the goblins. Borrowed loads of gold off them. A gang of them cornered him in the woods after the World Cup and took all the gold he had, and it still wasn't enough to cover all his debts. They followed him all the way to Hogwarts to keep an eye on him. He's lost everything gambling. Hasn't got two Galleons to rub together. And you know how the idiot tried to pay the goblins back?"

"How?" said Harry.

"He put a bet on you, mate," said Fred. "Put a big bet on you to win the tournament. Bet against the goblins."

"So that's why he kept trying to help me win!" said Harry. "Well - I did win, didn't I? So he can pay you your gold!"

"Nope," said George, shaking his head. "The goblins play as dirty as him. They say you drew with Diggory, and Bagman was betting you'd win outright. So Bagman had to run for it. He did run for it right after the third task."

George sighed deeply and started dealing out the cards again. The rest of the journey passed pleasantly enough; Harry wished it could have gone on all summer, in fact, and that he would never arrive at King's Cross . . . but as he had learned the hard way that year, time will not slow down when something unpleasant lies ahead, and all too soon, the Hogwarts Express was pulling in at platform nine and three-quarters. The usual confusion and noise filled the corridors as the students began to disembark. Ron and Hermione struggled out past Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, carrying their trunks. Harry, however, stayed put.

"Fred - George - wait a moment."

The twins turned. Harry pulled open his trunk and drew out his Triwizard winnings.

"Take it," he said, and he thrust the sack into George's hands.

"What?" said Fred, looking flabbergasted.

"Take it," Harry repeated firmly. "I don't want it."

"You're mental," said George, trying to push it back at Harry.

"No, I'm not," said Harry. "You take it, and get inventing. It's for the joke shop."

"He is mental," Fred said in an almost awed voice.

"Listen," said Harry firmly. "If you don't take it, I'm throwing it down the drain. I don't want it and I don't need it. But I could do with a few laughs. We could all do with a few laughs. I've got a feeling we're going to need them more than usual before long."

"Harry," said George weakly, weighing the money bag in his hands, "there's got to be a thousand Galleons in here."

"Yeah," said Harry, grinning. "Think how many Canary Creams that is." The twins stared at him.

"Just don't tell your mum where you got it... although she might not be so keen for you to join the Ministry anymore, come to think of it. . . ."
"Harry," Fred began, but Harry pulled out his wand.

"Look," he said flatly, "take it, or I'll hex you. I know some good ones now. Just do me one favor, okay? Buy Ron some different dress robes and say they're from you."

He left the compartment before they could say another word, stepping over Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were still lying on the floor, covered in hex marks.

Uncle Vernon was waiting beyond the barrier. Mrs. Weasley was close by him. She hugged Harry very tightly when she saw him and whispered in his ear, "I think Dumbledore will let you come to us later in the summer. Keep in touch, Harry."

"See you. Harry," said Ron, clapping him on the back.

"Bye, Harry!" said Hermione, and she did something she had never done before, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Harry - thanks," George muttered, while Fred nodded fervently at his side.

Harry winked at them, turned to Uncle Vernon, and followed him silently from the station. There was no point worrying yet, he told himself, as he got into the back of the Dursleys' car.

As Hagrid had said, what would come, would come ... and he would have to meet it when it did.