

CHAPTER ONE

THE OTHER MINISTER

It was nearing midnight and the Prime Minister was sitting alone in his office, reading a long memo that was slipping behind him. He was waiting for a call from the President of a far distant country, and between wondering when the wires would come, and wondering what would happen if they didn't, there was not much space in his head for anything else. To him, the more clearly the Prime Minister could see the gloating face of one of his political opponents. This particular opponent had enumerated all the terrible things that had happened in the last week (as though anyone needed reminding) but also that he was not.

The Prime Minister's pulse quickened at the very thought of these accusations, for they were neither fair nor true. He had been told that the bridge was collapsing? It was outrageous for anybody to suggest that they were not spending enough on bridges. The bridge had collapsed to explain why it had snapped cleanly in two, sending a dozen cars into the watery depths of the river below. And how could he be blamed in those two very nasty and well-publicized murders? Or that the government should have somehow foreseen the danger to both people and property? And was it his fault that one of his Junior Ministers, Herbert Chorley, had chosen this week to spend a lot more time with his family?

"A grim mood has gripped the country," the opponent had concluded, barely concealing his own broad grin. And unfortunately, this was perfectly true. The Prime Minister felt it himself; people really did seem more miserable than in the middle of July. . . . It wasn't right, it wasn't normal. . . .

He turned over the second page of the memo, saw how much longer it went on, and gave it up as a bad job. Stretching, he found it was a handsome room, with a fine marble fireplace facing the long sash windows, firmly closed against the unseasonable cold. He moved over to the window, looking out at the thin mist that was pressing itself against the glass. It was then, as he stood, that he saw him.

He froze, nose to nose with his own scared-looking reflection in the dark glass. He knew that cough. He had heard it often. "Hello?" he said, trying to sound braver than he felt.

For a brief moment he allowed himself the impossible hope that nobody would answer him. However, a voice responded, reading a prepared statement. It was coming — as the Prime Minister had known at the first cough — from the froglike little man in the dirty oil painting in the far corner of the room.

"To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Urgent we meet. Kindly respond immediately. Sincerely, Fudge."

The man in the painting looked inquiringly at the Prime Minister.

"Er," said the Prime Minister, "listen. . . . It's not a very good time for me. . . . I'm waiting for a telephone call, you see."

"That can be rearranged," said the portrait at once. The Prime Minister's heart sank. He had been afraid of that.

"But I really was rather hoping to speak —"

"We shall arrange for the President to forget to call. He will telephone tomorrow night instead," said the little man. "Kindly respond."

"I . . . oh . . . very well," said the Prime Minister weakly. "Yes, I'll see Fudge."

He hurried back to his desk, straightening his tie as he went. He had barely resumed his seat, and arranged his face to look calm, when eight green flames burst into life in the empty grate beneath his marble mantelpiece. He watched, trying not to betray his alarm, as the flames, spinning as fast as a top. Seconds later, he had climbed out onto a rather fine antique rug, brushing ash from his bowler hat in his hand.

"Ah . . . Prime Minister," said Cornelius Fudge, striding forward with his hand outstretched. "Good to see you again."

The Prime Minister could not honestly return this compliment, so said nothing at all. He was not remotely pleased to see Fudge, and Fudge was not pleased to see him. Fudge's green flames, generally meant that he was about to hear some very bad news. Furthermore, Fudge was not pleased to see his face had a crumpled look. The Prime Minister had seen that kind of look in politicians before, and it never boded well.

"How can I help you?" he said, shaking Fudge's hand very briefly and gesturing toward the hardest of the chairs in front of him.

"Difficult to know where to begin," muttered Fudge, pulling up the chair, sitting down, and placing his green bowler hat on the floor.

"Had a bad one too, have you?" asked the Prime Minister stiffly, hoping to convey by this that he had quite enough of his own.

"Yes, of course," said Fudge, rubbing his eyes wearily and looking morosely at the Prime Minister. "I've been having trouble with the Bones and Vance murders . . . not to mention the ruckus in the West Country . . ."

"You — er — your — I mean to say, some of your people were — were involved in those — those things, were they?"

Fudge fixed the Prime Minister with a rather stern look. "Of course they were," he said. "Surely you've realized what's happened?"

"I . . ." hesitated the Prime Minister.

It was precisely this sort of behavior that made him dislike Fudge's visits so much. He was, after all, the Prime Minister of a country where magic was a schoolboy. But of course, it had been like this from his very first meeting with Fudge on his very first evening as Prime Minister. He knew it would haunt him until his dying day.

He had been standing alone in this very office, savoring the triumph that was his after so many years of dreaming and waiting, and turned to find that ugly little portrait talking to him, announcing that the Minister of Magic was about to arrive. Naturally, he had thought that the long campaign and the strain of the election had caused him to go mad. He had been told that there had been nothing to how he felt when a self-proclaimed wizard had bounced out of the fireplace and shaken his head. He had been told that there were witches and wizards still living in secret all over the world and his reassurances that he was not to be afraid. He had been told that the regulations on responsible use of broomsticks to keeping the dragon population under control (the Prime Minister had been told that) then patted the shoulder of the still-dumbstruck Prime Minister in a fatherly sort of way.

"Not to worry," he had said, "it's odds-on you'll never see me again. I'll only bother you if there's something really serious. For the Muggles — the non-magical population, I should say. Otherwise, it's live and let live. And I must say, you're taking it too far." At the window, thought I was a hoax planned by the opposition."

At this, the Prime Minister had found his voice at last. "You're — you're not a hoax, then?"

It had been his last, desperate hope.

"No," said Fudge gently. "No, I'm afraid I'm not. Look."

And he had turned the Prime Minister's teacup into a gerbil.

"But," said the Prime Minister breathlessly, watching his teacup chewing on the corner of his next speech, "but why —

"The Minister of Magic only reveals him- or herself to the Muggle Prime Minister of the day," said Fudge, poking his wand into his pocket in secrecy."

"But then," bleated the Prime Minister, "why hasn't a former Prime Minister warned me — ?"

At this, Fudge had actually laughed.

"My dear Prime Minister, are you ever going to tell anybody?"

Still chortling, Fudge had thrown some powder into the fireplace, stepped into the emerald flames, and vanished without a trace. Motionless, and realized that he would never, as long as he lived, dare mention this encounter to a living soul, for who in his right mind would? The shock had taken a little while to wear off. For a time, he had tried to convince himself that Fudge had indeed been a good man. In an election campaign. In a vain attempt to rid himself of all reminders of this uncomfortable encounter, he had given the order to take down the portrait of the ugly little man who had announced Fudge's arrival. To the Prime Minister's delight, several carpenters, a builder or two, an art historian, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer had all tried unsuccessfully to do so. Fudge had ended the attempt and simply resolved to hope that the thing remained motionless and silent for the rest of his term in office. For of his eye the occupant of the painting yawning, or else scratching his nose; even, once or twice, simply walking out of the frame behind the canvas behind. However, he had trained himself not to look at the picture very much, and always to tell himself firmly that it had never happened.

Then, three years ago, on a night very like tonight, the Prime Minister had been alone in his office when the portrait of the ugly little man had burst out of the fireplace, sopping wet and in a state of considerable panic. Before the Prime Minister could ask what was going on, talking about a prison the Prime Minister had never heard of, a man named "Serious" Black, something that sounded like a name of the remotest sense to the Prime Minister.

"... I've just come from Azkaban," Fudge had panted, tipping a large amount of water out of the rim of his bowler hat. "The dementors are in uproar" — he shuddered — "they've never had a breakout before. Anyway, I had to come. I was planning to rejoin You-Know-Who. ... But of course, you don't even know who You-Know-Who is!" He had gazed hopelessly at the Prime Minister, sat down, I'd better fill you in. ... Have a whiskey ..."

The Prime Minister rather resented being told to sit down in his own office, let alone offered his own whiskey, but he had taken the glasses full of amber liquid out of thin air, pushed one of them into the Prime Minister's hand, and drew up a chair. Fudge had talked for more than an hour. At one point, he had refused to say a certain name aloud and wrote it instead on a piece of paper in the Prime Minister's whiskey-free hand. When at last Fudge had stood up to leave, the Prime Minister had stood up too.

"So you think that ... " He had squinted down at the name in his left hand. "Lord Vol —"

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" snarled Fudge.

"I'm sorry. ... You think that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is still alive, then?"

"Well, Dumbledore says he is," said Fudge, as he had fastened his pin-striped cloak under his chin, "but we've never found him. He's not here, so it's Black we ought to be worrying about. You'll put out that warning, then? Excellent. Well, I hope we don't see him again. But they had seen each other again. Less than a year later a harassed-looking Fudge had appeared out of thin air in the middle of a spot of bother at the Kwidditch (or that was what it had sounded like) World Cup and that several Muggles had been killed. The fact that You-Know-Who's Mark had been seen again meant nothing; Fudge was sure it was an isolated incident, and he had said so as they spoke.

"Oh, and I almost forgot," Fudge had added. "We're importing three foreign dragons and a sphinx for the Triwizard Tournament. The Department of Magical Creatures tells me that it's down in the rule book that we have to notify you if we're bringing high dragons to the country."

"I — what — dragons?" spluttered the Prime Minister.

"Yes, three," said Fudge. "And a sphinx. Well, good day to you."

The Prime Minister had hoped beyond hope that dragons and sphinxes would be the worst of it, but no. Less than two weeks later, he was faced with the news that there had been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

"A mass breakout?" repeated the Prime Minister hoarsely.

"No need to worry, no need to worry!" shouted Fudge, already with one foot in the flames. "We'll have them rounded up in a matter of days. And before the Prime Minister could shout, "Now, wait just one moment!" Fudge had vanished in a shower of green sparks. Whatever the press and the opposition might say, the Prime Minister was not a foolish man. It had not escaped his notice that the Muggles were now seeing rather a lot of each other, nor that Fudge was becoming more flustered with each visit. Little though he might have known, the Prime Minister called Fudge in his head, the Other Minister, the Prime Minister could not help but fear that the next time Fudge appeared, it would be the last. For, of Fudge stepping out of the fire once more, looking disheveled and fretful and sternly surprised that the Prime Minister was still there, the first thing that had happened in the course of this extremely gloomy week.

"How should I know what's going on in the — er — Wizarding community?" snapped the Prime Minister now. "I have no idea."

"We have the same concerns," Fudge interrupted. "The Brockdale Bridge didn't wear out. That wasn't really a hurricane."

y's family would be safer without him. We are currently making arrangements to have him transferred to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, effective tonight."

"What do you . . . I'm afraid I . . . What?" blustered the Prime Minister.

Fudge took a great, deep breath and said, "Prime Minister, I am very sorry to have to tell you that he's back. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Back? When you say 'back' . . . he's alive? I mean —"

The Prime Minister groped in his memory for the details of that horrible conversation of three years previously, when he had learned that the wizard who had committed a thousand terrible crimes before his mysterious disappearance fifteen years earlier was still alive.

"Yes, alive," said Fudge. "That is — I don't know — is a man alive if he can't be killed? I don't really understand it, and I don't know if he's really got a body and is walking and talking and killing, so I suppose, for the purposes of our discussion, yes, he's alive."

The Prime Minister did not know what to say to this, but a persistent habit of wishing to appear well-informed on any subject prevented him from remembering their previous conversations.

"Is Sirius Black with — er — He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"Black? Black?" said Fudge distractedly, turning his bowler rapidly in his fingers. "Sirius Black, you mean? Merlin's beard, no. Not Sirius Black. He was innocent after all. And he wasn't in league with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named either. I mean," he added, "he was never even named — we had more than fifty eyewitnesses — but anyway, as I say, he's dead. Murdered, as a matter of fact. Killed. . . ."

To his great surprise, the Prime Minister felt a fleeting stab of pity for Fudge at this point. It was, however, eclipsed almost immediately by a more powerful emotion, for although he himself might be in the area of materializing out of fireplaces, there had never been a murder in the Ministry of Magic, at least not yet, anyway . . .

While the Prime Minister surreptitiously touched the wood of his desk, Fudge continued, "But Black's by-the-by now. He's dead. . . ."

"At war?" repeated the Prime Minister nervously. "Surely that's a little bit of an overstatement?"

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has now been joined by those of his followers who broke out of Azkaban in January," said Fudge, his face growing a little paler as he spoke. "It's a bit of a lime-green blur. Since they have moved into the open, they have been wreaking havoc. The Brocklesby family was killed unless I stood aside for him and —"

"Good grief, so it's your fault those people were killed and I'm having to answer questions about rusted rigging and collapsed bridges?" said the Prime Minister furiously.

"My fault!" said Fudge, coloring up. "Are you saying you would have caved in to blackmail like that?"

"Maybe not," said the Prime Minister, standing up and striding about the room, "but I would have put all my efforts into preventing it!"

"Do you really think I wasn't already making every effort?" demanded Fudge heatedly. "Every Auror in the Ministry would be talking about one of the most powerful wizards of all time, a wizard who has eluded capture for almost twenty years."

"So I suppose you're going to tell me he caused the hurricane in the West Country too?" said the Prime Minister, his face growing even paler. "I don't know the reason for all these terrible disasters and not to be able to tell the public, almost worse than it being the government's fault."

"That was no hurricane," said Fudge miserably.

"Excuse me!" barked the Prime Minister, now positively stamping up and down. "Trees uprooted, roofs ripped off, landslides —"

"It was the Death Eaters," said Fudge. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's followers. And . . . and we suspect giant involvement."

The Prime Minister stopped in his tracks as though he had hit an invisible wall. "What involvement?"

Fudge grimaced. "He used giants last time, when he wanted to go for the grand effect," he said. "The Office of Misinformation and Public Relations is busy trying to modify the memories of all the Muggles who saw what really happened, we've got most of the country in a state of confusion around Somerset, but we can't find the giant — it's been a disaster."

"You don't say!" said the Prime Minister furiously.

"I won't deny that morale is pretty low at the Ministry," said Fudge. "What with all that, and then losing Amelia Bones."

"Losing who?"

"Amelia Bones. Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. We think He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named may have killed her. The evidence was that she put up a real fight."

Fudge cleared his throat and, with an effort, it seemed, stopped spinning his bowler hat.

"But that murder was in the newspapers," said the Prime Minister, momentarily diverted from his anger. "Our newspapers are full of it. She was a woman who lived alone. It was a — a nasty killing, wasn't it? It's had rather a lot of publicity. The police are baffled, you see."

Fudge sighed. "Well, of course they are," he said. "Killed in a room that was locked from the inside, wasn't she? We, of course, are doing our best to catch him. And then there was Emmeline Vance, maybe you didn't hear about that one —"

"Oh yes I did!" said the Prime Minister. "It happened just around the corner from here, as a matter of fact. The paper said it was in the Prime Minister's backyard —"

"And as if all that wasn't enough," said Fudge, barely listening to the Prime Minister, "we've got dementors swarming the streets. . . ."

Once upon a happier time this sentence would have been unintelligible to the Prime Minister, but he was wiser now.

"I thought dementors guard the prisoners in Azkaban," he said cautiously.

"They did," said Fudge wearily. "But not anymore. They've deserted the prison and joined He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"But," said the Prime Minister, with a sense of dawning horror, "didn't you tell me they're the creatures that drain hope?"

"That's right. And they're breeding. That's what's causing all this mist."

The Prime Minister sank, weak-kneed, into the nearest chair. The idea of invisible creatures swooping through the tatters, made him feel quite faint.

"Now see here, Fudge — you've got to do something! It's your responsibility as Minister of Magic!"

"My dear Prime Minister, you can't honestly think I'm still Minister of Magic after all this? I was sacked three days ago in disgrace and resignation for a fortnight. I've never known them so united in my whole term of office!" said Fudge, with a brave attempt at defiance. The Prime Minister was momentarily lost for words. Despite his indignation at the position into which he had been pushed, he was opposite him.

"I'm very sorry," he said finally. "If there's anything I can do?"

"It's very kind of you, Prime Minister, but there is nothing. I was sent here tonight to bring you up to date on recent events. He'd be here by now, but of course, he's very busy at the moment, with so much going on."

Fudge looked around at the portrait of the ugly little man wearing the long curly silver wig, who was digging in his ears. He said, "He'll be here in a moment, he's just finishing a letter to Dumbledore."

"I wish him luck," said Fudge, sounding bitter for the first time. "I've been writing to Dumbledore twice a day for the past week to persuade the boy, I might still be . . . Well, maybe Scrimgeour will have more success."

Fudge subsided into what was clearly an aggrieved silence, but it was broken almost immediately by the portrait, which spoke.

"To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Requesting a meeting. Urgent. Kindly respond immediately. Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic."

"Yes, yes, fine," said the Prime Minister distractedly, and he barely flinched as the flames in the grate turned emerald green. In their heart, disgorging him moments later onto the antique rug.

Fudge got to his feet and, after a moment's hesitation, the Prime Minister did the same, watching the new arrival stride into the room.

The Prime Minister's first, foolish thought was that Rufus Scrimgeour looked rather like an old lion. There were streaks of grey in his hair, and he had keen yellowish eyes behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles and a certain rangy, loping grace even though he was old.

He had a certain air of wisdom and toughness; the Prime Minister thought he understood why the Wizarding community preferred Scrimgeour to Fudge.

"How do you do?" said the Prime Minister politely, holding out his hand.

Scrimgeour grasped it briefly, his eyes scanning the room, then pulled out a wand from under his robes.

"Fudge told you everything?" he asked, striding over to the door and tapping the keyhole with his wand. The Prime Minister followed him.

"Er — yes," said the Prime Minister. "And if you don't mind, I'd rather that door remained unlocked."

"I'd rather not be interrupted," said Scrimgeour shortly, "or watched," he added, pointing his wand at the windows, so that the fire would not go out. "Let's get down to business. First of all, we need to discuss your security."

The Prime Minister drew himself up to his fullest height and replied, "I am perfectly happy with the security I've already arranged."

"Well, we're not," Scrimgeour cut in. "It'll be a poor lookout for the Muggles if their Prime Minister gets put under the thumb of a wizard."

"I'm not getting rid of Kingsley Shacklebolt, if that's what you're suggesting!" said the Prime Minister hotly. "He's highly respected."

"That's because he's a wizard," said Scrimgeour, without a flicker of a smile. "A highly trained Auror, who has been as successful as any wizard could be."

"Now, wait a moment!" declared the Prime Minister. "You can't just put your people into my office, I decide who works in my office."

"I thought you were happy with Shacklebolt?" said Scrimgeour coldly.

"I am — that's to say, I was —"

"Then there's no problem, is there?" said Scrimgeour.

"I . . . well, as long as Shacklebolt's work continues to be . . . er . . . excellent," said the Prime Minister lamely, but Scrimgeour was not listening.

"Now, about Herbert Chorley, your Junior Minister," he continued. "The one who has been entertaining the public by performing magic tricks."

"What about him?" asked the Prime Minister.

"He has clearly reacted to a poorly performed Imperius Curse," said Scrimgeour. "It's addled his brains, but he could be useful."

"He's only quacking!" said the Prime Minister weakly. "Surely a bit of a rest . . . Maybe go easy on the drink . . ."

"A team of Healers from St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries are examining him as we speak. So far, they think it best that we remove him from Muggle society for a while."

"I . . . well . . . He'll be all right, won't he?" said the Prime Minister anxiously.

Scrimgeour merely shrugged, already moving back toward the fireplace.

"Well, that's really all I had to say. I will keep you posted of developments, Prime Minister — or, at least, I shall probably do so. I shall send Fudge here. He has consented to stay on in an advisory capacity."

Fudge attempted to smile, but was unsuccessful; he merely looked as though he had a toothache. Scrimgeour was a man of few words. He looked at the fire green. The Prime Minister gazed hopelessly at the pair of them for a moment, then the words he had fought to say came back to him.

"But for heaven's sake — you're wizards! You can do magic! Surely you can sort out — well — anything!"

Scrimgeour turned slowly on the spot and exchanged an incredulous look with Fudge, who really did manage a smile. "You can do magic too, Prime Minister."

And with that, the two wizards stepped one after the other into the bright green fire and vanished.

CHAPTER TWO

SPINNER'S END

Many miles away the chilly mist that had pressed against the Prime Minister's windows drifted over a dirty river that had been a mill race, relic of a disused mill, reared up, shadowy and ominous. There was no sound apart from the whisper of the black water down the bank to nose hopefully at some old fish-and-chip wrappings in the tall grass.

But then, with a very faint pop, a slim, hooded figure appeared out of thin air on the edge of the river. The fox froze, seemed to take its bearings for a few moments, then set off with light, quick strides, its long cloak rustling over the grass. With a second and louder pop, another hooded figure materialized.

"Wait!"

The harsh cry startled the fox, now crouching almost flat in the undergrowth. It leapt from its hiding place and up the bank, only to fall ell back to the ground, dead.

The second figure turned over the animal with its toe.

"Just a fox," said a woman's voice dismissively from under the hood. "I thought perhaps an Auror — Cissy, wait!"

But her quarry, who had paused and looked back at the flash of light, was already scrambling up the bank the fox had just left.

"Cissy — Narcissa — listen to me —"

The second woman caught the first and seized her arm, but the other wrenched it away.

"Go back, Bella!"

"You must listen to me!"

"I've listened already. I've made my decision. Leave me alone!"

The woman named Narcissa gained the top of the bank, where a line of old railings separated the river from a narrow path. On the y side they stood looking across the road at the rows and rows of dilapidated brick houses, their windows dull and boarded up.

"He lives here?" asked Bella in a voice of contempt. "Here? In this Muggle dunghill? We must be the first of our kind ever to see this place."

But Narcissa was not listening; she had slipped through a gap in the rusty railings and was already hurrying across the road.

"Cissy, wait!"

Bella followed, her cloak streaming behind, and saw Narcissa darting through an alley between the houses into a second courtyard. The two women were running between patches of light and deep darkness. The pursuer caught up with her prey just as she was about to turn a corner. She seized Bella by the wrist of her arm and swinging her around so that they faced each other.

"Cissy, you must not do this, you can't trust him —"

"The Dark Lord trusts him, doesn't he?"

"The Dark Lord is . . . I believe . . . mistaken," Bella panted, and her eyes gleamed momentarily under her hood as she looked at her sister. "We were told not to speak of the plan to anyone. This is a betrayal of the Dark Lord's —"

"Let go, Bella!" snarled Narcissa, and she drew a wand from beneath her cloak, holding it threateningly in the other's face.

"Cissy, your own sister? You wouldn't —"

"There is nothing I wouldn't do anymore!" Narcissa breathed, a note of hysteria in her voice, and as she brought down the wand she let go of her sister's arm as though burned.

"Narcissa!"

But Narcissa had rushed ahead. Rubbing her hand, her pursuer followed again, keeping her distance now, as they moved through the narrow streets. Narcissa hurried up a street named Spinner's End, over which the towering mill chimney seemed to hover like a giant and dark shadow. She passed boarded and broken windows, until she reached the very last house, where a dim light glimmered through the curtains. She had knocked on the door before Bella, cursing under her breath, had caught up. Together they stood waiting, patiently, as the wind was carried to them on the night breeze. After a few seconds, they heard movement behind the door and it opened a crack. A woman with long black hair parted in curtains around a sallow face and black eyes.

Narcissa threw back her hood. She was so pale that she seemed to shine in the darkness; the long blonde hair streamed down her back.

"Narcissa!" said the man, opening the door a little wider, so that the light fell upon her and her sister too. "What a pleasure to see you."

"Severus," she said in a strained whisper. "May I speak to you? It's urgent."

"But of course."

He stood back to allow her to pass him into the house. Her still-hooded sister followed without invitation.

"Snape," she said curtly as she passed him.

"Bellatrix," he replied, his thin mouth curling into a slightly mocking smile as he closed the door with a snap behind them.

They had stepped directly into a tiny sitting room, which had the feeling of a dark, padded cell. The walls were completely covered in leather; a threadbare sofa, an old armchair, and a rickety table stood grouped together in a pool of dim light cast by a single lamp. The air of neglect, as though it was not usually inhabited.

Snape gestured Narcissa to the sofa. She threw off her cloak, cast it aside, and sat down, staring at her white and trembling hands. She re slowly. Dark as her sister was fair, with heavily lidded eyes and a strong jaw, she did not take her gaze from Snape's face.

"So, what can I do for you?" Snape asked, settling himself in the armchair opposite the two sisters.

"We . . . we are alone, aren't we?" Narcissa asked quietly.

"Yes, of course. Well, Wormtail's here, but we're not counting vermin, are we?"

He pointed his wand at the wall of books behind him and with a bang, a hidden door flew open, revealing a narrow staircase.

"As you have clearly realized, Wormtail, we have guests," said Snape lazily.

The man crept, hunchbacked, down the last few steps and moved into the room. He had small, watery eyes, a pointed nose, and a thin, pale face. He was dressed in a simple black robe, and he held a silver glove in his right hand, which looked as though it was encased in a bright silver glove.

"Narcissa!" he said, in a squeaky voice. "And Bellatrix! How charming —"

"Wormtail will get us drinks, if you'd like them," said Snape. "And then he will return to his bedroom."

Wormtail winced as though Snape had thrown something at him.

"I am not your servant!" he squeaked, avoiding Snape's eye.

"Really? I was under the impression that the Dark Lord placed you here to assist me."

"To assist, yes — but not to make you drinks and — and clean your house!"

"I had no idea, Wormtail, that you were craving more dangerous assignments," said Snape silkily. "This can be easily a

"I can speak to him myself if I want to!"

"Of course you can," said Snape, sneering. "But in the meantime, bring us drinks. Some of the elf-made wine will do."

Wormtail hesitated for a moment, looking as though he might argue, but then turned and headed through a second door. A moment later he was back, bearing a dusty bottle and three glasses upon a tray. He dropped these on the rickety table and scurried off to get more.

Snape poured out three glasses of bloodred wine and handed two of them to the sisters. Narcissa murmured a word of thanks. This did not seem to discompose him; on the contrary, he looked rather amused.

"The Dark Lord," he said, raising his glass and draining it.

The sisters copied him. Snape refilled their glasses. As Narcissa took her second drink she said in a rush, "Severus, I'm sure you are the only one who can help me —"

Snape held up a hand to stop her, then pointed his wand again at the concealed staircase door. There was a loud bang as the door opened.

"My apologies," said Snape. "He has lately taken to listening at doors, I don't know what he means by it. . . . You were right, he is here."

She took a great, shuddering breath and started again. "Severus, I know I ought not to be here, I have been told to say nothing to anyone, but —"

"Then you ought to hold your tongue!" snarled Bellatrix. "Particularly in present company!"

"Present company?" repeated Snape sardonically. "And what am I to understand by that, Bellatrix?"

"That I don't trust you, Snape, as you very well know!"

Narcissa let out a noise that might have been a dry sob and covered her face with her hands. Snape set his glass down on the table, smiling into Bellatrix's glowering face.

"Narcissa, I think we ought to hear what Bellatrix is bursting to say; it will save tedious interruptions. Well, continue, Bellatrix."

"A hundred reasons!" she said loudly, striding out from behind the sofa to slam her glass upon the table. "Where to start? Why did you not make any attempt to find him when he vanished? What have you been doing all these years that you've lived in Dumbledore's Stone? Why did you not return at once when the Dark Lord was reborn? Where were you a few weeks ago when he told us that Harry Potter is still alive, when you have had him at your mercy for five years?"

She paused, her chest rising and falling rapidly, the color high in her cheeks. Behind her, Narcissa sat motionless, her hands clasped. Snape smiled.

"Before I answer you — oh yes, Bellatrix, I am going to answer! You can carry my words back to the others who whisper behind their backs. Dark Lord! Before I answer you, I say, let me ask a question in turn. Do you really think that the Dark Lord has not asked you to find him? I think that, had I not been able to give satisfactory answers, I would be sitting here talking to you?"

She hesitated.

"I know he believes you, but . . ."

"You think he is mistaken? Or that I have somehow hoodwinked him? Fooled the Dark Lord, the greatest wizard, the greatest wizard? Bellatrix said nothing, but looked, for the first time, a little discomfited. Snape did not press the point. He picked up his glass. It was when the Dark Lord fell. I was where he had ordered me to be, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and I was there, I am sure, that it was on the Dark Lord's orders that I took up the post?"

She nodded almost imperceptibly and then opened her mouth, but Snape forestalled her.

"You ask why I did not attempt to find him when he vanished. For the same reason that Avery, Yaxley, the Carrows, Crabbe, and many others did not attempt to find him. I believed him finished. I am not proud of it, I was wrong, but there it is. If I had known he would have very few followers left."

"He'd have me!" said Bellatrix passionately. "I, who spent many years in Azkaban for him!"

"Yes, indeed, most admirable," said Snape in a bored voice. "Of course, you weren't a lot of use to him in prison, but that's another matter."

"Gesture!" she shrieked; in her fury she looked slightly mad. "While I endured the dementors, you remained at Hogwarts!"

"Not quite," said Snape calmly. "He wouldn't give me the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, you know. Seemed to think I was not up to it."

"This was your sacrifice for the Dark Lord, not to teach your favorite subject?" she jeered. "Why did you stay there all those years? Did you believe he was dead?"

"Hardly," said Snape, "although the Dark Lord is pleased that I never deserted my post: I had sixteen years of information to give him. A useful welcome-back present than endless reminiscences of how unpleasant Azkaban is. . . ."

"But you stayed —"

"Yes, Bellatrix, I stayed," said Snape, betraying a hint of impatience for the first time. "I had a comfortable job that I preferred to the Death Eaters, you know. Dumbledore's protection kept me out of jail; it was most convenient and I used it. I repeat: I stayed, not because I was afraid, but because I was comfortable. Why you do."

"I think you next wanted to know," he pressed on, a little more loudly, for Bellatrix showed every sign of interrupting. "That is easily answered. He did not know whether he could trust me. He thought, like you, that I had turned from faith to doubt, from a strong condition, very weak, sharing the body of a mediocre wizard. He did not dare reveal himself to a former ally if that ally was a traitor."

regret that he did not trust me. He would have returned to power three years sooner. As it was, I saw only greedy and did all I could to thwart him."

Bellatrix's mouth twisted as though she had taken an unpleasant dose of medicine.

"But you didn't return when he came back, you didn't fly back to him at once when you felt the Dark Mark burn —"

"Correct. I returned two hours later. I returned on Dumbledore's orders."

"On Dumbledore's — ?" she began, in tones of outrage.

"Think!" said Snape, impatient again. "Think! By waiting two hours, just two hours, I ensured that I could remain at Hogwarts. By returning to the Dark Lord's side because I was ordered to, I have been able to pass information on Dumbledore and the Dark Mark had been growing stronger for months. I knew he must be about to return, all the Death Eaters knew! I had a plan, a move, to escape like Karkaroff, didn't I?"

"The Dark Lord's initial displeasure at my lateness vanished entirely, I assure you, when I explained that I remained faithful. The Dark Lord thought that I had left him forever, but he was wrong."

"But what use have you been?" sneered Bellatrix. "What useful information have we had from you?"

"My information has been conveyed directly to the Dark Lord," said Snape. "If he chooses not to share it with you —"

"He shares everything with me!" said Bellatrix, firing up at once. "He calls me his most loyal, his most faithful —"

"Does he?" said Snape, his voice delicately inflected to suggest his disbelief. "Does he still, after the fiasco at the Ministry?"

"That was not my fault!" said Bellatrix, flushing. "The Dark Lord has, in the past, entrusted me with his most precious secrets."

"Don't you dare — don't you dare blame my husband!" said Narcissa, in a low and deadly voice, looking up at her sister.

"There is no point apportioning blame," said Snape smoothly. "What is done, is done."

"But not by you!" said Bellatrix furiously. "No, you were once again absent while the rest of us ran dangers, were you?"

"My orders were to remain behind," said Snape. "Perhaps you disagree with the Dark Lord, perhaps you think that Death Eaters to fight the Order of the Phoenix? And — forgive me — you speak of dangers . . . you were facing six teenagers?"

"They were joined, as you very well know, by half of the Order before long!" snarled Bellatrix. "And, while we are on the subject, whereabouts of their headquarters, don't you?"

"I am not the Secret-Keeper; I cannot speak the name of the place. You understand how the enchantment works, I thought. I am on the Order. It led, as perhaps you have guessed, to the recent capture and murder of Emmeline Vance, and it contributed for finishing him off."

He inclined his head and toasted her. Her expression did not soften.

"You are avoiding my last question, Snape. Harry Potter. You could have killed him at any point in the past five years."

"Have you discussed this matter with the Dark Lord?" asked Snape.

"He . . . lately, we . . . I am asking you, Snape!"

"If I had murdered Harry Potter, the Dark Lord could not have used his blood to regenerate, making him invincible —"

"You claim you foresaw his use of the boy!" she jeered.

"I do not claim it; I had no idea of his plans; I have already confessed that I thought the Dark Lord dead. I am merely lucky I survived, at least until a year ago. . . ."

"But why did you keep him alive?"

"Have you not understood me? It was only Dumbledore's protection that was keeping me out of Azkaban! Do you disagree with me? But there was more to it than that. I should remind you that when Potter first arrived at Hogwarts there were six of us. There was a great Dark wizard, which was how he had survived the Dark Lord's attack. Indeed, many of the Dark Lord's old friends rallied once more. I was curious, I admit it, and not at all inclined to murder him the moment he set foot in the castle."

"Of course, it became apparent to me very quickly that he had no extraordinary talent at all. He has fought his way out of luck and more talented friends. He is mediocre to the last degree, though as obnoxious and self-satisfied as was his father. He belongs at Hogwarts, where I believe he scarcely belongs, but kill him, or allow him to be killed in front of me? I would have been pleased to do either."

"And through all this we are supposed to believe Dumbledore has never suspected you?" asked Bellatrix. "He has not?"

"I have played my part well," said Snape. "And you overlook Dumbledore's greatest weakness: He has to believe the best of his staff, fresh from my Death Eater days, and he embraced me with open arms — though, as I say, never allowing me to be a wizard — oh yes, he has," (for Bellatrix had made a scathing noise), "the Dark Lord acknowledges it. I am pleased that the Dark Lord last month shook him. He has since sustained a serious injury because his reactions are slower than those of Severus Snape, and therein lies my great value to the Dark Lord."

Bellatrix still looked unhappy, though she appeared unsure how best to attack Snape next. Taking advantage of her silence,

"Now . . . you came to ask me for help, Narcissa?"

Narcissa looked up at him, her face eloquent with despair.

"Yes, Severus. I — I think you are the only one who can help me, I have nowhere else to turn. Lucius is in jail and . . ."

She closed her eyes and two large tears seeped from beneath her eyelids.

"The Dark Lord has forbidden me to speak of it," Narcissa continued, her eyes still closed. "He wishes none to know of my situation."

"If he has forbidden it, you ought not to speak," said Snape at once. "The Dark Lord's word is law."

Narcissa gasped as though he had doused her with cold water. Bellatrix looked satisfied for the first time since she had arrived.

"There!" she said triumphantly to her sister. "Even Snape says so: You were told not to talk, so hold your silence!"

But Snape had gotten to his feet and strode to the small window, peered through the curtains at the deserted street outside, and returned, frowning.

"It so happens that I know of the plan," he said in a low voice. "I am one of the few the Dark Lord has told. Nevertheless, I have not been guilty of great treachery to the Dark Lord."

"I thought you must know about it!" said Narcissa, breathing more freely. "He trusts you so, Severus. . . ."

"You know about the plan?" said Bellatrix, her fleeting expression of satisfaction replaced by a look of outrage. "You know he's only sixteen!"

"Certainly," said Snape. "But what help do you require, Narcissa? If you are imagining I can persuade the Dark Lord to spare Draco . . ."

"Severus," she whispered, tears sliding down her pale cheeks. "My son . . . my only son . . ."

"Draco should be proud," said Bellatrix indifferently. "The Dark Lord is granting him a great honor. And I will say this: he has a lad of a chance to prove himself, excited at the prospect —"

Narcissa began to cry in earnest, gazing beseechingly all the while at Snape.

"That's because he is sixteen and has no idea what lies in store! Why, Severus? Why my son? It is too dangerous! This is not a game!"

Snape said nothing. He looked away from the sight of her tears as though they were indecent, but he could not pretend to be in charge. He got himself captured, along with how many others, and failed to retrieve the prophecy into the hands of the one he had chosen.

"That's why he's chosen Draco, isn't it?" she persisted. "To punish Lucius?"

"If Draco succeeds," said Snape, still looking away from her, "he will be honored above all others."

"But he won't succeed!" sobbed Narcissa. "How can he, when the Dark Lord himself —?"

Bellatrix gasped; Narcissa seemed to lose her nerve.

"I only meant . . . that nobody has yet succeeded. . . . Severus . . . please . . . You are, you have always been, Draco's favorite. I beg you. . . . You are the Dark Lord's favorite, his most trusted advisor. . . . Will you speak to him, persuade him —?"

"The Dark Lord will not be persuaded, and I am not stupid enough to attempt it," said Snape flatly. "I cannot pretend to be in charge. He got himself captured, along with how many others, and failed to retrieve the prophecy into the hands of the one he had chosen."

"Then I am right, he has chosen Draco in revenge!" choked Narcissa. "He does not mean him to succeed, he wants him to fail!"

When Snape said nothing, Narcissa seemed to lose what little self-restraint she still possessed. Standing up, she staggered to his, her tears falling onto his chest, she gasped, "You could do it. You could do it instead of Draco, Severus. You would be beyond all of us —"

Snape caught hold of her wrists and removed her clutching hands. Looking down into her tearstained face, he said softly, "I have decided that Draco should try first. You see, in the unlikely event that Draco succeeds, I shall be able to remain at Hogwarts. In other words, it doesn't matter to him if Draco is killed!"

"The Dark Lord is very angry," repeated Snape quietly. "He failed to hear the prophecy. You know as well as I do, Narcissa. She crumpled, falling at his feet, sobbing and moaning on the floor."

"My only son . . . my only son . . ."

"You should be proud!" said Bellatrix ruthlessly. "If I had sons, I would be glad to give them up to the service of the Dark Lord. Narcissa gave a little scream of despair and clutched at her long blonde hair. Snape stooped, seized her by the arms, and forced her more wine and forced the glass into her hand."

"Narcissa, that's enough. Drink this. Listen to me."

She quieted a little; slopping wine down herself, she took a shaky sip.

"It might be possible . . . for me to help Draco."

She sat up, her face paper-white, her eyes huge.

"Severus — oh, Severus — you would help him? Would you look after him, see he comes to no harm?"

"I can try."

She flung away her glass; it skidded across the table as she slid off the sofa into a kneeling position at Snape's feet, sobbing.

"If you are there to protect him . . . Severus, will you swear it? Will you make the Unbreakable Vow?"

"The Unbreakable Vow?"

Snape's expression was blank, unreadable. Bellatrix, however, let out a cackle of triumphant laughter.

"Aren't you listening, Narcissa? Oh, he'll try, I'm sure. . . . The usual empty words, the usual slithering out of action . . ."

Snape did not look at Bellatrix. His black eyes were fixed upon Narcissa's tear-filled blue ones as she continued to clutch at his arm.

"Certainly, Narcissa, I shall make the Unbreakable Vow," he said quietly. "Perhaps your sister will consent to be our Blood-Partner?"

Bellatrix's mouth fell open. Snape lowered himself so that he was kneeling opposite Narcissa. Beneath Bellatrix's astonished gaze, he took her hand.

"You will need your wand, Bellatrix," said Snape coldly.

She drew it, still looking astonished.

"And you will need to move a little closer," he said.

She stepped forward so that she stood over them, and placed the tip of her wand on their linked hands.

Narcissa spoke.

"Will you, Severus, watch over my son, Draco, as he attempts to fulfill the Dark Lord's wishes?"

"I will," said Snape.

A thin tongue of brilliant flame issued from the wand and wound its way around their hands like a red-hot wire.

"And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?"

"I will," said Snape.

A second tongue of flame shot from the wand and interlinked with the first, making a fine, glowing chain.

"And, should it prove necessary . . . if it seems Draco will fail . . ." whispered Narcissa (Snape's hand twitched within hers). "Do you know that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?"

There was a moment's silence. Bellatrix watched, her wand upon their clasped hands, her eyes wide.

"I will," said Snape.

Bellatrix's astounded face glowed red in the blaze of a third tongue of flame, which shot from the wand, twisted with
, like a rope, like a fiery snake.

CHAPTER THREE

WILL AND WON'T

Harry Potter was snoring loudly. He had been sitting in a chair beside his bedroom window for the best part of four h
n asleep with one side of his face pressed against the cold windowpane, his glasses askew and his mouth wide open
ange glare of the streetlamp outside, and the artificial light drained his face of all color, so that he looked ghostly be
The room was strewn with various possessions and a good smattering of rubbish. Owl feathers, apple cores, and sw
piggledly among the tangled robes on his bed, and a mess of newspapers sat in a puddle of light on his desk. The hea
HARRY POTTER: THE CHOSEN ONE?

Rumors continue to fly about the mysterious recent disturbance at the Ministry of Magic, during which He-Who-Mus
"We're not allowed to talk about it, don't ask me anything," said one agitated Obliviator, who refused to give his name
Nevertheless, highly placed sources within the Ministry have confirmed that the disturbance centered on the fabled
Though Ministry spokeswizards have hitherto refused even to confirm the existence of such a place, a growing numb
ing sentences in Azkaban for trespass and attempted theft were attempting to steal a prophecy. The nature of that p
Harry Potter, the only person ever known to have survived the Killing Curse, and who is also known to have been at t
call Potter "the Chosen One," believing that the prophecy names him as the only one who will be able to rid us of He
The current whereabouts of the prophecy, if it exists, are unknown, although (ctd. page 2, column 5)

A second newspaper lay beside the first. This one bore the headline:

SCRIMGEOUR SUCCEEDS FUDGE

Most of this front page was taken up with a large black-and-white picture of a man with a lionlike mane of thick hair
waving at the ceiling.

Rufus Scrimgeour, previously Head of the Auror office in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has succeeded
een greeted with enthusiasm by the Wizarding community, though rumors of a rift between the new Minister and Al
aced within hours of Scrimgeour taking office.

Scrimgeour's representatives admitted that he had met with Dumbledore at once upon taking possession of the top
bledore is known to (ctd. page 3, column 2)

To the left of this paper sat another, which had been folded so that a story bearing the title MINISTRY GUARANTEES S
Newly appointed Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, spoke today of the tough new measures taken by his Ministry
chcraft and Wizardry this autumn.

"For obvious reasons, the Ministry will not be going into detail about its stringent new security plans," said the Minist
nsive spells and charms, a complex array of counterurses, and a small task force of Aurors dedicated solely to the p
Most seem reassured by the new Minister's tough stand on student safety. Said Mrs. Augusta Longbottom, "My gran
ght the Death Eaters alongside him at the Ministry in June and —"

But the rest of this story was obscured by the large birdcage standing on top of it. Inside it was a magnificent snowy
iveling occasionally to gaze at her snoring master. Once or twice she clicked her beak impatiently, but Harry was too
A large trunk stood in the very middle of the room. Its lid was open; it looked expectant; yet it was almost empty but
broken quills that coated the very bottom. Nearby, on the floor, lay a purple leaflet emblazoned with the words:

——— ISSUED ON BEHALF OF ———

The Ministry of Magic

PROTECTING YOUR HOME AND FAMILY AGAINST DARK FORCES

The Wizarding community is currently under threat from an organization calling itself the Death Eaters. Observing th
r family, and your home from attack.

