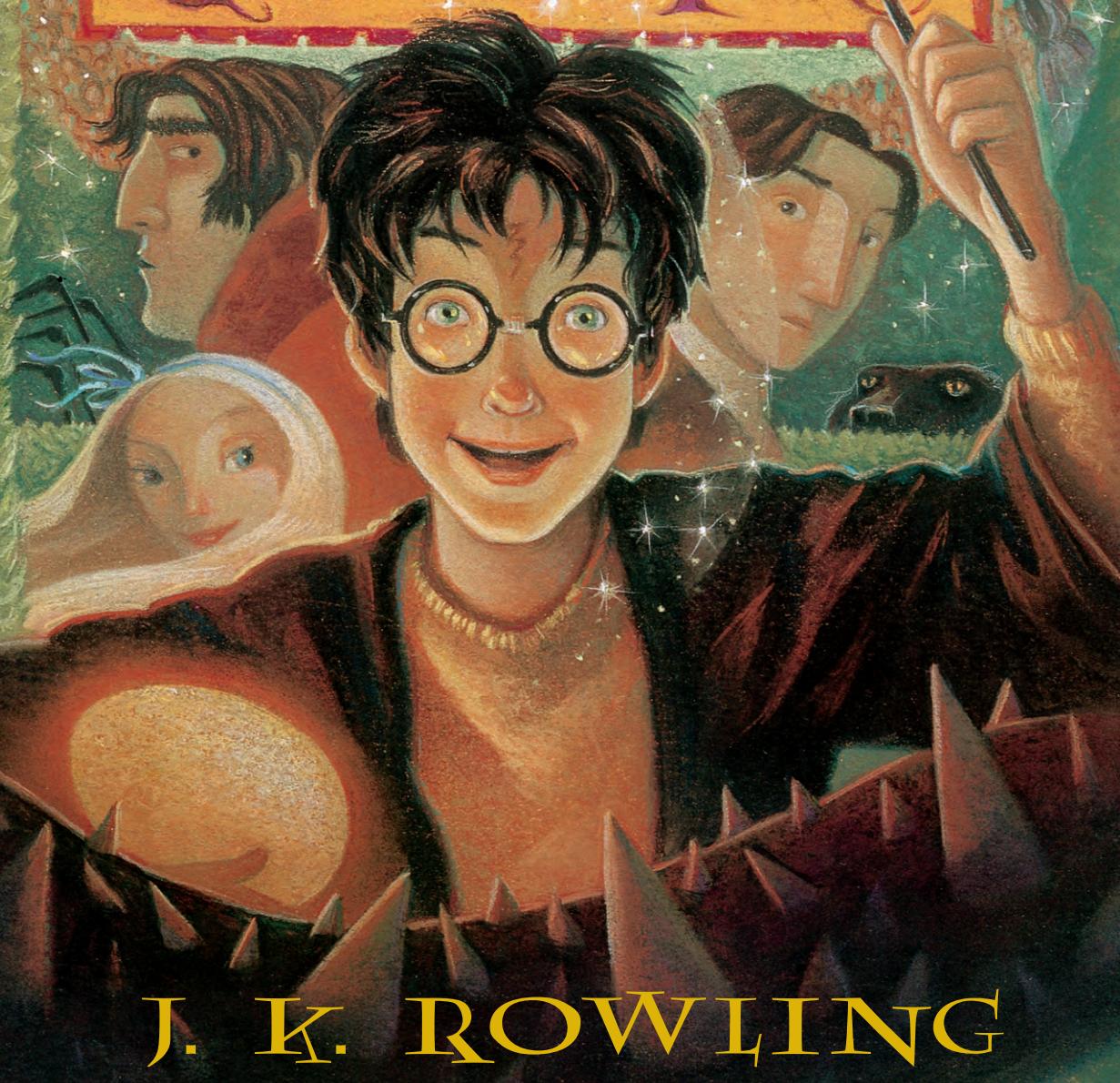


Harry Potter

AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE



J. K. ROWLING

HARRY POTTER

AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE

ALSO BY J. K. ROWLING

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

Year One at Hogwarts

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Year Two at Hogwarts

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Year Three at Hogwarts

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Year Five at Hogwarts

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

Year Six at Hogwarts

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

Year Seven

HARRY POTTER

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BY

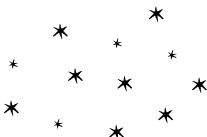
J. K. ROWLING

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARY GRANDPRÉ



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TO PETER ROWING,
IN MEMORY OF MR. RIDLEY
AND TO SUSAN SIADDEN,
WHO HELPED HARRY
OUT OF HIS CUPBOARD

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HARRY POTTER

AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE



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 rundown 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 vil-

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lagers, 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 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 that 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

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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 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, and 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 toward 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 very 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, grasping his walking stick firmly. Several feet from the entrance, 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."

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“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. “Perhaps 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 unusual 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 then 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

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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. Then 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 Voldemort’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 Jorkins’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* servant will have rejoined us —”

“I am a faithful servant,” said Wormtail, the merest trace of sullessness 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 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 upon 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 you this 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 the 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?"

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“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.



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 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 were 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 one 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 airborne 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 that 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 he? 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 god-father — 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 imagine 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 floorboard under Harry's bed, sounded cheerful, and in both of them he had reminded Harry to call on him if ever Harry needed to. Well, he needed to 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.

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T H E S C A R

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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.



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 Smeltlings 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 feel 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 —



"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.



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

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C H A P T E R T H R E E

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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.



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 — AAAAAAAARRRRRGH!"

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.

** B A C K T O T H E B U R R O W **

“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 draw-string 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.



WEASLEY'S WIZARD WHEELS

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’mɒn,” 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, it’s 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 I 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 rose-bushes, 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."



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 hustled 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 gen-

tlemen . . . 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 —

**

C H A P T E R S I X

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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.