1. You are advised not to leave the house alone.
2. Particular care should be taken during the hours of darkness. Wherever possible, arrange to complete journeys be
3. Review the security arrangements around your house, making sure that all family members are aware of emergen
e of underage family members, Side-Along-Apparition.
4. Agree on security questions with close friends and family so as to detect Death Eaters masquerading as others by
5. Should you feel that a family member, colleague, friend, or neighbor is acting in a strange manner, contact the Ma
r the Imperius Curse (see page 4).
6. Should the Dark Mark appear over any dwelling place or other building, DO NOT ENTER, but contact the Auror offi
7. Unconfirmed sightings suggest that the Death Eaters may now be using Inferi (see page 10). Any sighting of an Inf
IMMEDIATELY.

Harry grunted in his sleep and his face slid down the window an inch or so, making his glasses still more lopsided, bu
years ago, ticked loudly on the sill, showing one minute to eleven. Beside it, held in place by Harry's relaxed hand, w
rry had read this letter so often since its arrival three days ago that although it had been delivered in a tightly furled
Dear Harry,

If it is convenient to you, I shall call at number four, Privet Drive this coming Friday at eleven P.M. to escort you to the end of your school holidays.

If you are agreeable, I should also be glad of your assistance in a matter to which I hope to attend on the way to the Ministry. Kindly send your answer by return of this owl. Hoping to see you this Friday,

I am, yours most sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Though he already knew it by heart, Harry had been stealing glances at this missive every few minutes since seven o'clock. He looked out of his bedroom window, which had a reasonable view of both ends of Privet Drive. He knew it was pointless to keep waiting for the letter-delivering owl, as requested, and all he could do now was wait: Either Dumbledore was going to come, or he was not. But Harry had not packed. It just seemed too good to be true that he was going to be rescued from the Dursleys after all. He was feeling that something was going to go wrong — his reply to Dumbledore's letter might have gone astray; Dumbledore's letter might not be from Dumbledore at all, but a trick or joke or trap. Harry had not been able to face packing and then being left alone. The thought of the possibility of a journey was to shut his snowy owl, Hedwig, safely in her cage.

The minute hand on the alarm clock reached the number twelve and, at that precise moment, the streetlamp outside his window flickered. Harry awoke as though the sudden darkness were an alarm. Hastily straightening his glasses and unsticking his cheek from the pillow, he squinted down at the pavement. A tall figure in a long, billowing cloak was walking up the garden path.

Harry jumped up as though he had received an electric shock, knocked over his chair, and started snatching anything he could lay his hands on from the trunk. Even as he lobbed a set of robes, two spellbooks, and a packet of crisps across the room, the doorbell rang. "Who's there? The blazes is calling at this time of night?"

Harry froze with a brass telescope in one hand and a pair of trainers in the other. He had completely forgotten to warn the Dursleys. Nervously and close to laughter, he clambered over the trunk and wrenched open his bedroom door in time to hear a deep voice. "Has told you I would be coming for him?"

Harry ran down the stairs two at a time, coming to an abrupt halt several steps from the bottom, as long experience had taught him to do as possible. There in the doorway stood a tall, thin man with waist-length silver hair and beard. Half-moon spectacles with a long, thin black traveling cloak and a pointed hat. Vernon Dursley, whose mustache was quite as bushy as Dumbledore's, though he looked like a visitor as though he could not believe his tiny eyes.

"Judging by your look of stunned disbelief, Harry did not warn you that I was coming," said Dumbledore pleasantly. "I am sorry about the house. It is unwise to linger overlong on doorsteps in these troubled times."

He stepped smartly over the threshold and closed the front door behind him.

"It is a long time since my last visit," said Dumbledore, peering down his crooked nose at Uncle Vernon. "I must say, you look a little worse. Vernon Dursley said nothing at all. Harry did not doubt that speech would return to him, and soon — the vein pulsing in his forehead about Dumbledore seemed to have robbed him temporarily of breath. It might have been the blatant wizardishness of the man, but Harry could sense that here was a man whom it would be very difficult to bully.

"Ah, good evening Harry," said Dumbledore, looking up at him through his half-moon glasses with a most satisfied expression. These words seemed to rouse Uncle Vernon. It was clear that as far as he was concerned, any man who could look at him like that was to be feared.

"I don't mean to be rude —" he began, in a tone that threatened rudeness in every syllable.

"— yet, sadly, accidental rudeness occurs alarmingly often," Dumbledore finished the sentence gravely. "Best to say nothing. The kitchen door had opened, and there stood Harry's aunt, wearing rubber gloves and a housecoat over her nightgown, scrubbing the kitchen surfaces. Her rather horsey face registered nothing but shock.

"Albus Dumbledore," said Dumbledore, when Uncle Vernon failed to effect an introduction. "We have corresponded, but I am sorry that he had once sent her an exploding letter, but Aunt Petunia did not challenge the term. "And this must be your son, Harry. Dudley had that moment peered round the living room door. His large, blond head rising out of the striped collar of his pajamas with a mixture of interest and fear. Dumbledore waited a moment or two, apparently to see whether any of the Dursleys were going to speak.

"Shall we assume that you have invited me into your sitting room?"

Dudley scrambled out of the way as Dumbledore passed him. Harry, still clutching the telescope and trainers, jumped into the armchair nearest the fire and was taking in the surroundings with an expression of benign interest. He looked at the fireplace and said, "Aren't — aren't we leaving, sir?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Yes, indeed we are, but there are a few matters we need to discuss first," said Dumbledore. "And I would prefer not to burden your hospitality only a little longer."

"You will, will you?"

Vernon Dursley had entered the room, Petunia at his shoulder, and Dudley skulking behind them both.

"Yes," said Dumbledore simply, "I shall."

He drew his wand so rapidly that Harry barely saw it; with a casual flick, the sofa zoomed forward and knocked the table and chairs aside, landing upon it in a heap. Another flick of the wand and the sofa zoomed back to its original position.

"We may as well be comfortable," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

As he replaced his wand in his pocket, Harry saw that his hand was blackened and shriveled; it looked as though his skin had been scorched. "Sir — what happened to your — ?"

"Later, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Please sit down."

Harry took the remaining armchair, choosing not to look at the Dursleys, who seemed stunned into silence.

"I would assume that you were going to offer me refreshment," Dumbledore said to Uncle Vernon, "but the evidence hness."

A third twitch of the wand, and a dusty bottle and five glasses appeared in midair. The bottle tipped and poured a golden liquid which then floated to each person in the room.

"Madam Rosmerta's finest oak-matured mead," said Dumbledore, raising his glass to Harry, who caught hold of his goblet and drank it immensely. The Dursleys, after quick, scared looks at one another, tried to ignore their glasses completely, and drank from their heads. Harry could not suppress a suspicion that Dumbledore was rather enjoying himself.

"Well, Harry," said Dumbledore, turning toward him, "a difficulty has arisen which I hope you will be able to solve for me. I must tell you that Sirius's will was discovered a week ago and that he left you everything he owned."

Over on the sofa, Uncle Vernon's head turned, but Harry did not look at him, nor could he think of anything to say except "Yes."

"This is, in the main, fairly straightforward," Dumbledore went on. "You add a reasonable amount of gold to your account. The slightly problematic part of the legacy —"

"His godfather's dead?" said Uncle Vernon loudly from the sofa. Dumbledore and Harry both turned to look at him. The Dursleys looked at Vernon's head; he attempted to beat it away. "He's dead? His godfather?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore. He did not ask Harry why he had not confided in the Dursleys. "Our problem," he continued, "is that he left you number twelve, Grimmauld Place."

"He's been left a house?" said Uncle Vernon greedily, his small eyes narrowing, but nobody answered him.

"You can keep using it as headquarters," said Harry. "I don't care. You can have it, I don't really want it." Harry never wanted to leave if he could help it. He thought he would be haunted forever by the memory of Sirius prowling its dark musty rooms and corridors.

"That is generous," said Dumbledore. "We have, however, vacated the building temporarily."

"Why?"

"Well," said Dumbledore, ignoring the mutterings of Uncle Vernon, who was now being rapped smartly over the head by the house-elf, "the house was handed down the direct line, to the next male with the name of 'Black.' Sirius was the very last of the Blacks, and he and his wife were childless. While his will makes it perfectly plain that he wants you to have the house, it is nevertheless possible for him to ensure that it cannot be owned by anyone other than a pureblood."

A vivid image of the shrieking, spitting portrait of Sirius's mother that hung in the hall of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, came into Harry's mind.

"Quite," said Dumbledore. "And if such an enchantment exists, then the ownership of the house is most likely to pass to Sirius's only living cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange."

Without realizing what he was doing, Harry sprang to his feet; the telescope and trainers in his lap rolled across the floor.

"No," he said.

"Well, obviously we would prefer that she didn't get it either," said Dumbledore calmly. "The situation is fraught with difficulties. The Dursleys have placed upon it, for example, making it Unplottable, will hold now that ownership has passed from Sirius's will. It is not at any moment. Naturally we had to move out until such time as we have clarified the position."

"But how are you going to find out if I'm allowed to own it?"

"Fortunately," said Dumbledore, "there is a simple test."

He placed his empty glass on a small table beside his chair, but before he could do anything else, Uncle Vernon shouted. Harry looked around; all three of the Dursleys were cowering with their arms over their heads as their glasses bounced off the floor.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Dumbledore politely, and he raised his wand again. All three glasses vanished. "But it would have been better if they had broken. It looked as though Uncle Vernon was bursting with any number of unpleasant retorts, but he merely shrank back into his chair, staring at his small piggy eyes on Dumbledore's wand.

"You see," Dumbledore said, turning back to Harry and again speaking as though Uncle Vernon had not uttered, "if you can get Kreacher to agree to go and live with you, then the house is yours. He flicked his wand for a fifth time. There was a loud crack, and a house-elf appeared, with a snout for a nose, giant tusks, and a shag carpet and covered in grimy rags. Aunt Petunia let out a hair-raising shriek; nothing this filthy had entered the house in a hundred years. Kreacher stood a few feet off the floor and sat with them raised almost above his head, as though he thought the creature might run up and bite him.

"Kreacher," finished Dumbledore.

"Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't!" croaked the house-elf, quite as loudly as Uncle Vernon, stamping his feet. "Miss Bellatrix, oh yes, Kreacher belongs to the Blacks, Kreacher wants his new mistress, Kreacher won't go to the Potter house."

"As you can see, Harry," said Dumbledore loudly, over Kreacher's continued croaks of "won't, won't, won't," "Kreacher is not going to go with you. I don't care," said Harry again, looking with disgust at the writhing, stamping house-elf. "I don't want him."

"Won't, won't, won't, won't —"

"You would prefer him to pass into the ownership of Bellatrix Lestrange? Bearing in mind that he has lived at the head of the house for a hundred years?"

"Won't, won't, won't, won't —"

Harry stared at Dumbledore. He knew that Kreacher could not be permitted to go and live with Bellatrix Lestrange, but he knew that the house-elf, who had betrayed Sirius, was repugnant.

"Give him an order," said Dumbledore. "If he has passed into your ownership, he will have to obey. If not, then we shall have to deal with a very naughty mistress."

"Won't, won't, won't, WON'T!"

Kreacher's voice had risen to a scream. Harry could think of nothing to say, except, "Kreacher, shut up!" It looked for a moment as though Kreacher was going to choke. He grabbed his throat, his mouth still working furiously, threw himself face forward onto the carpet (Aunt Petunia whimpered) and beat the floor with his hands and feet, giving out a series of guttural sounds.

"Well, that simplifies matters," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "It seems that Sirius knew what he was doing. You are the only one who could have done that."

"Do I — do I have to keep him with me?" Harry asked, aghast, as Kreacher thrashed around at his feet.

"Not if you don't want to," said Dumbledore. "If I might make a suggestion, you could send him to Hogwarts to work in the kitchens. It would be an eye on him."

"Yeah," said Harry in relief, "yeah, I'll do that. Er — Kreacher — I want you to go to Hogwarts and work in the kitchens. Kreacher, who was now lying flat on his back with his arms and legs in the air, gave Harry one upside-down look of disbelief.

"Good," said Dumbledore. "There is also the matter of the hippogriff, Buckbeak. Hagrid has been looking after him since the accident. It would be better for him to make different arrangements —"

"No," said Harry at once, "he can stay with Hagrid. I think Buckbeak would prefer that."

"Hagrid will be delighted," said Dumbledore, smiling. "He was thrilled to see Buckbeak again. Incidentally, we have decided to keep the 'Witherwings' for the time being, though I doubt that the Ministry would ever guess he is the hippogriff they once sent to the Ministry."

"Erm . . ."

"Doubtful that I would turn up?" Dumbledore suggested shrewdly.

"I'll just go and — er — finish off," said Harry hastily, hurrying to pick up his fallen telescope and trainers. It took him a little over ten minutes to track down everything he needed; at last he had managed to extract his Invisibility Cloak from the trunk, and forced the lid of his trunk shut on his cauldron. Then, heaving his trunk in one hand and his wand in the other, he went out.

He was disappointed to discover that Dumbledore was not waiting in the hall, which meant that he had to return to the Dursleys. Nobody was talking. Dumbledore was humming quietly, apparently quite at his ease, but the atmosphere was thicker than usual.

"Professor — I'm ready now."

"Good," said Dumbledore. "Just one last thing, then." And he turned to speak to the Dursleys once more.

"As you will no doubt be aware, Harry comes of age in a year's time —"

"No," said Aunt Petunia, speaking for the first time since Dumbledore's arrival.

"I'm sorry?" said Dumbledore politely.

"No, he doesn't. He's a month younger than Dudley, and Dudders doesn't turn eighteen until the year after next."

"Ah," said Dumbledore pleasantly, "but in the Wizarding world, we come of age at seventeen."

Uncle Vernon muttered, "Preposterous," but Dumbledore ignored him.

"Now, as you already know, the wizard called Lord Voldemort has returned to this country. The Wizarding community has already attempted to kill him on a number of occasions, is in even greater danger now than the day when I left him in the forest. He has survived his parents' murder and expressing the hope that you would care for him as though he were your own."

Dumbledore paused, and although his voice remained light and calm, and he gave no obvious sign of anger, Harry felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

"You did not do as I asked. You have never treated Harry as a son. He has known nothing but neglect and often cruelty. He has escaped the appalling damage you have inflicted upon the unfortunate boy sitting between you."

Both Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon looked around instinctively, as though expecting to see someone other than Dumbledore.

"Us — mistreat Dudders? What d'you — ?" began Uncle Vernon furiously, but Dumbledore raised his finger for silence.

"The magic I evoked fifteen years ago means that Harry has powerful protection while he can still call this house 'home'. No matter how badly treated, you have at least, grudgingly, allowed him houseroom. This magic will cease to operate the moment he becomes a man. I ask only this: that you allow Harry to return, once more, to this house, before his seventeenth birthday."

None of the Dursleys said anything. Dudley was frowning slightly, as though he was still trying to work out when he had been tricked. Something stuck in his throat; Aunt Petunia, however, was oddly flushed.

"Well, Harry . . . time for us to be off," said Dumbledore at last, standing up and straightening his long black cloak. "Until next year, then. Goodnight."

Though that moment could wait forever as far as they were concerned, and after doffing his hat, he swept from the room.

"Bye," said Harry hastily to the Dursleys, and followed Dumbledore, who paused beside Harry's trunk, upon which he had placed his wand.

"We do not want to be encumbered by these just now," he said, pulling out his wand again. "I shall send them to the Ministry. The Invisibility Cloak . . . just in case."

Harry extracted his Cloak from his trunk with some difficulty, trying not to show Dumbledore the mess within. When he had done so, he waved his wand and the trunk, cage, and Hedwig vanished. Dumbledore then waved his wand again, and the front door closed.

"And now, Harry, let us step out into the night and pursue that flighty temptress, adventure."

CHAPTER FOUR

HORACE SLUGHORN

Despite the fact that he had spent every waking moment of the past few days hoping desperately that Dumbledore would come to Privet Drive, Harry was not surprised when the headmaster set off down Privet Drive together. He had never had a proper conversation with the headmaster outside of Hogwarts, and his last face-to-face encounter kept intruding too, and it rather heightened Harry's sense of embarrassment; he had shown

h several of Dumbledore's most prized possessions.

Dumbledore, however, seemed completely relaxed.

"Keep your wand at the ready, Harry," he said brightly.

"But I thought I'm not allowed to use magic outside school, sir?"

"If there is an attack," said Dumbledore, "I give you permission to use any counterjinx or curse that might occur to you tonight."

"Why not, sir?"

"You are with me," said Dumbledore simply. "This will do, Harry."

He came to an abrupt halt at the end of Privet Drive.

"You have not, of course, passed your Apparition Test," he said.

"No," said Harry. "I thought you had to be seventeen?"

"You do," said Dumbledore. "So you will need to hold on to my arm very tightly. My left, if you don't mind — as you have."

Harry gripped Dumbledore's proffered forearm.

"Very good," said Dumbledore. "Well, here we go."

Harry felt Dumbledore's arm twist away from him and redoubled his grip; the next thing he knew, everything went black.

He could not breathe, there were iron bands tightening around his chest; his eyeballs were being forced back into his head; his ears were ringing.

He gulped great lungfuls of cold night air and opened his streaming eyes. He felt as though he had just been forced to wake up.

He realized that Privet Drive had vanished. He and Dumbledore were now standing in what appeared to be a deserted village with a few benches.

His comprehension catching up with his senses, Harry realized that he had just Apparated for the first time.

"Are you all right?" asked Dumbledore, looking down at him solicitously. "The sensation does take some getting used to."

"I'm fine," said Harry, rubbing his ears, which felt as though they had left Privet Drive rather reluctantly. "But I think I'm dizzy."

Dumbledore smiled, drew his traveling cloak a little more tightly around his neck, and said, "This way."

He set off at a brisk pace, past an empty inn and a few houses. According to a clock on a nearby church, it was almost midnight.

"So tell me, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Your scar . . . has it been hurting at all?"

Harry raised a hand unconsciously to his forehead and rubbed the lightning-shaped mark.

"No," he said, "and I've been wondering about that. I thought it would be burning all the time now Voldemort's getting closer."

He glanced up at Dumbledore and saw that he was wearing a satisfied expression.

"I, on the other hand, thought otherwise," said Dumbledore. "Lord Voldemort has finally realized the dangerous accident that he is now employing Occlumency against you."

"Well, I'm not complaining," said Harry, who missed neither the disturbing dreams nor the startling flashes of insight. They turned a corner, passing a telephone box and a bus shelter. Harry looked sideways at Dumbledore again. "Professor?"

"Harry?"

"Er — where exactly are we?"

"This, Harry, is the charming village of Budleigh Babberton."

"And what are we doing here?"

"Ah yes, of course, I haven't told you," said Dumbledore. "Well, I have lost count of the number of times I have said that to you. It's a bit of a long story, but it's all over now. We are here to persuade an old colleague of mine to come out of retirement and return to Hogwarts."

"How can I help with that, sir?"

"Oh, I think we'll find a use for you," said Dumbledore vaguely. "Left here, Harry."

They proceeded up a steep, narrow street lined with houses. All the windows were dark. The odd chill that had lain on the air since the death of the mentors, Harry cast a look over his shoulder and grasped his wand reassuringly in his pocket.

"Professor, why couldn't we just Apparate directly into your old colleague's house?"

"Because it would be quite as rude as kicking down the front door," said Dumbledore. "Courtesy dictates that we offer to knock first. Most Wizarding dwellings are magically protected from unwanted Apparators. At Hogwarts, for instance —"

"— you can't Apparate anywhere inside the buildings or grounds," said Harry quickly. "Hermione Granger told me."

"And she is quite right. We turn left again."

The church clock chimed midnight behind them. Harry wondered why Dumbledore did not consider it rude to call on him at midnight. He had more pressing questions to ask.

"Sir, I saw in the Daily Prophet that Fudge has been sacked. . . ."

"Correct," said Dumbledore, now turning up a steep side street. "He has been replaced, as I am sure you also saw, by Cornelius Fudge."

"Is he . . . Do you think he's good?" asked Harry.

"An interesting question," said Dumbledore. "He is able, certainly. A more decisive and forceful personality than Cornelius Fudge."

"Yes, but I meant —"

"I know what you meant. Rufus is a man of action and, having fought Dark wizards for most of his working life, does not like to be replaced. He has waited, but Dumbledore did not say anything about the disagreement with Scrimgeour that the Daily Prophet reported."

he changed it. "And . . . sir . . . I saw about Madam Bones."

"Yes," said Dumbledore quietly. "A terrible loss. She was a great witch. Just up here, I think — ouch."

He had pointed with his injured hand.

"Professor, what happened to your — ?"

"I have no time to explain now," said Dumbledore. "It is a thrilling tale, I wish to do it justice."

He smiled at Harry, who understood that he was not being snubbed, and that he had permission to keep asking questions.

"Sir — I got a Ministry of Magic leaflet by owl, about security measures we should all take against the Death Eaters. . . ."

"Yes, I received one myself," said Dumbledore, still smiling. "Did you find it useful?"

"Not really."

"No, I thought not. You have not asked me, for instance, what is my favorite flavor of jam, to check that I am indeed Fudge's favorite?"

"I didn't . . ." Harry began, not entirely sure whether he was being reprimanded or not.

"For future reference, Harry, it is raspberry . . . although of course, if I were a Death Eater, I would have been sure to tell you otherwise."

"Er . . . right," said Harry. "Well, on that leaflet, it said something about Inferi. What exactly are they? The leaflet wasn't very clear."

"They are corpses," said Dumbledore calmly. "Dead bodies that have been bewitched to do a Dark wizard's bidding. I don't know how they were last powerful. . . . He killed enough people to make an army of them, of course. This is the place, Harry, just here."

They were nearing a small, neat stone house set in its own garden. Harry was too busy digesting the horrible idea of Inferi to notice anything else.

As they reached the front gate, Dumbledore stopped dead and Harry walked into him.

"Oh dear. Oh dear, dear, dear."

Harry followed his gaze up the carefully tended front path and felt his heart sink. The front door was hanging off its hinges.

Dumbledore glanced up and down the street. It seemed quite deserted.

"Wand out and follow me, Harry," he said quietly.

He opened the gate and walked swiftly and silently up the garden path, Harry at his heels, then pushed the front door open.

"Lumos."

Dumbledore's wand-tip ignited, casting its light up a narrow hallway. To the left, another door stood open. Holding his wand high, he entered the room with Harry right behind him.

A scene of total devastation met their eyes. A grandfather clock lay splintered at their feet, its face cracked, its pendulum broken. A chandelier lay on its side, its keys strewn across the floor. The wreckage of a fallen chandelier glittered nearby. Cushions lay in a heap. Pots of glass and china lay like powder over everything. Dumbledore raised his wand even higher, so that its light was as bright as the sun. Light was spattered over the wallpaper. Harry's small intake of breath made Dumbledore look around.

"Not pretty, is it?" he said heavily. "Yes, something horrible has happened here."

Dumbledore moved carefully into the middle of the room, scrutinizing the wreckage at his feet. Harry followed, gazing at the wreckage with a mixture of horror and curiosity. He looked at the piano or the overturned sofa, but there was no sign of a body.

"Maybe there was a fight and — and they dragged him off, Professor?" Harry suggested, trying not to imagine how badly he might have been hurt.

"I don't think so," said Dumbledore quietly, peering behind an overstuffed armchair lying on its side.

"You mean he's — ?"

"Still here somewhere? Yes."

And without warning, Dumbledore swooped, plunging the tip of his wand into the seat of the overstuffed armchair, where he found a small, round object.

"Good evening, Horace," said Dumbledore, straightening up again.

Harry's jaw dropped. Where a split second before there had been an armchair, there now crouched an enormously fat, round man.

Dumbledore looked at him with an aggrieved and watery eye.

"There was no need to stick the wand in that hard," he said gruffly, clambering to his feet. "It hurt."

The wandlight sparkled on his shiny pate, his prominent eyes, his enormous, silver, walruslike mustache, and the high-collared, patterned nightgown he wore over a pair of lilac silk pajamas. The top of his head barely reached Dumbledore's chin.

"What gave it away?" he grunted as he staggered to his feet, still rubbing his lower belly. He seemed remarkably unalarmed by his transformation.

"My dear Horace," said Dumbledore, looking amused, "if the Death Eaters really had come to call, the Dark Mark would have been enough to tell them where you were."

The wizard clapped a pudgy hand to his vast forehead.

"The Dark Mark," he muttered. "Knew there was something . . . ah well. Wouldn't have had time anyway, I'd only just got here."

He heaved a great sigh that made the ends of his mustache flutter.

"Would you like my assistance clearing up?" asked Dumbledore politely.

"Please," said the other.

They stood back to back, the tall thin wizard and the short round one, and waved their wands in one identical sweeping motion.

The furniture flew back to its original places; ornaments re-formed in midair, feathers zoomed into their cushions; teacups and saucers floated back to the table; oil lanterns soared onto side tables and reignited; a vast collection of splintered silver picture frames flew glittering back to the wall; a desk; rips, cracks, and holes healed everywhere, and the walls wiped themselves clean.

"What kind of blood was that, incidentally?" asked Dumbledore loudly over the chiming of the newly unsmashed grandfather clock.

"On the walls? Dragon," shouted the wizard called Horace, as, with a deafening grinding and tinkling, the chandelier sailed back to its place.

There was a final plunk from the piano, and silence.

"Yes, dragon," repeated the wizard conversationally. "My last bottle, and prices are sky-high at the moment. Still, it must be useful to you."

He stumped over to a small crystal bottle standing on top of a sideboard and held it up to the light, examining the thick, dark liquid inside.

"Hmm. Bit dusty."

He set the bottle back on the sideboard and sighed. It was then that his gaze fell upon Harry.

"Oho," he said, his large round eyes flying to Harry's forehead and the lightning-shaped scar it bore. "Oho!"

"This," said Dumbledore, moving forward to make the introduction, "is Harry Potter. Harry, this is an old friend and colleague of mine, Professor Slughorn. Slughorn turned on Dumbledore, his expression shrewd. "So that's how you thought you'd persuade me, is it? Well, thank you very much. He pushed past Harry, his face turned resolutely away with the air of a man trying to resist temptation.

"I suppose we can have a drink, at least?" asked Dumbledore. "For old time's sake?"

Slughorn hesitated.

"All right then, one drink," he said ungraciously.

Dumbledore smiled at Harry and directed him toward a chair not unlike the one that Slughorn had so recently imperiously glowing oil lamp. Harry took the seat with the distinct impression that Dumbledore, for some reason, wanted to keep him from being busy with decanters and glasses, turned to face the room again, his eyes fell immediately upon Harry.

"Hmpf," he said, looking away quickly as though frightened of hurting his eyes. "Here —" He gave a drink to Dumbledore, and then sank into the cushions of the repaired sofa and a disgruntled silence. His legs were so short they did not touch the floor.

"Well, how have you been keeping, Horace?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not so well," said Slughorn at once. "Weak chest. Wheezy. Rheumatism too. Can't move like I used to. Well, that's to be expected."

"And yet you must have moved fairly quickly to prepare such a welcome for us at such short notice," said Dumbledore.

Slughorn said, half irritably, half proudly, "Two. Didn't hear my Intruder Charm go off, I was taking a bath. Still," he added, "the fact remains that I'm an old man, Albus. A tired old man who's earned the right to a quiet life and a few creature comforts."

He certainly had those, thought Harry, looking around the room. It was stuffy and cluttered, yet nobody could say it was ugly. There were portraits and books, boxes of chocolates and plump cushions. If Harry had not known who lived there, he would have guessed it was a wizard's study.

"You're not yet as old as I am, Horace," said Dumbledore.

"Well, maybe you ought to think about retirement yourself," said Slughorn bluntly. His pale gooseberry eyes had found Harry's scar.

"You're quite right," said Dumbledore serenely, shaking back his sleeve to reveal the tips of those burned and blackened fingers. "I am undoubtedly slower than I was. But on the other hand . . ."

He shrugged and spread his hands wide, as though to say that age had its compensations, and Harry noticed a ring on his finger.

It was large, rather clumsily made of what looked like gold, and was set with a heavy black stone that had cracked down the middle. "I suppose you've seen that," said Slughorn, looking at Harry. "It's a family heirloom. I got it from my father. It's a good thing too, and Harry saw a tiny frown momentarily crease his wide forehead.

"So, all these precautions against intruders, Horace . . . are they for the Death Eaters' benefit, or mine?" asked Dumbledore.

"What would the Death Eaters want with a poor broken-down old buffer like me?" demanded Slughorn.

"I imagine that they would want you to turn your considerable talents to coercion, torture, and murder," said Dumbledore. "But I don't think you would."

Slughorn eyed Dumbledore balefully for a moment, then muttered, "I haven't given them the chance. I've been on the run from Muggle house to Muggle house — the owners of this place are on holiday in the Canary Islands — it's been very inconvenient. I've put one simple Freezing Charm on these absurd burglar alarms they use instead of Sneakoscopes and make sure the neighbors don't hear."

"Ingenious," said Dumbledore. "But it sounds a rather tiring existence for a broken-down old buffer in search of a quiet life."

"If you're going to tell me my life would be more peaceful at that pestilential school, you can save your breath, Albus. I've been here since Dolores Umbridge left! If that's how you treat teachers these days —"

"Professor Umbridge ran afoul of our centaur herd," said Dumbledore. "I think you, Horace, would have known better than to let a filthy half-breeds."

"That's what she did, did she?" said Slughorn. "Idiotic woman. Never liked her."

Harry chuckled and both Dumbledore and Slughorn looked round at him.

"Sorry," Harry said hastily. "It's just — I didn't like her either."

Dumbledore stood up rather suddenly.

"Are you leaving?" asked Slughorn at once, looking hopeful.

"No, I was wondering whether I might use your bathroom," said Dumbledore.

"Oh," said Slughorn, clearly disappointed. "Second on the left down the hall."

Dumbledore strode from the room. Once the door had closed behind him, there was silence. After a few moments, Slughorn spoke.

He shot a furtive look at Harry, then crossed to the fire and turned his back on it, warming his wide behind.

"Don't think I don't know why he's brought you," he said abruptly.

Harry merely looked at Slughorn. Slughorn's watery eyes slid over Harry's scar, this time taking in the rest of his face.

"You look very like your father."

"Yeah, I've been told," said Harry.

"Except for your eyes. You've got —"

"My mother's eyes, yeah." Harry had heard it so often he found it a bit wearing.

"Hmpf. Yes, well. You shouldn't have favorites as a teacher, of course, but she was one of mine. Your mother," Slughorn said, "was one of the brightest I ever taught. Vivacious, you know. Charming girl. I used to tell her she ought to have been in my House."

"Which was your House?"

"I was Head of Slytherin," said Slughorn. "Oh, now," he went on quickly, seeing the expression on Harry's face and wanting to change the subject. "You'll be Gryffindor like her, I suppose? Yes, it usually goes in families. Not always, though. Ever heard of Sirius Black? He was a friend of mine — died a few weeks ago —"

It was as though an invisible hand had twisted Harry's intestines and held them tight.

"Well, anyway, he was a big pal of your father's at school. The whole Black family had been in my House, but Sirius and his brother, Regulus, when he came along, but I'd have liked the set."

He sounded like an enthusiastic collector who had been outbid at auction. Apparently lost in memories, he gazed at the portrait on his backside.

"Your mother was Muggle-born, of course. Couldn't believe it when I found out. Thought she must have been pure-blood."

"One of my best friends is Muggle-born," said Harry, "and she's the best in our year."

"Funny how that sometimes happens, isn't it?" said Slughorn.

"Not really," said Harry coldly.

Slughorn looked down at him in surprise. "You mustn't think I'm prejudiced!" he said. "No, no, no! Haven't I just said you were like me? You were Dirk Cresswell in the year after her too — now Head of the Goblin Liaison Office, of course — another Muggle-born. Lots of information on the goings-on at Gringotts!"

He bounced up and down a little, smiling in a self-satisfied way, and pointed at the many glittering photograph frames on the wall.

"All ex-students, all signed. You'll notice Barnabas Cuffe, editor of the Daily Prophet, he's always interested to hear from me — a hamper every birthday, and all because I was able to give him an introduction to Ciceron Harkiss, who gave him the job — your neck — that's Gwenog Jones, who of course captains the Holyhead Harpies. . . . People are always astonished to see me whenever I want them!"

This thought seemed to cheer him up enormously.

"And all these people know where to find you, to send you stuff?" asked Harry, who could not help wondering why the portraits, Quidditch tickets, and visitors craving his advice and opinions could find him.

The smile slid from Slughorn's face as quickly as the blood from his walls.

"Of course not," he said, looking down at Harry. "I have been out of touch with everybody for a year."

Harry had the impression that the words shocked Slughorn himself; he looked quite unsettled for a moment. Then he smiled again.

"Still . . . the prudent wizard keeps his head down in such times. All very well for Dumbledore to talk, but taking up a public allegiance to the Order of the Phoenix! And while I'm sure they're very admirable and brave and all the rest of it, it's not for me."

"You don't have to join the Order to teach at Hogwarts," said Harry, who could not quite keep a note of derision out of his voice when he remembered Sirius, crouching in a cave and living on rats. "Most of the teachers aren't in it, and neither am I. I'm rell, and he got what he deserved seeing as he was working with Voldemort."

Harry had been sure Slughorn would be one of those wizards who could not bear to hear Voldemort's name spoken, but he did not protest, which Harry ignored.

"I reckon the staff are safer than most people while Dumbledore's headmaster; he's supposed to be the only one Voldemort is afraid of. Slughorn gazed into space for a moment or two: He seemed to be thinking over Harry's words.

"Well, yes, it is true that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has never sought a fight with Dumbledore," he muttered grudgingly. "But Death Eaters, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named can hardly count me a friend . . . in which case, I might well be safer a little while longer. Death did not shake me. . . . If she, with all her Ministry contacts and protection . . ."

Dumbledore reentered the room and Slughorn jumped as though he had forgotten he was in the house.

"Oh, there you are, Albus," he said. "You've been a very long time. Upset stomach?"

"No, I was merely reading the Muggle magazines," said Dumbledore. "I do love knitting patterns. Well, Harry, we have to go. It is time for us to leave."

Not at all reluctant to obey, Harry jumped to his feet. Slughorn seemed taken aback.

"You're leaving?"

"Yes, indeed. I think I know a lost cause when I see one."

"Lost . . . ?"

Slughorn seemed agitated. He twiddled his fat thumbs and fidgeted as he watched Dumbledore fasten his traveling bag.

"Well, I'm sorry you don't want the job, Horace," said Dumbledore, raising his uninjured hand in a farewell salute. "However, with the increased security notwithstanding, you will always be welcome to visit, should you wish to."

"Yes . . . well . . . very gracious . . . as I say . . ."

"Good-bye, then."

"Bye," said Harry.

They were at the front door when there was a shout from behind them.

"All right, all right, I'll do it!"

Dumbledore turned to see Slughorn standing breathless in the doorway to the sitting room.

"You will come out of retirement?"

"Yes, yes," said Slughorn impatiently. "I must be mad, but yes."

"Wonderful," said Dumbledore, beaming. "Then, Horace, we shall see you on the first of September."

"Yes, I daresay you will," grunted Slughorn.

As they set off down the garden path, Slughorn's voice floated after them, "I'll want a pay rise, Dumbledore!"

Dumbledore chuckled. The garden gate swung shut behind them, and they set off back down the hill through the darkening woods.

"Well done, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"I didn't do anything," said Harry in surprise.

"Oh yes you did. You showed Horace exactly how much he stands to gain by returning to Hogwarts. Did you like him?"

"Er . . ."

Harry wasn't sure whether he liked Slughorn or not. He supposed he had been pleasant in his way, but he had also said that a Muggle-born should make a good witch.

"Horace," said Dumbledore, relieving Harry of the responsibility to say any of this, "likes his comfort. He also likes the way he enjoys the feeling that he influences these people. He has never wanted to occupy the throne himself; he prefers to pick favorites at Hogwarts, sometimes for their ambition or their brains, sometimes for their charm or their talent, and sometimes because they become outstanding in their various fields. Horace formed a kind of club of his favorites with himself at the center, and always reaping some kind of benefit in return, whether a free box of his favorite crystalized pineapple or the chair in his office."

Harry had a sudden and vivid mental image of a great swollen spider, spinning a web around it, twitching a thread here and there.

"I tell you all this," Dumbledore continued, "not to turn you against Horace — or, as we must now call him, Professor Slughorn — to collect you, Harry. You would be the jewel of his collection; 'the Boy Who Lived' . . . or, as they call you these days, 'the Chosen One' . . . At these words, a chill that had nothing to do with the surrounding mist stole over Harry. He was reminded of words that had a particular meaning to him: Neither can live while the other survives . . ."

Dumbledore had stopped walking, level with the church they had passed earlier.

"This will do, Harry. If you will grasp my arm."

Braced this time, Harry was ready for the Apparition, but still found it unpleasant. When the pressure disappeared and he found himself in a country lane beside Dumbledore and looking ahead to the crooked silhouette of his second favorite building in the world, he felt as if he had been swept through him, his spirits could not help but lift at the sight of it. Ron was in there . . . and so was Mrs. Weasley, who was always there.

"If you don't mind, Harry," said Dumbledore, as they passed through the gate, "I'd like a few words with you before we go to the castle. There is a little something I want to say to you. Dumbledore pointed toward a run-down stone outhouse where the Weasleys kept their broomsticks. A little puzzle, a little smaller than the average cupboard. Dumbledore illuminated the tip of his wand, so that it glowed like a torch, and he said, "I hope you will forgive me for mentioning it, Harry, but I am pleased and a little proud at how well you seem to be coping with this. I want to say that I think Sirius would have been proud of you."

Harry swallowed; his voice seemed to have deserted him. He did not think he could stand to discuss Sirius; it had been a painful subject, and even worse to hear Sirius's name thrown out casually by Slughorn.

"It was cruel," said Dumbledore softly, "that you and Sirius had such a short time together. A brutal ending to what should have been a long and happy life. Harry nodded, his eyes fixed resolutely on the spider now climbing Dumbledore's hat. He could tell that Dumbledore was not alone. He had spent nearly all his time at the Dursleys' lying on his bed, refusing meals, and staring at the misted window with dementors.

"It's just hard," Harry said finally, in a low voice, "to realize he won't write to me again."

His eyes burned suddenly and he blinked. He felt stupid for admitting it, but the fact that he had had someone outside the castle who had been one of the best things about discovering his godfather . . . and now the post owls would never bring him that news, it was a terrible loss.

"Sirius represented much to you that you had never known before," said Dumbledore gently. "Naturally, the loss is difficult. But while I was at the Dursleys' . . ." interrupted Harry, his voice growing stronger, "I realized I can't shut myself away from the world. I can't shut out the world? And anyway, life's too short. . . . Look at Madam Bones, look at Emmeline Vance. . . . It could be me next, could it?"

Dumbledore's blue eyes gleaming in the wandlight, "I'll make sure I take as many Death Eaters with me as I can, and I'll make sure I take as many as I can. Spoken both like your mother and father's son and Sirius's true godson!" said Dumbledore, with an approving pat on the back.

Not afraid of showering you in spiders.

"And now, Harry, on a closely related subject . . . I gather that you have been taking the Daily Prophet over the last two weeks. Yes," said Harry, and his heart beat a little faster.

"Then you will have seen that there have been not so much leaks as floods concerning your adventure in the Hall of Prophecy. Yes," said Harry again. "And now everyone knows that I'm the one —"

"No, they do not," interrupted Dumbledore. "There are only two people in the whole world who know the full content of the prophecy. One is standing in this smelly, spidery broom shed. It is true, however, that many have guessed, correctly, that Voldemort's prophecy concerned you."

"Now, I think I am correct in saying that you have not told anybody that you know what the prophecy said?"

"No," said Harry.

"A wise decision, on the whole," said Dumbledore. "Although I think you ought to relax it in favor of your friends, Mr. Potter. When Harry looked startled, "I think they ought to know. You do them a disservice by not confiding something this important in their hands. I didn't want —"

"— to worry or frighten them?" said Dumbledore, surveying Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "Or perhaps to protect your friends, Harry. As you so rightly said, Sirius would not have wanted you to shut yourself away."

Harry said nothing, but Dumbledore did not seem to require an answer. He continued, "On a different, though related, subject. . . . s year."

"Private — with you?" said Harry, surprised out of his preoccupied silence.

"Yes. I think it is time that I took a greater hand in your education."

"What will you be teaching me, sir?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," said Dumbledore airily.

Harry waited hopefully, but Dumbledore did not elaborate, so he asked something else that had been bothering him. "If I'm having lessons with you, I won't have to do Occlumency lessons with Snape, will I?"

"Professor Snape, Harry — and no, you will not."

"Good," said Harry in relief, "because they were a —"

He stopped, careful not to say what he really thought.

"I think the word 'fiasco' would be a good one here," said Dumbledore, nodding.

Harry laughed.

"Well, that means I won't see much of Professor Snape from now on," he said, "because he won't let me carry on Potions."

"Don't count your owls before they are delivered," said Dumbledore gravely. "Which, now I think of it, ought to be soon."

"Firstly, I wish you to keep your Invisibility Cloak with you at all times from this moment onward. Even within Hogwarts."

Harry nodded.

"And lastly, while you stay here, the Burrow has been given the highest security the Ministry of Magic can provide. The Weasleys, Arthur and Molly — all their post, for instance, is being searched at the Ministry before being sent on. They do not mind, but ever, it would be poor repayment if you risked your neck while staying with them."

"I understand," said Harry quickly.

"Very well, then," said Dumbledore, pushing open the broom shed door and stepping out into the yard. "I see a light to deplore how thin you are."

CHAPTER FIVE

AN EXCESS OF PHLEGM

Harry and Dumbledore approached the back door of the Burrow, which was surrounded by the familiar litter of old chickens and the sound of sleepy chickens coming from a distant shed. Dumbledore knocked three times and Harry saw sudden movement.

"Who's there?" said a nervous voice he recognized as Mrs. Weasley's. "Declare yourself!"

"It is I, Dumbledore, bringing Harry."

The door opened at once. There stood Mrs. Weasley, short, plump, and wearing an old green dressing gown.

"Harry, dear! Gracious, Albus, you gave me a fright, you said not to expect you before morning!"

"We were lucky," said Dumbledore, ushering Harry over the threshold. "Slughorn proved much more persuadable than I thought."

Harry looked around and saw that Mrs. Weasley was not alone, despite the lateness of the hour. A young witch with dark hair, wearing a blue dress, was sitting on the floor, hunched over a large mug between her hands.

"Hello, Professor," she said. "Wotcher, Harry."

"Hi, Tonks."

Harry thought she looked drawn, even ill, and there was something forced in her smile. Certainly her appearance was not what he had expected. Her hair was a pale pink.

"I'd better be off," she said quickly, standing up and pulling her cloak around her shoulders. "Thanks for the tea and the fire."

"Please don't leave on my account," said Dumbledore courteously, "I cannot stay, I have urgent matters to discuss with the Minister."

"No, no, I need to get going," said Tonks, not meeting Dumbledore's eyes. "Night —"

"Dear, why not come to dinner at the weekend, Remus and Mad-Eye are coming —?"

"No, really, Molly . . . thanks anyway . . . Good night, everyone."

Tonks hurried past Dumbledore and Harry into the yard; a few paces beyond the doorstep, she turned on the spot and looked back.

"Well, I shall see you at Hogwarts, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Take care of yourself. Molly, your servant."

He made Mrs. Weasley a bow and followed Tonks, vanishing at precisely the same spot. Mrs. Weasley closed the door and went to the kitchen, where she lit the full glow of the lantern on the table to examine his appearance.

"You're like Ron," she sighed, looking him up and down. "Both of you look as though you've had Stretching Jinxes put on you. School robes. Are you hungry, Harry?"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry, suddenly realizing just how hungry he was.

"Sit down, dear, I'll knock something up."

As Harry sat down, a furry ginger cat with a squashed face jumped onto his knees and settled there, purring.

"So Hermione's here?" he asked happily as he tickled Crookshanks behind the ears.

"Oh yes, she arrived the day before yesterday," said Mrs. Weasley, rapping a large iron pot with her wand. It bounced on the floor.

Everyone's in bed, of course, we didn't expect you for hours. Here you are —"

She tapped the pot again; it rose into the air, flew toward Harry, and tipped over; Mrs. Weasley slid a bowl neatly beside it.

"Bread, dear?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley."

She waved her wand over her shoulder; a loaf of bread and a knife soared gracefully onto the table; as the loaf sliced itself, she sat down opposite him.

"So you persuaded Horace Slughorn to take the job?"

Harry nodded, his mouth so full of hot soup that he could not speak.

"He taught Arthur and me," said Mrs. Weasley. "He was at Hogwarts for ages, started around the same time as Dumbledore. His mouth now full of bread, Harry shrugged and gave a noncommittal jerk of the head.

"I know what you mean," said Mrs. Weasley, nodding wisely. "Of course he can be charming when he wants to be, but Ron's old favorites, he was always good at giving leg ups, but he never had much time for Arthur — didn't seem to think a lughorn makes mistakes. I don't know whether Ron's told you in any of his letters — it's only just happened — but Arthur. It could not have been clearer that Mrs. Weasley had been bursting to say this.

Harry swallowed a large amount of very hot soup and thought he could feel his throat blistering. "That's great!" he gasped. "You are sweet," beamed Mrs. Weasley, possibly taking his watering eyes for emotion at the news. "Yes, Rufus Scrimgeour's promotion, and Arthur's heading the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protection Measures. It's a great job, and Arthur's doing it brilliantly well. He's in now!"

"What exactly — ?"

"Well, you see, in all the panic about You-Know-Who, odd things have been cropping up for sale everywhere, things that are dangerous. You can imagine the kind of thing — so-called protective potions that are really gravy with a bit of bubotuber pus and a dash of your ears fall off. . . . Well, in the main the perpetrators are just people like Mundungus Fletcher, who've never done anything of how frightened everybody is, but every now and then something really nasty turns up. The other day Arthur confiscated a Death Eater. So you see, it's a very important job, and I tell him it's just silly to miss dealing with spark plugs and spark plugs. Mrs. Weasley ended her speech with a stern look, as if it had been Harry suggesting that it was natural to miss spark plugs and spark plugs.

"Is Mr. Weasley still at work?" Harry asked.

"Yes, he is. As a matter of fact, he's a tiny bit late. . . . He said he'd be back around midnight. . . ."

She turned to look at a large clock that was perched awkwardly on top of a pile of sheets in the washing basket at the end of the hallway, each inscribed with the name of a family member, and usually hung on the Weasleys' sitting room wall, though it had been moved around the house with her. Every single one of its nine hands was now pointing at "mortal peril."

"It's been like that for a while now," said Mrs. Weasley, in an unconvincingly casual voice, "ever since You-Know-Who came. . . . I don't think it can be just our family. . . . but I don't know anyone else who's got a clock like this, so I can't check. With a sudden exclamation she pointed at the clock's face. Mr. Weasley's hand had switched to "traveling."

"He's coming!"

And sure enough, a moment later there was a knock on the back door. Mrs. Weasley jumped up and hurried to it; with a gasp she called softly, "Arthur, is that you?"

"Yes," came Mr. Weasley's weary voice. "But I would say that even if I were a Death Eater, dear. Ask the question!"

"Oh, honestly. . . ."

"Molly!"

"All right, all right. . . . What is your dearest ambition?"

"To find out how airplanes stay up."

Mrs. Weasley nodded and turned the doorknob, but apparently Mr. Weasley was holding tight to it on the other side.

"Molly! I've got to ask you your question first!"

"Arthur, really, this is just silly. . . ."

"What do you like me to call you when we're alone together?"

Even by the dim light of the lantern Harry could tell that Mrs. Weasley had turned bright red; he himself felt suddenly embarrassed, dropping his spoon as loudly as he could against the bowl.

"Mollywobbles," whispered a mortified Mrs. Weasley into the crack at the edge of the door.

"Correct," said Mr. Weasley. "Now you can let me in."

Mrs. Weasley opened the door to reveal her husband, a thin, balding, red-haired wizard wearing horn-rimmed spectacles.

"I still don't see why we have to go through that every time you come home," said Mrs. Weasley, still pink in the face. "A Death Eater might have forced the answer out of you before impersonating you!"

"I know, dear, but it's Ministry procedure, and I have to set an example. Something smells good — onion soup?"

Mr. Weasley turned hopefully in the direction of the table.

"Harry! We didn't expect you until morning!"

They shook hands, and Mr. Weasley dropped into the chair beside Harry as Mrs. Weasley set a bowl of soup in front of him.

"Thanks, Molly. It's been a tough night. Some idiot's started selling Metamorph-Medals. Just sling them around your neck. They're worth a red thousand disguises, all for ten Galleons!"

"And what really happens when you put them on?"

"Mostly you just turn a fairly unpleasant orange color, but a couple of people have also sprouted tentaclelike warts on their heads. . . . It's a bit of a nuisance, but it's not so bad. . . ."

"It sounds like the sort of thing Fred and George would find funny," said Mrs. Weasley hesitantly. "Are you sure — ?"

"Of course I am!" said Mr. Weasley. "The boys wouldn't do anything like that now, not when people are desperate for protection."

"So is that why you're late, Metamorph-Medals?"

"No, we got wind of a nasty backfiring jinx down in Elephant and Castle, but luckily the Magical Law Enforcement Squad was there. Harry stifled a yawn behind his hand.

"Bed," said an undeceived Mrs. Weasley at once. "I've got Fred and George's room all ready for you, you'll have it to yourself."

"Why, where are they?"

"Oh, they're in Diagon Alley, sleeping in the little flat over their joke shop as they're so busy," said Mrs. Weasley. "I must have a bit of a flair for business! Come on, dear, your trunk's already up there."

"Night, Mr. Weasley," said Harry, pushing back his chair. Crookshanks leapt lightly from his lap and slunk out of the room.

"G'night, Harry," said Mr. Weasley.

Harry saw Mrs. Weasley glance at the clock in the washing basket as they left the kitchen. All the hands were once again pointing to twelve. Fred and George's bedroom was on the second floor. Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at a lamp on the bedside table. Although a large vase of flowers had been placed on a desk in front of the small window, their perfume could not disguise the considerable amount of floor space was devoted to a vast number of unmarked, sealed cardboard boxes, amongst which Mrs. Weasley had ed as a temporary warehouse.

Hedwig hooted happily at Harry from her perch on top of a large wardrobe, then took off through the window; Harry said good night to Mrs. Weasley, put on pajamas, and got into one of the beds. There was something hard inside the pillow, which he recognized as a Puking Pastille. Smiling to himself, he rolled over and was instantly asleep.

Seconds later, or so it seemed to Harry, he was awakened by what sounded like cannon fire as the door burst open. He sat up: The dazzling sunlight seemed to poke him hard in both eyes. Shielding them with one hand, he groped hopelessly for his glasses.

"Wuzzgoimon?"

"We didn't know you were here already!" said a loud and excited voice, and he received a sharp blow to the top of the head.

"Ron, don't hit him!" said a girl's voice reproachfully.

Harry's hand found his glasses and he shoved them on, though the light was so bright he could hardly see anyway. A second later, Ron Weasley came into focus, grinning down at him.

"All right?"

"Never been better," said Harry, rubbing the top of his head and slumping back onto his pillows. "You?"

"Not bad," said Ron, pulling over a cardboard box and sitting on it. "When did you get here? Mum's only just told us!"

"About one o'clock this morning."

"Were the Muggles all right? Did they treat you okay?"

"Same as usual," said Harry, as Hermione perched herself on the edge of his bed, "they didn't talk to me much, but I got the message."

"Oh, I'm fine," said Hermione, who was scrutinizing Harry as though he was sickening for something. He thought he knew her death or any other miserable subject at the moment, he said, "What's the time? Have I missed breakfast?"

"Don't worry about that, Mum's bringing you up a tray; she reckons you look underfed," said Ron, rolling his eyes. "So, how was it?"

"Nothing much, I've just been stuck at my aunt and uncle's, haven't I?"

"Come off it!" said Ron. "You've been off with Dumbledore!"

"It wasn't that exciting. He just wanted me to help him persuade this old teacher to come out of retirement. His name was Professor Trelawney."

"Oh," said Ron, looking disappointed. "We thought —"

Hermione flashed a warning look at Ron, and Ron changed tack at top speed.

"— we thought it'd be something like that."

"You did?" said Harry, amused.

"Yeah . . . yeah, now Umbridge has left, obviously we need a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, don't we? So we thought —"

"He looks a bit like a walrus, and he used to be Head of Slytherin," said Harry. "Something wrong, Hermione?"

She was watching him as though expecting strange symptoms to manifest themselves at any moment. She rearranged her hair.

"No, of course not! So, um, did Slughorn seem like he'll be a good teacher?"

"Dunno," said Harry. "He can't be worse than Umbridge, can he?"

"I know someone who's worse than Umbridge," said a voice from the doorway. Ron's younger sister slouched into the room.

"What's up with you?" Ron asked.

"It's her," said Ginny, plonking herself down on Harry's bed. "She's driving me mad."

"What's she done now?" asked Hermione sympathetically.

"It's the way she talks to me — you'd think I was about three!"

"I know," said Hermione, dropping her voice. "She's so full of herself."

Harry was astonished to hear Hermione talking about Mrs. Weasley like this and could not blame Ron for saying anything.

"Oh, that's right, defend her," snapped Ginny. "We all know you can't get enough of her."

This seemed an odd comment to make about Ron's mother. Starting to feel that he was missing something, Harry said, "What's she done?" But his question was answered before he could finish it. The bedroom door flew open again, and Harry instinctively yelped as he slid off the bed onto the floor.

A young woman was standing in the doorway, a woman of such breathtaking beauty that the room seemed to have a glow and appeared to emanate a faint, silvery glow. To complete this vision of perfection, she was carrying a heavily laden tray.

"Arry," she said in a throaty voice. "Eet 'as been too long!"

As she swept over the threshold toward him, Mrs. Weasley was revealed, bobbing along in her wake, looking rather cross.

"There was no need to bring up the tray, I was just about to do it myself!"

"Eet was no trouble," said Fleur Delacour, setting the tray across Harry's knees and then swooping to kiss him on each cheek. "I 'ave been longing to see 'im. You remember my seester, Gabrielle? She never stops talking about 'Arry Potter. She says he's a real hero."

"Oh . . . is she here too?" Harry croaked.

"No, no, silly boy," said Fleur with a tinkling laugh, "I mean next summer, when we — but do you not know?" Her great blue eyes widened and she looked reproachfully at Mrs. Weasley, who said, "We hadn't got around to telling you." Fleur turned back to Harry, swinging her silvery sheet of hair so that it whipped Mrs. Weasley across the face. "Bill and I are going to be married!"

"Oh," said Harry blankly. He could not help noticing how Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, and Ginny were all determinedly averted their faces. She swooped down upon him and kissed him again.

"Bill is very busy at ze moment, working very 'ard, and I only work part-time at Gringotts for my Eenglish, so he brought me here. I was so pleased to 'ear you would be coming — zere isn't much to do 'ere, unless you like cooking and chickens! Well, I'll be off. With these words she turned gracefully and seemed to float out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her. Mrs. Weasley made a noise that sounded like "tchah!"

"Mum hates her," said Ginny quietly.

"I do not hate her!" said Mrs. Weasley in a cross whisper. "I just think they've hurried into this engagement, that's all!"

"They've known each other a year," said Ron, who looked oddly groggy and was staring at the closed door.

"Well, that's not very long! I know why it's happened, of course. It's all this uncertainty with You-Know-Who coming back, making all sorts of decisions they'd normally take time over. It was the same last time he was powerful, people eloping left and right. Including you and Dad," said Ginny slyly.

"Yes, well, your father and I were made for each other, what was the point in waiting?" said Mrs. Weasley. "Whereas Bill and Fleur? He's a hardworking, down-to-earth sort of person, whereas she's —"

"A cow," said Ginny, nodding. "But Bill's not that down-to-earth. He's a Curse-Breaker, isn't he, he likes a bit of adventure. Not for Phlegm."

"Stop calling her that, Ginny," said Mrs. Weasley sharply, as Harry and Hermione laughed. "Well, I'd better get on. . . . Looking careworn, she left the room. Ron still seemed slightly punch-drunk; he was shaking his head experimentally.

"Don't you get used to her if she's staying in the same house?" Harry asked.

"Well, you do," said Ron, "but if she jumps out at you unexpectedly, like then . . ."

"It's pathetic," said Hermione furiously, striding away from Ron as far as she could go and turning to face him with her back to the door.

"You don't really want her around forever?" Ginny asked Ron incredulously. When he merely shrugged, she said, "Well, she's got to be around for a while. How's she going to manage that?" asked Harry.

"She keeps trying to get Tonks round for dinner. I think she's hoping Bill will fall for Tonks instead. I hope he does, I'd like to see her with him."

"Yeah, that'll work," said Ron sarcastically. "Listen, no bloke in his right mind's going to fancy Tonks when Fleur's around. She's got all those id things to her hair and her nose, but —"

"She's a damn sight nicer than Phlegm," said Ginny.

"And she's more intelligent, she's an Auror!" said Hermione from the corner.

"Fleur's not stupid, she was good enough to enter the Triwizard Tournament," said Harry.

"Not you as well!" said Hermione bitterly.

"I suppose you like the way Phlegm says "Arry," do you?" asked Ginny scornfully.

"No," said Harry, wishing he hadn't spoken, "I was just saying, Phlegm — I mean, Fleur —"

"I'd much rather have Tonks in the family," said Ginny. "At least she's a laugh."

"She hasn't been much of a laugh lately," said Ron. "Every time I've seen her she's looked more like Moaning Myrtle."

"That's not fair," snapped Hermione. "She still hasn't got over what happened . . . you know . . . I mean, he was her cousin. It's not her fault. Harry's heart sank. They had arrived at Sirius. He picked up a fork and began shoveling scrambled eggs into his mouth. The conversation continued.

"Tonks and Sirius barely knew each other!" said Ron. "Sirius was in Azkaban half her life and before that their families were enemies."

"That's not the point," said Hermione. "She thinks it was her fault he died!"

"How does she work that one out?" asked Harry, in spite of himself.

"Well, she was fighting Bellatrix Lestrange, wasn't she? I think she feels that if only she had finished her off, Bellatrix could have killed Sirius. That's stupid," said Ron.

"It's survivor's guilt," said Hermione. "I know Lupin's tried to talk her round, but she's still really down. She's actually happy to be with her —?"

"She can't change her appearance like she used to," explained Hermione. "I think her powers must have been affected by the war. I didn't know that could happen," said Harry.

"Nor did I," said Hermione, "but I suppose if you're really depressed . . ."

The door opened again and Mrs. Weasley popped her head in. "Ginny," she whispered, "come downstairs and help me with the shopping."

"I'm talking to this lot!" said Ginny, outraged.

"Now!" said Mrs. Weasley, and withdrew.

"She only wants me there so she doesn't have to be alone with Phlegm!" said Ginny crossly. She swung her long red hair and left the room with her arms held aloft like a ballerina.

"You lot had better come down quickly too," she said as she left.

Harry took advantage of the temporary silence to eat more breakfast. Hermione was peering into Fred and George's room, who was now helping himself to Harry's toast, was still gazing dreamily at the door.

"What's this?" Hermione asked eventually, holding up what looked like a small telescope.

"Dunno," said Ron, "but if Fred and George've left it here, it's probably not ready for the joke shop yet, so be careful."

"Your mum said the shop's going well," said Harry. "Said Fred and George have got a real flair for business."

"That's an understatement," said Ron. "They're raking in the Galleons! I can't wait to see the place, we haven't been to it for ages. It's got extra security and he's been really busy at work, but it sounds excellent."

"And what about Percy?" asked Harry; the third-eldest Weasley brother had fallen out with the rest of the family. "Is he coming?"

"Nope," said Ron.

"But he knows your dad was right all along now about Voldemort being back —"

"Dumbledore says people find it far easier to forgive others for being wrong than being right," said Hermione. "I heard that from him."

"Sounds like the sort of mental thing Dumbledore would say," said Ron.

"He's going to be giving me private lessons this year," said Harry conversationally.

Ron choked on his bit of toast, and Hermione gasped.

"You kept that quiet!" said Ron.

"I only just remembered," said Harry honestly. "He told me last night in your broom shed."

"Blimey . . . private lessons with Dumbledore!" said Ron, looking impressed. "I wonder why he's . . . ?"

His voice tailed away. Harry saw him and Hermione exchange looks. Harry laid down his knife and fork, his heart beating fast. Dumbledore had said to do it. . . . Why not now? He fixed his eyes on his fork, which was gleaming in the sunlight. He was going to be giving me lessons, but I think it must be because of the prophecy.

Neither Ron nor Hermione spoke. Harry had the impression that both had frozen. He continued, still speaking to himself.

"Nobody knows what it said, though," said Hermione quickly. "It got smashed."

"Although the Prophet says —" began Ron, but Hermione said, "Shh!"

"The Prophet's got it right," said Harry, looking up at them both with a great effort: Hermione seemed frightened and Ron was angry. He thought of the prophecy. I heard the whole thing in Dumbledore's office, he was the one the prophecy was made to, so he's the one who's got to finish off Voldemort. . . . At least, it said neither of us could live while the other survives. The three of them gazed at one another in silence for a moment. Then there was a loud bang and Hermione vanished.

"Hermione!" shouted Harry and Ron; the breakfast tray slid to the floor with a crash.

Hermione emerged, coughing, out of the smoke, clutching the telescope and sporting a brilliantly purple black eye.

"I squeezed it and it — it punched me!" she gasped.

And sure enough, they now saw a tiny fist on a long spring protruding from the end of the telescope.

"Don't worry," said Ron, who was plainly trying not to laugh, "Mum'll fix that, she's good at healing minor injuries —"

"Oh well, never mind that now!" said Hermione hastily. "Harry, oh, Harry . . ."

She sat down on the edge of his bed again.

"We wondered, after we got back from the Ministry . . . Obviously, we didn't want to say anything to you, but from what we heard about you and Voldemort, well, we thought it might be something like this. . . . Oh, Harry . . ." She stared at him, then whispered, "Not as much as I was," said Harry. "When I first heard it, I was . . . but now, it seems as though I always knew I'd have to do it."

"When we heard Dumbledore was collecting you in person, we thought he might be telling you something or showing you something of the kind of right, weren't we? He wouldn't be giving you lessons if he thought you were a goner, wouldn't waste his time on you."

"That's true," said Hermione. "I wonder what he'll teach you, Harry? Really advanced defensive magic, probably . . ."

Harry did not really listen. A warmth was spreading through him that had nothing to do with the sunlight; a tight obsession was taking hold of him and Hermione were more shocked than they were letting on, but the mere fact that they were still there on either side of him as though he were contaminated or dangerous, was worth more than he could ever tell them.

". . . and evasive enchantments generally," concluded Hermione. "Well, at least you know one lesson you'll be having to learn. What are your W.L. results will come?"

"Can't be long now, it's been a month," said Ron.

"Hang on," said Harry, as another part of last night's conversation came back to him. "I think Dumbledore said our O.W.L.s were coming."

"Today?" shrieked Hermione. "Today? But why didn't you — oh my God — you should have said —"

She leapt to her feet.

"I'm going to see whether any owls have come. . . ."

But when Harry arrived downstairs ten minutes later, fully dressed and carrying his empty breakfast tray, it was to find Mrs. Weasley trying to lessen her resemblance to half a panda.

"It just won't budge," Mrs. Weasley was saying anxiously, standing over Hermione with her wand in her hand and a cross on her face.

"This has always worked before, I just can't understand it."

"It'll be Fred and George's idea of a funny joke, making sure it can't come off," said Ginny.

"But it's got to come off!" squeaked Hermione. "I can't go around looking like this forever!"

"You won't, dear, we'll find an antidote, don't worry," said Mrs. Weasley soothingly.

"Bill told me 'ow Fred and George are very amusing!" said Fleur, smiling serenely.

"Yes, I can hardly breathe for laughing," snapped Hermione.

She jumped up and started walking round and round the kitchen, twisting her fingers together.

"Mrs. Weasley, you're quite, quite sure no owls have arrived this morning?"

"Yes, dear, I'd have noticed," said Mrs. Weasley patiently. "But it's barely nine, there's still plenty of time. . . ."

"I know I messed up Ancient Runes," muttered Hermione feverishly, "I definitely made at least one serious mistranslation at all. I thought Transfiguration went all right at the time, but looking back —"

"Hermione, will you shut up, you're not the only one who's nervous!" barked Ron. "And when you've got your ten 'Outstandings' —"

"Don't, don't, don't!" said Hermione, flapping her hands hysterically. "I know I've failed everything!"

"What happens if we fail?" Harry asked the room at large, but it was again Hermione who answered.

"We discuss our options with our Head of House, I asked Professor McGonagall at the end of last term."

Harry's stomach squirmed. He wished he had eaten less breakfast.

"At Beauxbatons," said Fleur complacently, "we 'ad a different way of doing things. I think eet was better. We sat out —"

Fleur's words were drowned in a scream. Hermione was pointing through the kitchen window. Three black specks were flying directly at the Burrow, three handsome tawnies, each of which, it became clear as they flew lower, was carrying a square envelope.

"Oh no!" squealed Hermione.

Mrs. Weasley squeezed past them and opened the kitchen window. One, two, three, the owls soared through it and landed on the table.

Harry moved forward. The letter addressed to him was tied to the leg of the owl in the middle. He untied it with fumbling hands; to his right, Hermione's hands were shaking so much she was making her whole owl tremble.

Nobody in the kitchen spoke. At last, Harry managed to detach the envelope. He slit it open quickly and unfolded the parchment.

ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL RESULTS

Pass Grades

OUTSTANDING (O)

EXCEEDS EXPECTATIONS (E)

ACCEPTABLE (A)

Fail Grades

POOR (P)

DREADFUL (D)

TROLL (T)

Harry James Potter has achieved:

Astronomy A

Care of Magical Creatures E

Charms E

Defense Against the Dark Arts O

Divination P

Herbology E

History of Magic D

Potions E

Transfiguration E

Harry read the parchment through several times, his breathing becoming easier with each reading. It was all right: He had no chance of passing History of Magic, given that he had collapsed halfway through the examination, but he had passed well in Transfiguration and Herbology, he had even exceeded expectations at Potions! And best of all, he had passed in Defense Against the Dark Arts. He looked around. Hermione had her back to him and her head bent, but Ron was looking delighted.

"Only failed Divination and History of Magic, and who cares about them?" he said happily to Harry. "Here — swap —"

Harry glanced down Ron's grades: There were no "Outstandings" there. . . .

"Knew you'd be top at Defense Against the Dark Arts," said Ron, punching Harry on the shoulder. "We've done all right!"

"Well done!" said Mrs. Weasley proudly, ruffling Ron's hair. "Seven O.W.L.s, that's more than Fred and George got together!"

"Hermione?" said Ginny tentatively, for Hermione still hadn't turned around. "How did you do?"

"I — not bad," said Hermione in a small voice.

"Oh, come off it," said Ron, striding over to her and whipping her results out of her hand. "Yep — nine 'Outstandings' and one 'Exceeds Expectations'!"

He looked down at her, half-amused, half-exasperated. "You're actually disappointed, aren't you?"

Hermione shook her head, but Harry laughed.

"Well, we're N.E.W.T. students now!" grinned Ron. "Mum, are there any more sausages?"

Harry looked back down at his results. They were as good as he could have hoped for. He felt just one tiny twinge of regret. He had not secured the required Potions grade. He had known all along that he wouldn't, but he still felt a sinking feeling. It was odd, really, seeing that it had been a Death Eater in disguise who had first told Harry he would make a good Auror. He didn't really think of anything else he would like to be. Moreover, it had seemed the right destiny for him since he had heard that the other survives. . . . Wouldn't he be living up to the prophecy, and giving himself the best chance of survival, if he just kept on and kill Voldemort?

CHAPTER SIX

DRACO'S DETOUR

Harry remained within the confines of the Burrow's garden over the next few weeks. He spent most of his days playing against Ron and Ginny; Hermione was dreadful and Ginny good, so they were reasonably well matched) and his evening with him.

It would have been a happy, peaceful holiday had it not been for the stories of disappearances, odd accidents, even deaths. Bill and Mr. Weasley brought home news before it even reached the paper. To Mrs. Weasley's displeasure, Harry's sixth birthday party by Remus Lupin, who was looking gaunt and grim, his brown hair streaked liberally with gray, his clothes worn. "There have been another couple of dementor attacks," he announced, as Mrs. Weasley passed him a large slice of birthday cake. "The Dark Mark had been set over it — well, frankly, I'm surprised he stayed alive for even a year after deserting. A few days as far as I can remember."

"Yes, well," said Mrs. Weasley, frowning, "perhaps we should talk about something different —"

"Did you hear about Florean Fortescue, Remus?" asked Bill, who was being plied with wine by Fleur. "The man who ran the ice-cream place in Diagon Alley?" Harry interrupted, with an unpleasant, hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach. "What happened to him?"

"Dragged off, by the look of his place."

"Why?" asked Ron, while Mrs. Weasley pointedly glared at Bill.

"Who knows? He must've upset them somehow. He was a good man, Florean."

"Talking of Diagon Alley," said Mr. Weasley, "looks like Ollivander's gone too."

"The wandmaker?" said Ginny, looking startled.

"That's the one. Shop's empty. No sign of a struggle. No one knows whether he left voluntarily or was kidnapped."

"But wands — what'll people do for wands?"

"They'll make do with other makers," said Lupin. "But Ollivander was the best, and if the other side have got him it's not good."

The day after this rather gloomy birthday tea, their letters and booklists arrived from Hogwarts. Harry's included a surprise.

"That gives you equal status with prefects!" cried Hermione happily. "You can use our special bathroom now and even have a key!"

"Wow, I remember when Charlie wore one of these," said Ron, examining the badge with glee. "Harry, this is so cool, it's like a badge of honor!"

"Well, I don't suppose we can put off a trip to Diagon Alley much longer now you've got these," sighed Mrs. Weasley, looking at the badge. "Your father doesn't have to go into work again. I'm not going there without him."

"Mum, d'you honestly think You-Know-Who's going to be hiding behind a bookshelf in Flourish and Blotts?" sniggered Harry.

"Fortescue and Ollivander went on holiday, did they?" said Mrs. Weasley, firing up at once. "If you think security's a laughing matter, you're wrong!"

"No, I wanna come, I want to see Fred and George's shop!" said Ron hastily.

"Then you just buck up your ideas, young man, before I decide you're too immature to come with us!" said Mrs. Weasley, pointing at "mortal peril," and balancing it on top of a pile of just-laundered towels. "And that goes for returning to school!"

Ron turned to stare incredulously at Harry as his mother hoisted the laundry basket and the teetering clock into her car. "Blimey . . . you can't even make a joke round here anymore. . . ."

But Ron was careful not to be flippant about Voldemort over the next few days. Saturday dawned without any more news. Bill, who would be staying at home with Fleur (much to Hermione and Ginny's pleasure), passed a full money bag and a letter.

"Where's mine?" demanded Ron at once, his eyes wide.

"That's already Harry's, idiot," said Bill. "I got it out of your vault for you, Harry, because it's taking about five hours for the vaults to be opened. Oblongs have tightened security so much. Two days ago Arkie Philpott had a Probity Probe stuck up his . . . Well, trust me, it's not good."

"Thanks, Bill," said Harry, pocketing his gold.

"E is always so thoughtful," purred Fleur adoringly, stroking Bill's nose. Ginny mimed vomiting into her cereal behind her back.

It was an overcast, murky day. One of the special Ministry of Magic cars, in which Harry had ridden once before, was waiting outside the Burrow, pulling on their cloaks.

"It's good Dad can get us these again," said Ron appreciatively, stretching luxuriously as the car moved smoothly away. He, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny were all sitting in roomy comfort in the wide backseat.

"Don't get used to it, it's only because of Harry," said Mr. Weasley over his shoulder. He and Mrs. Weasley were in front, sitting gingerly stretched into what resembled a two-seater sofa. "He's been given top-grade security status. And we'll be joining him soon."

Harry said nothing; he did not much fancy doing his shopping while surrounded by a battalion of Aurors. He had stood as good enough for Dumbledore, it ought to be good enough for the Ministry, though now he came to think of it, he was not sure.

"Here you are, then," said the driver, a surprisingly short while later, speaking for the first time as he slowed in Charlie's driveway. "To wait for you, any idea how long you'll be?"

"A couple of hours, I expect," said Mr. Weasley. "Ah, good, he's here!"

Harry imitated Mr. Weasley and peered through the window; his heart leapt. There were no Aurors waiting outside the car. Instead, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, wearing a long beaverskin coat, beaming at the sight of Harry's face and oblivious to the others, stood by the door.

"Harry!" he boomed, sweeping Harry into a bone-crushing hug the moment Harry had stepped out of the car. "Buck up, mate!"

er be back in the open air —"

"Glad he's pleased," said Harry, grinning as he massaged his ribs. "We didn't know 'security' meant you!"

"I know, jus' like old times, innit? See, the Ministry wanted ter send a bunch o' Aurors, but Dumbledore said I'd do," said Umbridge, tucking her thumbs into his pockets. "Let's get goin' then — after yeh, Molly, Arthur —"

The Leaky Cauldron was, for the first time in Harry's memory, completely empty. Only Tom the landlord, wizened and balding, was there when they entered, but before he could speak, Hagrid said importantly, "Jus' passin' through today, Tom, sure yeh understand." Tom nodded gloomily and returned to wiping glasses; Harry, Hermione, Hagrid, and the Weasleys walked through the shop. Dustbins stood. Hagrid raised his pink umbrella and rapped a certain brick in the wall, which opened at once to form a new entrance and paused, looking around.

Diagon Alley had changed. The colorful, glittering window displays of spellbooks, potion ingredients, and cauldrons were now covered by posters that had been pasted over them. Most of these somber purple posters carried blown-up versions of the security notices from the Ministry, but others bore moving black-and-white photographs of Death Eaters known to be on the loose. Bellatrix Lestrange's name was on one. Windows were boarded up, including those of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor. On the other hand, a number of shops, including Flourish and Blotts, which had been erected outside Flourish and Blotts, under a striped, stained awning, had a cardboard sign pinned to the door.

AMULETS

Effective Against Werewolves, Dementors, and Inferi

A seedy-looking little wizard was rattling armfuls of silver symbols on chains at passersby.

"One for your little girl, madam?" he called at Mrs. Weasley as they passed, leering at Ginny. "Protect her pretty neck!"

"If I were on duty . . ." said Mr. Weasley, glaring angrily at the amulet seller.

"Yes, but don't go arresting anyone now, dear, we're in a hurry," said Mrs. Weasley, nervously consulting a list. "I think I need new robes, and Ron's showing much too much ankle in his school robes, and you must need new ones too, Harry, you know."

"Molly, it doesn't make sense for all of us to go to Madam Malkin's," said Mr. Weasley. "Why don't those three go with their schoolbooks?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Weasley anxiously, clearly torn between a desire to finish the shopping quickly and the wish to see her children.

"Don't fret, they'll be fine with me, Molly," said Hagrid soothingly, waving an airy hand the size of a dustbin lid. Mrs. Weasley gave a grateful nod, scurrying off toward Flourish and Blotts with her husband and Ginny while Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Hagrid waited. Harry noticed that many of the people who passed them had the same harried, anxious look as Mrs. Weasley, and that they were always in their own tightly knit groups, moving intently about their business. Nobody seemed to be shopping alone.

"Migh' be a bit of a squeeze in there with all of us," said Hagrid, stopping outside Madam Malkin's and bending down to look at the sign.

So Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the little shop together. It appeared, at first glance, to be empty, but no sooner had they stepped in than a voice issuing from behind a rack of dress robes in spangled green and blue.

"I'm not a child, in case you haven't noticed, Mother. I am perfectly capable of doing my shopping alone."

There was a clucking noise and a voice Harry recognized as that of Madam Malkin, the owner, said, "Now, dear, you're old enough to do on our own anymore, it's nothing to do with being a child —"

"Watch where you're sticking that pin, will you!"

A teenage boy with a pale, pointed face and white-blond hair appeared from behind the rack, wearing a handsome suit. He strode to the mirror and examined himself; it was a few moments before he noticed Harry and Ron. His eyes narrowed.

"If you're wondering what the smell is, Mother, a Mudblood just walked in," said Draco Malfoy.

"I don't think there's any need for language like that!" said Madam Malkin, scurrying out from behind the clothes rack. "I don't want any language in my shop either!" she added hastily, for a glance toward the door had shown her Harry and Ron both standing there. She was standing slightly behind them, whispered, "No, don't, honestly, it's not worth it. . . ."

"Yeah, like you'd dare do magic out of school," sneered Malfoy. "Who blacked your eye, Granger? I want to send them to the hospital."

"That's quite enough!" said Madam Malkin sharply, looking over her shoulder for support. "Madam — please —"

Narcissa Malfoy strolled out from behind the clothes rack.

"Put those away," she said coldly to Harry and Ron. "If you attack my son again, I shall ensure that it is the last thing you do."

"Really?" said Harry, taking a step forward and gazing into the smoothly arrogant face that, for all its pallor, still resembled his mother. "To get a few Death Eater pals to do us in, are you?"

Madam Malkin squealed and clutched at her heart.

"Really, you shouldn't accuse — dangerous thing to say — wands away, please!"

But Harry did not lower his wand. Narcissa Malfoy smiled unpleasantly.

"I see that being Dumbledore's favorite has given you a false sense of security, Harry Potter. But Dumbledore won't protect you. Harry looked mockingly all around the shop. "Wow . . . look at that . . . he's not here now! So why not have a go? They'll be a loser of a husband!"

Malfoy made an angry movement toward Harry, but stumbled over his overlong robe. Ron laughed loudly.

"Don't you dare talk to my mother like that, Potter!" Malfoy snarled.

"It's all right, Draco," said Narcissa, restraining him with her thin white fingers upon his shoulder. "I expect Potter will be a loser of a husband."

Harry raised his wand higher.

"Harry, no!" moaned Hermione, grabbing his arm and attempting to push it down by his side. "Think. . . . You mustn't!" Madam Malkin dithered for a moment on the spot, then seemed to decide to act as though nothing was happening and went on talking at Harry.

"I think this left sleeve could come up a little bit more, dear, let me just —"

"Ouch!" bellowed Malfoy, slapping her hand away. "Watch where you're putting your pins, woman! Mother — I don't want to be hurt!" He pulled the robes over his head and threw them onto the floor at Madam Malkin's feet.

"You're right, Draco," said Narcissa, with a contemptuous glance at Hermione, "now I know the kind of scum that shows up on robes. And with that, the pair of them strode out of the shop, Malfoy taking care to bang as hard as he could into Ron on the stairs."

"Well, really!" said Madam Malkin, snatching up the fallen robes and moving the tip of her wand over them like a vacuum cleaner. She was distracted all through the fitting of Ron's and Harry's new robes, tried to sell Hermione wizard's dress robes as well, but in the end she left the shop it was with an air of being glad to see the back of them.

"Got ev'rything?" asked Hagrid brightly when they reappeared at his side.

"Just about," said Harry. "Did you see the Malfoys?"

"Yeah," said Hagrid, unconcerned. "Bu' they wouldn' dare make trouble in the middle o' Diagon Alley, Harry. Don' worry, they won't." Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged looks, but before they could disabuse Hagrid of this comfortable notion, Mr. Weasley came along with his books.

"Everyone all right?" said Mrs. Weasley. "Got your robes? Right then, we can pop in at the Apothecary and Eeylops on the corner. Neither Harry nor Ron bought any ingredients at the Apothecary, seeing that they were no longer studying Potions, but they did buy a few at Eeylops Owl Emporium. Then, with Mrs. Weasley checking her watch every minute or so, they headed farther along the street, followed by Fred and George.

"We really haven't got too long," Mrs. Weasley said. "So we'll just have a quick look around and then back to the car. Vroom! . . ."

"Whoa," said Ron, stopping in his tracks.

Set against the dull, poster-muffled shop fronts around them, Fred and George's windows hit the eye like a firework. The windows were lit at the windows, and a few rather stunned-looking people had actually come to a halt, transfixed. The left-hand window was lit up, pped, flashed, bounced, and shrieked; Harry's eyes began to water just looking at it. The right-hand window was covered with a sign that emblazoned with flashing yellow letters:

WHY ARE YOU WORRYING ABOUT YOU-KNOW-WHO?

YOU SHOULD BE WORRYING ABOUT U-NO-POO —

THE CONSTIPATION SENSATION THAT'S GRIPPING THE NATION!

Harry started to laugh. He heard a weak sort of moan beside him and looked around to see Mrs. Weasley gazing, dumbly, at the sign. "U-No-Poo."

"They'll be murdered in their beds!" she whispered.

"No they won't!" said Ron, who, like Harry, was laughing. "This is brilliant!"

And he and Harry led the way into the shop. It was packed with customers; Harry could not get near the shelves. He saw a display of the Skiving Snackboxes that the twins had perfected during their last, unfinished year at Hogwarts; Harry noticed a small, empty box left on the shelf. There were bins full of trick wands, the cheapest merely turning into rubber chickens or popping out of the wand user around the head and neck, and boxes of quills, which came in Self-Inking, Spell-Checking, and Smart-Answer versions. He went toward the counter, where a gaggle of delighted ten-year-olds was watching a tiny little wooden man slowly ascending a gallows. The sign above the counter read: REUSABLE HANGMAN — SPELL IT OR HE'LL SWING!

"Patented Daydream Charms . . ."

Hermione had managed to squeeze through to a large display near the counter and was reading the information on a sign. Next to her was a swooning girl who were standing on the deck of a pirate ship.

"One simple incantation and you will enter a top-quality, highly realistic, thirty-minute daydream, easy to fit into the tightest schedule (side effects include vacant expression and minor drooling). Not for sale to under-sixteens.' You know," said Hermione, looking at the sign.

"For that, Hermione," said a voice behind them, "you can have one for free."

A beaming Fred stood before them, wearing a set of magenta robes that clashed magnificently with his flaming hair.

"How are you, Harry?" They shook hands. "And what's happened to your eye, Hermione?"

"Your punching telescope," she said ruefully.

"Oh blimey, I forgot about those," said Fred. "Here —"

He pulled a tub out of his pocket and handed it to her; she unscrewed it gingerly to reveal a thick yellow paste.

"Just dab it on, that bruise'll be gone within the hour," said Fred. "We had to find a decent bruise remover. We're testing it out on ourselves." Hermione looked nervous. "It is safe, isn't it?" she asked.

"Course it is," said Fred bracingly. "Come on, Harry, I'll give you a tour."

Harry left Hermione dabbing her black eye with paste and followed Fred toward the back of the shop, where he saw a display of Muggle magic tricks!

"Muggle magic tricks!" said Fred happily, pointing them out. "For freaks like Dad, you know, who love Muggle stuff. It's a great novelty. . . . Oh, here's George. . . ."

Fred's twin shook Harry's hand energetically.

"Giving him the tour? Come through the back, Harry, that's where we're making the real money — pocket anything, y'know." Harry saw a small boy who hastily whipped his hand out of the tub labeled EDIBLE DARK MARKS — THEY'LL MAKE ANYONE SICK!

George pushed back a curtain beside the Muggle tricks and Harry saw a darker, less crowded room. The packaging c

"We've just developed this more serious line," said Fred. "Funny how it happened . . ."

"You wouldn't believe how many people, even people who work at the Ministry, can't do a decent Shield Charm," said

"That's right. . . . Well, we thought Shield Hats were a bit of a laugh, you know, challenge your mate to jinx you while v

. But the Ministry bought five hundred for all its support staff! And we're still getting massive orders!"

"So we've expanded into a range of Shield Cloaks, Shield Gloves . . ."

". . . I mean, they wouldn't help much against the Unforgivable Curses, but for minor to moderate hexes or jinxes . . ."

"And then we thought we'd get into the whole area of Defense Against the Dark Arts, because it's such a money spinner

nt Darkness Powder, we're importing it from Peru. Handy if you want to make a quick escape."

"And our Decoy Detonators are just walking off the shelves, look," said Fred, pointing at a number of weird-looking b

of sight. "You just drop one surreptitiously and it'll run off and make a nice loud noise out of sight, giving you a diver

"Handy," said Harry, impressed.

"Here," said George, catching a couple and throwing them to Harry.

A young witch with short blonde hair poked her head around the curtain; Harry saw that she too was wearing mager

"There's a customer out here looking for a joke cauldron, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley," she said.

Harry found it very odd to hear Fred and George called "Mr. Weasley," but they took it in their stride.

"Right you are, Verity, I'm coming," said George promptly. "Harry, you help yourself to anything you want, all right? N

"I can't do that!" said Harry, who had already pulled out his money bag to pay for the Decoy Detonators.

"You don't pay here," said Fred firmly, waving away Harry's gold.

"But —"

"You gave us our start-up loan, we haven't forgotten," said George sternly. "Take whatever you like, and just rememb

George swept off through the curtain to help with the customers, and Fred led Harry back into the main part of the s

dream Charms.

"Haven't you girls found our special WonderWitch products yet?" asked Fred. "Follow me, ladies. . . ."

Near the window was an array of violently pink products around which a cluster of excited girls was giggling enthusia

"There you go," said Fred proudly. "Best range of love potions you'll find anywhere."

Ginny raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Do they work?" she asked.

"Certainly they work, for up to twenty-four hours at a time depending on the weight of the boy in question —"

"— and the attractiveness of the girl," said George, reappearing suddenly at their side. "But we're not selling them to

's already got about five boys on the go from what we've —"

"Whatever you've heard from Ron is a big fat lie," said Ginny calmly, leaning forward to take a small pink pot off the s

"Guaranteed ten-second pimple vanisher," said Fred. "Excellent on everything from boils to blackheads, but don't cha

a boy called Dean Thomas?"

"Yes, I am," said Ginny. "And last time I looked, he was definitely one boy, not five. What are those?"

She was pointing at a number of round balls of fluff in shades of pink and purple, all rolling around the bottom of a c

"Pygmy Puffs," said George. "Miniature puffskeins, we can't breed them fast enough. So what about Michael Corner?"

"I dumped him, he was a bad loser," said Ginny, putting a finger through the bars of the cage and watching the Pygm

"They're fairly cuddly, yes," conceded Fred. "But you're moving through boyfriends a bit fast, aren't you?"

Ginny turned to look at him, her hands on her hips. There was such a Mrs. Weasley-ish glare on her face that Harry v

"It's none of your business. And I'll thank you," she added angrily to Ron, who had just appeared at George's elbow, la

!"

"That's three Galleons, nine Sickles, and a Knut," said Fred, examining the many boxes in Ron's arms. "Cough up."

"I'm your brother!"

"And that's our stuff you're nicking. Three Galleons, nine Sickles. I'll knock off the Knut."

"But I haven't got three Galleons, nine Sickles!"

"You'd better put it back then, and mind you put it on the right shelves."

Ron dropped several boxes, swore, and made a rude hand gesture at Fred that was unfortunately spotted by Mrs. W

"If I see you do that again I'll jinx your fingers together," she said sharply.

"Mum, can I have a Pygmy Puff?" said Ginny at once.

"A what?" said Mrs. Weasley warily.

"Look, they're so sweet. . . ."

Mrs. Weasley moved aside to look at the Pygmy Puffs, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione momentarily had an unimpede

As he passed Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, he glanced over his shoulder. Seconds later, he moved beyond the scope o

"Wonder where his mummy is?" said Harry, frowning.

"Given her the slip by the looks of it," said Ron.

"Why, though?" said Hermione.

Harry said nothing; he was thinking too hard. Narcissa Malfoy would not have let her precious son out of her sight w

m her clutches. Harry, knowing and loathing Malfoy, was sure the reason could not be innocent.

He glanced around. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were bending over the Pygmy Puffs. Mr. Weasley was delightedly exami

elping customers. On the other side of the glass, Hagrid was standing with his back to them, looking up and down th

"Get under here, quick," said Harry, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his bag.
"Oh — I don't know, Harry," said Hermione, looking uncertainly toward Mrs. Weasley.
"Come on!" said Ron.

She hesitated for a second longer, then ducked under the Cloak with Harry and Ron. Nobody noticed them vanish; they slipped out of the door, and Hermione squeezed their way out of the door as quickly as they could, but by the time they gained the street, Mr. Malfoy was gone.
"He was going in that direction," murmured Harry as quietly as possible, so that the humming Hagrid would not hear.
They scurried along, peering left and right, through shop windows and doors, until Hermione pointed ahead.
"That's him, isn't it?" she whispered. "Turning left?"

"Big surprise," whispered Ron.

For Malfoy had glanced around, then slid into Knockturn Alley and out of sight.

"Quick, or we'll lose him," said Harry, speeding up.

"Our feet'll be seen!" said Hermione anxiously, as the Cloak flapped a little around their ankles; it was much more difficult to move than it looked.

"It doesn't matter," said Harry impatiently. "Just hurry!"

But Knockturn Alley, the side street devoted to the Dark Arts, looked completely deserted. They peered into windows and doors, but saw nothing at all. Harry supposed it was a bit of a giveaway in these dangerous and suspicious times to buy Dark artifacts — or, at least, to buy anything. Hermione gave his arm a hard pinch.

"Ouch!"

"Shh! Look! He's in there!" she breathed in Harry's ear.

They had drawn level with the only shop in Knockturn Alley that Harry had ever visited, Borgin and Burkes, which sold all sorts of magical trinkets. As Draco Malfoy with his back to them, just visible beyond the very same large black door that his father had used. Judging by the movements of Malfoy's hands, he was talking animatedly. The proprietor of the shop, Mr. Borgin, was wearing a curious expression of mingled resentment and fear.

"If only we could hear what they're saying!" said Hermione.

"We can!" said Ron excitedly. "Hang on — damn —"

He dropped a couple more of the boxes he was still clutching as he fumbled with the largest.

"Extendable Ears, look!"

"Fantastic!" said Hermione, as Ron unraveled the long, flesh-colored strings and began to feed them toward the bottom of the door.

"No!" said Ron gleefully. "Listen!"

They put their heads together and listened intently to the ends of the strings, through which Malfoy's voice could be heard.
". . . you know how to fix it?"

"Possibly," said Borgin, in a tone that suggested he was unwilling to commit himself. "I'll need to see it, though. Why don't you bring it in?"

"I can't," said Malfoy. "It's got to stay put. I just need you to tell me how to do it."

Harry saw Borgin lick his lips nervously.

"Well, without seeing it, I must say it will be a very difficult job, perhaps impossible. I couldn't guarantee anything."

"No?" said Malfoy, and Harry knew, just by his tone, that Malfoy was sneering. "Perhaps this will make you more confident."

He moved toward Borgin and was blocked from view by the cabinet. Harry, Ron, and Hermione shuffled sideways to get a better look. They were very frightened.

"Tell anyone," said Malfoy, "and there will be retribution. You know Fenrir Greyback? He's a family friend. He'll be dropping in to pay a visit and blemish your full attention."

"There will be no need for —"

"I'll decide that," said Malfoy. "Well, I'd better be off. And don't forget to keep that one safe, I'll need it."

"Perhaps you'd like to take it now?"

"No, of course I wouldn't, you stupid little man, how would I look carrying that down the street? Just don't sell it."

"Of course not . . . sir."

Borgin made a bow as deep as the one Harry had once seen him give Lucius Malfoy.

"Not a word to anyone, Borgin, and that includes my mother, understand?"

"Naturally, naturally," murmured Borgin, bowing again.

Next moment, the bell over the door tinkled loudly as Malfoy stalked out of the shop looking very pleased with himself. The Cloak fluttered around their knees again. Inside the shop, Borgin remained frozen; his unctuous smile had vanished.

"What was that about?" whispered Ron, reeling in the Extendable Ears.

"Dunno," said Harry, thinking hard. "He wants something mended . . . and he wants to reserve something in there. . ."

"No, he was behind that cabinet —"

"You two stay here," whispered Hermione.

"What are you — ?"

But Hermione had already ducked out from under the Cloak. She checked her hair in the reflection in the glass, then slipped the Extendable Ears back under the door and passed one of the strings to Harry.

"Hello, horrible morning, isn't it?" Hermione said brightly to Borgin, who did not answer, but cast her a suspicious look at the objects on display.

"Is this necklace for sale?" she asked, pausing beside a glass-fronted case.

"If you've got one and a half thousand Galleons," said Mr. Borgin coldly.

"Oh — er — no, I haven't got quite that much," said Hermione, walking on. "And . . . what about this lovely — um — sixteen Galleons."

"So it's for sale, then? It isn't being . . . kept for anyone?"

Mr. Borgin squinted at her. Harry had the nasty feeling he knew exactly what Hermione was up to. Apparently Hermione was up to the winds.

"The thing is, that — er — boy who was in here just now, Draco Malfoy, well, he's a friend of mine, and I want to get him the same thing, so . . . um . . ."

It was a pretty lame story in Harry's opinion, and apparently Borgin thought so too.

"Out," he said sharply. "Get out!"

Hermione did not wait to be asked twice, but hurried to the door with Borgin at her heels. As the bell tinkled again, Ron said, "Ah well," throwing the Cloak back over Hermione. "Worth a try, but you were a bit obvious —"

"Well, next time you can show me how it's done, Master of Mystery!" she snapped.

Ron and Hermione bickered all the way back to Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, where they were forced to stop so that they could see the new owner, Hagrid, who had clearly noticed their absence. Once in the shop, Harry whipped off the Invisibility Cloak, hid it in the back room, and in answer to Mrs. Weasley's accusations, that they had been in the back room all along, and that she could not have

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SLUG CLUB

Harry spent a lot of the last week of the holidays pondering the meaning of Malfoy's behavior in Knockturn Alley. What he had left the shop. Nothing that made Malfoy look that happy could be good news. To his slight annoyance, however, he found that he was as busy as ever; or at least, they seemed to get bored of discussing it after a few days.

"Yes, I've already agreed it was fishy, Harry," said Hermione a little impatiently. She was sitting on the windowsill in Fred and George's boxes and had only grudgingly looked up from her new copy of Advanced Rune Translation. "But haven't we agreed that maybe he's broken his Hand of Glory?"

"Maybe he's broken his Hand of Glory," said Ron vaguely, as he attempted to straighten his broomstick's bent tail with his wand.

"But what about when he said, 'Don't forget to keep that one safe?'" asked Harry for the umpteenth time. "That sounds like Malfoy wants both."

"You reckon?" said Ron, now trying to scrape some dirt off his broom handle.

"Yeah, I do," said Harry. When neither Ron nor Hermione answered, he said, "Malfoy's father's in Azkaban. Don't you think he'd want revenge?"

Ron looked up, blinking.

"Malfoy, revenge? What can he do about it?"

"That's my point, I don't know!" said Harry, frustrated. "But he's up to something and I think we should take it seriously."

Harry broke off, his eyes fixed on the window behind Hermione, his mouth open. A startling thought had just occurred to him.

"Harry?" said Hermione in an anxious voice. "What's wrong?"

"Your scar's not hurting again, is it?" asked Ron nervously.

"He's a Death Eater," said Harry slowly. "He's replaced his father as a Death Eater!"

There was a silence; then Ron erupted in laughter. "Malfoy? He's sixteen, Harry! You think You-Know-Who would let Malfoy replace his father?"

"It seems very unlikely, Harry," said Hermione in a repressive sort of voice. "What makes you think —?"

"In Madam Malkin's. She didn't touch him, but he yelled and jerked his arm away from her when she went to roll up his sleeve."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other.

"Well . . ." said Ron, sounding thoroughly unconvinced.

"I think he just wanted to get out of there, Harry," said Hermione.

"He showed Borgin something we couldn't see," Harry pressed on stubbornly. "Something that seriously scared Borgin. I mean, you saw how seriously Borgin took him!"

Ron and Hermione exchanged another look.

"I'm not sure, Harry. . . ."

"Yeah, I still don't reckon You-Know-Who would let Malfoy join. . . ."

Annoyed, but absolutely convinced he was right, Harry snatched up a pile of filthy Quidditch robes and left the room without washing and packing until the last moment. On the landing he bumped into Ginny, who was returning to her room carrying a large box.

"I wouldn't go in the kitchen just now," she warned him. "There's a lot of Phlegm around."

"I'll be careful not to slip in it," Harry smiled.

Sure enough, when he entered the kitchen it was to find Fleur sitting at the kitchen table, in full flow about plans for the wedding. She was eating a large pile of self-peeling sprouts, looking bad-tempered.

". . . Bill and I've almost decided on only two bridesmaids, Ginny and Gabrielle will look very sweet togezzzer. I am the only one who can be 'orrible with Ginny's 'air —"

"Ah, Harry!" said Mrs. Weasley loudly, cutting across Fleur's monologue. "Good, I wanted to explain about the security of the Ministry cars again, and there will be Aurors waiting at the station —"

"Is Tonks going to be there?" asked Harry, handing over his Quidditch things.

"No, I don't think so, she's been stationed somewhere else from what Arthur said."

"She has let 'erself go, zat Tonks," Fleur mused, examining her own stunning reflection in the back of a teaspoon. "A lot better than she was before."

"Yes, thank you," said Mrs. Weasley tartly, cutting across Fleur again. "You'd better get on, Harry, I want the trunks re-nute scramble."

And in fact, their departure the following morning was smoother than usual. The Ministry cars glided up to the front platform, Crookshanks, safely enclosed in his traveling basket; and Hedwig; Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon; and Ginny's new purple Puffendoot. "Au revoir, 'Arry," said Fleur throatily, kissing him good-bye. Ron hurried forward, looking hopeful, but Ginny stuck out her tongue. Furious, red-faced, and dirt-spattered, he hurried into the car without saying good-bye.

There was no cheerful Hagrid waiting for them at King's Cross Station. Instead, two grim-faced, bearded Aurors in dark robes, flanking the party, marched them into the station without speaking.

"Quick, quick, through the barrier," said Mrs. Weasley, who seemed a little flustered by this austere efficiency. "Harry, hurry! She looked inquiringly at one of the Aurors, who nodded briefly, seized Harry's upper arm, and attempted to steer him through the barrier. "I can walk, thanks," said Harry irritably, jerking his arm out of the Auror's grip. He pushed his trolley directly at the second Auror, a second later, standing on platform nine and three-quarters, where the scarlet Hogwarts Express stood belching smoke. Hermione and the Weasleys joined him within seconds. Without waiting to consult his grim-faced Auror, Harry motioned Hermione to an empty compartment.

"We can't, Harry," said Hermione, looking apologetic. "Ron and I've got to go to the prefects' carriage first and then pass our trunks." "Oh yeah, I forgot," said Harry.

"You'd better get straight on the train, all of you, you've only got a few minutes to go," said Mrs. Weasley, consulting her watch. "Mr. Weasley, can I have a quick word?" said Harry, making up his mind on the spur of the moment.

"Of course," said Mr. Weasley, who looked slightly surprised, but followed Harry out of earshot of the others nevertheless. Harry had thought it through carefully and come to the conclusion that, if he was to tell anyone, Mr. Weasley was the best person to tell, and therefore in the best position to make further investigations, and secondly, because he thought that there was not much chance of Mrs. Weasley or the Aurors casting suspicious looks as they moved away.

"When we were in Diagon Alley," Harry began, but Mr. Weasley forestalled him with a grimace. "Am I about to discover where you, Ron, and Hermione disappeared to while you were supposed to be in the back room?" "How did you —?"

"Harry, please. You're talking to the man who raised Fred and George." "Er . . . yeah, all right, we weren't in the back room."

"Very well, then, let's hear the worst." "Well, we followed Draco Malfoy. We used my Invisibility Cloak."

"Did you have any particular reason for doing so, or was it a mere whim?" "Because I thought Malfoy was up to something," said Harry, disregarding Mr. Weasley's look of mingled exasperation and disapproval. "How why?"

"Of course you did," said Mr. Weasley, sounding resigned. "Well? Did you find out why?" "He went into Borgin and Burkes," said Harry, "and started bullying the bloke in there, Borgin, to help him fix something. He made it sound like it was the same kind of thing that needed fixing. Like they were a pair. And . . ."

Harry took a deep breath. "There's something else. We saw Malfoy jump about a mile when Madam Malkin tried to touch his left arm. I think he's a Death Eater."

Mr. Weasley looked taken aback. After a moment he said, "Harry, I doubt whether You-Know-Who would allow a sixth-year boy to do that." "Does anyone really know what You-Know-Who would or wouldn't do?" asked Harry angrily. "Mr. Weasley, I'm sorry, but I think he needs to threaten Borgin to get it done, it's probably something Dark or dangerous, isn't it?"

"I doubt it, to be honest, Harry," said Mr. Weasley slowly. "You see, when Lucius Malfoy was arrested, we raided his home. I think you missed something," said Harry stubbornly.

"Well, maybe," said Mr. Weasley, but Harry could tell that Mr. Weasley was humoring him.

There was a whistle behind them; nearly everyone had boarded the train and the doors were closing. "You'd better hurry," said Mr. Weasley, as Mrs. Weasley cried, "Harry, quickly!"

He hurried forward and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley helped him load his trunk onto the train.

"Now, dear, you're coming to us for Christmas, it's all fixed with Dumbledore, so we'll see you quite soon," said Mrs. Weasley. "The train and the train began to move. "You make sure you look after yourself and —"

The train was gathering speed. "— be good and —"

She was jogging to keep up now. "— stay safe!"

Harry waved until the train had turned a corner and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were lost to view, then turned to see where he was in the prefects' carriage, but Ginny was a little way along the corridor, chatting to some friends. He made his way back to his compartment. People stared shamelessly as he approached. They even pressed their faces against the windows of their compartments, gaping and gawping he would have to endure this term after all the "Chosen One" rumors in the Daily Prophet, but he didn't mind. He tapped Ginny on the shoulder.

"Fancy trying to find a compartment?" "I can't, Harry, I said I'd meet Dean," said Ginny brightly. "See you later."

"Right," said Harry. He felt a strange twinge of annoyance as she walked away, her long red hair dancing behind her; he'd almost forgotten that Ginny did not hang around with him, Ron, and Hermione while at school. Then he blinked and—

"Hi, Harry!" said a familiar voice from behind him.

"Neville!" said Harry in relief, turning to see a round-faced boy struggling toward him.

"Hello, Harry," said a girl with long hair and large misty eyes, who was just behind Neville.

"Luna, hi, how are you?"

"Very well, thank you," said Luna. She was clutching a magazine to her chest; large letters on the front announced that the "Quibbler" was still going strong, then? asked Harry, who felt a certain fondness for the magazine, having given it an exclusive interview.

"Oh yes, circulation's well up," said Luna happily.

"Let's find seats," said Harry, and the three of them set off along the train through hordes of silently staring students and into the train cars.

"They're even staring at us!" said Neville, indicating himself and Luna. "Because we're with you!"

"They're staring at you because you were at the Ministry too," said Harry, as he hoisted his trunk into the luggage rack. "You must've seen it."

"Yes, I thought Gran would be angry about all the publicity," said Neville, "but she was really pleased. Says I'm starting to grow up, look!"

He pulled it out and showed it to Harry.

"Cherry and unicorn hair," he said proudly. "We think it was one of the last Ollivander ever sold, he vanished next day." And he dived under the seat to retrieve his toad as it made one of its frequent bids for freedom.

"Are we still doing D.A. meetings this year, Harry?" asked Luna, who was detaching a pair of psychedelic spectacles from her forehead.

"No point now we've got rid of Umbridge, is there?" said Harry, sitting down. Neville bumped his head against the seat.

"I liked the D.A.! I learned loads with you!"

"I enjoyed the meetings too," said Luna serenely. "It was like having friends."

This was one of those uncomfortable things Luna often said and which made Harry feel a squirming mixture of pity and embarrassment outside their compartment door; a group of fourth-year girls was whispering and giggling together on the corridor.

"You ask him!"

"No, you!"

"I'll do it!"

And one of them, a bold-looking girl with large dark eyes, a prominent chin, and long black hair pushed her way through the crowd.

"Hi, Harry, I'm Romilda, Romilda Vane," she said loudly and confidently. "Why don't you join us in our compartment?"

Indicating Neville's bottom, which was sticking out from under the seat again as he groped around for Trevor, and Luna.

Look of a demented, multicolored owl.

"They're friends of mine," said Harry coldly.

"Oh," said the girl, looking very surprised. "Oh. Okay."

And she withdrew, sliding the door closed behind her.

"People expect you to have cooler friends than us," said Luna, once again displaying her knack for embarrassing Harry.

"You are cool," said Harry shortly. "None of them was at the Ministry. They didn't fight with me."

"That's a very nice thing to say," beamed Luna. Then she pushed her Spectrespecs farther up her nose and settled down.

"We didn't face him, though," said Neville, emerging from under the seat with fluff and dust in his hair and a resigned expression.

"Talk about you. 'That Harry Potter's got more backbone than the whole Ministry of Magic put together!' She'd give an interview to anyone."

Harry laughed uncomfortably and changed the subject to O.W.L. results as soon as he could. While Neville recited his Transfiguration N.E.W.T. with only an "Acceptable," Harry watched him without really listening.

Neville's childhood had been blighted by Voldemort just as much as Harry's had, but Neville had no idea how close he'd come to either of them, yet, for his own inscrutable reasons, Voldemort had chosen to believe that Harry was the one who'd defeated him.

Had Voldemort chosen Neville, it would be Neville sitting opposite Harry bearing the lightning-shaped scar and the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Have died to save him, as Lily had died for Harry? Surely she would. . . . But what if she had been unable to stand between them?

"Sen One" at all? An empty seat where Neville now sat and a scarless Harry who would have been kissed good-bye by Voldemort.

"You all right, Harry? You look funny," said Neville.

Harry started. "Sorry — I —"

"Wrackspurt got you?" asked Luna sympathetically, peering at Harry through her enormous colored spectacles.

"I — what?"

"A Wrackspurt . . . They're invisible. They float in through your ears and make your brain go fuzzy," she said. "I thought you were." She flapped her hands at thin air, as though beating off large invisible moths. Harry and Neville caught each other's eyes.

The weather beyond the train windows was as patchy as it had been all summer; they passed through stretches of thick fog, then clear air, then more fog.

One of the clear spells, when the sun was visible almost directly overhead, that Ron and Hermione entered the compartment.

"Wish the lunch trolley would hurry up, I'm starving," said Ron longingly, slumping into the seat beside Harry and rubbing his stomach.

Harry, turning to Harry. "Malfoy's not doing prefect duty. He's just sitting in his compartment with the other Slytherins, waiting for the chance to show off."

Harry sat up straight, interested. It was not like Malfoy to pass up the chance to demonstrate his power as prefect, was it?

"What did he do when he saw you?"

"The usual," said Ron indifferently, demonstrating a rude hand gesture. "Not like him, though, is it? Well — that is" —

ullying first years?"

"Dunno," said Harry, but his mind was racing. Didn't this look as though Malfoy had more important things on his mind?

"Maybe he preferred the Inquisitorial Squad," said Hermione. "Maybe being a prefect seems a bit tame after that."

"I don't think so," said Harry. "I think he's —"

But before he could expound on his theory, the compartment door slid open again and a breathless third-year girl stood in the doorway.

"I'm supposed to deliver these to Neville Longbottom and Harry P-Potter," she faltered, as her eyes met Harry's and she saw his tie.

It was tied with violet ribbon. Perplexed, Harry and Neville took the scroll addressed to each of them and the girl stumbled away.

"What is it?" Ron demanded, as Harry unrolled his.

"An invitation," said Harry.

Harry,

I would be delighted if you would join me for a bite of lunch in compartment C.

Sincerely,

Professor H.E.F. Slughorn

"Who's Professor Slughorn?" asked Neville, looking perplexed at his own invitation.

"New teacher," said Harry. "Well, I suppose we'll have to go, won't we?"

"But what does he want me for?" asked Neville nervously, as though he was expecting detention.

"No idea," said Harry, which was not entirely true, though he had no proof yet that his hunch was correct. "Listen, if we can get a good look at Malfoy on the way, see what he's up to."

This idea, however, came to nothing: The corridors, which were packed with people on the lookout for the lunch trolley, were too crowded for that. Harry towed it regretfully back in his bag, reflecting that it would have been nice to wear it just to avoid all the staring, which he had experienced last walked down the train.

Every now and then, students would hurtle out of their compartments to get a better look at the new teacher. Hermione stopped in her compartment when she saw Harry coming.

As Harry passed the window, he saw her deep in determined conversation with Neville. Her hair was pulled back, and it did not entirely obscure the odd formation of pimples still etched across her face. Smirking slightly, Harry pushed on.

When they reached compartment C, they saw at once that they were not Slughorn's only invitees, although judging by the number of people there, they anticipated.

"Harry, m'boy!" said Slughorn, jumping up at the sight of him so that his great velvet-covered belly seemed to fill all the compartment. His red and great silvery mustache gleamed as brightly in the sunlight as the golden buttons on his waistcoat. "Good to see you!"

Neville nodded, looking scared. At a gesture from Slughorn, they sat down opposite each other in the only two empty seats. There were a few fellow guests. He recognized a Slytherin from their year, a tall black boy with high cheekbones and long, slanting eyes.

She was d, squashed in the corner beside Slughorn and looking as though she was not entirely sure how she had got there, Granger.

"Now, do you know everyone?" Slughorn asked Harry and Neville. "Blaise Zabini is in your year, of course —"

Zabini did not make any sign of recognition or greeting, nor did Harry or Neville: Gryffindor and Slytherin students loathed each other.

"This is Cormac McLaggen, perhaps you've come across each other — ? No?"

McLaggen, a large, wiry-haired youth, raised a hand, and Harry and Neville nodded back at him.

"— and this is Marcus Belby, I don't know whether — ?"

Belby, who was thin and nervous-looking, gave a strained smile.

"— and this charming young lady tells me she knows you!" Slughorn finished.

Ginny grimaced at Harry and Neville from behind Slughorn's back.

"Well now, this is most pleasant," said Slughorn cozily. "A chance to get to know you all a little better. Here, take a nap. The pheasant, it is heavy on licorice wands, and a poor old man's digestive system isn't quite up to such things. . . . Pheasant, Belby."

Belby started and accepted what looked like half a cold pheasant.

"I was just telling young Marcus here that I had the pleasure of teaching his Uncle Damocles," Slughorn told Harry and Neville. "A wizard, outstanding, and his Order of Merlin most well-deserved. Do you see much of your uncle, Marcus?"

Unfortunately, Belby had just taken a large mouthful of pheasant; in his haste to answer Slughorn he swallowed too much.

"Anapneo," said Slughorn calmly, pointing his wand at Belby, whose airway seemed to clear at once.

"Not . . . not much of him, no," gasped Belby, his eyes streaming.

"Well, of course, I daresay he's busy," said Slughorn, looking questioningly at Belby. "I doubt he invented the Wolfsbane Potion."

"I suppose . . ." said Belby, who seemed afraid to take another bite of pheasant until he was sure that Slughorn had finished. "I, you see, so I don't really know much about . . ."

His voice tailed away as Slughorn gave him a cold smile and turned to McLaggen instead.

"Now, you, Cormac," said Slughorn, "I happen to know you see a lot of your Uncle Tiberius, because he has a rather strong interest in Dorsetshire orfolk?"

"Oh, yeah, that was fun, that was," said McLaggen. "We went with Bertie Higgs and Rufus Scrimgeour — this was before the war."

"Ah, you know Bertie and Rufus too?" beamed Slughorn, now offering around a small tray of pies; somehow, Belby was not invited.

It was as Harry had suspected. Everyone here seemed to have been invited because they were connected to somebody. Hermione, who had been interrogated after McLaggen, turned out to have a famously beautiful witch for a mother (from what Harry could make out).

She had mysteriously and leaving her mounds of gold). It was Neville's turn next: This was a very uncomfortable ten minutes, during which he was interrogated by Bellatrix Lestrange and a couple of Death Eater cronies. At the end of Neville's interview, Harry had the impression that he was being

t to see whether he had any of his parents' flair.

"And now," said Slughorn, shifting massively in his seat with the air of a compere introducing his star act. "Harry Potter and the

n we met over the summer!" He contemplated Harry for a moment as though he was a particularly large and succulent u now!"

Harry said nothing. Belby, McLaggen, and Zabini were all staring at him.

"Of course," said Slughorn, watching Harry closely, "there have been rumors for years. . . . I remember when — well — and the word was that you must have powers beyond the ordinary —"

Zabini gave a tiny little cough that was clearly supposed to indicate amused skepticism. An angry voice burst out from

"Yeah, Zabini, because you're so talented . . . at posing. . . ."

"Oh dear!" chuckled Slughorn comfortably, looking around at Ginny, who was glaring at Zabini around Slughorn's gre

rform the most marvelous Bat-Bogey Hex as I was passing her carriage! I wouldn't cross her!"

Zabini merely looked contemptuous.

"Anyway," said Slughorn, turning back to Harry. "Such rumors this summer. Of course, one doesn't know what to believe — but there seems little doubt, given the number of witnesses, that there was quite a disturbance at the Ministry and Harry, who could not see any way out of this without flatly lying, nodded but still said nothing. Slughorn beamed at h

"So modest, so modest, no wonder Dumbledore is so fond — you were there, then? But the rest of the stories — so s

fabled prophecy, for instance —"

"We never heard a prophecy," said Neville, turning geranium pink as he said it.

"That's right," said Ginny staunchly. "Neville and I were both there too, and all this 'Chosen One' rubbish is just the Pr

"You were both there too, were you?" said Slughorn with great interest, looking from Ginny to Neville, but both of the

"Yes . . . well . . . it is true that the Prophet often exaggerates, of course. . . ." Slughorn said, sounding a little disappointed

s, I mean, of course, Captain of the Holyhead Harpies) —"

He meandered off into a long-winded reminiscence, but Harry had the distinct impression that Slughorn had not finished

nny.

The afternoon wore on with more anecdotes about illustrious wizards Slughorn had taught, all of whom had been de

ld not wait to leave, but couldn't see how to do so politely. Finally the train emerged from yet another long misty stre

n the twilight.

"Good gracious, it's getting dark already! I didn't notice that they'd lit the lamps! You'd better go and change into your

hat book on nogtails. Harry, Blaise — any time you're passing. Same goes for you, miss," he twinkled at Ginny. "Well,

As he pushed past Harry into the darkening corridor, Zabini shot him a filthy look that Harry returned with interest. H

"I'm glad that's over," muttered Neville. "Strange man, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he is a bit," said Harry, his eyes on Zabini. "How come you ended up in there, Ginny?"

"He saw me hex Zacharias Smith," said Ginny. "You remember that idiot from Hufflepuff who was in the D.A.? He kept

d he annoyed me so much I hexed him — when Slughorn came in I thought I was going to get detention, but he just

"Better reason for inviting someone than because their mother's famous," said Harry, scowling at the back of Zabini's

But he broke off. An idea had just occurred to him, a reckless but potentially wonderful idea. . . . In a minute's time, Z

ment and Malfoy would be sitting there, thinking himself unheard by anybody except fellow Slytherins. . . . If Harry c

ear? True, there was little of the journey left — Hogsmeade Station had to be less than half an hour away, judging by

y else seemed prepared to take Harry's suspicions seriously, so it was down to him to prove them.

"I'll see you two later," said Harry under his breath, pulling out his Invisibility Cloak and flinging it over himself.

"But what're you — ?" asked Neville.

"Later!" whispered Harry, darting after Zabini as quietly as possible, though the rattling of the train made such caution

The corridors were almost completely empty now. Nearly everyone had returned to their carriages to change into th

se as he could get to Zabini without touching him, Harry was not quick enough to slip into the compartment when Z

hastily stuck out his foot to prevent it closing.

"What's wrong with this thing?" said Zabini angrily as he smashed the sliding door repeatedly into Harry's foot.

Harry seized the door and pushed it open, hard; Zabini, still clinging on to the handle, toppled over sideways into Gr

the compartment, leapt onto Zabini's temporarily empty seat, and hoisted himself up into the luggage rack. It was fo

ng all eyes onto them, for Harry was quite sure his feet and ankles had been revealed as the Cloak had flapped arou

s eyes follow his trainer as it whipped upward out of sight. But then Goyle slammed the door shut and flung Zabini o

nt Crabbe returned to his comic, and Malfoy, sniggering, lay back down across two seats with his head in Pansy Park

ure that every inch of him remained hidden, and watched Pansy stroke the sleek blond hair off Malfoy's forehead, s

en in her place. The lanterns swinging from the carriage ceiling cast a bright light over the scene: Harry could read ev

"So, Zabini," said Malfoy, "what did Slughorn want?"

"Just trying to make up to well-connected people," said Zabini, who was still glowering at Goyle. "Not that he manage

This information did not seem to please Malfoy.

"Who else had he invited?" he demanded.

"McLaggen from Gryffindor," said Zabini.

"Oh yeah, his uncle's big in the Ministry," said Malfoy.

"— someone else called Belby, from Ravenclaw —"

"Not him, he's a prat!" said Pansy.

"— and Longbottom, Potter, and that Weasley girl," finished Zabini.

Malfoy sat up very suddenly, knocking Pansy's hand aside.

"He invited Longbottom?"

"Well, I assume so, as Longbottom was there," said Zabini indifferently.

"What's Longbottom got to interest Slughorn?"

Zabini shrugged.

"Potter, precious Potter, obviously he wanted a look at 'the Chosen One,'" sneered Malfoy, "but that Weasley girl! What?"

"A lot of boys like her," said Pansy, watching Malfoy out of the corner of her eyes for his reaction. "Even you think she's better than you are to please!"

"I wouldn't touch a filthy little blood traitor like her whatever she looked like," said Zabini coldly, and Pansy looked pleased to resume the stroking of his hair.

"Well, I pity Slughorn's taste. Maybe he's going a bit senile. Shame, my father always said he was a good wizard in his time. He probably hasn't heard I'm on the train, or —"

"I wouldn't bank on an invitation," said Zabini. "He asked me about Nott's father when I first arrived. They used to be friends. But at the Ministry he didn't look happy, and Nott didn't get an invitation, did he? I don't think Slughorn's interested in Death Eaters." Malfoy looked angry, but forced out a singularly humorless laugh.

"Well, who cares what he's interested in? What is he, when you come down to it? Just some stupid teacher." Malfoy yawned. "This year, what's it matter to me if some fat old has-been likes me or not?"

"What do you mean, you might not be at Hogwarts next year?" said Pansy indignantly, ceasing grooming Malfoy at once.

"Well, you never know," said Malfoy with the ghost of a smirk. "I might have — er — moved on to bigger and better things." Crouched in the luggage rack under his Cloak, Harry's heart began to race. What would Ron and Hermione say about Malfoy? He had no inkling of any plans to move on to bigger and better things. Even Zabini had allowed a look of curiosity to mar his indifference. Malfoy's hair, looking dumbfounded.

"Do you mean — Him?"

Malfoy shrugged.

"Mother wants me to complete my education, but personally, I don't see it as that important these days. I mean, think of it: how many O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s anyone's got? Of course he isn't. . . . It'll be all about the kind of service he receives."

"And you think you'll be able to do something for him?" asked Zabini scathingly. "Sixteen years old and not even fully trained?"

"I've just said, haven't I? Maybe he doesn't care if I'm qualified. Maybe the job he wants me to do isn't something that requires a lot of brains." Crabbe and Goyle were both sitting with their mouths open like gargoyles. Pansy was gazing down at Malfoy as though she was in love.

"I can see Hogwarts," said Malfoy, clearly relishing the effect he had created as he pointed out of the blackened window. Harry was so busy staring at Malfoy, he did not notice Goyle reaching up for his trunk; as he swung it down, it hit Harry on the head. A sharp pain, and Malfoy looked up at the luggage rack, frowning.

Harry was not afraid of Malfoy, but he still did not much like the idea of being discovered hiding under his Invisibility Cloak. His head aching and head still throbbing, he drew his wand, careful not to disarrange the Cloak, and waited, breath held. To his relief, nothing happened. He pulled on his robes like the others, locked his trunk, and as the train slowed to a jerky crawl, fastened a thick new spell. Harry could see the corridors filling up again and hoped that Hermione and Ron would take his things out onto the platform. The train had quite emptied. At last, with a final lurch, the train came to a complete halt. Goyle threw the door open and musclebumped Crabbe and Zabini followed.

"You go on," Malfoy told Pansy, who was waiting for him with her hand held out as though hoping he would hold it. "I'll be right behind you." Pansy left. Now Harry and Malfoy were alone in the compartment. People were filing past, descending onto the dark platform. Malfoy pulled the blinds, so that people in the corridor beyond could not peer in. He then bent down over his trunk and opened it again. Harry peered down over the edge of the luggage rack, his heart pumping a little faster. What had Malfoy wanted to hide? What was so important to mend?

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Without warning, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry, who was instantly paralyzed. As though in slow motion, he toppled backward. A loud crash, at Malfoy's feet, the Invisibility Cloak trapped beneath him, his whole body revealed with his legs still curled up. He lay over a muscle; he could only gaze up at Malfoy, who smiled broadly.

"I thought so," he said jubilantly. "I heard Goyle's trunk hit you. And I thought I saw something white flash through the blinds. His eyes lingered for a moment upon Harry's trainers."

"You didn't hear anything I care about, Potter. But while I've got you here . . ."

And he stamped, hard, on Harry's face. Harry felt his nose break; blood spurted everywhere.

"That's from my father. Now, let's see. . . ."

Malfoy dragged the Cloak out from under Harry's immobilized body and threw it over him.

"I don't reckon they'll find you till the train's back in London," he said quietly. "See you around, Potter . . . or not."

And taking care to tread on Harry's fingers, Malfoy left the compartment.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SNAPE VICTORIOUS

Harry could not move a muscle. He lay there beneath the Invisibility Cloak feeling the blood from his nose flow, hot and sticky, down his face. He heard the train chugging in the corridor beyond. His immediate thought was that someone, surely, would check the compartments before the train

even if somebody looked into the compartment, he would be neither seen nor heard. His best hope was that somebody would find him. Harry had never hated Malfoy more than as he lay there, like an absurd turtle on its back, blood dripping sickeningly down his face. . . . and now the last few footsteps were dying away; everyone was shuffling along the dark platform outside; he was alone.

Ron and Hermione would think that he had left the train without them. Once they arrived at Hogwarts and took their seats, they would realize that he was not there, he, no doubt, would be halfway back to London.

He tried to make a sound, even a grunt, but it was impossible. Then he remembered that some wizards, like Dumbledore, could make things move without touching them, by saying the words "Accio Wand!" over and over again in his head, but not in his hand. He thought he could hear the rustling of the trees that surrounded the lake, and the far-off hoot of an owl, but no human voices. He panicked, wondering where Harry Potter had gone. A feeling of hopelessness spread through him. He heard the school and the muffled yells of laughter issuing from whichever carriage Malfoy was riding in, where he could not go. Pansy Parkinson.

The train lurched, causing Harry to roll over onto his side. Now he was staring at the dusty underside of the seats instead of the ceiling. The Express was leaving and nobody knew he was still on it. . . .

Then he felt his Invisibility Cloak fly off him and a voice overhead said, "Wotcher, Harry."

There was a flash of red light and Harry's body unfroze; he was able to push himself into a more dignified sitting position, and raise his head to look up at Tonks, who was holding the Invisibility Cloak she had just pulled away.

"We'd better get out of here, quickly," she said, as the train windows became obscured with steam and they began to move. Harry hurried after her into the corridor. She pulled open the train door and leapt onto the platform, which seemed to follow her, staggered a little on landing, then straightened up in time to see the gleaming scarlet steam engine pick her up.

The cold night air was soothing on his throbbing nose. Tonks was looking at him; he felt angry and embarrassed that she had found him. He handed her back the Invisibility Cloak.

"Who did it?"

"Draco Malfoy," said Harry bitterly. "Thanks for . . . well . . ."

"No problem," said Tonks, without smiling. From what Harry could see in the darkness, she was as mousy-haired and plain as he. "I can fix your nose if you stand still."

Harry did not think much of this idea; he had been intending to visit Madam Pomfrey, the matron, in whom he had a great deal of confidence. He was rude to say this, so he stayed stock-still and closed his eyes.

"Episkey," said Tonks.

Harry's nose felt very hot, and then very cold. He raised a hand and felt it gingerly. It seemed to be mended.

"Thanks a lot!"

"You'd better put that Cloak back on, and we can walk up to the school," said Tonks, still unsmiling. As Harry swung the door open, a four-legged creature erupted from it and streaked off into the darkness.

"Was that a Patronus?" asked Harry, who had seen Dumbledore send messages like this.

"Yes, I'm sending word to the castle that I've got you or they'll worry. Come on, we'd better not dawdle."

They set off toward the lane that led to the school.

"How did you find me?"

"I noticed you hadn't left the train and I knew you had that Cloak. I thought you might be hiding for some reason. When I saw you, I'd check."

"But what are you doing here, anyway?" Harry asked.

"I'm stationed in Hogsmeade now, to give the school extra protection," said Tonks.

"Is it just you who's stationed up here, or — ?"

"No, Proudfoot, Savage, and Dawlish are here too."

"Dawlish, that Auror Dumbledore attacked last year?"

"That's right."

They trudged up the dark, deserted lane, following the freshly made carriage tracks. Harry looked sideways at Tonks (she was a little annoying at times), she had laughed easily, she had made jokes. Now she seemed older and much more serious.

What had happened at the Ministry? He reflected uncomfortably that Hermione would have suggested he say something consolatory to Sirius. He didn't bring himself to do it. He was far from blaming her for Sirius's death; it was no more her fault than anyone else's.

He thought of Sirius if he could avoid it. And so they tramped on through the cold night in silence, Tonks's long cloak whispering on the ground. Having always traveled there by carriage, Harry had never before appreciated just how far Hogwarts was from Hogsmeade.

On either side of the gates, each topped with a winged boar. He was cold, he was hungry, and he was quite keen to leave. He tried to open the gates, he found them chained shut.

"Alohomora!" he said confidently, pointing his wand at the padlock, but nothing happened.

"That won't work on these," said Tonks. "Dumbledore bewitched them himself."

Harry looked around.

"I could climb a wall," he suggested.

"No, you couldn't," said Tonks flatly. "Anti-intruder jinxes on all of them. Security's been tightened a hundredfold this year."

"Well then," said Harry, starting to feel annoyed at her lack of helpfulness, "I suppose I'll just have to sleep out here a while."

"Someone's coming down for you," said Tonks. "Look."

A lantern was bobbing at the distant foot of the castle. Harry was so pleased to see it he felt he could even endure Filch. His timekeeping would improve with the regular application of thumbscrews. It was not until the glowing yellow light vanished behind the Invisibility Cloak so that he could be seen, that he recognized, with a rush of pure loathing, the uplit hooked nose and long, thin lips. "Well, well, well," sneered Snape, taking out his wand and tapping the padlock once, so that the chains snaked backward. "I couldn't change, I didn't have my —" Harry began, but Snape cut across him.

"There is no need to wait, Nymphadora, Potter is quite — ah — safe in my hands."

"I meant Hagrid to get the message," said Tonks, frowning.

"Hagrid was late for the start-of-term feast, just like Potter here, so I took it instead. And incidentally," said Snape, standing up, "I came to see your new Patronus."

He shut the gates in her face with a loud clang and tapped the chains with his wand again, so that they slithered, clinking.

"I think you were better off with the old one," said Snape, the malice in his voice unmistakable. "The new one looks wretched."

As Snape swung the lantern about, Harry saw, fleetingly, a look of shock and anger on Tonks's face. Then she was gone.

"Good night," Harry called to her over his shoulder, as he began the walk up to the school with Snape. "Thanks for . . ."

"See you, Harry."

Snape did not speak for a minute or so. Harry felt as though his body was generating waves of hatred so powerful that he could feel them in his bones. He had loathed Snape from their first encounter, but Snape had placed himself forever and irrevocably beyond the reach of Harry's anger. Whatever Dumbledore said, Harry had had time to think over the summer, and had concluded that Snape's snide remarks about the Phoenix were off fighting Voldemort had probably been a powerful factor in Sirius rushing off to the Ministry. At least, it enabled him to blame Snape, which felt satisfying, and also because he knew that if anyone was not sorry that Sirius was dead, it was Snape.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor for lateness, I think," said Snape. "And, let me see, another twenty for your Muggle attire. You've lost five figures this early in the term: We haven't even started pudding. You might have set a record, Potter."

The fury and hatred bubbling inside Harry seemed to blaze white-hot, but he would rather have been immobilized than angry.

"I suppose you wanted to make an entrance, did you?" Snape continued. "And with no flying car available you decided to create a dramatic effect."

Still Harry remained silent, though he thought his chest might explode. He knew that Snape had come to fetch him for the feast without anyone else listening.

They reached the castle steps at last and as the great oaken front doors swung open into the vast flagged entrance hall, the doors greeted them through the doors standing open into the Great Hall. Harry wondered whether he could slip his Invisibility Cloak under the Gryffindor table (which, inconveniently, was the farthest from the entrance hall) without being noticed. As though he had read his mind, Snape said, "In so that everyone sees you, which is what you wanted, I'm sure."

Harry turned on the spot and marched straight through the open doors: anything to get away from Snape. The Great Hall, at the top of the room, was decorated as usual with floating candles that made the plates below glitter and glow. It was all very bright. As he was passing the Hufflepuff table before people really started to stare, and by the time they were standing up to get their plates, the benches toward them, and forced his way in between them.

"Where've you — blimey, what've you done to your face?" said Ron, goggling at him along with everyone else in the vast hall.

"Why, what's wrong with it?" said Harry, grabbing a spoon and squinting at his distorted reflection.

"You're covered in blood!" said Hermione. "Come here —"

She raised her wand, said "Tergeo!" and siphoned off the dried blood.

"Thanks," said Harry, feeling his now clean face. "How's my nose looking?"

"Normal," said Hermione anxiously. "Why shouldn't it? Harry, what happened? We've been terrified!"

"I'll tell you later," said Harry curtly. He was very conscious that Ginny, Neville, Dean, and Seamus were listening in; even Sirius, who was floating along the bench to eavesdrop.

"But —" said Hermione.

"Not now, Hermione," said Harry, in a darkly significant voice. He hoped very much that they would all assume he had been attacked by a horde of Death Eaters and a dementor. Of course, Malfoy would spread the story as far and wide as he could, but there was nothing he could do about that. He reached across Ron for a couple of chicken legs and a handful of chips, but before he could take them they vanished.

"You missed the Sorting, anyway," said Hermione, as Ron dived for a large chocolate gateau.

"Hat say anything interesting?" asked Harry, taking a piece of treacle tart.

"More of the same, really . . . advising us all to unite in the face of our enemies, you know."

"Dumbledore mentioned Voldemort at all?"

"Not yet, but he always saves his proper speech for after the feast, doesn't he? It can't be long now."

"Snape said Hagrid was late for the feast —"

"You've seen Snape? How come?" said Ron between frenzied mouthfuls of gateau.

"Bumped into him," said Harry evasively.

"Hagrid was only a few minutes late," said Hermione. "Look, he's waving at you, Harry."

Harry looked up at the staff table and grinned at Hagrid, who was indeed waving at him. Hagrid had never quite managed to get to the head of Gryffindor House, the top of whose head came up to somewhere between Hagrid's elbow and shoulder as they sat. Hagrid gave an enthusiastic greeting. Harry was surprised to see the Divination teacher, Professor Trelawney, sitting on Hagrid's other side.

her at the start-of-term feast before. She looked as odd as ever, glittering with beads and trailing shawls, her eyes m

nsidered her a bit of a fraud, Harry had been shocked to discover at the end of the previous term that it had been sh

Harry's parents and attack Harry himself. The knowledge had made him even less eager to find himself in her comp

great beaconlike eyes swiveled in his direction; he hastily looked away toward the Slytherin table. Draco Malfoy was

. Harry dropped his gaze to his treacle tart, his insides burning again. What he would not give to fight Malfoy one-on-

"So what did Professor Slughorn want?" Hermione asked.

"To know what really happened at the Ministry," said Harry.

"Him and everyone else here," sniffed Hermione. "People were interrogating us about it on the train, weren't they, Ron?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "All wanting to know if you really are 'the Chosen One' —"

"There has been much talk on that very subject even amongst the ghosts," interrupted Nearly Headless Nick, inclin

ously on its ruff. "I am considered something of a Potter authority; it is widely known that we are friendly. I have assu

rmation, however. 'Harry Potter knows that he can confide in me with complete confidence,' I told them. 'I would rath

"That's not saying much, seeing as you're already dead," Ron observed.

"Once again, you show all the sensitivity of a blunt axe," said Nearly Headless Nick in affronted tones, and he rose int

r table just as Dumbledore got to his feet at the staff table. The talk and laughter echoing around the Hall died away.

"The very best of evenings to you!" he said, smiling broadly, his arms opened wide as though to embrace the whole r

"What happened to his hand?" gasped Hermione.

She was not the only one who had noticed. Dumbledore's right hand was as blackened and dead-looking as it had be

s swept the room; Dumbledore, interpreting them correctly, merely smiled and shook his purple-and-gold sleeve ove

"Nothing to worry about," he said airily. "Now . . . to our new students, welcome, to our old students, welcome back!

"His hand was like that when I saw him over the summer," Harry whispered to Hermione. "I thought he'd have cured

"It looks as if it's died," said Hermione, with a nauseated expression. "But there are some injuries you can't cure . . . o

. . ."

". . . and Mr. Filch, our caretaker, has asked me to say that there is a blanket ban on any joke items bought at the sho

"Those wishing to play for their House Quidditch teams should give their names to their Heads of House as usual. W

kewise.

"We are pleased to welcome a new member of staff this year. Professor Slughorn" — Slughorn stood up, his bald hea

table below into shadow — "is a former colleague of mine who has agreed to resume his old post of Potions master

"Potions?"

"Potions?"

The word echoed all over the Hall as people wondered whether they had heard right.

"Potions?" said Ron and Hermione together, turning to stare at Harry. "But you said —"

"Professor Snape, meanwhile," said Dumbledore, raising his voice so that it carried over all the muttering, "will be tak

r."

"No!" said Harry, so loudly that many heads turned in his direction. He did not care; he was staring up at the staff tab

e Dark Arts job after all this time? Hadn't it been widely known for years that Dumbledore did not trust him to do it?

"But Harry, you said that Slughorn was going to be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts!" said Hermione.

"I thought he was!" said Harry, racking his brains to remember when Dumbledore had told him this, but now that he

g him what Slughorn would be teaching.

Snape, who was sitting on Dumbledore's right, did not stand up at the mention of his name; he merely raised a hand

et Harry was sure he could detect a look of triumph on the features he loathed so much.

"Well, there's one good thing," he said savagely. "Snape'll be gone by the end of the year."

"What do you mean?" asked Ron.

"That job's jinxed. No one's lasted more than a year. . . . Quirrell actually died doing it. . . . Personally, I'm going to kee

"Harry!" said Hermione, shocked and reproachful.

"He might just go back to teaching Potions at the end of the year," said Ron reasonably. "That Slughorn bloke might r

Dumbledore cleared his throat. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were not the only ones who had been talking; the whole H

finally achieved his heart's desire. Seemingly oblivious to the sensational nature of the news he had just imparted, D

d a few seconds to ensure that the silence was absolute before continuing.

"Now, as everybody in this Hall knows, Lord Voldemort and his followers are once more at large and gaining in stren

The silence seemed to tauten and strain as Dumbledore spoke. Harry glanced at Malfoy. Malfoy was not looking at D

ugh he found the headmaster's words unworthy of his attention.

"I cannot emphasize strongly enough how dangerous the present situation is, and how much care each of us at Hogv

rtifications have been strengthened over the summer, we are protected in new and more powerful ways, but we mu

dent or member of staff. I urge you, therefore, to abide by any security restrictions that your teachers might impose

the rule that you are not to be out of bed after hours. I implore you, should you notice anything strange or suspicious

ff immediately. I trust you to conduct yourselves, always, with the utmost regard for your own and others' safety."

Dumbledore's blue eyes swept over the students before he smiled once more.

"But now, your beds await, as warm and comfortable as you could possibly wish, and I know that your top priority is

good night. Pip pip!"

With the usual deafening scraping noise, the benches were moved back and the hundreds of students began to file out in a hurry at all to leave with the gawping crowd, nor to get near enough to Malfoy to allow him to retell the story of the night with his trainer, allowing most of the Gryffindors to draw ahead of him. Hermione had darted ahead to fulfill her prefect's duty.

"What really happened to your nose?" he asked, once they were at the very back of the throng pressing out of the Hall. Harry told him. It was a mark of the strength of their friendship that Ron did not laugh.

"I saw Malfoy miming something to do with a nose," he said darkly.

"Yeah, well, never mind that," said Harry bitterly. "Listen to what he was saying before he found out I was there. . . ."

Harry had expected Ron to be stunned by Malfoy's boasts. With what Harry considered pure pigheadedness, however.

"Come on, Harry, he was just showing off for Parkinson. . . . What kind of mission would You-Know-Who have given him?"

"How d'you know Voldemort doesn't need someone at Hogwarts? It wouldn't be the first —"

"I wish yeh'd stop sayin' tha' name, Harry," said a reproachful voice behind them. Harry looked over his shoulder to see

"Dumbledore uses that name," said Harry stubbornly.

"Yeah, well, tha's Dumbledore, innit?" said Hagrid mysteriously. "So how come yeh were late, Harry? I was worried."

"Got held up on the train," said Harry. "Why were you late?"

"I was with Grawp," said Hagrid happily. "Los' track o' the time. He's got a new home up in the mountains now, Dumbledore the forest. We were havin' a good chat."

"Really?" said Harry, taking care not to catch Ron's eye; the last time he had met Hagrid's half-brother, a vicious giant, his lary had comprised five words, two of which he was unable to pronounce properly.

"Oh yeah, he's really come on," said Hagrid proudly. "Yeh'll be amazed. I'm thinkin' o' trainin' him up as me assistant."

Ron snorted loudly, but managed to pass it off as a violent sneeze. They were now standing beside the oak front door.

"Anyway, I'll see yeh tomorrow, firs' lesson's straight after lunch. Come early an' yeh can say hello ter Buck — I mean, Buck. Raising an arm in cheery farewell, he headed out of the front doors into the darkness.

Harry and Ron looked at each other. Harry could tell that Ron was experiencing the same sinking feeling as himself.

"You're not taking Care of Magical Creatures, are you?"

Ron shook his head. "And you're not either, are you?"

Harry shook his head too.

"And Hermione," said Ron, "she's not, is she?"

Harry shook his head again. Exactly what Hagrid would say when he realized his three favorite students had given up.

CHAPTER NINE

THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE

Harry and Ron met Hermione in the common room before breakfast next morning. Hoping for some support for his theory, Malfoy saying on the Hogwarts Express.

"But he was obviously showing off for Parkinson, wasn't he?" interjected Ron quickly, before Hermione could say anything.

"Well," she said uncertainly, "I don't know. . . . It would be like Malfoy to make himself seem more important than he is."

"Exactly," said Harry, but he could not press the point, because so many people were trying to listen in to his conversation that he had to hold his hands.

"It's rude to point," Ron snapped at a particularly minuscule first-year boy as they joined the queue to climb out of the common room. Harry, out Harry behind his hand to his friend, promptly turned scarlet and toppled out of the hole in alarm. Ron sniggered.

"I love being a sixth year. And we're going to be getting free time this year. Whole periods when we can just sit up here and do nothing."

"We're going to need that time for studying, Ron!" said Hermione, as they set off down the corridor.

"Yeah, but not today," said Ron. "Today's going to be a real doss, I reckon."

"Hold it!" said Hermione, throwing out an arm and halting a passing fourth year, who was attempting to push past her. "No bees are banned, hand it over," she told him sternly. The scowling boy handed over the snarling Frisbee, ducked under the barrier, and vanished, then tugged the Frisbee from Hermione's grip.

"Excellent, I've always wanted one of these."

Hermione's remonstrations were drowned by a loud giggle; Lavender Brown had apparently found Ron's remark highly amusing. She patted him on over her shoulder. Ron looked rather pleased with himself.

The ceiling of the Great Hall was serenely blue and streaked with frail, wispy clouds, just like the squares of sky visible through the windows. On porridge and eggs and bacon, Harry and Ron told Hermione about their embarrassing conversation with Hagrid the night before.

"But he can't really think we'd continue Care of Magical Creatures!" she said, looking distressed. "I mean, when has anyone ever?"

"That's it, though, innit?" said Ron, swallowing an entire fried egg whole. "We were the ones who made the most effort to learn about this stupid subject. D'you reckon anyone's going to go on to N.E.W.T.?"

Neither Harry nor Hermione answered; there was no need. They knew perfectly well that nobody in their year would be taking the exam, and returned his cheery wave only halfheartedly when he left the staff table ten minutes later.

After they had eaten, they remained in their places, awaiting Professor McGonagall's descent from the staff table. They were waiting for this year, for Professor McGonagall needed first to confirm that everybody had achieved the necessary O.W.L. grades.

Hermione was immediately cleared to continue with Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Herbology, and the new period Ancient Runes class without further ado. Neville took a little longer to sort out; his round face was anxious as

sulted his O.W.L. results.

"Herbology, fine," she said. "Professor Sprout will be delighted to see you back with an 'Outstanding' O.W.L. And you tions.' But the problem is Transfiguration. I'm sorry, Longbottom, but an 'Acceptable' really isn't good enough to cope with the coursework."

Neville hung his head. Professor McGonagall peered at him through her square spectacles.

"Why do you want to continue with Transfiguration, anyway? I've never had the impression that you particularly enjoyed it." Neville looked miserable and muttered something about "my grandmother wants."

"Hmph," snorted Professor McGonagall. "It's high time your grandmother learned to be proud of the grandson she's got after what happened at the Ministry."

Neville turned very pink and blinked confusedly; Professor McGonagall had never paid him a compliment before.

"I'm sorry, Longbottom, but I cannot let you into my N.E.W.T. class. I see that you have an 'Exceeds Expectations' in Charms."

"My grandmother thinks Charms is a soft option," mumbled Neville.

"Take Charms," said Professor McGonagall, "and I shall drop Augusta a line reminding her that just because she failed to smile slightly at the look of delighted incredulity on Neville's face, Professor McGonagall tapped a blank schedule with his new classes, to Neville.

Professor McGonagall turned next to Parvati Patil, whose first question was whether Firenze, the handsome centaur, was still available.

"He and Professor Trelawney are dividing classes between them this year," said Professor McGonagall, a hint of disapproval in her voice. "The sixth year is being taken by Professor Trelawney."

Parvati set off for Divination five minutes later looking slightly crestfallen.

"So, Potter, Potter . . ." said Professor McGonagall, consulting her notes as she turned to Harry. "Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Transfiguration. I must say, I was pleased with your Transfiguration mark, Potter, very pleased. Now, why haven't you applied to continue with Transfiguration?"

"It was, but you told me I had to get an 'Outstanding' in my O.W.L., Professor."

"And so you did when Professor Snape was teaching the subject. Professor Slughorn, however, is perfectly happy to let you continue with Potions?"

"Yes," said Harry, "but I didn't buy the books or any ingredients or anything —"

"I'm sure Professor Slughorn will be able to lend you some," said Professor McGonagall. "Very well, Potter, here is your list of names for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. I shall pass the list to you in due course and you can fix up your schedule. A few minutes later, Ron was cleared to do the same subjects as Harry, and the two of them left the table together.

"Look," said Ron delightedly, gazing at his schedule, "we've got a free period now . . . and a free period after break . . ." They returned to the common room, which was empty apart from a half dozen seventh years, including Katie Bell, though at Harry had joined in his first year.

"I thought you'd get that, well done," she called over, pointing at the Captain's badge on Harry's chest. "Tell me when you get it."

"Don't be stupid," said Harry, "you don't need to try out, I've watched you play for five years. . . ."

"You mustn't start off like that," she said warningly. "For all you know, there's someone much better than me out there who's been kept playing the old faces, or letting in their friends. . . ."

Ron looked a little uncomfortable and began playing with the Fanged Frisbee Hermione had taken from the fourth-year's mouth to take bites of the tapestry. Crookshanks's yellow eyes followed it and he hissed when it came too close.

An hour later they reluctantly left the sunlit common room for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom four floors up, a room full of heavy books and looking put-upon.

"We got so much homework for Runes," she said anxiously, when Harry and Ron joined her. "A fifteen-inch essay, two essays on the Dark Arts, and a paper on the Dark Arts." "Shame," yawned Ron.

"You wait," she said resentfully. "I bet Snape gives us loads."

The classroom door opened as she spoke, and Snape stepped into the corridor, his sallow face framed as ever by two dark eyes. "Inside," he said.

Harry looked around as they entered. Snape had imposed his personality upon the room already; it was gloomier than the common room, with its candlelight. New pictures adorned the walls, many of them showing people who appeared to be in pain, sporting gruesome injuries. They settled down, looking around at the shadowy, gruesome pictures.

"I have not asked you to take out your books," said Snape, closing the door and moving to face the class from behind his desk. "I wish to speak to you, and I want your fullest attention."

His black eyes roved over their upturned faces, lingering for a fraction of a second longer on Harry's than anyone else's. "You have had five teachers in this subject so far, I believe."

You believe . . . like you haven't watched them all come and go, Snape, hoping you'd be next, thought Harry scathingly. "Naturally, these teachers will all have had their own methods and priorities. Given this confusion I am surprised so many of you are still here. I am more surprised if all of you manage to keep up with the N.E.W.T. work, which will be much more advanced."

Snape set off around the edge of the room, speaking now in a lower voice; the class craned their necks to keep him in sight. "The Dark Arts," said Snape, "are many, varied, ever-changing, and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed hydra. They are even fiercer and cleverer than before. You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible."

Harry stared at Snape. It was surely one thing to respect the Dark Arts as a dangerous enemy, another to speak of them as a

"Your defenses," said Snape, a little louder, "must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the arts you seek to undo. . . . t — "give a fair representation of what happens to those who suffer, for instance, the Cruciatus Curse" — he waved a wand. "The Dementor's Kiss" — a wizard lying huddled and blank-eyed, slumped against a wall — "or provoke the aggression of the Dark Lord." "Has an Inferius been seen, then?" said Parvati Patil in a high-pitched voice. "Is it definite, is he using them?" "The Dark Lord has used Inferi in the past," said Snape, "which means you would be well-advised to assume he might use them again. He set off again around the other side of the classroom toward his desk, and again, they watched him as he walked, and again, they thought, . . . you are, I believe, complete novices in the use of nonverbal spells. What is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?" Hermione's hand shot into the air. Snape took his time looking around at everybody else, making sure he had no challengers. "Your adversary has no warning about what kind of magic you're about to perform," said Hermione, "which gives you a great advantage." "An answer copied almost word for word from The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Six," said Snape dismissively (over the heads of those who progress to using magic without shouting incantations gain an element of surprise in their spell-casting. It is concentration and mind power which some — his gaze lingered maliciously upon Harry once more — "lack." Harry knew Snape was thinking of their disastrous Occlumency lessons of the previous year. He refused to drop his guard. "You will now divide," Snape went on, "into pairs. One partner will attempt to jinx the other without speaking. The other will attempt to defend. Although Snape did not know it, Harry had taught at least half the class (everyone who had been a member of the Defense Against the Dark Arts ad ever cast the charm without speaking, however. A reasonable amount of cheating ensued; many people were made to stop. In ten minutes into the lesson Hermione managed to repel Neville's muttered Jelly-Legs Jinx without uttering a single word. Harry, who had yffindor from any reasonable teacher, thought Harry bitterly, but which Snape ignored. He swept between them as they struggled, lingering to watch Harry and Ron struggling with the task. Ron, who was supposed to be jinxing Harry, was purple in the face, his lips tightly compressed to save himself from tenses. He raised, waiting on tenterhooks to repel a jinx that seemed unlikely ever to come. "Pathetic, Weasley," said Snape, after a while. "Here — let me show you —" He turned his wand on Harry so fast that Harry reacted instinctively; all thought of nonverbal spells forgotten, he yelled "Protego!" His Shield Charm was so strong Snape was knocked off-balance and hit a desk. The whole class had looked around at the commotion. "Do you remember me telling you we are practicing nonverbal spells, Potter?" "Yes," said Harry stiffly. "Yes, sir."

"There's no need to call me 'sir,' Professor." The words had escaped him before he knew what he was saying. Several people gasped, including Hermione. Behind him, Ron said, "Detention, Saturday night, my office," said Snape. "I do not take cheek from anyone, Potter . . . not even 'the Chosen One.'" "That was brilliant, Harry!" chortled Ron, once they were safely on their way to break a short while later. "You really shouldn't have said it," said Hermione, frowning at Ron. "What made you?" "He tried to jinx me, in case you didn't notice!" fumed Harry. "I had enough of that during those Occlumency lessons! He was ledore playing at, anyway, letting him teach Defense? Did you hear him talking about the Dark Arts? He loves them! A lot!" "Well," said Hermione, "I thought he sounded a bit like you."

"Like me?" "Yes, when you were telling us what it's like to face Voldemort. You said it wasn't just memorizing a bunch of spells, you said it wasn't that what Snape was saying? That it really comes down to being brave and quick-thinking?" Harry was so disarmed that she had thought his words as well worth memorizing as The Standard Book of Spells that he had said. "Harry! Hey, Harry!"

Harry looked around; Jack Sloper, one of the Beaters on last year's Gryffindor Quidditch team, was hurrying toward him. "For you," panted Sloper. "Listen, I heard you're the new Captain. When're you holding trials?" "I'm not sure yet," said Harry, thinking privately that Sloper would be very lucky to get back on the team. "I'll let you know when." "Oh, right. I was hoping it'd be this weekend —"

But Harry was not listening; he had just recognized the thin, slanting writing on the parchment. Leaving Sloper in mid-sentence, he turned back to the parchment as he went.

Dear Harry,

I would like to start our private lessons this Saturday. Kindly come along to my office at 8 p.m. I hope you are enjoying your lessons.

Yours sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

P.S. I enjoy Acid Pops.

"He enjoys Acid Pops?" said Ron, who had read the message over Harry's shoulder and was looking perplexed.

"It's the password to get past the gargoyle outside his study," said Harry in a low voice. "Ha! Snape's not going to be paying attention." He, Ron, and Hermione spent the whole of break speculating on what Dumbledore would teach Harry. Ron thought it was unlikely the Eaters would not know. Hermione said such things were illegal, and thought it much more likely that Dumbledore would teach Harry off to Arithmancy while Harry and Ron returned to the common room, where they grudgingly started Snape's homework. When Hermione joined them for their after-lunch free period (though she considerably speeded up the process). They went to the Potions and they beat the familiar path down to the dungeon classroom that had, for so long, been Snape's.

When they arrived in the corridor they saw that there were only a dozen people progressing to N.E.W.T. level. Crabbe and Goyle, but four Slytherins had made it through, including Malfoy. Four Ravenclaws were there, and one Hufflepuff, Ernie Macmillan.

"Harry," Ernie said portentously, holding out his hand as Harry approached, "didn't get a chance to speak in Defense. Shield Charms are old hat, of course, for us old D.A. lags . . . And how are you, Ron — Hermione?"

Before they could say more than "fine," the dungeon door opened and Slughorn's belly preceded him out of the door. He had a wide, toothy grin on his beaming mouth, and he greeted Harry and Zabini with particular enthusiasm.

The dungeon was, most unusually, already full of vapors and odd smells. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sniffed interestedly. They took a table together, as did the four Ravenclaws. This left Harry, Ron, and Hermione to share a table with Ernie. They were inhaling one of the most seductive scents Harry had ever inhaled: Somehow it reminded him simultaneously of treacle tart and the air he thought he might have smelled at the Burrow. He found that he was breathing very slowly and deeply and that the potion's effect was stealing over him; he grinned across at Ron, who grinned back lazily.

"Now then, now then, now then," said Slughorn, whose massive outline was quivering through the many shimmering copies of Advanced Potion-Making. . . ."

"Sir?" said Harry, raising his hand.

"Harry, m'boy?"

"I haven't got a book or scales or anything — nor's Ron — we didn't realize we'd be able to do the N.E.W.T., you see —"

"Ah, yes, Professor McGonagall did mention . . . not to worry, my dear boy, not to worry at all. You can use ingredients instead of scales, and we've got a small stock of old books here, they'll do until you can write to Flourish and Blotts. . . ."

Slughorn strode over to a corner cupboard and, after a moment's foraging, emerged with two very battered-looking scales for Harry and Ron along with two sets of tarnished scales.

"Now then," said Slughorn, returning to the front of the class and inflating his already bulging chest so that the buttons of his robe strained a few potions for you to have a look at, just out of interest, you know. These are the kind of thing you ought to be able to recognize, I heard of 'em, even if you haven't made 'em yet. Anyone tell me what this one is?"

He indicated the cauldron nearest the Slytherin table. Harry raised himself slightly in his seat and saw what looked like a small, clear, colorless liquid. Hermione's well-practiced hand hit the air before anybody else's; Slughorn pointed at her.

"It's Veritaserum, a colorless, odorless potion that forces the drinker to tell the truth," said Hermione.

"Very good, very good!" said Slughorn happily. "Now," he continued, pointing at the cauldron nearest the Ravenclaw table, "this is a new Ministry leaflet lately too . . . Who can — ?"

Hermione's hand was fastest once more.

"It's Polyjuice Potion, sir," she said.

Harry too had recognized the slow-bubbling, mudlike substance in the second cauldron, but did not resent Hermione's recognition. It was the one who had succeeded in making it, back in their second year.

"Excellent, excellent! Now, this one here . . . yes, my dear?" said Slughorn, now looking slightly bemused, as Hermione pointed at the third cauldron.

"It's Amortentia!"

"It is indeed. It seems almost foolish to ask," said Slughorn, who was looking mightily impressed, "but I assume you know what it is?"

"It's the most powerful love potion in the world!" said Hermione.

"Quite right! You recognized it, I suppose, by its distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen?"

"And the steam rising in characteristic spirals," said Hermione enthusiastically, "and it's supposed to smell differently to each person. It smells like freshly mown grass and new parchment and —"

But she turned slightly pink and did not complete the sentence.

"May I ask your name, my dear?" said Slughorn, ignoring Hermione's embarrassment.

"Hermione Granger, sir."

"Granger? Granger? Can you possibly be related to Hector Dagworth-Granger, who founded the Most Extraordinary Society of Secret Admirers?"

"No, I don't think so, sir. I'm Muggle-born, you see."

Harry saw Malfoy lean close to Nott and whisper something; both of them sniggered, but Slughorn showed no dismay. He continued to sit as sitting next to her.

"Oho! 'One of my best friends is Muggle-born, and she's the best in our year!' I'm assuming this is the very friend of yours who was the best in the year? Oh, Harry!"

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

"Well, well, take twenty well-earned points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger," said Slughorn genially.

Malfoy looked rather as he had done the time Hermione had punched him in the face. Hermione turned to Harry with a wide grin.

"Well, what's so impressive about that?" whispered Ron, who for some reason looked annoyed. "You are the best in the year!"

Hermione smiled but made a "shhing" gesture, so that they could hear what Slughorn was saying. Ron looked slightly annoyed.

"Amortentia doesn't really create love, of course. It is impossible to manufacture or imitate love. No, this will simply create a strong attraction, the most dangerous and powerful potion in this room — oh yes," he said, nodding gravely at Malfoy and Nott, both of whom were looking at him with interest.

As I have, you will not underestimate the power of obsessive love. . . ."

"And now," said Slughorn, "it is time for us to start work."

"Sir, you haven't told us what's in this one," said Ernie Macmillan, pointing at a small black cauldron standing on Slughorn's table. The liquid inside was the color of molten gold, and large drops were leaping like goldfish above the surface, though not a particle had fallen.

"Oho," said Slughorn again. Harry was sure that Slughorn had not forgotten the potion at all, but had waited to be asked about it.

"This, gentlemen, is a most curious little potion called Felix Felicis. I take it," he turned, smiling, to look at Hermione, who had been the only one to ask, "do you know what it does, Miss Granger?"

"It's liquid luck," said Hermione excitedly. "It makes you lucky!"

The whole class seemed to sit up a little straighter. Now all Harry could see of Malfoy was the back of his sleek blond hair, divided attention.

"Quite right, take another ten points for Gryffindor. Yes, it's a funny little potion, Felix Felicis," said Slughorn. "Desperately, if brewed correctly, as this has been, you will find that all your endeavors tend to succeed . . . at least until the effect wears off." "Why don't people drink it all the time, sir?" said Terry Boot eagerly.

"Because if taken in excess, it causes giddiness, recklessness, and dangerous overconfidence," said Slughorn. "Too much is bad. But taken sparingly, and very occasionally . . ."

"Have you ever taken it, sir?" asked Michael Corner with great interest.

"Twice in my life," said Slughorn. "Once when I was twenty-four, once when I was fifty-seven. Two tablespoonfuls take the edge off. He gazed dreamily into the distance. Whether he was playacting or not, thought Harry, the effect was good.

"And that," said Slughorn, apparently coming back to earth, "is what I shall be offering as a prize in this lesson."

There was silence in which every bubble and gurgle of the surrounding potions seemed magnified tenfold.

"One tiny bottle of Felix Felicis," said Slughorn, taking a minuscule glass bottle with a cork in it out of his pocket and setting it on the table. "From dawn till dusk, you will be lucky in everything you attempt."

"Now, I must give you warning that Felix Felicis is a banned substance in organized competitions . . . sporting events, and so on. Use it on an ordinary day only . . . and watch how that ordinary day becomes extraordinary!"

"So," said Slughorn, suddenly brisk, "how are you to win my fabulous prize? Well, by turning to page ten of Advanced Potion-Making. It should be time for you to make a decent attempt at the Draught of Living Death. I know it is more complex than anything I have ever seen from anybody. The person who does best, however, will win little Felix here. Off you go!"

There was a scraping as everyone drew their cauldrons toward them and some loud clunks as people began adding ingredients. The air in the room was almost tangible. Harry saw Malfoy riffling feverishly through his copy of Advanced Potion-Making. It could be seen that Harry bent swiftly over the tattered book Slughorn had lent him.

To his annoyance he saw that the previous owner had scribbled all over the pages, so that the margins were as black as ink. (Even here, the previous owner had made annotations and crossed things out) Harry hurried off toward the store cupboard. He saw Malfoy cutting up valerian roots as fast as he could.

Everyone kept glancing around at what the rest of the class was doing; this was both an advantage and a disadvantage. In ten minutes, the whole place was full of bluish steam. Hermione, of course, seemed to have progressed furthest. Her cauldron was the only one mentioned as the ideal halfway stage.

Having finished chopping his roots, Harry bent low over his book again. It was really very irritating, having to try and decipher the previous owner, who for some reason had taken issue with the order to cut up the sopophorous bean and had written "Crush with flat side of silver dagger, releases juice better than cutting."

"Sir, I think you knew my grandfather, Abraxas Malfoy?"

Harry looked up; Slughorn was just passing the Slytherin table.

"Yes," said Slughorn, without looking at Malfoy, "I was sorry to hear he had died, although of course it wasn't unexpected. And he walked away. Harry bent back over his cauldron, smirking. He could tell that Malfoy had expected to be treated with the same treatment of the type he had learned to expect from Snape. It looked as though Malfoy would have to rely on nothing but his own wits. The sopophorous bean was proving very difficult to cut up. Harry turned to Hermione.

"Can I borrow your silver knife?"

She nodded impatiently, not taking her eyes off her potion, which was still deep purple, though according to the book it should be clear. Harry crushed his bean with the flat side of the dagger. To his astonishment, it immediately exuded so much juice he had to stop. Drooping it all into the cauldron he saw, to his surprise, that the potion immediately turned exactly the shade of lilac described in the book. His annoyance with the previous owner vanishing on the spot, Harry now squinted at the next line of instructions. According to the addition the previous owner had made, however, he ought to add a clockwise stir. "The previous owner be right twice?"

Harry stirred counterclockwise, held his breath, and stirred once clockwise. The effect was immediate. The potion turned clear.

"How are you doing that?" demanded Hermione, who was red-faced and whose hair was growing bushier and bushier.

"Add a clockwise stir —"

"No, no, the book says counterclockwise!" she snapped.

Harry shrugged and continued what he was doing. Seven stirs counterclockwise, one clockwise, pause . . . seven stirs clockwise. Across the table, Ron was cursing fluently under his breath; his potion looked like liquid licorice. Harry glanced around at the others. Hermione's was pale as his. He felt elated, something that had certainly never happened before in this dungeon.

"And time's . . . up!" called Slughorn. "Stop stirring, please!"

Slughorn moved slowly among the tables, peering into cauldrons. He made no comment, but occasionally gave the point of the wand. Hermione and Ernie were sitting. He smiled ruefully at the tarlike substance in Ron's cauldron. He passed over Ernie's. Then he saw Harry's, and a look of incredulous delight spread over his face.

"The clear winner!" he cried to the dungeon. "Excellent, excellent, Harry! Good lord, it's clear you've inherited your mother's talent. You are, then, here you are — one bottle of Felix Felicis, as promised, and use it well!"

Harry slipped the tiny bottle of golden liquid into his inner pocket, feeling an odd combination of delight at the furious expression on Hermione's. Ron looked simply dumbfounded.

"How did you do that?" he whispered to Harry as they left the dungeon.

"Got lucky, I suppose," said Harry, because Malfoy was within earshot.

Once they were securely ensconced at the Gryffindor table for dinner, however, he felt safe enough to tell them. Her

"I s'pose you think I cheated?" he finished, aggravated by her expression.

"Well, it wasn't exactly your own work, was it?" she said stiffly.

"He only followed different instructions to ours," said Ron. "Could've been a catastrophe, couldn't it? But he took a risk. He showed me that book, but no, I get the one no one's ever written on. Puked on, by the look of page fifty-two, but —"

"Hang on," said a voice close by Harry's left ear and he caught a sudden waft of that flowery smell he had picked up when he joined them. "Did I hear right? You've been taking orders from something someone wrote in a book, Harry?"

She looked alarmed and angry. Harry knew what was on her mind at once.

"It's nothing," he said reassuringly, lowering his voice. "It's not like, you know, Riddle's diary. It's just an old textbook s

"But you're doing what it says?"

"I just tried a few of the tips written in the margins, honestly, Ginny, there's nothing funny —"

"Ginny's got a point," said Hermione, perking up at once. "We ought to check that there's nothing odd about it. I mean, it's a textbook. It's got to be right."

"Hey!" said Harry indignantly, as she pulled his copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag and raised her wand. "Specialis Revelio!" she said, rapping it smartly on the front cover.

Nothing whatsoever happened. The book simply lay there, looking old and dirty and dog-eared.

"Finished?" said Harry irritably. "Or d'you want to wait and see if it does a few backflips?"

"It seems all right," said Hermione, still staring at the book suspiciously. "I mean, it really does seem to be . . . just a textbook."

"Good. Then I'll have it back," said Harry, snatching it off the table, but it slipped from his hand and landed open on the floor.

Nobody else was looking. Harry bent low to retrieve the book, and as he did so, he saw something scribbled along the bottom of the page, as the instructions that had won him his bottle of Felix Felicis, now safely hidden inside a pair of socks in his trunk up in his room.

This Book is the Property of the Half-Blood Prince.

CHAPTER TEN

THE HOUSE OF GAUNT

For the rest of the week's Potions lessons Harry continued to follow the Half-Blood Prince's instructions wherever they took them. During his fourth lesson Slughorn was raving about Harry's abilities, saying that he had rarely taught anyone so talented. Neither Harry nor Hermione offered to share his book with both of them, Ron had more difficulty deciphering the handwriting than Harry did, and Hermione, meanwhile, was resolutely plowing on with what she called the "official" instructions, but becoming increasingly convinced of the Half-Blood Prince's.

Harry wondered vaguely who the Half-Blood Prince had been. Although the amount of homework they had been given had increased, he had skimmed through it sufficiently to see that there was barely a page on which the Prince had not made a correction and there were directions for what looked like spells that the Prince had made up himself.

"Or herself," said Hermione irritably, overhearing Harry pointing some of these out to Ron in the common room on Saturday night. "It looks more like a girl's than a boy's."

"The Half-Blood Prince, he was called," Harry said. "How many girls have been Princes?"

Hermione seemed to have no answer to this. She merely scowled and twitched her essay on The Principles of Remedy.

Harry looked at his watch and hurriedly put the old copy of Advanced Potion-Making back into his bag.

"It's five to eight, I'd better go, I'll be late for Dumbledore."

"Ooooh!" gasped Hermione, looking up at once. "Good luck! We'll wait up, we want to hear what he teaches you!"

"Hope it goes okay," said Ron, and the pair of them watched Harry leave through the portrait hole.

Harry proceeded through deserted corridors, though he had to step hastily behind a statue when Professor Trelawney appeared, looking at a pack of dirty-looking playing cards, reading them as she walked.

"Two of spades: conflict," she murmured, as she passed the place where Harry crouched, hidden. "Seven of spades: a man, possibly troubled, one who dislikes the questioner —"

She stopped dead, right on the other side of Harry's statue.

"Well, that can't be right," she said, annoyed, and Harry heard her reshuffling vigorously as she set off again, leaving him waiting until he was quite sure she had gone, then hurried off again until he reached the spot in the seventh-floor corridor where he had hidden.

"Acid Pops," said Harry, and the gargoyle leapt aside; the wall behind it slid apart, and a moving spiral stone staircase appeared, leading in smooth circles up to the door with the brass knocker that led to Dumbledore's office.

Harry knocked.

"Come in," said Dumbledore's voice.

"Good evening, sir," said Harry, walking into the headmaster's office.

"Ah, good evening, Harry. Sit down," said Dumbledore, smiling. "I hope you've had an enjoyable first week back at school."

"Yes, thanks, sir," said Harry.

"You must have been busy, a detention under your belt already!"

"Er," began Harry awkwardly, but Dumbledore did not look too stern.

"I have arranged with Professor Snape that you will do your detention next Saturday instead."

"Right," said Harry, who had more pressing matters on his mind than Snape's detention, and now looked around surprised to find himself alone with the headmaster.

o with him this evening. The circular office looked just as it always did; the delicate silver instruments stood on spind
revious headmasters and headmistresses dozed in their frames, and Dumbledore's magnificent phoenix, Fawkes, st
It did not even look as though Dumbledore had cleared a space for dueling practice.

"So, Harry," said Dumbledore, in a businesslike voice. "You have been wondering, I am sure, what I have planned for
"Yes, sir."

"Well, I have decided that it is time, now that you know what prompted Lord Voldemort to try and kill you fifteen yea
There was a pause.

"You said, at the end of last term, you were going to tell me everything," said Harry. It was hard to keep a note of acc

"And so I did," said Dumbledore placidly. "I told you everything I know. From this point forth, we shall be leaving the f
urky marshes of memory into thickets of wildest guesswork. From here on in, Harry, I may be as woefully wrong as H
on."

"But you think you're right?" said Harry.

"Naturally I do, but as I have already proven to you, I make mistakes like the next man. In fact, being — forgive me —
ndingly huger."

"Sir," said Harry tentatively, "does what you're going to tell me have anything to do with the prophecy? Will it help me

"It has a very great deal to do with the prophecy," said Dumbledore, as casually as if Harry had asked him about the
to survive."

Dumbledore got to his feet and walked around the desk, past Harry, who turned eagerly in his seat to watch Dumble
ghtened up, he was holding a familiar shallow stone basin etched with odd markings around its rim. He placed the P
"You look worried."

Harry had indeed been eyeing the Pensieve with some apprehension. His previous experiences with the odd device
ive, had also been uncomfortable. The last time he had disturbed its contents, he had seen much more than he wou
"This time, you enter the Pensieve with me . . . and, even more unusually, with permission."

"Where are we going, sir?"

"For a trip down Bob Ogden's memory lane," said Dumbledore, pulling from his pocket a crystal bottle containing a s

"Who was Bob Ogden?"

"He was employed by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," said Dumbledore. "He died some time ago, but
ollections to me. We are about to accompany him on a visit he made in the course of his duties. If you will stand, Har
But Dumbledore was having difficulty pulling out the stopper of the crystal bottle: His injured hand seemed stiff and

"Shall — shall I, sir?"

"No matter, Harry —"

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the bottle and the cork flew out.

"Sir — how did you injure your hand?" Harry asked again, looking at the blackened fingers with a mixture of revulsion

"Now is not the moment for that story, Harry. Not yet. We have an appointment with Bob Ogden."

Dumbledore tipped the silvery contents of the bottle into the Pensieve, where they swirled and shimmered, neither

"After you," said Dumbledore, gesturing toward the bowl.

Harry bent forward, took a deep breath, and plunged his face into the silvery substance. He felt his feet leave the off
nd then, quite suddenly, he was blinking in dazzling sunlight. Before his eyes had adjusted, Dumbledore landed besi
They were standing in a country lane bordered by high, tangled hedgerows, beneath a summer sky as bright and blu
lump man wearing enormously thick glasses that reduced his eyes to molelike specks. He was reading a wooden sign
he road. Harry knew this must be Ogden; he was the only person in sight, and he was also wearing the strange assor
look like Muggles: in this case, a frock coat and spats over a striped one-piece bathing costume. Before Harry had tim
den had set off at a brisk walk down the lane.

Dumbledore and Harry followed. As they passed the wooden sign, Harry looked up at its two arms. The one pointing
ointing after Ogden said LITTLE HANGLETON, 1 MILE.

They walked a short way with nothing to see but the hedgerows, the wide blue sky overhead and the swishing, frock
, sloping steeply down a hillside, so that they had a sudden, unexpected view of a whole valley laid out in front of the
estled between two steep hills, its church and graveyard clearly visible. Across the valley, set on the opposite hillside,
velvety green lawn.

Ogden had broken into a reluctant trot due to the steep downward slope. Dumbledore lengthened his stride, and Ha
al destination and wondered, as he had done on the night they had found Slughorn, why they had to approach it fro
ng that they were going to the village, however. The lane curved to the right and when they rounded the corner, it wa
gap in the hedge.

Dumbledore and Harry followed him onto a narrow dirt track bordered by higher and wilder hedgerows than those
g downhill like the last one, and it seemed to be heading for a patch of dark trees a little below them. Sure enough, t
came to a halt behind Ogden, who had stopped and drawn his wand.

Despite the cloudless sky, the old trees ahead cast deep, dark, cool shadows, and it was a few seconds before Harry
runks. It seemed to him a very strange location to choose for a house, or else an odd decision to leave the trees grow
. He wondered whether it was inhabited; its walls were mossy and so many tiles had fallen off the roof that the raft
s reaching the windows, which were tiny and thick with grime. Just as he had concluded that nobody could possibly l

ter, and a thin trickle of steam or smoke issued from it, as though somebody was cooking.

Ogden moved forward quietly and, it seemed to Harry, rather cautiously. As the dark shadows of the trees slid over him, he had nailed a dead snake.

Then there was a rustle and a crack, and a man in rags dropped from the nearest tree, landing on his feet right in front of him, fumbling his frock coat and stumbling.

"You're not welcome."

The man standing before them had thick hair so matted with dirt it could have been any color. Several of his teeth were missing. He might have looked comical, but he did not; the effect was frightening, and Harry could not blame Ogden.

"Er — good morning. I'm from the Ministry of Magic —"

"You're not welcome."

"Er — I'm sorry — I don't understand you," said Ogden nervously.

Harry thought Ogden was being extremely dim; the stranger was making himself very clear in Harry's opinion, particularly when he held up his bloody knife in the other.

"You understand him, I'm sure, Harry?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Yes, of course," said Harry, slightly nonplussed. "Why can't Ogden —?"

But as his eyes found the dead snake on the door again, he suddenly understood.

"He's speaking Parseltongue?"

"Very good," said Dumbledore, nodding and smiling.

The man in rags was now advancing on Ogden, knife in one hand, wand in the other.

"Now, look —" Ogden began, but too late: There was a bang, and Ogden was on the ground, clutching his nose, while the man in rags stood over him.

"Morfin!" said a loud voice.

An elderly man had come hurrying out of the cottage, banging the door behind him so that the dead snake swung past him; his shoulders were very broad and his arms overlong, which, with his bright brown eyes, short scrubby hair, and a friendly expression, made him look like a giant. He came to a halt beside the man with the knife, who was now cackling with laughter at the sight of Ogden on the ground.

"Ministry, is it?" said the older man, looking down at Ogden.

"Correct!" said Ogden angrily, dabbing his face. "And you, I take it, are Mr. Gaunt?"

"S'right," said Gaunt. "Got you in the face, did he?"

"Yes, he did!" snapped Ogden.

"Should've made your presence known, shouldn't you?" said Gaunt aggressively. "This is private property. Can't just walk in."

"Defend himself against what, man?" said Ogden, clambering back to his feet.

"Busybodies. Intruders. Muggles and filth."

Ogden pointed his wand at his own nose, which was still issuing large amounts of what looked like yellow pus, and then he turned and looked at Morfin.

"Get in the house. Don't argue."

This time, ready for it, Harry recognized Parseltongue; even while he could understand what was being said, he distinguished Morfin seemed to be on the point of disagreeing, but when his father cast him a threatening look he changed his mind.

ing the front door behind him, so that the snake swung sadly again.

"It's your son I'm here to see, Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, as he mopped the last of the pus from the front of his coat. "The snake."

"Ar, that was Morfin," said the old man indifferently. "Are you pure-blood?" he asked, suddenly aggressive.

"That's neither here nor there," said Ogden coldly, and Harry felt his respect for Ogden rise. Apparently Gaunt felt rather in what was clearly supposed to be an offensive tone, "Now I come to think about it, I've seen noses like yours down in the Ministry."

"I don't doubt it, if your son's been let loose on them," said Ogden. "Perhaps we could continue this discussion inside."

"Inside?"

"Yes, Mr. Gaunt. I've already told you. I'm here about Morfin. We sent an owl —"

"I've no use for owls," said Gaunt. "I don't open letters."

"Then you can hardly complain that you get no warning of visitors," said Ogden tartly. "I am here following a serious matter."

"Of this morning —"

"All right, all right, all right!" bellowed Gaunt. "Come in the bleeding house, then, and much good it'll do you!"

The house seemed to contain three tiny rooms. Two doors led off the main room, which served as kitchen and living room. The third door led to a small bathroom. The house was old and the walls were peeling, and the air was thick with the smell of smoking fire, twisting a live adder between his thick fingers and crooning softly at it in Parseltongue:

Hissy, hissy, little snakey,

Slither on the floor,

You be good to Morfin

Or he'll nail you to the door.

There was a scuffling noise in the corner beside the open window, and Harry realized that there was somebody else in the house.

the dirty stone wall behind her. She was standing beside a steaming pot on a grimy black stove, and was fiddling around with it. Her

hair was lank and dull and she had a plain, pale, rather heavy face. Her eyes, like her brother's, stared in opposite directions.

Harry thought he had never seen a more defeated-looking person.

"M'daughter, Merope," said Gaunt grudgingly, as Ogden looked inquiringly toward her.

"Good morning," said Ogden.

She did not answer, but with a frightened glance at her father turned her back on the room and continued shifting things.

"Well, Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, "to get straight to the point, we have reason to believe that your son, Morfin, performed a very serious offence. There was a deafening clang. Merope had dropped one of the pots.

"Pick it up!" Gaunt bellowed at her. "That's it, grub on the floor like some filthy Muggle, what's your wand for, you use it!"

"Mr. Gaunt, please!" said Ogden in a shocked voice, as Merope, who had already picked up the pot, flushed blotchily from her pocket, pointed it at the pot, and muttered a hasty, inaudible spell that caused the pot to shoot across the floor. Morfin let out a mad cackle of laughter. Gaunt screamed, "Mend it, you pointless lump, mend it!"

Merope stumbled across the room, but before she had time to raise her wand, Ogden had lifted his own and said firmly, "Mend it, you pointless lump, mend it!"

Gaunt looked for a moment as though he was going to shout at Ogden, but seemed to think better of it: Instead, he said, "Yes, isn't it? Perhaps he'll take you off my hands, perhaps he doesn't mind dirty Squibs. . . ."

Without looking at anybody or thanking Ogden, Merope picked up the pot and returned it, hands trembling, to its shelf. She looked at the filthy window and the stove, as though she wished for nothing more than to sink into the stone and vanish.

"Mr. Gaunt," Ogden began again, "as I've said: the reason for my visit —"

"I heard you the first time!" snapped Gaunt. "And so what? Morfin gave a Muggle a bit of what was coming to him —"

"Morfin has broken Wizarding law," said Ogden sternly.

"Morfin has broken Wizarding law." Gaunt imitated Ogden's voice, making it pompous and singsong. Morfin cackled again.

"Yes," said Ogden. "I'm afraid it is."

He pulled from an inside pocket a small scroll of parchment and unrolled it.

"What's that, then, his sentence?" said Gaunt, his voice rising angrily.

"It is a summons to the Ministry for a hearing —"

"Summons! Summons? Who do you think you are, summoning my son anywhere?"

"I'm Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad," said Ogden.

"And you think we're scum, do you?" screamed Gaunt, advancing on Ogden now, with a dirty yellow-nailed finger pointing at him. "Do you know who you're talking to, you filthy little Mudblood, do you?"

"I was under the impression that I was speaking to Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, looking wary, but standing his ground.

"That's right!" roared Gaunt. For a moment, Harry thought Gaunt was making an obscene hand gesture, but then realised he was holding up his middle finger, waving it before Ogden's eyes. "See this? See this? Know what it is? Know where it came from? It's from a pure-blood, and pure-blood all the way! Know how much I've been offered for this, with the Peverell coat of arms engraved on it?"

"I've really no idea," said Ogden, blinking as the ring sailed within an inch of his nose, "and it's quite beside the point, Mr. Gaunt."

With a howl of rage, Gaunt ran toward his daughter. For a split second, Harry thought he was going to throttle her as she ran. He caught her by a gold chain around her neck.

"See this?" he bellowed at Ogden, shaking a heavy gold locket at him, while Merope spluttered and gasped for breath.

"I see it, I see it!" said Ogden hastily.

"Slytherin's!" yelled Gaunt. "Salazar Slytherin's! We're his last living descendants, what do you say to that, eh?"

"Mr. Gaunt, your daughter!" said Ogden in alarm, but Gaunt had already released Merope; she staggered away from him.

"So!" said Gaunt triumphantly, as though he had just proved a complicated point beyond all possible dispute. "Don't you see? Pure-bloods, wizards all — more than you can say, I don't doubt!"

And he spat on the floor at Ogden's feet. Morfin cackled again. Merope, huddled beside the window, her head bowed.

"Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden doggedly, "I am afraid that neither your ancestors nor mine have anything to do with the matter. The matter was discussed late last night. Our information" — he glanced down at his scroll of parchment — "is that Morfin performed a very serious offence. He has caused many painful hives."

Morfin giggled.

"Be quiet, boy," snarled Gaunt in Parseltongue, and Morfin fell silent again.

"And so what if he did, then?" Gaunt said defiantly to Ogden. "I expect you've wiped the Muggle's filthy face clean for me."

"That's hardly the point, is it, Mr. Gaunt?" said Ogden. "This was an unprovoked attack on a defenseless —"

"Ar, I had you marked out as a Muggle-lover the moment I saw you," sneered Gaunt, and he spat on the floor again.

"This discussion is getting us nowhere," said Ogden firmly. "It is clear from your son's attitude that he feels no remorse. He will attend a hearing on the fourteenth of September to answer the charges of using magic in front of the Ministry. He will be punished accordingly."

Ogden broke off. The jingling, clapping sounds of horses and loud, laughing voices were drifting in through the open window. Outside, the copse where the house stood. Gaunt froze, listening, his eyes wide. Morfin hissed and turned his face toward the window. Harry saw, was starkly white.

"My God, what an eyesore!" rang out a girl's voice, as clearly audible through the open window as if she had stood in the room. "What a disgrace, Tom?"

"It's not ours," said a young man's voice. "Everything on the other side of the valley belongs to us, but that cottage belongs to the Gaunts. It's quite mad, you should hear some of the stories they tell in the village —"

The girl laughed. The jingling, clapping noises were growing louder and louder. Morfin made to get out of his armchair.

"Keep your seat," said his father warningly, in Parseltongue.

"Tom," said the girl's voice again, now so close they were clearly right beside the house, "I might be wrong — but has he?"

"Good lord, you're right!" said the man's voice. "That'll be the son, I told you he's not right in the head. Don't look at it, it's a disgrace."

The jingling and clapping sounds were now growing fainter again.

"Darling," whispered Morfin in Parseltongue, looking at his sister. "'Darling,' he called her. So he wouldn't have you a Merope was so white Harry felt sure she was going to faint.

"What's that?" said Gaunt sharply, also in Parseltongue, looking from his son to his daughter. "What did you say, Morfin?"

"She likes looking at that Muggle," said Morfin, a vicious expression on his face as he stared at his sister, who now looked through the hedge at him, isn't she? And last night —"

Merope shook her head jerkily, imploringly, but Morfin went on ruthlessly, "Hanging out of the window waiting for him."

"Hanging out of the window to look at a Muggle?" said Gaunt quietly.

All three of the Gaunts seemed to have forgotten Ogden, who was looking both bewildered and irritated at this renewed conversation.

"Is it true?" said Gaunt in a deadly voice, advancing a step or two toward the terrified girl. "My daughter — pure-blood, dirt-veined Muggle?"

Merope shook her head frantically, pressing herself into the wall, apparently unable to speak.

"But I got him, Father!" cackled Morfin. "I got him as he went by and he didn't look so pretty with hives all over him, did he?"

"You disgusting little Squib, you filthy little blood traitor!" roared Gaunt, losing control, and his hands closed around Morfin's shoulders.

Both Harry and Ogden yelled "No!" at the same time; Ogden raised his wand and cried, "Relashio!" Gaunt was thrown back flat on his back.

With a roar of rage, Morfin leapt out of his chair and ran at Ogden, brandishing his bloody knife and shouting, "Kill him!"

Ogden ran for his life. Dumbledore indicated that they ought to follow and Harry obeyed, Merope's screams echoing behind him.

Ogden hurtled up the path and erupted onto the main lane, his arms over his head, where he collided with the gloss of the stone.

Both he and the pretty girl riding beside him on a gray horse roared with laughter at the sight of Ogden, who bounced back covered from head to foot in dust, running pell-mell up the lane.

"I think that will do, Harry," said Dumbledore. He took Harry by the elbow and tugged. Next moment, they were both on their feet, back in Dumbledore's now twilight office.

"What happened to the girl in the cottage?" said Harry at once, as Dumbledore lit extra lamps with a flick of his wand.

"Oh, she survived," said Dumbledore, reseating himself behind his desk and indicating that Harry should sit down to the left of the desk.

Within fifteen minutes, Morfin and his father attempted to fight, but both were overpowered, removed from the manor, and Morfin, who already had a record of Muggle attacks, was sentenced to three years in Azkaban.

Marvolo, who had injured several Muggles, was sentenced to five years.

"Marvolo?" Harry repeated wonderingly.

"That's right," said Dumbledore, smiling in approval. "I am glad to see you're keeping up."

"That old man was —?"

"Voldemort's grandfather, yes," said Dumbledore. "Marvolo, his son, Morfin, and his daughter, Merope, were the last of a family of instability and violence that flourished through the generations due to their habit of marrying their own cousins. Later, the family gold was squandered several generations before Marvolo was born. He, as you saw, was left in squalor and poverty, with a pride and a couple of family heirlooms that he treasured just as much as his son, and rather more than his daughter."

"So Merope," said Harry, leaning forward in his chair and staring at Dumbledore, "so Merope was . . . Sir, does that mean she was a witch?"

"It does," said Dumbledore. "And it so happens that we also had a glimpse of Voldemort's father. I wonder whether you have seen him?"

"The Muggle Morfin attacked? The man on the horse?"

"Very good indeed," said Dumbledore, beaming. "Yes, that was Tom Riddle senior, the handsome Muggle who used to be a secret, burning passion."

"And they ended up married?" Harry said in disbelief, unable to imagine two people less likely to fall in love.

"I think you are forgetting," said Dumbledore, "that Merope was a witch. I do not believe that her magical powers appeared to her father. Once Marvolo and Morfin were safely in Azkaban, once she was alone and free for the first time in her life, she began to plot her escape from the desperate life she had led for eighteen years."

"Can you not think of any measure Merope could have taken to make Tom Riddle forget his Muggle companion, and to make him forget her?"

"The Imperius Curse?" Harry suggested. "Or a love potion?"

"Very good. Personally, I am inclined to think that she used a love potion. I am sure it would have seemed more romantic, some hot day, when Riddle was riding alone, to persuade him to take a drink of water. In any case, within a few months, Little Hangleton enjoyed a tremendous scandal. You can imagine the gossip it caused when the squire's son ran off with the daughter of a Muggle."

"But the villagers' shock was nothing to Marvolo's. He returned from Azkaban, expecting to find his daughter dutifully waiting for him, but he found a clear inch of dust and her note of farewell, explaining what she had done."

"From all that I have been able to discover, he never mentioned her name or existence from that time forth. The shock was perhaps he had simply never learned to feed himself. Azkaban had greatly weakened Marvolo, and he did not live to see his daughter again."

"And Merope? She . . . she died, didn't she? Wasn't Voldemort brought up in an orphanage?"

"Yes, indeed," said Dumbledore. "We must do a certain amount of guessing here, although I do not think it is difficult. After the runaway marriage, Tom Riddle reappeared at the manor house in Little Hangleton without his wife. The rumor flew that he had been 'taken in.' What he meant, I am sure, is that he had been under an enchantment that had now lifted, though I dare say it was a ghastly sight. When they heard what he was saying, however, the villagers guessed that Merope had lied to Tom Riddle and married her for this reason."

"But she did have his baby."

"But not until a year after they were married. Tom Riddle left her while she was still pregnant."

"What went wrong?" asked Harry. "Why did the love potion stop working?"

"Again, this is guesswork," said Dumbledore, "but I believe that Merope, who was deeply in love with her husband, convinced her that she made the choice to stop giving him the potion. Perhaps, besotted as she was, she had convinced herself that she thought he would stay for the baby's sake. If so, she was wrong on both counts. He left her, never saw her again. The sky outside was inky black and the lamps in Dumbledore's office seemed to glow more brightly than before. "I think that will do for tonight, Harry," said Dumbledore after a moment or two.

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

He got to his feet, but did not leave.

"Sir . . . is it important to know all this about Voldemort's past?"

"Very important, I think," said Dumbledore.

"And it . . . it's got something to do with the prophecy?"

"It has everything to do with the prophecy."

"Right," said Harry, a little confused, but reassured all the same.

He turned to go, then another question occurred to him, and he turned back again. "Sir, am I allowed to tell Ron and Hermione?"

Dumbledore considered him for a moment, then said, "Yes, I think Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger have proved themselves. They can repeat any of this to anybody else. It would not be a good idea if word got around how much I know, or suspect, about the past."

"No, sir, I'll make sure it's just Ron and Hermione. Good night."

He turned away again, and was almost at the door when he saw it. Sitting on one of the little spindle-legged tables that were set with a gleaming gold ring set with a large, cracked, black stone.

"Sir," said Harry, staring at it. "That ring —"

"Yes?" said Dumbledore.

"You were wearing it when we visited Professor Slughorn that night."

"So I was," Dumbledore agreed.

"But isn't it . . . sir, isn't it the same ring Marvolo Gaunt showed Ogden?"

Dumbledore bowed his head. "The very same."

"But how come — ? Have you always had it?"

"No, I acquired it very recently," said Dumbledore. "A few days before I came to fetch you from your aunt and uncle's house."

"That would be around the time you injured your hand, then, sir?"

"Around that time, yes, Harry."

Harry hesitated. Dumbledore was smiling.

"Sir, how exactly — ?"

"Too late, Harry! You shall hear the story another time. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HERMIONE'S HELPING HAND

As Hermione had predicted, the sixth years' free periods were not the hours of blissful relaxation Ron had anticipated. Instead, they were hours of homework they were being set. Not only were they studying as though they had exams every day, but the lessons were more difficult. Hermione understood half of what Professor McGonagall said to them these days; even Hermione had had to ask her to repeat things. Harry's best subject had suddenly become Potions, thanks to the Half-Blood Prince. Nonverbal spells were now expected, not only in Defense Against the Dark Arts, but in Charms and Transfiguration too. They were often in the room or at mealtimes to see them purple in the face and straining as though they had overdosed on U-No-Poo; but he was still trying to get the incantations aloud. It was a relief to get outside into the greenhouses; they were dealing with more dangerous plants. They were not allowed to swear loudly if the Venomous Tentacula seized them unexpectedly from behind.

One result of their enormous workload and the frantic hours of practicing nonverbal spells was that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had stopped coming to meals at the staff table, an ominous sign, and on the few occasions when they had passed the staff table, they had failed to notice them or hear their greetings.

"We've got to go and explain," said Hermione, looking up at Hagrid's huge empty chair at the staff table the following morning.

"We've got Quidditch tryouts this morning!" said Ron. "And we're supposed to be practicing that Aguamenti Charm for the final. Do you hate his stupid subject?"

"We didn't hate it!" said Hermione.

"Speak for yourself, I haven't forgotten the skrewts," said Ron darkly. "And I'm telling you now, we've had a narrow escape — we'd have been teaching Grawp how to tie his shoelaces if we'd stayed."

"I hate not talking to Hagrid," said Hermione, looking upset.

"We'll go down after Quidditch," Harry assured her. He too was missing Hagrid, although like Ron he thought that the more people who took all morning, the number of people who have applied." He felt slightly nervous at confronting the first hurdle of the year.

"Oh, come on, Harry," said Hermione, suddenly impatient. "It's not Quidditch that's popular, it's you! You've never been able to do it."

Ron gagged on a large piece of kipper. Hermione spared him one look of disdain before turning back to Harry.

"Everyone knows you've been telling the truth now, don't they? The whole Wizarding world has had to admit that you were right."

ght him twice in the last two years and escaped both times. And now they're calling you 'the Chosen One' — well, com Harry was finding the Great Hall very hot all of a sudden, even though the ceiling still looked cold and rainy.

"And you've been through all that persecution from the Ministry when they were trying to make out you were unstable where that evil woman made you write with your own blood, but you stuck to your story anyway. . . ."

"You can still see where those brains got hold of me in the Ministry, look," said Ron, shaking back his sleeves.

"And it doesn't hurt that you've grown about a foot over the summer either," Hermione finished, ignoring Ron.

"I'm tall," said Ron inconsequentially.

The post owls arrived, swooping down through rain-flecked windows, scattering everyone with droplets of water. Most keen to hear from their children and to reassure them, in turn, that all was well at home. Harry had received no mail dead and although he had hoped that Lupin might write occasionally, he had so far been disappointed. He was very t all the brown and gray owls. She landed in front of him carrying a large, square package. A moment later, an identical scule and exhausted owl, Pigwidgeon.

"Ha!" said Harry, unwrapping the parcel to reveal a new copy of Advanced Potion-Making, fresh from Flourish and Blott's.

"Oh good," said Hermione, delighted. "Now you can give that graffitied copy back."

"Are you mad?" said Harry. "I'm keeping it! Look, I've thought it out —"

He pulled the old copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag and tapped the cover with his wand, muttering, "Disapparate." The new book (Hermione looked scandalized). He then swapped the covers, tapped each, and said, "Reparo!"

There sat the Prince's copy, disguised as a new book, and there sat the fresh copy from Flourish and Blotts, looking t

"I'll give Slughorn back the new one, he can't complain, it cost nine Galleons."

Hermione pressed her lips together, looking angry and disapproving, but was distracted by a third owl landing in front of her. She looked at it hastily and scanned the front page.

"Anyone we know dead?" asked Ron in a determinedly casual voice; he posed the same question every time Hermione mentioned a death.

"No, but there have been more dementor attacks," said Hermione. "And an arrest."

"Excellent, who?" said Harry, thinking of Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Stan Shunpike," said Hermione.

"What?" said Harry, startled.

"Stanley Shunpike, conductor on the popular Wizarding conveyance the Knight Bus, has been arrested on suspicion of being a Death Eater last night after a raid on his Clapham home . . ."

"Stan Shunpike, a Death Eater?" said Harry, remembering the spotty youth he had first met three years before. "No way!"

"He might have been put under the Imperius Curse," said Ron reasonably. "You never can tell."

"It doesn't look like it," said Hermione, who was still reading. "It says here he was arrested after he was overheard talking up with a troubled expression on her face. 'If he was under the Imperius Curse, he'd hardly stand around gossiping with a Death Eater.'"

"It sounds like he was trying to make out he knew more than he did," said Ron. "Isn't he the one who claimed he was a Death Eater?"

"Yeah, that's him," said Harry. "I dunno what they're playing at, taking Stan seriously."

"They probably want to look as though they're doing something," said Hermione, frowning. "People are terrified — you know that. The Ministry has already been withdrawn. Her father picked her up last night."

"What!" said Ron, goggling at Hermione. "But Hogwarts is safer than their homes, bound to be! We've got Aurors, and the Ministry is bound to be safe!"

"I don't think we've got him all the time," said Hermione very quietly, glancing toward the staff table over the top of the Gryffindor table.

Harry and Ron looked up at the staff table. The headmaster's chair was indeed empty. Now Harry came to think of it, he was sure he had seen the headmaster's chair empty before.

"I think he's left the school to do something with the Order," said Hermione in a low voice. "I mean . . . it's all looking so serious."

Harry and Ron did not answer, but Harry knew that they were all thinking the same thing. There had been a horrible accident in Herbology to be told her mother had been found dead. They had not seen Hannah since.

When they left the Gryffindor table five minutes later to head down to the Quidditch pitch, they passed Lavender Brown and the Patil twins' parents wanting them to leave Hogwarts, Harry was unsurprised to see that the two best friends were very close. That when Ron drew level with them, Parvati suddenly nudged Lavender, who looked around and gave Ron a wide smile. Ron instantly became something more like a strut. Harry resisted the temptation to laugh, remembering that Ron had recently been very close to the edge, however, looked cold and distant all the way down to the stadium through the cool, misty drizzle, and departed to the Quidditch pitch.

As Harry had expected, the trials took most of the morning. Half of Gryffindor House seemed to have turned up, from first years to seventh years who towered over the rest, looking coolly intimidating. The latter included a few from the Hogwarts Express.

"We met on the train, in old Sluggy's compartment," he said confidently, stepping out of the crowd to shake Harry's hand.

"You didn't try out last year, did you?" asked Harry, taking note of the breadth of McLaggen and thinking that he would have been a good player.

"I was in the hospital wing when they held the trials," said McLaggen, with something of a swagger. "Ate a pound of dementor."

"Right," said Harry. "Well . . . if you wait over there . . ."

He pointed over to the edge of the pitch, close to where Hermione was sitting. He thought he saw a flicker of annoyance.

ted preferential treatment because they were both "old Sluggy's" favorites.

Harry decided to start with a basic test, asking all applicants for the team to divide into groups of ten and fly once around the pitch. The first group made up of first years and it could not have been plainer that they had hardly ever flown before. Only one boy managed to fly a decent distance.

surprised he promptly crashed into one of the goalposts.

The second group was comprised of ten of the silliest girls Harry had ever encountered, who, when he blew his whistle, Vane was amongst them. When he told them to leave the pitch, they did so quite cheerfully and went to sit in the stands. The third group had a pileup halfway around the pitch. Most of the fourth group had come without broomsticks. The fifth group, "If there's anyone else here who's not from Gryffindor," roared Harry, who was starting to get seriously annoyed, "leave the pitch!" There was a pause, then a couple of little Ravenclaws went sprinting off the pitch, snorting with laughter. After two hours, many complaints, and several tantrums, one involving a crashed Comet Two Sixty and several broken brooms, to the team after an excellent trial; a new find called Demelza Robins, who was particularly good at dodging Bludgers, had scored seventeen goals to boot. Pleased though he was with his choices, Harry had also shouted himself hoarse at the ejected Beaters.

"That's my final decision and if you don't get out of the way for the Keepers I'll hex you," he bellowed.

Neither of his chosen Beaters had the old brilliance of Fred and George, but he was still reasonably pleased with the selection. He had managed to raise a lump the size of an egg on the back of Harry's head with a ferociously hit Bludger, and Ritchie Coot had managed to get the spectators in the stands to watch the selection of their last team member.

Harry had deliberately left the trial of the Keepers until last, hoping for an emptier stadium and less pressure on all concerned. A number of people who had come down to watch after a lengthy breakfast had joined the crowd by now, so that the crowd roared and jeered in equal measure. Harry glanced over at Ron, who had always had a problem with nerves, but he seemed cured it, but apparently not: Ron was a delicate shade of green.

None of the first five applicants saved more than two goals apiece. To Harry's great disappointment, Cormac McLaggen had shot off in completely the wrong direction; the crowd laughed and booed and McLaggen returned to the ground grinning. Ron looked ready to pass out as he mounted his Cleansweep Eleven. "Good luck!" cried a voice from the stands. Harry frowned. He would have quite liked to have hidden his face in his hands, as she did a moment later, but thought that as they were to watch Ron do his trial.

Yet he need not have worried: Ron saved one, two, three, four, five penalties in a row. Delighted, and resisting joining in, McLaggen told him that, most unfortunately, Ron had beaten him, only to find McLaggen's red face inches from his. "His sister didn't really try," said McLaggen menacingly. There was a vein pulsing in his temple like the one Harry had in his. "Rubbish," said Harry coldly. "That was the one he nearly missed."

McLaggen took a step nearer Harry, who stood his ground this time.

"Give me another go."

"No," said Harry. "You've had your go. You saved four. Ron saved five. Ron's Keeper, he won it fair and square. Get out of the pitch!" He thought for a moment that McLaggen might punch him, but he contented himself with an ugly grimace and stormed off. Harry turned around to find his new team beaming at him.

"Well done," he croaked. "You flew really well —"

"You did brilliantly, Ron!"

This time it really was Hermione running toward them from the stands; Harry saw Lavender walking off the pitch, and Ron looked extremely pleased with himself and even taller than usual as he grinned at the team and at Hermione.

After fixing the time of their first full practice for the following Thursday, Harry, Ron, and Hermione bade good-bye to the sun, which was trying to break through the clouds now and it had stopped drizzling at last. Harry felt extremely hungry; he had not eaten since breakfast. "I thought I was going to miss that fourth penalty," Ron was saying happily. "Tricky shot from Demelza, did you see, Hermione?"

"Yes, yes, you were magnificent," said Hermione, looking amused. "I was better than that McLaggen anyway," said Ron in a highly satisfied voice. "Did you see him lumbering off in the rain?"

To Harry's surprise, Hermione turned a very deep shade of pink at these words. Ron noticed nothing; he was too busy talking to Hermione. The great gray hippogriff, Buckbeak, was tethered in front of Hagrid's cabin. He clicked his razor-sharp beak at their feet.

"Oh dear," said Hermione nervously. "He's still a bit scary, isn't he?"

"Come off it, you've ridden him, haven't you?" said Ron.

Harry stepped forward and bowed low to the hippogriff without breaking eye contact or blinking. After a few seconds, he looked up at them.

"How are you?" Harry asked him in a low voice, moving forward to stroke the feathery head. "Missing him? But you're here!"

"Oi!" said a loud voice.

Hagrid had come striding around the corner of his cabin wearing a large flowery apron and carrying a sack of potatoes. He came bounding toward them.

"Git away from him! He'll have yer fingers — oh. It's yeh lot."

Fang was jumping up at Hermione and Ron, attempting to lick their ears. Hagrid stood and looked at them all for a moment before turning to the door behind him.

"Oh dear!" said Hermione, looking stricken.

"Don't worry about it," said Harry grimly. He walked over to the door and knocked loudly.

"Hagrid! Open up, we want to talk to you!"

There was no sound from within.

"If you don't open the door, we'll blast it open!" Harry said, pulling out his wand.

"Harry!" said Hermione, sounding shocked. "You can't possibly —"

"Yeah, I can!" said Harry. "Stand back —"

But before he could say anything else, the door flew open again as Harry had known it would, and there stood Hagrid sitting alarmingly.

"I'm a teacher!" he roared at Harry. "A teacher, Potter! How dare yeh threaten ter break down my door!"

"I'm sorry, sir," said Harry, emphasizing the last word as he stowed his wand inside his robes.

Hagrid looked stunned. "Since when have yeh called me 'sir'?"

"Since when have you called me 'Potter'?"

"Oh, very clever," growled Hagrid. "Very amusin'. That's me outsmarted, innit? All righ', come in then, yeh ungrateful!"

Mumbling darkly, he stood back to let them pass. Hermione scurried in after Harry, looking rather frightened.

"Well?" said Hagrid grumpily, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down around his enormous wooden table, Fang laying his head on the floor. "What's this? Feelin' sorry for me? Reckon I'm lonely or summat?"

"No," said Harry at once. "We wanted to see you."

"We've missed you!" said Hermione tremulously.

"Missed me, have yeh?" snorted Hagrid. "Yeah. Righ'."

He stomped around, brewing up tea in his enormous copper kettle, muttering all the while. Finally he slammed down a plate of his rock cakes. Harry was hungry enough even for Hagrid's cooking, and took one at once.

"Hagrid," said Hermione timidly, when he joined them at the table and started peeling his potatoes with a brutality that made her wince. "We really wanted to carry on with Care of Magical Creatures, you know."

Hagrid gave another great snort. Harry rather thought some bogeys landed on the potatoes, and was inwardly thankful.

"We did!" said Hermione. "But none of us could fit it into our schedules!"

"Yeah. Righ'," said Hagrid again.

There was a funny squelching sound and they all looked around: Hermione let out a tiny shriek, and Ron leapt out of his seat standing in the corner that they had only just noticed. It was full of what looked like foot-long maggots, slimy, white, and writhing.

"What are they, Hagrid?" asked Harry, trying to sound interested rather than revolted, but putting down his rock cake.

"Jus' giant grubs," said Hagrid.

"And they grow into . . . ?" said Ron, looking apprehensive.

"They won' grow inter nuthin'," said Hagrid. "I got 'em ter feed ter Aragog."

And without warning, he burst into tears.

"Hagrid!" cried Hermione, leaping up, hurrying around the table the long way to avoid the barrel of maggots, and putting her hand to his shoulder.

"It's . . . him . . ." gulped Hagrid, his beetle-black eyes streaming as he mopped his face with his apron. "It's . . . Aragog. He's . . . ummer an' he's not gettin' better. . . . I don' know what I'll do if he . . . if he . . . We've bin tergeth'er so long. . . ."

Hermione patted Hagrid's shoulder, looking at a complete loss for anything to say. Harry knew how she felt. He had seen him croon over giant scorpions with suckers and stingers, attempt to reason with his brutal giant of a half-brother, and even try to tame the monstrous talking spider, Aragog, who dwelled deep in the Forbidden Forest and which he and Ron had been told to kill.

"Is there — is there anything we can do?" Hermione asked, ignoring Ron's frantic grimaces and head-shakings.

"I don' think there is, Hermione," choked Hagrid, attempting to stem the flood of his tears. "See, the rest o' the tribe . . . they're all sick. He's ill . . . bit restive . . ."

"Yeah, I think we saw a bit of that side of them," said Ron in an undertone.

". . . I don' reckon it'd be safe fer anyone but me ter go near the colony at the mo'," Hagrid finished, blowing his nose. "It means a lot. . . ."

After that, the atmosphere lightened considerably, for although neither Harry nor Ron had shown any inclination to do so, Hagrid seemed to take it for granted that they would have liked to have done and became his usual self once more.

"Ar, I always knew yeh'd find it hard ter squeeze me inter yer timetables," he said gruffly, pouring them more tea. "Even if it means missin' yer lessons."

"We couldn't have done," said Hermione. "We smashed the entire stock of Ministry Time-Turners when we were there."

"Ar, well then," said Hagrid. "There's no way yeh could've done it. . . . I'm sorry I've bin — yeh know — I've jus' bin worried. Professor Grubbly-Plank had bin teachin' yeh —"

At which all three of them stated categorically and untruthfully that Professor Grubbly-Plank, who had substituted for him at by the time Hagrid waved them off the premises at dusk, he looked quite cheerful.

"I'm starving," said Harry, once the door had closed behind them and they were hurrying through the dark and deserted corridors, making a great deal of noise from one of his back teeth. "And I've got that detention with Snape tonight, I haven't got much time for dinner."

As they came into the castle they spotted Cormac McLaggen entering the Great Hall. It took him two attempts to get to the table. Ron merely guffawed gloatingly and strode off into the Hall after him, but Harry caught Hermione's arm and held her back.

"What?" said Hermione defensively.

"If you ask me," said Harry quietly, "McLaggen looks like he was Confunded this morning. And he was standing right in front of me." Hermione blushed.

"Oh, all right then, I did it," she whispered. "But you should have heard the way he was talking about Ron and Ginny. He said he didn't get in — you wouldn't have wanted someone like that on the team."

"No," said Harry. "No, I suppose that's true. But wasn't that dishonest, Hermione? I mean, you're a prefect, aren't you?"

"Oh, be quiet," she snapped, as he smirked.

"What are you two doing?" demanded Ron, reappearing in the doorway to the Great Hall and looking suspicious.

"Nothing," said Harry and Hermione together, and they hurried after Ron. The smell of roast beef made Harry's stomach rumble. He reached the Gryffindor table when Professor Slughorn appeared in front of them, blocking their path.

"Harry, Harry, just the man I was hoping to see!" he boomed genially, twiddling the ends of his walrus mustache and looking at the food. "Dinner! What do you say to a spot of supper tonight in my rooms instead? We're having a little party, just a few rising stars — and a lady, I think. Linda Bobbin — I don't know whether you know her? Her family owns a large chain of apothecaries — and, of course, she's brilliant. Slughorn made Hermione a little bow as he finished speaking. It was as though Ron was not present; Slughorn did not even look at him.

"I can't come, Professor," said Harry at once. "I've got a detention with Professor Snape."

"Oh dear!" said Slughorn, his face falling comically. "Dear, dear, I was counting on you, Harry! Well, now, I'll just have to try and persuade him to postpone your detention. Yes, I'll see you both later!"

He bustled away out of the Hall.

"He's got no chance of persuading Snape," said Harry, the moment Slughorn was out of earshot. "This detention's all his fault. He's got to do it for anyone else."

"Oh, I wish you could come, I don't want to go on my own!" said Hermione anxiously; Harry knew that she was thinking of the party.

"I doubt you'll be alone, Ginny'll probably be invited," snapped Ron, who did not seem to have taken kindly to being ignored.

After dinner they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower. The common room was very crowded, as most people had stayed in the Hall; down; Ron, who had been in a bad mood ever since the encounter with Slughorn, folded his arms and frowned at the sight of somebody who had left abandoned on a chair.

"Anything new?" said Harry.

"Not really . . ." Hermione had opened the newspaper and was scanning the inside pages. "Oh, look, your dad's in here. He's been round in alarm. 'It just says he's been to visit the Malfoys' house. 'This second search of the Death Eater's residence conducted by the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects said that his tears were a danger to the Ministry.'"

"Yeah, mine!" said Harry. "I told him at King's Cross about Malfoy and that thing he was trying to get Borgin to fix! We don't want it is to Hogwarts with him —"

"But how can he have done, Harry?" said Hermione, putting down the newspaper with a surprised look. "We were all there."

"Were you?" said Harry, taken aback. "I wasn't!"

"Oh no, of course you weren't, I forgot you were late. . . . Well, Filch ran over all of us with Secrecy Sensors when we got back. I found, I know for a fact Crabbe had a shrunken head confiscated. So you see, Malfoy can't have brought in anything without it being noticed. Momentarily stymied, Harry watched Ginny Weasley playing with Arnold the Pygmy Puff for a while before seeing a way out.

"Someone's sent it to him by owl, then," he said. "His mother or someone."

"All the owls are being checked too," said Hermione. "Filch told us so when he was jabbing those Secrecy Sensors everywhere. Really stumped this time, Harry found nothing else to say. There did not seem to be any way Malfoy could have brought it in without it being noticed at Ron, who was sitting with his arms folded, staring over at Lavender Brown.

"Can you think of any way Malfoy — ?"

"Oh, drop it, Harry," said Ron.

"Listen, it's not my fault Slughorn invited Hermione and me to his stupid party, neither of us wanted to go, you know."

"Well, as I'm not invited to any parties," said Ron, getting to his feet again, "I think I'll go to bed."

He stomped off toward the door to the boys' dormitories, leaving Harry and Hermione staring after him.

"Harry?" said the new Chaser, Demelza Robins, appearing suddenly at his shoulder. "I've got a message for you."

"From Professor Slughorn?" asked Harry, sitting up hopefully.

"No . . . from Professor Snape," said Demelza. Harry's heart sank. "He says you're to come to his office at half past eight tomorrow. He's got eighty invitations you've received. And he wanted you to know you'll be sorting out rotten flobberworms from good ones. He's got protective gloves."

"Right," said Harry grimly. "Thanks a lot, Demelza."

CHAPTER TWELVE

SILVER AND OPALS

Where was Dumbledore, and what was he doing? Harry caught sight of the headmaster only twice over the next few weeks. He was right in thinking that he was leaving the school for days at a time. Had Dumbledore forgotten the lessons he was teaching? The lessons were leading to something to do with the prophecy; Harry had felt bolstered, comforted, and now he felt slightly disappointed. Halfway through October came their first trip of the term to Hogsmeade. Harry had wondered whether these trips would be around the school, but was pleased to know that they were going ahead; it was always good to get out of the castle walls. Harry woke early on the morning of the trip, which was proving stormy, and whiled away the time until breakfast by sitting in bed reading his textbooks; that sort of behavior, as Ron rightly said, was indecent in anybody except Hermione, who had a copy of the Blood-Prince's copy of Advanced Potion-Making hardly qualified as a textbook. The more Harry pored over the book, the more he was struck by the facts and shortcuts on potions that were earning him such a glowing reputation with Slughorn, but also the imaginative and sure, judging by the crossings-out and revisions, that the Prince had invented himself.

Harry had already attempted a few of the Prince's self-invented spells. There had been a hex that caused toenails to grow back (which he had used, with very entertaining results); a jinx that glued the tongue to the roof of the mouth (which he had twice used, to good effect); a spell most useful of all, Muffliato, a spell that filled the ears of anyone nearby with an unidentifiable buzzing, so that length of time he had heard. The only person who did not find these charms amusing was Hermione, who maintained a rigidly disapproving expression.

the Muffliato spell on anyone in the vicinity.

Sitting up in bed, Harry turned the book sideways so as to examine more closely the scribbled instructions for a spell with many crossings-out and alterations, but finally, crammed into a corner of the page, the scribble:

Levicorpus (nvbl)

While the wind and sleet pounded relentlessly on the windows, and Neville snored loudly, Harry stared at the letters. He doubted he would be able to bring off this particular spell; he was still having difficulty with nonverbal spells, some of which were in his class. On the other hand, the Prince had proved a much more effective teacher than Snape so far.

Pointing his wand at nothing in particular, he gave it an upward flick and said Levicorpus! inside his head.

"Aaaaaaaargh!"

There was a flash of light and the room was full of voices: Everyone had woken up as Ron had let out a yell. Harry fell head down in midair as though an invisible hook had hoisted him up by the ankle.

"Sorry!" yelled Harry, as Dean and Seamus roared with laughter, and Neville picked himself up from the floor, having groped for the potion book and riffled through it in a panic, trying to find the right page; at last he located it and found out that this was the counter-jinx, Harry thought Liberacorpus! with all his might.

There was another flash of light, and Ron fell in a heap onto his mattress.

"Sorry," repeated Harry weakly, while Dean and Seamus continued to roar with laughter.

"Tomorrow," said Ron in a muffled voice, "I'd rather you set the alarm clock."

By the time they had got dressed, padding themselves out with several of Mrs. Weasley's hand-knitted sweaters and pajamas, he had decided that Harry's new spell was highly amusing; so amusing, in fact, that he lost no time in regaling Hermione with it. ". . . and then there was another flash of light and I landed on the bed again!" Ron grinned, helping himself to a sausage.

Hermione had not cracked a smile during this anecdote, and now turned an expression of wintry disapproval upon him. "Was this spell, by any chance, another one from that potion book of yours?" she asked.

Harry frowned at her.

"Always jump to the worst conclusion, don't you?"

"Was it?"

"Well . . . yeah, it was, but so what?"

"So you just decided to try out an unknown, handwritten incantation and see what would happen?"

"Why does it matter if it's handwritten?" said Harry, preferring not to answer the rest of the question.

"Because it's probably not Ministry of Magic-approved," said Hermione. "And also," she added, as Harry and Ron rolled their eyes, "your spell was a bit dodgy."

Both Harry and Ron shouted her down at once.

"It was a laugh!" said Ron, upending a ketchup bottle over his sausages. "Just a laugh, Hermione, that's all!"

"Dangling people upside down by the ankle?" said Hermione. "Who puts their time and energy into making up spells?"

"Fred and George," said Ron, shrugging, "it's their kind of thing. And, er —"

"My dad," said Harry. He had only just remembered.

"What?" said Ron and Hermione together.

"My dad used this spell," said Harry. "I — Lupin told me."

This last part was not true; in fact, Harry had seen his father use the spell on Snape, but he had never told Ron and Hermione about it, however, a wonderful possibility occurred to him. Could the Half-Blood Prince possibly be — ?

"Maybe your dad did use it, Harry," said Hermione, "but he's not the only one. We've seen a whole bunch of people use it. They just let them float along, asleep, helpless."

Harry stared at her. With a sinking feeling, he too remembered the behavior of the Death Eaters at the Quidditch World Cup.

"That was different," he said robustly. "They were abusing it. Harry and his dad were just having a laugh. You don't like Sirius, do you? Sternly, 'because he's better than you at Potions —'"

"It's got nothing to do with that!" said Hermione, her cheeks reddening. "I just think it's very irresponsible to start perusing the book and stop talking about 'the Prince' as if it's his title, I bet it's just a stupid nickname, and it doesn't seem as though he'd be a Death Eater."

"I don't see where you get that from," said Harry heatedly. "If he'd been a budding Death Eater he wouldn't have been a teacher. Even as he said it, Harry remembered that his father had been pure-blood, but he pushed the thought out of his mind.

"The Death Eaters can't all be pure-blood, there aren't enough pure-blood wizards left," said Hermione stubbornly. "I don't care if they're only Muggle-borns they hate, they'd be quite happy to let you and Ron join up."

"There is no way they'd let me be a Death Eater!" said Ron indignantly, a bit of sausage flying off the fork he was now holding. "My whole family are blood traitors! That's as bad as Muggle-borns to Death Eaters!"

"And they'd love to have me," said Harry sarcastically. "We'd be best pals if they didn't keep trying to do me in."

This made Ron laugh; even Hermione gave a grudging smile, and a distraction arrived in the shape of Ginny.

"Hey, Harry, I'm supposed to give you this."

It was a scroll of parchment with Harry's name written upon it in familiar thin, slanting writing.

"Thanks, Ginny . . . It's Dumbledore's next lesson!" Harry told Ron and Hermione, pulling open the parchment and quizzing them. "Want to join us in Hogsmeade, Ginny?" he asked.

"I'm going with Dean — might see you there," she replied, waving at them as she left.

Filch was standing at the oak front doors as usual, checking off the names of people who had permission to go into the school.

riple-checking everybody with his Secrecy Sensor.

"What does it matter if we're smuggling Dark stuff OUT?" demanded Ron, eyeing the long thin Secrecy Sensor with ap-

His cheek earned him a few extra jabs with the Sensor, and he was still wincing as they stepped out into the wind and rain. The walk into Hogsmeade was not enjoyable. Harry wrapped his scarf over his lower face; the exposed part soon felt numb against the bitter wind. More than once Harry wondered whether they might not have had a better time in the snow. When he saw that Zonko's Joke Shop had been boarded up, Harry took it as confirmation that this trip was not destined to be fun. The shop, which was mercifully open, and Harry and Hermione staggered in his wake into the crowded shop.

"Thank God," shivered Ron as they were enveloped by warm, toffee-scented air. "Let's stay here all afternoon."

"Harry, m'boy!" said a booming voice from behind them.

"Oh no," muttered Harry. The three of them turned to see Professor Slughorn, who was wearing an enormous furry hat and holding a crystalized pineapple, and occupying at least a quarter of the shop.

"Harry, that's three of my little suppers you've missed now!" said Slughorn, poking him genially in the chest. "It won't hurt you, em, don't you?"

"Yes," said Hermione helplessly, "they're really —"

"So why don't you come along, Harry?" demanded Slughorn.

"Well, I've had Quidditch practice, Professor," said Harry, who had indeed been scheduling practices every time Slughorn's strategy meant that Ron was not left out, and they usually had a laugh with Ginny, imagining Hermione shut up with a book.

"Well, I certainly expect you to win your first match after all this hard work!" said Slughorn. "But a little recreation never hurts. Possibly want to practice in this weather. . . ."

"I can't, Professor, I've got — er — an appointment with Professor Dumbledore that evening."

"Unlucky again!" cried Slughorn dramatically. "Ah, well . . . you can't evade me forever, Harry!"

And with a regal wave, he waddled out of the shop, taking as little notice of Ron as though he had been a display of Crockford's.

"I can't believe you've wriggled out of another one," said Hermione, shaking her head. "They're not that bad, you know. I caught sight of Ron's expression. "Oh, look — they've got deluxe sugar quills — those would last hours!"

Glad that Hermione had changed the subject, Harry showed much more interest in the new extra-large sugar quills than in the fact that he had merely shrugged when Hermione asked him where he wanted to go next.

"Let's go to the Three Broomsticks," said Harry. "It'll be warm."

They bundled their scarves back over their faces and left the sweetshop. The bitter wind was like knives on their faces. They were busy; nobody was lingering to chat, just hurrying toward their destinations. The exceptions were two men a little apart from the others, as very tall and thin; squinting through his rain-washed glasses Harry recognized the barman who worked in the other pub. Closer, the barman drew his cloak more tightly around his neck and walked away, leaving the shorter man to fumble for a key. Harry realized who the man was.

"Mundungus!"

The squat, bandy-legged man with long, straggly, ginger hair jumped and dropped an ancient suitcase, which burst open and spilled its contents into the window.

"Oh, 'ello, 'Arry," said Mundungus Fletcher, with a most unconvincing stab at airiness. "Well, don't let me keep ya."

And he began scrabbling on the ground to retrieve the contents of his suitcase with every appearance of a man eager to get on with his work.

"Are you selling this stuff?" asked Harry, watching Mundungus grab an assortment of grubby-looking objects from the ground.

"Oh, well, gotta scrape a living," said Mundungus. "Gimme that!"

Ron had stooped down and picked up something silver.

"Hang on," Ron said slowly. "This looks familiar —"

"Thank you!" said Mundungus, snatching the goblet out of Ron's hand and stuffing it back into the case. "Well, I'll see you later. Harry had pinned Mundungus against the wall of the pub by the throat. Holding him fast with one hand, he pulled out his wand.

"Harry!" squealed Hermione.

"You took that from Sirius's house," said Harry, who was almost nose to nose with Mundungus and was breathing in the scent of his family crest on it."

"I — no — what — ?" spluttered Mundungus, who was slowly turning purple.

"What did you do, go back the night he died and strip the place?" snarled Harry.

"I — no —"

"Give it to me!"

"Harry, you mustn't!" shrieked Hermione, as Mundungus started to turn blue.

There was a bang, and Harry felt his hands fly off Mundungus's throat. Gasping and spluttering, Mundungus seized Harry by the wrist. Harry swore at the top of his voice, spinning on the spot to see where Mundungus had gone.

"COME BACK, YOU THIEVING — !"

"There's no point, Harry."

Tonks had appeared out of nowhere, her mousy hair wet with sleet.

"Mundungus will probably be in London by now. There's no point yelling."

"He's nicked Sirius's stuff! Nicked it!"

"Yes, but still," said Tonks, who seemed perfectly untroubled by this piece of information. "You should get out of the

She watched them go through the door of the Three Broomsticks.

The moment he was inside, Harry burst out, "He was nicking Sirius's stuff!"

"I know, Harry, but please don't shout, people are staring," whispered Hermione. "Go and sit down, I'll get you a drink."

Harry was still fuming when Hermione returned to their table a few minutes later holding three bottles of butterbeer.

"Can't the Order control Mundungus?" Harry demanded of the other two in a furious whisper. "Can't they at least stop him from stealing things?"

"Shh!" said Hermione desperately, looking around to make sure nobody was listening; there were a couple of warlocks and Zabini was lolling against a pillar not far away. "Harry, I'd be annoyed too, I know it's your things he's stealing —"

Harry gagged on his butterbeer; he had momentarily forgotten that he owned number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"Yeah, it's my stuff!" he said. "No wonder he wasn't pleased to see me! Well, I'm going to tell Dumbledore what's going on."

"Good idea," whispered Hermione, clearly pleased that Harry was calming down. "Ron, what are you staring at?"

"Nothing," said Ron, hastily looking away from the bar, but Harry knew he was trying to catch the eye of the curvy witch sitting at the end of the bar.

"I expect 'nothing's' in the back getting more firewhisky," said Hermione waspishly.

Ron ignored this jibe, sipping his drink in what he evidently considered to be a dignified silence. Harry was thinking about the fact that he had never seen anyone behave as Katie had just behaved and could not think of what he had learned from this.

Hermione drummed her fingers on the table, her eyes flickering between Ron and the bar. The moment Harry drained his glass, she said, "What's the matter, Harry? Do you want to go back to school, then?"

The other two nodded; it had not been a fun trip and the weather was getting worse the longer they stayed. Once again, the girls pulled on their gloves, then followed Katie Bell and a friend out of the pub and back up the High Street. Harry watched them disappear through the frozen slush. They had not met up with her, undoubtedly, thought Harry, because she and Dean were not a couple. Scowling, he bowed his head against the swirling sleet and trudged on.

It was a little while before Harry became aware that the voices of Katie Bell and her friend, which were being carried by the wind, were coming from behind him. He squinted at their indistinct figures. The two girls were having an argument about something Katie was holding in her hands.

They rounded a corner in the lane, sleet coming thick and fast, blurring Harry's glasses. Just as he raised a gloved hand to his eyes, he saw a package flying through the air. He was holding; Katie tugged it back and the package fell to the ground.

At once, Katie rose into the air, not as Ron had done, suspended comically by the ankle, but gracefully, her arms outstretched. She was doing something wrong, something eerie. . . . Her hair was whipped around her by the fierce wind, but her eyes were closed and her expression was one of intense concentration. Leanne and Dean had all halted in their tracks, watching.

Then, six feet above the ground, Katie let out a terrible scream. Her eyes flew open but whatever she could see, or was trying to see, she lost. She screamed and screamed; Leanne started to scream too and seized Katie's ankles, trying to tug her back to the ground. As they grabbed Katie's legs, she fell on top of them; Harry and Ron managed to catch her but she was writhing so much that they could not hold her. She rolled round where she thrashed and screamed, apparently unable to recognize any of them.

Harry looked around; the landscape seemed deserted.

"Stay there!" he shouted at the others over the howling wind. "I'm going for help!"

He began to sprint toward the school; he had never seen anyone behave as Katie had just behaved and could not think of what he had learned from this. He was idled with what seemed to be an enormous bear on its hind legs.

"Hagrid!" he panted, disentangling himself from the hedgerow into which he had fallen.

"Harry!" said Hagrid, who had sleet trapped in his eyebrows and beard, and was wearing his great, shaggy beaverskin hat. "What's happened?"

"Hagrid, someone's hurt back there, or cursed, or something —"

"Wha'?" said Hagrid, bending lower to hear what Harry was saying over the raging wind.

"Someone's been cursed!" bellowed Harry.

"Cursed? Who's bin cursed — not Ron? Hermione?"

"No, it's not them, it's Katie Bell — this way . . ."

Together they ran back along the lane. It took them no time to find the little group of people around Katie, who was lying on the ground. Leanne and Dean were all trying to quiet her.

"Get back!" shouted Hagrid. "Lemme see her!"

"Something's happened to her!" sobbed Leanne. "I don't know what —"

Hagrid stared at Katie for a second, then without a word, bent down, scooped her into his arms, and ran off toward the school. The girls followed him, and the sound of the wind died away and the only sound was the roar of the wind.

Hermione hurried over to Katie's wailing friend and put an arm around her.

"It's Leanne, isn't it?"

The girl nodded.

"Did it just happen all of a sudden, or — ?"

"It was when that package tore," sobbed Leanne, pointing at the now sodden brown-paper package on the ground, which was lying on its side and outstretched, but Harry seized his arm and pulled him back.

"Don't touch it!"

He crouched down. An ornate opal necklace was visible, poking out of the paper.

"I've seen that before," said Harry, staring at the thing. "It was on display in Borgin and Burkes ages ago. The label said 'Katie Bell's necklace'."

at Leanne, who had started to shake uncontrollably. "How did Katie get hold of this?"

"Well, that's why we were arguing. She came back from the bathroom in the Three Broomsticks holding it, said it was e looked all funny when she said it. . . . Oh no, oh no, I bet she'd been Imperiused and I didn't realize!"

Leanne shook with renewed sobs. Hermione patted her shoulder gently.

"She didn't say who'd given it to her, Leanne?"

"No . . . she wouldn't tell me . . . and I said she was being stupid and not to take it up to school, but she just wouldn't . . . and — and —"

Leanne let out a wail of despair.

"We'd better get up to school," said Hermione, her arm still around Leanne. "We'll be able to find out how she is. Come on, Harry." Harry hesitated for a moment, then pulled his scarf from around his face and, ignoring Ron's gasp, carefully covered it. "We'll need to show this to Madam Pomfrey," he said.

As they followed Hermione and Leanne up the road, Harry was thinking furiously. They had just entered the grounds. "Malfoy knows about this necklace. It was in a case at Borgin and Burkes four years ago, I saw him having a good look at it when he was buying that day when we followed him! He remembered it and he went back for it!"

"I — I dunno, Harry," said Ron hesitantly. "Loads of people go to Borgin and Burkes . . . and didn't that girl say Katie got it?"

"She said she came back from the bathroom with it, she didn't necessarily get it in the bathroom itself —"

"McGonagall!" said Ron warningly.

Harry looked up. Sure enough, Professor McGonagall was hurrying down the stone steps through swirling sleet to meet them.

"Hagrid says you four saw what happened to Katie Bell — upstairs to my office at once, please! What's that you're holding?"

"It's the thing she touched," said Harry.

"Good lord," said Professor McGonagall, looking alarmed as she took the necklace from Harry. "No, no, Filch, they're not to go in there. Stay outside the entrance hall holding his Secrecy Sensor aloft. Take this necklace to Professor Snape at once, but be sure not to let anyone see it." Harry and the others followed Professor McGonagall upstairs and into her office. The sleet-spattered windows were rattling in the grate. Professor McGonagall closed the door and swept around her desk to face Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Leanne.

"Well?" she said sharply. "What happened?"

Haltingly, and with many pauses while she attempted to control her crying, Leanne told Professor McGonagall how Katie had found the unmarked package, how Katie had seemed a little odd, and how they had argued about the advisability of opening it. She told her about the tussle over the parcel, which tore open. At this point, Leanne was so overcome, there was no getting another word out of her.

"All right," said Professor McGonagall, not unkindly, "go up to the hospital wing, please, Leanne, and get Madam Pomfrey to look at her. When she has left the room, Professor McGonagall turned back to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"What happened when Katie touched the necklace?"

"She rose up in the air," said Harry, before either Ron or Hermione could speak, "and then began to scream, and collapsed." "The headmaster is away until Monday, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, looking surprised.

"Away?" Harry repeated angrily.

"Yes, Potter, away!" said Professor McGonagall tartly. "But anything you have to say about this horrible business can wait until Monday. For a split second, Harry hesitated. Professor McGonagall did not invite confidences; Dumbledore, though in many ways the most lenient of heads, was however wild. This was a life-and-death matter, though, and no moment to worry about being laughed at.

"I think Draco Malfoy gave Katie that necklace, Professor."

On one side of him, Ron rubbed his nose in apparent embarrassment; on the other, Hermione shuffled her feet as though she were cold.

"That is a very serious accusation, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, after a shocked pause. "Do you have any proof?"

"No," said Harry, "but . . ." and he told her about following Malfoy to Borgin and Burkes and the conversation they had overheard. When he had finished speaking, Professor McGonagall looked slightly confused.

"Malfoy took something to Borgin and Burkes for repair?"

"No, Professor, he just wanted Borgin to tell him how to mend something, he didn't have it with him. But that's not the whole story, and I think it was that necklace —"

"You saw Malfoy leaving the shop with a similar package?"

"No, Professor, he told Borgin to keep it in the shop for him —"

"But Harry," Hermione interrupted, "Borgin asked him if he wanted to take it with him, and Malfoy said no —"

"Because he didn't want to touch it, obviously!" said Harry angrily.

"What he actually said was, 'How would I look carrying that down the street?'" said Hermione.

"Well, he would look a bit of a prat carrying a necklace," interjected Ron.

"Oh, Ron," said Hermione despairingly, "it would be all wrapped up, so he wouldn't have to touch it, and quite easy to carry. The thing he reserved at Borgin and Burkes was noisy or bulky, something he knew would draw attention to him if he carried it. Harry could interrupt, "I asked Borgin about the necklace, don't you remember? When I went in to try and find out what it was, he told me the price, he didn't say it was already sold or anything —"

"Well, you were being really obvious, he realized what you were up to within about five seconds, of course he wasn't stupid —"

"That's enough!" said Professor McGonagall, as Hermione opened her mouth to retort, looking furious. "Potter, I appreciate your loyalty, but I am not punishing you at Mr. Malfoy purely because he visited the shop where this necklace might have been purchased. The same is possible for any number of shops in the wizarding world — that's what I said —" muttered Ron.

"— and in any case, we have put stringent security measures in place this year. I do not believe that necklace can pos—
 "But —"
 "— and what is more," said Professor McGonagall, with an air of awful finality, "Mr. Malfoy was not in Hogsmeade too."
 Harry gaped at her, deflating.
 "How do you know, Professor?"
 "Because he was doing detention with me. He has now failed to complete his Transfiguration homework twice in a row."
 As she marched past them, "but I need to go up to the hospital wing now to check on Katie Bell. Good day to you all."
 She held open her office door. They had no choice but to file past her without another word.
 Harry was angry with the other two for siding with McGonagall; nevertheless, he felt compelled to join in once they saw her.
 "So who do you reckon Katie was supposed to give the necklace to?" asked Ron, as they climbed the stairs to the common room.
 "Goodness only knows," said Hermione. "But whoever it was has had a narrow escape. No one could have opened the door."
 "It could've been meant for loads of people," said Harry. "Dumbledore — the Death Eaters would love to get rid of him."
 "He reckons Voldemort really wanted him and they can't be pleased that he's sided with Dumbledore. Or —"
 "Or you," said Hermione, looking troubled.
 "Couldn't have been," said Harry, "or Katie would've just turned around in the lane and given it to me, wouldn't she? It would have made much more sense to deliver the parcel outside Hogwarts, what with Filch searching everyone who goes in."
 "Harry, Malfoy wasn't in Hogsmeade!" said Hermione, actually stamping her foot in frustration.
 "He must have used an accomplice, then," said Harry. "Crabbe or Goyle — or, come to think of it, another Death Eater."
 "He joined up —"
 Ron and Hermione exchanged looks that plainly said There's no point arguing with him.
 "Dilligrout," said Hermione firmly as they reached the Fat Lady.
 The portrait swung open to admit them to the common room. It was quite full and smelled of damp clothing; many people were there.
 "The weather. There was no buzz of fear or speculation, however: Clearly, the news of Katie's fate had not yet spread."
 "It wasn't a very slick attack, really, when you stop and think about it," said Ron, casually turving a first year out of one of the beds.
 "The curse didn't even make it into the castle. Not what you'd call foolproof."
 "You're right," said Hermione, prodding Ron out of the chair with her foot and offering it to the first year again. "It was a good idea."
 "But since when has Malfoy been one of the world's great thinkers?" asked Harry.
 Neither Ron nor Hermione answered him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SECRET RIDDLE

Katie was removed to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries the following day, by which time the news of her accident had spread.
 The details were confused and nobody other than Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Leanne seemed to know that Katie had been hurt.
 "Oh, and Malfoy knows, of course," said Harry to Ron and Hermione, who continued their new policy of feigning deafness.
 Harry had wondered whether Dumbledore would return from wherever he had been in time for Monday night's lesson.
 At eight o'clock, he went to Dumbledore's office, knocked, and was told to enter. There sat Dumbledore looking unusually tired; he looked like a man who had been up all night.
 "He gestured to Harry to sit down. The Pensieve was sitting on the desk again, casting silvery specks of light over the ceiling."
 "You have had a busy time while I have been away," Dumbledore said. "I believe you witnessed Katie's accident."
 "Yes, sir. How is she?"
 "Still very unwell, although she was relatively lucky. She appears to have brushed the necklace with the smallest possible force."
 "If she had put it on, had she even held it in her ungloved hand, she would have died, perhaps instantly. Luckily Professor Snape was there."
 "Why him?" asked Harry quickly. "Why not Madam Pomfrey?"
 "Impertinent," said a soft voice from one of the portraits on the wall, and Phineas Nigellus Black, Sirius's great-great-grandfather, appeared to be sleeping. "I would not have permitted a student to question the way Hogwarts operated in my day."
 "Yes, thank you, Phineas," said Dumbledore quellingly. "Professor Snape knows much more about the Dark Arts than I do."
 "I'll give you my daily reports, and I am hopeful that Katie will make a full recovery in time."
 "Where were you this weekend, sir?" Harry asked, disregarding a strong feeling that he might be pushing his luck, a feeling that he had never before.
 "I would rather not say just now," said Dumbledore. "However, I shall tell you in due course."
 "You will?" said Harry, startled.
 "Yes, I expect so," said Dumbledore, withdrawing a fresh bottle of silver memories from inside his robes and uncorking it.
 "Sir," said Harry tentatively, "I met Mundungus in Hogsmeade."
 "Ah yes, I am already aware that Mundungus has been treating your inheritance with light-fingered contempt," said Dumbledore.
 "He posted him outside the Three Broomsticks; I rather think he dreads facing me. However, rest assured that he will not be able to do anything."
 "That mangy old half-blood has been stealing Black heirlooms?" said Phineas Nigellus, incensed; and he stalked out of the portrait.
 "Grimmauld Place."
 "Professor," said Harry, after a short pause, "did Professor McGonagall tell you what I told her after Katie got hurt? About the necklace?"
 "She told me of your suspicions, yes," said Dumbledore.
 "And do you — ?"

"I shall take all appropriate measures to investigate anyone who might have had a hand in Katie's accident," said Dumbledore. Harry felt slightly resentful at this: If their lessons were so very important, why had there been such a long gap between Malfoy, but watched as Dumbledore poured the fresh memories into the Pensieve and began swirling the stone basin. "You will remember, I am sure, that we left the tale of Lord Voldemort's beginnings at the point where the handsome young man returned to his family home in Little Hangleton. Merope was left alone in London, expecting the baby who would one day be her son." "How do you know she was in London, sir?" "Because of the evidence of one Caractacus Burke," said Dumbledore, "who, by an odd coincidence, helped find the locket. He swilled the contents of the Pensieve as Harry had seen him swill them before, much as a gold prospector sifts for gold. The locket, revolving slowly in the Pensieve, silver as a ghost but much more solid, with a thatch of hair that completely covered the top, was obvious. Covered in rags and pretty far along . . . Going to have a baby, see. She said the locket had been Slytherin's, but it was Merlin's, this was, his favorite teapot,' but when I looked at it, it had his mark all right, and a few simple spells were near enough priceless. She didn't seem to have any idea how much it was worth. Happy to get ten Galleons for it. But Dumbledore gave the Pensieve an extra-vigorous shake and Caractacus Burke descended back into the swirling mass of memories. "He only gave her ten Galleons?" said Harry indignantly. "Caractacus Burke was not famed for his generosity," said Dumbledore. "So we know that, near the end of her pregnancy, she was desperate enough to sell her one and only valuable possession, the locket that was one of Marvolo's treasured family heirlooms. "But she could do magic!" said Harry impatiently. "She could have got food and everything for herself by magic, could she not?" "Ah," said Dumbledore, "perhaps she could. But it is my belief — I am guessing again, but I am sure I am right — that she did not think that she wanted to be a witch any longer. Of course, it is also possible that her unrequited love and the pain of it, in any case, as you are about to see, Merope refused to raise her wand even to save her own life." "She wouldn't even stay alive for her son?" Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Could you possibly be feeling sorry for Lord Voldemort?" "No," said Harry quickly, "but she had a choice, didn't she, not like my mother —" "Your mother had a choice too," said Dumbledore gently. "Yes, Merope Riddle chose death in spite of a son who needed her, but she was weakened by long suffering and she never had your mother's courage. And now, if you will stand . . ." "Where are we going?" Harry asked, as Dumbledore joined him at the front of the desk. "This time," said Dumbledore, "we are going to enter my memory. I think you will find it both rich in detail and satisfying. Harry bent over the Pensieve; his face broke the cool surface of the memory and then he was falling through darkness. When his eyes opened, he found that he and Dumbledore were standing in a bustling, old-fashioned London street. "There I am," said Dumbledore brightly, pointing ahead of them to a tall figure crossing the road in front of a horse-drawn carriage. This younger Albus Dumbledore's long hair and beard were auburn. Having reached their side of the street, he strode forward in a flamboyantly cut suit of plum velvet that he was wearing. "Nice suit, sir," said Harry, before he could stop himself, but Dumbledore merely chuckled as they followed his young companion through the gates into a bare courtyard that fronted a rather grim, square building surrounded by high railings. He mounted the steps and, after a moment or two, the door was opened by a scruffy girl wearing an apron. "Good afternoon. I have an appointment with a Mrs. Cole, who, I believe, is the matron here?" "Oh," said the bewildered-looking girl, taking in Dumbledore's eccentric appearance. "Um . . . just a moment . . . MRS. COLE is in." Harry heard a distant voice shouting something in response. The girl turned back to Dumbledore. "Come in, she's on the second floor." Dumbledore stepped into a hallway tiled in black and white; the whole place was shabby but spotlessly clean. Harry followed him, and behind them, a skinny, harassed-looking woman came scurrying toward them. She had a sharp-featured face that was lined with worry. "Here, here, here," she called to another aproned helper as she walked toward Dumbledore. ". . . and take the iodine upstairs to Martha, Billy Stubbs has been picking his scabs and Eric Whalley's oozing all over his face. I don't know what to do about it, and then her eyes fell upon Dumbledore and she stopped dead in her tracks, looking as if she had seen a ghost. "Good afternoon," said Dumbledore, holding out his hand. Mrs. Cole simply gaped. "My name is Albus Dumbledore. I sent you a letter requesting an appointment and you very kindly invited me here to discuss Tom Riddle. Mrs. Cole blinked. Apparently deciding that Dumbledore was not a hallucination, she said feebly, "Oh yes. Well — welcome. She led Dumbledore into a small room that seemed part sitting room, part office. It was as shabby as the hallway and the furniture was old. He sat on a rickety chair and seated herself behind a cluttered desk, eyeing him nervously. "I am here, as I told you in my letter, to discuss Tom Riddle and arrangements for his future," said Dumbledore. "Are you family?" asked Mrs. Cole. "No, I am a teacher," said Dumbledore. "I have come to offer Tom a place at my school." "What school's this, then?" "It is called Hogwarts," said Dumbledore. "And how come you're interested in Tom?" "We believe he has qualities we are looking for." "You mean he's won a scholarship? How can he have done? He's never been entered for one." "Well, his name has been down for our school since birth —" "Who registered him? His parents?"

There was no doubt that Mrs. Cole was an inconveniently sharp woman. Apparently Dumbledore thought so too, for at the same time picking up a piece of perfectly blank paper from Mrs. Cole's desktop.

"Here," said Dumbledore, waving his wand once as he passed her the piece of paper, "I think this will make everything clear." Mrs. Cole's eyes slid out of focus and back again as she gazed intently at the blank paper for a moment.

"That seems perfectly in order," she said placidly, handing it back. Then her eyes fell upon a bottle of gin and two glasses.

"Er — may I offer you a glass of gin?" she said in an extra-refined voice.

"Thank you very much," said Dumbledore, beaming.

It soon became clear that Mrs. Cole was no novice when it came to gin drinking. Pouring both of them a generous measure, she smiled at Dumbledore for the first time, and he didn't hesitate to press his advantage.

"I was wondering whether you could tell me anything of Tom Riddle's history? I think he was born here in the orphanage."

"That's right," said Mrs. Cole, helping herself to more gin. "I remember it clear as anything, because I'd just started here. A w. Nasty night. And this girl, not much older than I was myself at the time, came staggering up the front steps. Well, she died within the hour. And she was dead in another hour."

Mrs. Cole nodded impressively and took another generous gulp of gin.

"Did she say anything before she died?" asked Dumbledore. "Anything about the boy's father, for instance?"

"Now, as it happens, she did," said Mrs. Cole, who seemed to be rather enjoying herself now, with the gin in her hand. "I hope he looks like his papa," and I won't lie, she was right to hope it, because she was no beauty — and then she told me about her father — yes, I know, funny name, isn't it? We wondered whether she came from a circus — and she said the boy was called another word.

"Well, we named him just as she'd said, it seemed so important to the poor girl, but no Tom nor Marvolo nor any kind of name he stayed in the orphanage and he's been here ever since."

Mrs. Cole helped herself, almost absentmindedly, to another healthy measure of gin. Two pink spots had appeared on her cheeks.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "I thought he might be."

"He was a funny baby too. He hardly ever cried, you know. And then, when he got a little older, he was . . . odd."

"Odd in what way?" asked Dumbledore gently.

"Well, he —"

But Mrs. Cole pulled up short, and there was nothing blurry or vague about the inquisitorial glance she shot at him.

"He's definitely got a place at your school, you say?"

"Definitely," said Dumbledore.

"And nothing I say can change that?"

"Nothing," said Dumbledore.

"You'll be taking him away, whatever?"

"Whatever," repeated Dumbledore gravely.

She squinted at him as though deciding whether or not to trust him. Apparently she decided she could, because she said:

"You mean he is a bully?" asked Dumbledore.

"I think he must be," said Mrs. Cole, frowning slightly, "but it's very hard to catch him at it. There have been incidents. But Dumbledore did not press her, though Harry could tell that he was interested. She took yet another gulp of gin and helped herself to more.

"Billy Stubbs's rabbit . . . well, Tom said he didn't do it and I don't see how he could have done, but even so, it didn't hurt him."

"I shouldn't think so, no," said Dumbledore quietly.

"But I'm jiggered if I know how he got up there to do it. All I know is he and Billy had argued the day before. And then he fell over her chin this time — "on the summer outing — we take them out, you know, once a year, to the countryside or to the mountains. Right afterwards, and all we ever got out of them was that they'd gone into a cave with Tom Riddle. He swore they'd just been there. And, well, there have been a lot of things, funny things. . . ."

She looked around at Dumbledore again, and though her cheeks were flushed, her gaze was steady. "I don't think Mr. Riddle will be a trouble."

"You understand, I'm sure, that we will not be keeping him permanently?" said Dumbledore. "He will have to return home."

"Oh, well, that's better than a whack on the nose with a rusty poker," said Mrs. Cole with a slight hiccup. She got to her feet, ready, even though two-thirds of the gin was now gone. "I suppose you'd like to see him?"

"Very much," said Dumbledore, rising too.

She led him out of her office and up the stone stairs, calling out instructions and admonitions to helpers and children. They wore a kind of grayish tunic. They looked reasonably well-cared for, but there was no denying that this was a grim place.

"Here we are," said Mrs. Cole, as they turned off the second landing and stopped outside the first door in a long corridor.

"Tom? You've got a visitor. This is Mr. Dumberton — sorry, Dunderbore. He's come to tell you — well, I'll let him do it."

Harry and the two Dumbledores entered the room, and Mrs. Cole closed the door on them. It was a small bare room with a wooden bedstead. A boy was sitting on top of the gray blankets, his legs stretched out in front of him, holding a book.

There was no trace of the Gaunts in Tom Riddle's face. Merope had got her dying wish: He was his handsome father's son.

His eyes narrowed slightly as he took in Dumbledore's eccentric appearance. There was a moment's silence.

"How do you do, Tom?" said Dumbledore, walking forward and holding out his hand.

The boy hesitated, then took it, and they shook hands. Dumbledore drew up the hard wooden chair beside Riddle, sitting down.

room. These were taken from victims of his bullying behavior, souvenirs, if you will, of particularly unpleasant bits of particularly, will be important later.

"And now, it really is time for bed."

Harry got to his feet. As he walked across the room, his eyes fell upon the little table on which Marvolo Gaunt's ring had

"Yes, Harry?" said Dumbledore, for Harry had come to a halt.

"The ring's gone," said Harry, looking around. "But I thought you might have the mouth organ or something."

Dumbledore beamed at him, peering over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

"Very astute, Harry, but the mouth organ was only ever a mouth organ."

And on that enigmatic note he waved to Harry, who understood himself to be dismissed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE UNBREAKABLE VOW

Snow was swirling against the icy windows once more; Christmas was approaching fast. Hagrid had already single-handedly ; garlands of holly and tinsel had been twisted around the banisters of the stairs; everlasting candles glowed from in ; oe had been hung at intervals along the corridors. Large groups of girls tended to converge underneath the mistletoe e corridors; fortunately, however, Harry's frequent nighttime wanderings had given him an unusually good knowledge oo much difficulty, to navigate mistletoe-free routes between classes.

Ron, who might once have found the necessity of these detours a cause for jealousy rather than hilarity, simply roared new laughing, joking Ron to the moody, aggressive model he had been enduring for the last few weeks, the improvement frequent presence of Lavender Brown, who seemed to regard any moment that she was not kissing Ron as a moment wo people who seemed unlikely ever to speak to each other again.

Ron, whose hands and forearms still bore scratches and cuts from Hermione's bird attack, was taking a defensive an "She can't complain," he told Harry. "She snogged Krum. So she's found out someone wants to snog me too. Well, it's Harry did not answer, but pretended to be absorbed in the book they were supposed to have read before Charms n ends with both Ron and Hermione, he was spending a lot of time with his mouth shut tight.

"I never promised Hermione anything," Ron mumbled. "I mean, all right, I was going to go to Slughorn's Christmas party free agent. . . ."

Harry turned a page of Quintessence, aware that Ron was watching him. Ron's voice tailed away in mutters, barely a caught the words "Krum" and "can't complain" again.

Hermione's schedule was so full that Harry could only talk to her properly in the evenings, when Ron was, in any case Harry was doing. Hermione refused to sit in the common room while Ron was there, so Harry generally joined her in spers.

"He's at perfect liberty to kiss whomever he likes," said Hermione, while the librarian, Madam Pince, prowled the shelves. She raised her quill and dotted an i so ferociously that she punctured a hole in her parchment. Harry said nothing. H a little lower over Advanced Potion-Making and continued to make notes on Everlasting Elixirs, occasionally pausing xt.

"And incidentally," said Hermione, after a few moments, "you need to be careful."

"For the last time," said Harry, speaking in a slightly hoarse whisper after three-quarters of an hour of silence, "I am n lood Prince than Snape or Slughorn have taught me in —"

"I'm not talking about your stupid so-called Prince," said Hermione, giving his book a nasty look as though it had been s' bathroom just before I came in here and there were about a dozen girls in there, including that Romilda Vane, trying hey're going to get you to take them to Slughorn's party, and they all seem to have bought Fred and George's love po

"Why didn't you confiscate them then?" demanded Harry. It seemed extraordinary that Hermione's mania for uphold

"They didn't have the potions with them in the bathroom," said Hermione scornfully. "They were just discussing tactic book another nasty look — "could dream up an antidote for a dozen different love potions at once, I'd just invite sor ve still got a chance. It's tomorrow night, they're getting desperate."

"There isn't anyone I want to invite," mumbled Harry, who was still trying not to think about Ginny any more than he eams in ways that made him devoutly thankful that Ron could not perform Legilimency.

"Well, just be careful what you drink, because Romilda Vane looked like she meant business," said Hermione grimly. She hitched up the long roll of parchment on which she was writing her Arithmancy essay and continued to scratch a

"Hang on a moment," he said slowly. "I thought Filch had banned anything bought at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes?"

"And when has anyone ever paid attention to what Filch has banned?" asked Hermione, still concentrating on her ess

"But I thought all the owls were being searched. So how come these girls are able to bring love potions into school?"

"Fred and George send them disguised as perfumes and cough potions," said Hermione. "It's part of their Owl Order

"You know a lot about it."

Hermione gave him the kind of nasty look she had just given his copy of Advanced Potion-Making.

"It was all on the back of the bottles they showed Ginny and me in the summer," she said coldly. "I don't go around p , which is just as bad. . . ."

"Yeah, well, never mind that," said Harry quickly. "The point is, Filch is being fooled, isn't he? These girls are getting st

couldn't Malfoy have brought the necklace into the school — ?"

"Oh, Harry . . . not that again . . ."

"Come on, why not?" demanded Harry.

"Look," sighed Hermione, "Secrecy Sensors detect jinxes, curses, and concealment charms, don't they? They're used to detect the curse, like the one on that necklace, within seconds. But something that's just been put in the wrong bottle wouldn't —"

"Easy for you to say," muttered Harry, thinking of Romilda Vane.

"— so it would be down to Filch to realize it wasn't a cough potion, and he's not a very good wizard, I doubt he can tell," Hermione stopped dead; Harry had heard it too. Somebody had moved close behind them among the dark bookshelves.

Pince appeared around the corner, her sunken cheeks, her skin like parchment, and her long hooked nose illuminated.

"The library is now closed," she said. "Mind you return anything you have borrowed to the correct — what have you brought?"

"It isn't the library's, it's mine!" said Harry hastily, snatching his copy of Advanced Potion-Making off the table as she left.

"Despoiled!" she hissed. "Desecrated! Befouled!"

"It's just a book that's been written on!" said Harry, tugging it out of her grip.

She looked as though she might have a seizure; Hermione, who had hastily packed her things, grabbed Harry by the arm.

"She'll ban you from the library if you're not careful. Why did you have to bring that stupid book?"

"It's not my fault she's barking mad, Hermione. Or d'you think she overheard you being rude about Filch? I've always been nice to him."

"Oh, ha ha . . ."

Enjoying the fact that they could speak normally again, they made their way along the deserted, lamp-lit corridors back to their dormitory. Pius Pince was secretly in love with each other.

"Baubles," said Harry to the Fat Lady, this being the new, festive password.

"Same to you," said the Fat Lady with a roguish grin, and she swung forward to admit them.

"Hi, Harry!" said Romilda Vane, the moment he had climbed through the portrait hole. "Fancy a gillywater?"

Hermione gave him a "what-did-I-tell-you?" look over her shoulder.

"No thanks," said Harry quickly. "I don't like it much."

"Well, take these anyway," said Romilda, thrusting a box into his hands. "Chocolate Cauldrons, they've got firewhisky in them."

"Oh — right — thanks a lot," said Harry, who could not think what else to say. "Er — I'm just going over here with . . ."

He hurried off behind Hermione, his voice trailing away feebly.

"Told you," said Hermione succinctly. "Sooner you ask someone, sooner they'll all leave you alone and you can —"

But her face suddenly turned blank; she had just spotted Ron and Lavender, who were entwined in the same armchair.

"Well, good night, Harry," said Hermione, though it was only seven o'clock in the evening, and she left for the girls' dormitory.

Harry went to bed comforting himself that there was only one more day of lessons to struggle through, plus Slughorn's party. It now seemed impossible that Ron and Hermione would make up with each other before the holidays began, but he was a better of their behavior. . . .

But his hopes were not high, and they sank still lower after enduring a Transfiguration lesson with them both next day. In the human Transfiguration; working in front of mirrors, they were supposed to be changing the color of their own eyebrows. During which he somehow managed to give himself a spectacular handlebar mustache; Ron retaliated by doing a cruel prank on every time Professor McGonagall asked a question, which Lavender and Parvati found deeply amusing and which resulted in a boom on the bell, leaving half her things behind; Harry, deciding that her need was greater than Ron's just now, scooped up her things.

He finally tracked her down as she emerged from a girls' bathroom on the floor below. She was accompanied by Luna.

"Oh, hello, Harry," said Luna. "Did you know one of your eyebrows is bright yellow?"

"Hi, Luna. Hermione, you left your stuff. . . ."

He held out her books.

"Oh yes," said Hermione in a choked voice, taking her things and turning away quickly to hide the fact that she was worried. . . .

And she hurried off, without giving Harry any time to offer words of comfort, though admittedly he could not think of any.

"She's a bit upset," said Luna. "I thought at first it was Moaning Myrtle in there, but it turned out to be Hermione. She's been a bit upset."

"Yeah, they've had a row," said Harry.

"He says very funny things sometimes, doesn't he?" said Luna, as they set off down the corridor together. "But he can be nice."

"I s'pose," said Harry. Luna was demonstrating her usual knack of speaking uncomfortable truths; he had never met anyone else who did.

"Oh, it's been all right," said Luna. "A bit lonely without the D.A. Ginny's been nice, though. She stopped two boys in our year."

"How would you like to come to Slughorn's party with me tonight?"

The words were out of Harry's mouth before he could stop them; he heard himself say them as though it were a strategy. Luna turned her protuberant eyes upon him in surprise.

"Slughorn's party? With you?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "We're supposed to bring guests, so I thought you might like . . . I mean . . ." He was keen to make sure she knew. But if you don't want to . . .

He was already half hoping that she didn't want to.

"Oh, no, I'd love to go with you as friends!" said Luna, beaming as he had never seen her beam before. "Nobody's ever been to Slughorn's party, for the party? Should I do mine too?"

"No," said Harry firmly, "that was a mistake. I'll get Hermione to put it right for me. So, I'll meet you in the entrance hall."

"AHA!" screamed a voice from overhead and both of them jumped; unnoticed by either of them, they had just passed her and grinning maliciously at them.

"Potty asked Loony to go to the party! Potty lures Loony! Potty luuuuurves Loooooony!"

And he zoomed away, cackling and shrieking, "Potty loves Loony!"

"Nice to keep these things private," said Harry. And sure enough, in no time at all the whole school seemed to know that.

"You could've taken anyone!" said Ron in disbelief over dinner. "Anyone! And you chose Loony Lovegood?"

"Don't call her that, Ron," snapped Ginny, pausing behind Harry on her way to join friends. "I'm really glad you're taking her."

And she moved on down the table to sit with Dean. Harry tried to feel pleased that Ginny was glad he was taking her.

At the other end of the table, Hermione was sitting alone, playing with her stew. Harry noticed Ron looking at her furtively.

"You could say sorry," suggested Harry bluntly.

"What, and get attacked by another flock of canaries?" muttered Ron.

"What did you have to imitate her for?"

"She laughed at my mustache!"

"So did I, it was the stupidest thing I've ever seen."

But Ron did not seem to have heard; Lavender had just arrived with Parvati. Squeezing herself in between Harry and Ron.

"Hi, Harry," said Parvati who, like him, looked faintly embarrassed and bored by the behavior of their two friends.

"Hi," said Harry. "How're you? You're staying at Hogwarts, then? I heard your parents wanted you to leave."

"I managed to talk them out of it for the time being," said Parvati. "That Katie thing really freaked them out, but as the year goes on, they'll get over it."

Parvati positively beamed. Harry could tell that she was feeling guilty for having laughed at Hermione in Transfiguration class.

"f possible even more brightly. Girls were very strange sometimes."

"Hi, Parvati!" said Hermione, ignoring Ron and Lavender completely. "Are you going to Slughorn's party tonight?"

"No invite," said Parvati gloomily. "I'd love to go, though, it sounds like it's going to be really good. . . . You're going, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm meeting Cormac at eight, and we're —"

There was a noise like a plunger being withdrawn from a blocked sink and Ron surfaced. Hermione acted as though she hadn't heard.

"— we're going up to the party together."

"Cormac?" said Parvati. "Cormac McLaggen, you mean?"

"That's right," said Hermione sweetly. "The one who almost" — she put a great deal of emphasis on the word — "became a prefect."

"Are you going out with him, then?" asked Parvati, wide-eyed.

"Oh — yes — didn't you know?" said Hermione, with a most un-Hermione-ish giggle.

"No!" said Parvati, looking positively agog at this piece of gossip. "Wow, you like your Quidditch players, don't you? First you like Quidditch, then you like Quidditch players."

"I like really good Quidditch players," Hermione corrected her, still smiling. "Well, see you . . . Got to go and get ready for the party."

She left. At once Lavender and Parvati put their heads together to discuss this new development, with everything they could remember about Hermione.

Ron looked strangely blank and said nothing. Harry was left to ponder in silence the depths to which he had fallen.

When he arrived in the entrance hall at eight o'clock that night, he found an unusually large number of girls lurking there.

He approached Luna. She was wearing a set of spangled silver robes that were attracting a certain amount of giggles from the other girls.

"I'm glad, in any case, that she had left off her radish earrings, her butterbeer cork necklace, and her Spectrespecs."

"Hi," he said. "Shall we get going then?"

"Oh yes," she said happily. "Where is the party?"

"Slughorn's office," said Harry, leading her up the marble staircase away from all the staring and muttering. "Did you know?"

"Rufus Scrimgeour?" asked Luna.

"I — what?" said Harry, disconcerted. "You mean the Minister of Magic?"

"Yes, he's a vampire," said Luna matter-of-factly. "Father wrote a very long article about it when Scrimgeour first took office."

by somebody from the Ministry. Obviously, they didn't want the truth to get out!"

Harry, who thought it most unlikely that Rufus Scrimgeour was a vampire, but who was used to Luna repeating her facts, was already approaching Slughorn's office and the sounds of laughter, music, and loud conversation were growing louder.

Whether it had been built that way, or because he had used magical trickery to make it so, Slughorn's office was much more comfortable than it had been draped with emerald, crimson, and gold hangings, so that it looked as though they were all inside a vast tent.

It was lit by an ornate golden lamp dangling from the center of the ceiling in which real fairies were fluttering, each a brilliant color.

Like mandolins issued from a distant corner; a haze of pipe smoke hung over several elderly warlocks deep in conversation.

Unnoticed by any of them, Harry and Luna slipped quickly through the forest of knees, obscured by the heavy silver platters of food they were bearing, so that they looked like a pair of ghosts.

"Harry, m'boy!" boomed Slughorn, almost as soon as Harry and Luna had squeezed in through the door. "Come in, come in, I'm so glad to see you!"

Slughorn was wearing a tasseled velvet hat to match his smoking jacket. Gripping Harry's arm so tightly he might have squeezed the life out of him.

He led them into the party; Harry seized Luna's hand and dragged her along with him.

"Harry, I'd like you to meet Eldred Worple, an old student of mine, author of Blood Brothers: My Life Amongst the Vampires."

Worple, who was a small, stout, bespectacled man, grabbed Harry's hand and shook it enthusiastically; the vampire Slughorn merely nodded. He looked rather bored. A gaggle of girls was standing close to him, looking curious and excited.

"Harry Potter, I am simply delighted!" said Worple, peering shortsightedly up into Harry's face. "I was saying to Professor McGonagall that I was waiting for Harry Potter for which we have all been waiting?"

"Er," said Harry, "were you?"

"Just as modest as Horace described!" said Worple. "But seriously" — his manner changed; it became suddenly businesslike, as if he were trying to know more about you, dear boy, craving! If you were prepared to grant me a few interviews, say in four- or five minutes. And all with very little effort on your part, I assure you — ask Sanguini here if it isn't quite — Sanguini, stay here!" edging toward the nearby group of girls, a rather hungry look in his eye. "Here, have a pasty," said Worple, seizing on the first opportunity to turn his attention back to Harry.

"My dear boy, the gold you could make, you have no idea —"

"I'm definitely not interested," said Harry firmly, "and I've just seen a friend of mine, sorry."

He pulled Luna after him into the crowd; he had indeed just seen a long mane of brown hair disappear between what he had taken to be two girls.

"Hermione! Hermione!"

"Harry! There you are, thank goodness! Hi, Luna!"

"What's happened to you?" asked Harry, for Hermione looked distinctly disheveled, rather as though she had just fought a battle.

"Oh, I've just escaped — I mean, I've just left Cormac," she said. "Under the mistletoe," she added in explanation, as Harry looked at her.

"Serves you right for coming with him," he told her severely.

"I thought he'd annoy Ron most," said Hermione dispassionately. "I debated for a while about Zacharias Smith, but I thought it was better to be safe than sorry."

"You considered Smith?" said Harry, revolted.

"Yes, I did, and I'm starting to wish I'd chosen him, McLaggen makes Grawp look a gentleman. Let's go this way, we'll be out of here in five minutes."

The three of them made their way over to the other side of the room, scooping up goblets of mead on the way, realising that they were late.

"Hello," said Luna politely to Professor Trelawney.

"Good evening, my dear," said Professor Trelawney, focusing upon Luna with some difficulty. Harry could smell cooking smells from the kitchen.

"No, I've got Firenze this year," said Luna.

"Oh, of course," said Professor Trelawney with an angry, drunken titter. "Or Dobbin, as I prefer to think of him. You would have thought the school Professor Dumbledore might have got rid of the horse? But no . . . we share classes. . . . It's an insult, frankly."

Professor Trelawney seemed too tipsy to have recognized Harry. Under cover of her furious criticisms of Firenze, Harry tried to get a word in.

"t. Are you planning to tell Ron that you interfered at Keeper tryouts?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Do you really think I'd stoop that low?"

Harry looked at her shrewdly. "Hermione, if you can ask out McLaggen —"

"There's a difference," said Hermione with dignity. "I've got no plans to tell Ron anything about what might, or might not, happen."

"Good," said Harry fervently. "Because he'll just fall apart again, and we'll lose the next match —"

"Quidditch!" said Hermione angrily. "Is that all boys care about? Cormac hasn't asked me one single question about me since he was in my class."

by Cormac McLaggen' nonstop ever since — oh no, here he comes!"

She moved so fast it was as though she had Disapparated; one moment she was there, the next, she had squeezed between two people and disappeared.

"Seen Hermione?" asked McLaggen, forcing his way through the throng a minute later.

"No, sorry," said Harry, and he turned quickly to join in Luna's conversation, forgetting for a split second to whom she was talking.

"Harry Potter!" said Professor Trelawney in deep, vibrant tones, noticing him for the first time.

"Oh, hello," said Harry unenthusiastically.

"My dear boy!" she said in a very carrying whisper. "The rumors! The stories! 'The Chosen One'! Of course, I have known you for years. . . . But why have you not returned to Divination? For you, of all people, the subject is of the utmost importance!"

"Ah, Sybill, we all think our subject's most important!" said a loud voice, and Slughorn appeared at Professor Trelawney's elbow, a glass of mead in one hand and an enormous mince pie in the other. "But I don't think I've ever known such a nervous girl."

bloodshot, eye. "Instinctive, you know — like his mother! I've only ever taught a few with this kind of ability, I can tell you."

And to Harry's horror, Slughorn threw out an arm and seemed to scoop Snape out of thin air toward them.

"Stop skulking and come and join us, Severus!" hiccuped Slughorn happily. "I was just talking about Harry's exceptional talent for five years!"

Trapped, with Slughorn's arm around his shoulders, Snape looked down his hooked nose at Harry, his black eyes narrowing.

"Funny, I never had the impression that I managed to teach Potter anything at all."

"Well, then, it's natural ability!" shouted Slughorn. "You should have seen what he gave me, first lesson, Draught of Living Death. . . ."

empt, I don't think even you, Severus —"

"Really?" said Snape quietly, his eyes still boring into Harry, who felt a certain disquiet. The last thing he wanted was to be compared to Potter.

brilliance at Potions.

"Remind me what other subjects you're taking, Harry?" asked Slughorn.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology . . ."

"All the subjects required, in short, for an Auror," said Snape, with the faintest sneer.

"Yeah, well, that's what I'd like to do," said Harry defiantly.

"And a great one you'll make too!" boomed Slughorn.

"I don't think you should be an Auror, Harry," said Luna unexpectedly. Everybody looked at her. "The Aurors are part of the system that's working to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using a combination of Dark Magic and gum disease."

Harry inhaled half his mead up his nose as he started to laugh. Really, it had been worth bringing Luna just for this. But then, he saw something calculated to raise his spirits even higher: Draco Malfoy being dragged by the ear toward the door.

"Professor Slughorn," wheezed Filch, his jowls aquiver and the maniacal light of mischief-detection in his bulging eyes.

claims to have been invited to your party and to have been delayed in setting out. Did you issue him with an invitation?"

Malfoy pulled himself free of Filch's grip, looking furious.

"All right, I wasn't invited!" he said angrily. "I was trying to gate-crash, happy?"

"No, I'm not!" said Filch, a statement at complete odds with the glee on his face. "You're in trouble, you are! Didn't the professor give you permission, didn't he, eh?"

"That's all right, Argus, that's all right," said Slughorn, waving a hand. "It's Christmas, and it's not a crime to want to come to the party; you may stay, Draco."

Filch's expression of outraged disappointment was perfectly predictable; but why, Harry wondered, watching him, did Malfoy as though both angry and . . . was it possible? . . . a little afraid?

But almost before Harry had registered what he had seen, Filch had turned and shuffled away, muttering under his breath about Filch's generosity, and Snape's face was smoothly inscrutable again.

"It's nothing, nothing," said Slughorn, waving away Malfoy's thanks. "I did know your grandfather, after all. . . ."

"He always spoke very highly of you, sir," said Malfoy quickly. "Said you were the best potion-maker he'd ever known."

Harry stared at Malfoy. It was not the sucking-up that intrigued him; he had watched Malfoy do that to Snape for a long time. He was ill. This was the first time he had seen Malfoy close up for ages; he now saw that Malfoy had dark shadows under his eyes.

"I'd like a word with you, Draco," said Snape suddenly.

"Oh, now, Severus," said Slughorn, hiccuping again, "it's Christmas, don't be too hard —"

"I'm his Head of House, and I shall decide how hard, or otherwise, to be," said Snape curtly. "Follow me, Draco."

They left, Snape leading the way, Malfoy looking resentful. Harry stood there for a moment, irresolute, then said, "I'll go."

"All right," she said cheerfully, and he thought he heard her, as he hurried off into the crowd, resume the subject of the Christmas party. He was sincerely interested.

It was easy, once out of the party, to pull his Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket and throw it over himself, for the corridors were empty. He was avoiding Snape and Malfoy. Harry ran down the corridor, the noise of his feet masked by the music and loud talk still issuing from the Slytherin common room.

Malfoy to his office in the dungeons . . . or perhaps he was escorting him back to the Slytherin common room. . . . Harry ran down the corridor until, with a great jolt of excitement, he crouched down to the keyhole of the last classroom in the corridor.

"I . . . cannot afford mistakes, Draco, because if you are expelled —"

"I didn't have anything to do with it, all right?"

"I hope you are telling the truth, because it was both clumsy and foolish. Already you are suspected of having a hand in it."

"Who suspects me?" said Malfoy angrily. "For the last time, I didn't do it, okay? That Bell girl must've had an enemy not only in the Slytherin common room, but in the corridors, too. You're doing, I'm not stupid, but it won't work — I can stop you!"

There was a pause and then Snape said quietly, "Ah . . . Aunt Bellatrix has been teaching you Occlumency, I see. What are you up to?"

"I'm not trying to conceal anything from him, I just don't want you butting in!"

Harry pressed his ear still more closely against the keyhole. . . . What had happened to make Malfoy speak to Snape like that? He was not liking?

"So that is why you have been avoiding me this term? You have feared my interference? You realize that, had anybody else been there, Draco —"

"So put me in detention! Report me to Dumbledore!" jeered Malfoy.

There was another pause. Then Snape said, "You know perfectly well that I do not wish to do either of those things."

"You'd better stop telling me to come to your office then!"

"Listen to me," said Snape, his voice so low now that Harry had to push his ear very hard against the keyhole to hear him. "I made the Unbreakable Vow, Draco —"

"Looks like you'll have to break it, then, because I don't need your protection! It's my job, he gave it to me and I'm doing it. I'm staying a bit longer than I thought it would!"

"What is your plan?"

"It's none of your business!"

"If you tell me what you are trying to do, I can assist you —"

"I've got all the assistance I need, thanks, I'm not alone!"

"You were certainly alone tonight, which was foolish in the extreme, wandering the corridors without lookouts or backup."

"I would've had Crabbe and Goyle with me if you hadn't put them in detention!"

"Keep your voice down!" spat Snape, for Malfoy's voice had risen excitedly. "If your friends Crabbe and Goyle intend to help you, they will need to work a little harder than they are doing at present —"

"What does it matter?" said Malfoy. "Defense Against the Dark Arts — it's all just a joke, isn't it, an act? Like any of us, I'm just a student."

"It is an act that is crucial to success, Draco!" said Snape. "Where do you think I would have been all these years, if I hadn't been so cautious, wandering around at night, getting yourself caught, and if you are placing your reliance in assistants like Crabbe and Goyle?"

"They're not the only ones, I've got other people on my side, better people!"

"Then why not confide in me, and I can —"

"I know what you're up to! You want to steal my glory!"

There was another pause, then Snape said coldly, "You are speaking like a child. I quite understand that your father's death was a tragedy, but Harry had barely a second's warning; he heard Malfoy's footsteps on the other side of the door and flung himself out of the corridor, past the open door of Slughorn's office, around the distant corner, and out of sight."

Hardly daring to breathe, Harry remained crouched down as Snape emerged slowly from the classroom. His expression was one of

, hidden beneath the Cloak, his mind racing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A VERY FROSTY CHRISTMAS

So Snape was offering to help him? He was definitely offering to help him?"

"If you ask that once more," said Harry, "I'm going to stick this sprout —"

"I'm only checking!" said Ron. They were standing alone at the Burrow's kitchen sink, peeling a mountain of sprouts for themselves.

"Yes, Snape was offering to help him!" said Harry. "He said he'd promised Malfoy's mother to protect him, that he'd made an Unbreakable Vow?"

"An Unbreakable Vow?" said Ron, looking stunned. "Nah, he can't have. . . . Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," said Harry. "Why, what does it mean?"

"Well, you can't break an Unbreakable Vow. . . ."

"I'd worked that much out for myself, funnily enough. What happens if you break it, then?"

"You die," said Ron simply. "Fred and George tried to get me to make one when I was about five. I nearly did too, I was a bit mad, but I didn't go mental," said Ron, with a reminiscent gleam in his eyes. "Only time I've ever seen Dad as angry as Mum. Fred and George were the ones who got him so angry."

"Yeah, well, passing over Fred's left buttock —"

"I beg your pardon?" said Fred's voice as the twins entered the kitchen.

"Aaah, George, look at this. They're using knives and everything. Bless them."

"I'll be seventeen in two and a bit months' time," said Ron grumpily, "and then I'll be able to do it by magic!"

"But meanwhile," said George, sitting down at the kitchen table and putting his feet up on it, "we can enjoy watching you try to do it."

"You made me do that!" said Ron angrily, sucking his cut thumb. "You wait, when I'm seventeen —"

"I'm sure you'll dazzle us all with hitherto unsuspected magical skills," yawned Fred.

"And speaking of hitherto unsuspected skills, Ronald," said George, "what is this we hear from Ginny about you and a certain Mr. Brown?"

Ron turned a little pink, but did not look displeased as he turned back to the sprouts. "Mind your own business."

"What a snappy retort," said Fred. "I really don't know how you think of them. No, what we wanted to know was . . . how you got on."

"What d'you mean?"

"Did she have an accident or something?"

"What?"

"Well, how did she sustain such extensive brain damage? Careful, now!"

Mrs. Weasley entered the room just in time to see Ron throw the sprout knife at Fred, who had turned it into a paper airplane.

"Ron!" she said furiously. "Don't you ever let me see you throwing knives again!"

"I won't," said Ron, "let you see," he added under his breath, as he turned back to the sprout mountain.

"Fred, George, I'm sorry, dears, but Remus is arriving tonight, so Bill will have to squeeze in with you two."

"No problem," said George.

"Then, as Charlie isn't coming home, that just leaves Harry and Ron in the attic, and if Fleur shares with Ginny —"

"— that'll make Ginny's Christmas —" muttered Fred.

"— everyone should be comfortable. Well, they'll have a bed, anyway," said Mrs. Weasley, sounding slightly harassed.

"Percy definitely not showing his ugly face, then?" asked Fred.

Mrs. Weasley turned away before she answered. "No, he's busy, I expect, at the Ministry."

"Or he's the world's biggest prat," said Fred, as Mrs. Weasley left the kitchen. "One of the two. Well, let's get going, then."

"What are you two up to?" asked Ron. "Can't you help us with these sprouts? You could just use your wand and then we wouldn't have to peel them."

"No, I don't think we can do that," said Fred seriously. "It's very character-building stuff, learning to peel sprouts without magic. It's called being a wizard. It's called being a Squib —"

"— and if you want people to help you, Ron," added George, throwing the paper airplane at him, "I wouldn't chuck knives at people. I know a very pretty girl working in the paper shop who thinks my card tricks are something marvelous . . . almost like real magic."

"Gits," said Ron darkly, watching Fred and George setting off across the snowy yard. "Would've only taken them ten seconds to get that message."

"I couldn't," said Harry. "I promised Dumbledore I wouldn't wander off while I'm staying here."

"Oh yeah," said Ron. He peeled a few more sprouts and then said, "Are you going to tell Dumbledore what you heard about Malfoy?"

"Yep," said Harry. "I'm going to tell anyone who can put a stop to it, and Dumbledore's top of the list. I might have another name or two."

"Pity you didn't hear what Malfoy's actually doing, though."

"I couldn't have done, could I? That was the whole point, he was refusing to tell Snape."

There was silence for a moment or two, then Ron said, "Course, you know what they'll all say? Dad and Dumbledore were just trying to find out what Malfoy's up to."

"They didn't hear him," said Harry flatly. "No one's that good an actor, not even Snape."

"Yeah . . . I'm just saying, though," said Ron.

Harry turned to face him, frowning. "You think I'm right, though?"

"Yeah, I do!" said Ron hastily. "Seriously, I do! But they're all convinced Snape's in the Order, aren't they?"

Harry said nothing. It had already occurred to him that this would be the most likely objection to his new evidence; he had to offer help so he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he's doing. . . .

This was pure imagination, however, as he had had no opportunity to tell Hermione what he had overheard. She had been informed by an irate McLaggen, and she had already gone to bed by the time he returned to the common room. He barely had time to wish her a happy Christmas and to tell her that he had some very important news when they got to him, though; Ron and Lavender had been saying a thoroughly nonverbal good-bye just behind him at the time. Still, even Hermione would not be able to deny one thing: Malfoy was definitely up to something, and Snape knew it, and he had done several times to Ron already.

Harry did not get the chance to speak to Mr. Weasley, who was working very long hours at the Ministry, until Christmas Eve. The living room, which Ginny had decorated so lavishly that it was rather like sitting in a paper-chain explosion. Fred, George, and Percy were on top of the tree was actually a garden gnome that had bitten Fred on the ankle as he pulled up carrots for Christmas. The owl on top of the tree and with small wings glued to its back, it glowered down at them all, the ugliest angel Harry had ever seen, with a large, pointed nose. They were all supposed to be listening to a Christmas broadcast by Mrs. Weasley's favorite singer, Celestina Warbeck. Fleur, who seemed to find Celestina very dull, was talking so loudly in the corner that a scowling Mrs. Weasley kept pulling her back. Louder and louder. Under cover of a particularly jazzy number called "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love," Fred and George were making out. Bill and Fleur covert looks, as though hoping to pick up tips. Meanwhile, Remus Lupin, who was thinner and more intense, was leaning into its depths as though he could not hear Celestina's voice.

Oh, come and stir my cauldron,
And if you do it right,
I'll boil you up some hot strong love
To keep you warm tonight.

"We danced to this when we were eighteen!" said Mrs. Weasley, wiping her eyes on her knitting. "Do you remember, Harry?" "Mphf?" said Mr. Weasley, whose head had been nodding over the satsuma he was peeling. "Oh yes . . . marvelous tune." With an effort, he sat up a little straighter and looked around at Harry, who was sitting next to him.

"Sorry about this," he said, jerking his head toward the wireless as Celestina broke into the chorus. "Be over soon."

"No problem," said Harry, grinning. "Has it been busy at the Ministry?"

"Very," said Mr. Weasley. "I wouldn't mind if we were getting anywhere, but of the three arrests we've made in the last month, only one was a Death Eater — only don't repeat that, Harry," he added quickly, looking much more awake all of a sudden.

"They're not still holding Stan Shunpike, are they?" asked Harry.

"I'm afraid so," said Mr. Weasley. "I know Dumbledore's tried appealing directly to Scrimgeour about Stan. . . . I mean, it's not as much a Death Eater as this satsuma . . . but the top levels want to look as though they're making some progress with arrests and releases' . . . but again, this is all top secret. . . ."

"I won't say anything," said Harry. He hesitated for a moment, wondering how best to embark on what he wanted to say. "You Charmed the Heart Right Out of Me."

"Mr. Weasley, you know what I told you at the station when we were setting off for school?"

"I checked, Harry," said Mr. Weasley at once. "I went and searched the Malfoys' house. There was nothing, either broom or wand." "Yeah, I know, I saw in the Prophet that you'd looked . . . but this is something different. . . . Well, something more . . ."

And he told Mr. Weasley everything he had overheard between Malfoy and Snape. As Harry spoke, he saw Lupin's head nodding, and there was silence, except for Celestina's crooning.

Oh, my poor heart, where has it gone?

It's left me for a spell . . .

"Has it occurred to you, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, "that Snape was simply pretending — ?"

"Pretending to offer help, so that he could find out what Malfoy's up to?" said Harry quickly. "Yeah, I thought you'd said that."

"It isn't our business to know," said Lupin unexpectedly. He had turned his back on the fire now and faced Harry across the room. "Severus, and that ought to be good enough for all of us."

"But," said Harry, "just say — just say Dumbledore's wrong about Snape —"

"People have said it, many times. It comes down to whether or not you trust Dumbledore's judgment. I do; therefore, I believe him."

"But Dumbledore can make mistakes," argued Harry. "He says it himself. And you" — he looked Lupin straight in the eye. "I neither like nor dislike Severus," said Lupin. "No, Harry, I am speaking the truth," he added, as Harry pulled a skeptical look.

After all that happened between James and Sirius and Severus, there is too much bitterness there. But I do not forget that the Wolfsbane Potion for me every month, made it perfectly, so that I did not have to suffer as I usually do at the full moon."

"But he 'accidentally' let it slip that you're a werewolf, so you had to leave!" said Harry angrily.

Lupin shrugged. "The news would have leaked out anyway. We both know he wanted my job, but he could have wreathed it in lies. I must be grateful."

"Maybe he didn't dare mess with the potion with Dumbledore watching him!" said Harry.

"You are determined to hate him, Harry," said Lupin with a faint smile. "And I understand; with James as your father, it's not surprising. By all means tell Dumbledore what you have told Arthur and me, but do not expect him to share your view of the man. It might have been on Dumbledore's orders that Severus questioned Draco."

. . . and now you've torn it quite apart

I'll thank you to give back my heart!

Celestina ended her song on a very long, high-pitched note and loud applause issued out of the wireless, which Mrs. Weasley was humming.

"Eez eet over?" said Fleur loudly. "Thank goodness, what an 'orrible —"

"Shall we have a nightcap, then?" asked Mr. Weasley loudly, leaping to his feet. "Who wants eggnog?"

"What have you been up to lately?" Harry asked Lupin, as Mr. Weasley bustled off to fetch the eggnog, and everybody

"Oh, I've been underground," said Lupin. "Almost literally. That's why I haven't been able to write, Harry; sending letters

"What do you mean?"

"I've been living among my fellows, my equals," said Lupin. "Werewolves," he added, at Harry's look of incomprehension. "I was a spy and here I was . . . ready-made."

He sounded a little bitter, and perhaps realized it, for he smiled more warmly as he went on, "I am not complaining; it has been difficult gaining their trust. I bear the unmistakable signs of having tried to live among wizards, you see, werewolves, stealing — and sometimes killing — to eat."

"How come they like Voldemort?"

"They think that, under his rule, they will have a better life," said Lupin. "And it is hard to argue with Greyback out there."

"Who's Greyback?"

"You haven't heard of him?" Lupin's hands closed convulsively in his lap. "Fenrir Greyback is, perhaps, the most savage werewolf; he likes to bite and to contaminate as many people as possible; he wants to create enough werewolves to overcome the wizardry. Greyback specializes in children. . . . Bite them young, he says, and raise them away from their parents, raise them to hate normal people's sons and daughters; it is a threat that usually produces good results."

Lupin paused and then said, "It was Greyback who bit me."

"What?" said Harry, astonished. "When — when you were a kid, you mean?"

"Yes. My father had offended him. I did not know, for a very long time, the identity of the werewolf who had attacked me. I was a fool, knowing by then how it felt to transform. But Greyback is not like that. At the full moon, he positions himself close to his victims. He kills them. He kills them all. And this is the man Voldemort is using to marshal the werewolves. I cannot pretend that my particular brand of werewolfism is any different from his. It's his insistence that we werewolves deserve blood, that we ought to revenge ourselves on normal people."

"But you are normal!" said Harry fiercely. "You've just got a — a problem —"

Lupin burst out laughing. "Sometimes you remind me a lot of James. He called it my 'furry little problem' in company with a normal rabbit."

He accepted a glass of eggnog from Mr. Weasley with a word of thanks, looking slightly more cheerful. Harry, meanwhile, had reminded him that there was something he had been looking forward to asking Lupin.

"Have you ever heard of someone called the Half-Blood Prince?"

"The Half-Blood what?"

"Prince," said Harry, watching him closely for signs of recognition.

"There are no Wizarding princes," said Lupin, now smiling. "Is this a title you're thinking of adopting? I should have thought so."

"It's nothing to do with me!" said Harry indignantly. "The Half-Blood Prince is someone who used to go to Hogwarts, I think. I think he invented. One of them was Levicorpus —"

"Oh, that one had a great vogue during my time at Hogwarts," said Lupin reminiscently. "There were a few months in which it was worn by your ankle."

"My dad used it," said Harry. "I saw him in the Pensieve, he used it on Snape."

He tried to sound casual, as though this was a throwaway comment of no real importance, but he was not sure he had succeeded in doing so.

"Yes," he said, "but he wasn't the only one. As I say, it was very popular. . . . You know how these spells come and go."

"But it sounds like it was invented while you were at school," Harry persisted.

"Not necessarily," said Lupin. "Jinxes go in and out of fashion like everything else."

He looked into Harry's face and then said quietly, "James was a pureblood, Harry, and I promise you, he never asked me to invent anything. Abandoning pretense, Harry said, "And it wasn't Sirius? Or you?"

"Definitely not."

"Oh." Harry stared into the fire. "I just thought — well, he's helped me out a lot in Potions classes, the Prince has."

"How old is this book, Harry?"

"I dunno, I've never checked."

"Well, perhaps that will give you some clue as to when the Prince was at Hogwarts," said Lupin.

Shortly after this, Fleur decided to imitate Celestina singing "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love," which was taken by her to be the cue to go to bed. Harry and Ron climbed all the way up to Ron's attic bedroom, where a camp bed had been set up. Ron fell asleep almost immediately, but Harry delved into his trunk and pulled out his copy of Advanced Potion-Making until he finally found, at the front of the book, the date that it had been published. It was nearly fifty years old. Neither of them was fifty years old. Feeling disappointed, Harry threw the book back into his trunk, turned off the lamp, and rolled over. He thought of the Half-Blood Prince, and finally falling into an uneasy sleep full of creeping shadows and the cries of bitten children. . . .

"She's got to be joking. . . ."

Harry woke with a start to find a bulging stocking lying over the end of his bed. He put on his glasses and looked around, and in front of it, Ron was sitting bolt upright in bed and examining what appeared to be a thick gold chain.

"What's that?" asked Harry.

"It's from Lavender," said Ron, sounding revolted. "She can't honestly think I'd wear . . ."

Harry looked more closely and let out a shout of laughter. Dangling from the chain in large gold letters were the words

My Sweetheart

"Nice," he said. "Classy. You should definitely wear it in front of Fred and George."

"If you tell them," said Ron, shoving the necklace out of sight under his pillow, "I — I — I'll —"

"Stutter at me?" said Harry, grinning. "Come on, would I?"

"How could she think I'd like something like that, though?" Ron demanded of thin air, looking rather shocked.

"Well, think back," said Harry. "Have you ever let it slip that you'd like to go out in public with the words 'My Sweetheart'?"

"Well . . . we don't really talk much," said Ron. "It's mainly . . ."

"Snogging," said Harry.

"Well, yeah," said Ron. He hesitated a moment, then said, "Is Hermione really going out with McLaggen?"

"I dunno," said Harry. "They were at Slughorn's party together, but I don't think it went that well."

Ron looked slightly more cheerful as he delved deeper into his stocking.

Harry's presents included a sweater with a large Golden Snitch worked onto the front, hand-knitted by Mrs. Weasley, and a slightly damp, moldy-smelling package that came with a label reading TO MASTER, FROM KREACHER.

Harry stared at it. "D'you reckon this is safe to open?" he asked.

"Can't be anything dangerous, all our mail's still being searched at the Ministry," replied Ron, though he was eyeing the package.

"I didn't think of giving Kreacher anything. Do people usually give their house-elves Christmas presents?" asked Harry.

"Hermione would," said Ron. "But let's wait and see what it is before you start feeling guilty."

A moment later, Harry had given a loud yell and leapt out of his camp bed; the package contained a large number of socks.

"Nice," said Ron, roaring with laughter. "Very thoughtful."

"I'd rather have them than that necklace," said Harry, which sobered Ron up at once.

Everybody was wearing new sweaters when they all sat down for Christmas lunch, everyone except Fleur (on whom, Harry thought, she was sporty), who was sporting a brand-new midnight blue witch's hat glittering with what looked like tiny starlike diamonds.

"Fred and George gave them to me! Aren't they beautiful?"

"Well, we find we appreciate you more and more, Mum, now we're washing our own socks," said George, waving an arm.

"Harry, you've got a maggot in your hair," said Ginny cheerfully, leaning across the table to pick it out; Harry felt goosebumps.

"Ow 'orrible," said Fleur, with an affected little shudder.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Ron. "Gravy, Fleur?"

In his eagerness to help her, he knocked the gravy boat flying; Bill waved his wand and the gravy soared up in the air.

"You are as bad as zat Tonks," said Fleur to Ron, when she had finished kissing Bill in thanks. "She is always knocking things over."

"I invited dear Tonks to come along today," said Mrs. Weasley, setting down the carrots with unnecessary force and glee. "What about Remus?"

"No, I haven't been in contact with anybody very much," said Lupin. "But Tonks has got her own family to go to, hasn't she?"

"Hmmm," said Mrs. Weasley. "Maybe. I got the impression she was planning to spend Christmas alone, actually."

She gave Lupin an annoyed look, as though it was all his fault she was getting Fleur for a daughter-in-law instead of Tonks. Bill bits of turkey off her own fork, thought that Mrs. Weasley was fighting a long-lost battle. He was, however, reminded of the fact that he was not to ask than Lupin, the man who knew all about Patronuses?

"Tonks's Patronus has changed its form," he told him. "Snape said so anyway. I didn't know that could happen. Why would it?"

Lupin took his time chewing his turkey and swallowing before saying slowly, "Sometimes . . . a great shock . . . an emotional shock."

"It looked big, and it had four legs," said Harry, struck by a sudden thought and lowering his voice. "Hey . . . it couldn't be a dog, could it?"

"Arthur!" said Mrs. Weasley suddenly. She had risen from her chair; her hand was pressed over her heart and she was looking pale.

"What?"

Mr. Weasley looked around. Everybody looked quickly at the window; Ginny stood up for a better look. There, sure enough, was the Minister, wearing his rimmed glasses glinting in the sunlight. He was not, however, alone.

"Arthur, he's — he's with the Minister!"

And sure enough, the man Harry had seen in the Daily Prophet was following along in Percy's wake, limping slightly, before any of them could say anything, before Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could do more than exchange stunned looks, the Minister was gone.

There was a moment's painful silence. Then Percy said rather stiffly, "Merry Christmas, Mother."

"Oh, Percy!" said Mrs. Weasley, and she threw herself into his arms.

Rufus Scrimgeour paused in the doorway, leaning on his walking stick and smiling as he observed this affecting scene. "You must forgive this intrusion," he said, when Mrs. Weasley looked around at him, beaming and wiping her eyes. "Percy couldn't resist dropping in and seeing you all."

But Percy showed no sign of wanting to greet any of the rest of the family. He stood, poker-straight and awkward-looking, and George were all observing him, stony-faced.

"Please, come in, sit down, Minister!" fluttered Mrs. Weasley, straightening her hat. "Have a little purkey, or some too?"

"No, no, my dear Molly," said Scrimgeour. Harry guessed that he had checked her name with Percy before they entered. "Percy hadn't wanted to see you all so badly. . . ."

"Oh, Perce!" said Mrs. Weasley tearfully, reaching up to kiss him.

". . . We've only looked in for five minutes, so I'll have a stroll around the yard while you catch up with Percy. No, no, I don't want to show me your charming garden . . . Ah, that young man's finished, why doesn't he take a stroll with me?"

Crouch did. You never get it right, you people, do you? Either we've got Fudge, pretending everything's lovely while p
 cking the wrong people into jail and trying to pretend you've got 'the Chosen One' working for you!"

"So you're not 'the Chosen One'?" said Scrimgeour.

"I thought you said it didn't matter either way?" said Harry, with a bitter laugh. "Not to you anyway."

"I shouldn't have said that," said Scrimgeour quickly. "It was tactless —"

"No, it was honest," said Harry. "One of the only honest things you've said to me. You don't care whether I live or die,
 ning the war against Voldemort. I haven't forgotten, Minister. . . ."

He raised his right fist. There, shining white on the back of his cold hand, were the scars which Dolores Umbridge ha
 "I don't remember you rushing to my defense when I was trying to tell everyone Voldemort was back. The Ministry w
 They stood in silence as icy as the ground beneath their feet. The gnome had finally managed to extricate his worm a
 branches of the rhododendron bush.

"What is Dumbledore up to?" said Scrimgeour brusquely. "Where does he go when he is absent from Hogwarts?"

"No idea," said Harry.

"And you wouldn't tell me if you knew," said Scrimgeour, "would you?"

"No, I wouldn't," said Harry.

"Well, then, I shall have to see whether I can't find out by other means."

"You can try," said Harry indifferently. "But you seem cleverer than Fudge, so I'd have thought you'd have learned fro
 e noticed he's not Minister anymore, but Dumbledore's still headmaster. I'd leave Dumbledore alone, if I were you."

There was a long pause.

"Well, it is clear to me that he has done a very good job on you," said Scrimgeour, his eyes cold and hard behind his v
 n't you, Potter?"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry. "Glad we straightened that out."

And turning his back on the Minister of Magic, he strode back toward the house.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A SLUGGISH MEMORY

Late in the afternoon, a few days after New Year, Harry, Ron, and Ginny lined up beside the kitchen fire to return to H
 the Floo Network to return students quickly and safely to the school. Only Mrs. Weasley was there to say good-bye, a
 s. Weasley dissolved into tears at the moment of parting. Admittedly, it took very little to set her off lately; she had b
 house on Christmas Day with his glasses splattered with mashed parsnip (for which Fred, George, and Ginny all claim
 "Don't cry, Mum," said Ginny, patting her on the back as Mrs. Weasley sobbed into her shoulder. "It's okay. . . ."

"Yeah, don't worry about us," said Ron, permitting his mother to plant a very wet kiss on his cheek, "or about Percy. H
 Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever as she enfolded Harry in her arms.

"Promise me you'll look after yourself. . . . Stay out of trouble. . . ."

"I always do, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry. "I like a quiet life, you know me."

She gave a watery chuckle and stood back. "Be good, then, all of you. . . ."

Harry stepped into the emerald fire and shouted "Hogwarts!" He had one last fleeting view of the Weasleys' kitchen a
 inning very fast, he caught blurred glimpses of other Wizarding rooms, which were whipped out of sight before he co
 squarely in the fireplace in Professor McGonagall's office. She barely glanced up from her work as he clambered out
 "Evening, Potter. Try not to get too much ash on the carpet."

"No, Professor."

Harry straightened his glasses and flattened his hair as Ron came spinning into view. When Ginny had arrived, all thr
 ffindor Tower. Harry glanced out of the corridor windows as they passed; the sun was already sinking over grounds
 e distance, he could see Hagrid feeding Buckbeak in front of his cabin.

"Baubles," said Ron confidently, when they reached the Fat Lady, who was looking rather paler than usual and wince
 "No," she said.

"What d'you mean, 'no'?"

"There is a new password," she said. "And please don't shout."

"But we've been away, how're we supposed to — ?"

"Harry! Ginny!"

Hermione was hurrying toward them, very pink-faced and wearing a cloak, hat, and gloves.

"I got back a couple of hours ago, I've just been down to visit Hagrid and Buck — I mean Witherwings," she said breat
 "Yeah," said Ron at once, "pretty eventful, Rufus Scrim —"

"I've got something for you, Harry," said Hermione, neither looking at Ron nor giving any sign that she had heard him
 "Precisely," said the Fat Lady in a feeble voice, and swung forward to reveal the portrait hole.

"What's up with her?" asked Harry.

"Overindulged over Christmas, apparently," said Hermione, rolling her eyes as she led the way into the packed comm
 wine in that picture of drunk monks down by the Charms corridor. Anyway . . ."

She rummaged in her pocket for a moment, then pulled out a scroll of parchment with Dumbledore's writing on it.

"Great," said Harry, unrolling it at once to discover that his next lesson with Dumbledore was scheduled for the follow

wn —"

But at that moment there was a loud squeal of "Won-Won!" and Lavender Brown came hurtling out of nowhere and a tinkling laugh and said, "There's a table over here. . . . Coming, Ginny?"

"No, thanks, I said I'd meet Dean," said Ginny, though Harry could not help noticing that she did not sound very enthralled by the wrestling match, Harry led Hermione over to the spare table.

"So how was your Christmas?"

"Oh, fine," she shrugged. "Nothing special. How was it at Won-Won's?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," said Harry. "Look, Hermione, can't you — ?"

"No, I can't," she said flatly. "So don't even ask."

"I thought maybe, you know, over Christmas —"

"It was the Fat Lady who drank a vat of five-hundred-year-old wine, Harry, not me. So what was this important news? She looked too fierce to argue with at that moment, so Harry dropped the subject of Ron and recounted all that he had heard. She sat in thought for a moment and then said, "Don't you think — ?"

"— he was pretending to offer help so that he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he's doing?"

"Well, yes," said Hermione.

"Ron's dad and Lupin think so," Harry said grudgingly. "But this definitely proves Malfoy's planning something, you can't deny that."

"No, I can't," she answered slowly.

"And he's acting on Voldemort's orders, just like I said!"

"Hmm . . . did either of them actually mention Voldemort's name?"

Harry frowned, trying to remember. "I'm not sure . . . Snape definitely said 'your master,' and who else would that be?"

"I don't know," said Hermione, biting her lip. "Maybe his father?"

She stared across the room, apparently lost in thought, not even noticing Lavender tickling Ron. "How's Lupin?"

"Not great," said Harry, and he told her all about Lupin's mission among the werewolves and the difficulties he was facing.

"Yes, I have!" said Hermione, sounding startled. "And so have you, Harry!"

"When, History of Magic? You know full well I never listened . . ."

"No, no, not History of Magic — Malfoy threatened Borgin with him!" said Hermione. "Back in Knockturn Alley, don't you remember? He said he'd be checking up on Borgin's progress!"

Harry gaped at her. "I forgot! But this proves Malfoy's a Death Eater, how else could he be in contact with Greyback and the others?"

"It is pretty suspicious," breathed Hermione. "Unless . . ."

"Oh, come on," said Harry in exasperation, "you can't get round this one!"

"Well . . . there is the possibility it was an empty threat."

"You're unbelievable, you are," said Harry, shaking his head. "We'll see who's right. . . . You'll be eating your words, Hermione, and so will Rufus Scrimgeour as well. . . ."

And the rest of the evening passed amicably with both of them abusing the Minister of Magic, for Hermione, like Ron, had been in the same position the previous year, they had a great deal of nerve asking him for help now.

The new term started next morning with a pleasant surprise for the sixth years: a large sign had been pinned to the wall in the Apparition classroom.

If you are seventeen years of age, or will turn seventeen on or before the 31st August next, you are eligible for a two-hour Apparition lesson. Please sign below if you would like to participate. Cost: 12 Galleons.

Harry and Ron joined the crowd that was jostling around the notice and taking it in turns to write their names at the bottom. When Lavender crept up behind him, slipped her hands over his eyes, and trilled, "Guess who, Won-Won?" Harry turned round to tell her off, but to his surprise, Ron caught up with them only a little way beyond the notice. Without a word, Hermione sped up to walk with Neville.

"So — Apparition," said Ron, his tone making it perfectly plain that Harry was not to mention what had just happened.

"I dunno," said Harry. "Maybe it's better when you do it yourself, I didn't enjoy it much when Dumbledore took me along."

"I forgot you'd already done it. . . . I'd better pass my test first time," said Ron, looking anxious. "Fred and George did."

"Charlie failed, though, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but Charlie's bigger than me" — Ron held his arms out from his body as though he was a gorilla — "so Fred and George didn't mind."

"When can we take the actual test?"

"Soon as we're seventeen. That's only March for me!"

"Yeah, but you wouldn't be able to Apparate in here, not in the castle . . ."

"Not the point, is it? Everyone would know I could Apparate if I wanted."

Ron was not the only one to be excited at the prospect of Apparition. All that day there was much talk about the fortification of the castle and the ability to vanish and reappear at will.

"How cool will it be when we can just —" Seamus clicked his fingers to indicate disappearance. "Me cousin Fergus doesn't want to go to school anymore, he's going to be a wizard. . . ."

Lost in visions of this happy prospect, he flicked his wand a little too enthusiastically, so that instead of producing the fire for the lesson, he let out a hoselike jet that ricocheted off the ceiling and knocked Professor Flitwick flat on his face.

"Harry's already Apparated," Ron told a slightly abashed Seamus, after Professor Flitwick had dried himself off with a towel.

aboon brandishing a stick." "Dum — er — someone took him. Side-Along-Apparition, you know."

"Whoa!" whispered Seamus, and he, Dean, and Neville put their heads a little closer to hear what Apparition felt like. the other sixth years to describe the sensation of Apparition. All of them seemed awed, rather than put off, when he detailed questions at ten to eight that evening, when he was forced to lie and say that he needed to return a book to dore.

The lamps in Dumbledore's office were lit, the portraits of previous headmasters were snoring gently in their frames. s hands lay on either side of it, the right one as blackened and burnt-looking as ever. It did not seem to have healed. t had caused such a distinctive injury, but did not ask; Dumbledore had said that he would know eventually and there re Harry could say anything about Snape and Malfoy, Dumbledore spoke.

"I hear that you met the Minister of Magic over Christmas?"

"Yes," said Harry. "He's not very happy with me."

"No," sighed Dumbledore. "He is not very happy with me either. We must try not to sink beneath our anguish, Harry, Harry grinned.

"He wanted me to tell the Wizarding community that the Ministry's doing a wonderful job."

Dumbledore smiled.

"It was Fudge's idea originally, you know. During his last days in office, when he was trying desperately to cling to his ive him your support —"

"After everything Fudge did last year?" said Harry angrily. "After Umbridge?"

"I told Cornelius there was no chance of it, but the idea did not die when he left office. Within hours of Scrimgeour's ith you —"

"So that's why you argued!" Harry blurted out. "It was in the Daily Prophet."

"The Prophet is bound to report the truth occasionally," said Dumbledore, "if only accidentally. Yes, that was why we t last."

"He accused me of being 'Dumbledore's man through and through.'"

"How very rude of him."

"I told him I was."

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. Behind Harry, Fawkes the phoenix let out a low, so zed that Dumbledore's bright blue eyes looked rather watery, and stared hastily at his own knees. When Dumbledore

"I am very touched, Harry."

"Scrimgeour wanted to know where you go when you're not at Hogwarts," said Harry, still looking fixedly at his knees

"Yes, he is very nosy about that," said Dumbledore, now sounding cheerful, and Harry thought it safe to look up again e set Dawlish to tail me. It wasn't kind. I have already been forced to jinx Dawlish once; I did it again with the greatest

"So they still don't know where you go?" asked Harry, hoping for more information on this intriguing subject, but Dur

"No, they don't, and the time is not quite right for you to know either. Now, I suggest we press on, unless there's any

"There is, actually, sir," said Harry. "It's about Malfoy and Snape."

"Professor Snape, Harry."

"Yes, sir. I overheard them during Professor Slughorn's party . . . well, I followed them, actually. . . ."

Dumbledore listened to Harry's story with an impassive face. When Harry had finished he did not speak for a few mo est that you put it out of your mind. I do not think that it is of great importance."

"Not of great importance?" repeated Harry incredulously. "Professor, did you understand — ?"

"Yes, Harry, blessed as I am with extraordinary brainpower, I understood everything you told me," said Dumbledore, that I understood more than you did. Again, I am glad that you have confided in me, but let me reassure you that yo

Harry sat in seething silence, glaring at Dumbledore. What was going on? Did this mean that Dumbledore had indeed ad already heard everything Harry had just told him from Snape? Or was he really worried by what he had heard, bu

"So, sir," said Harry, in what he hoped was a polite, calm voice, "you definitely still trust — ?"

"I have been tolerant enough to answer that question already," said Dumbledore, but he did not sound very tolerant

"I should think not," said a snide voice; Phineas Nigellus was evidently only pretending to be asleep. Dumbledore ign

"And now, Harry, I must insist that we press on. I have more important things to discuss with you this evening."

Harry sat there feeling mutinous. How would it be if he refused to permit the change of subject, if he insisted upon a ind, Dumbledore shook his head.

"Ah, Harry, how often this happens, even between the best of friends! Each of us believes that what he has to say is r bute!"

"I don't think what you've got to say is unimportant, sir," said Harry stiffly.

"Well, you are quite right, because it is not," said Dumbledore briskly. "I have two more memories to show you this ev f them is, I think, the most important I have collected."

Harry did not say anything to this; he still felt angry at the reception his confidences had received, but could not see

"So," said Dumbledore, in a ringing voice, "we meet this evening to continue the tale of Tom Riddle, whom we left las ill remember how excited he was to hear that he was a wizard, that he refused my company on a trip to Diagon Alley e arrived at school.

"Well, the start of the school year arrived and with it came Tom Riddle, a quiet boy in his secondhand robes, who line

Slytherin House almost the moment that the Sorting Hat touched his head," continued Dumbledore, waving his black wand. "How soon Riddle learned that the famous founder of the House could talk to snakes, I do not know. But it certainly flattered him and increased his sense of self-importance.

"However, if he was frightening or impressing fellow Slytherins with displays of Parseltongue in their common room, it did not show arrogance or aggression at all. As an unusually talented and very good-looking orphan, he naturally drew attention and seemed polite, quiet, and thirsty for knowledge. Nearly all were most favorably impressed by him."

"Didn't you tell them, sir, what he'd been like when you met him at the orphanage?" asked Harry.

"No, I did not. Though he had shown no hint of remorse, it was possible that he felt sorry for how he had behaved before he was given that chance."

Dumbledore paused and looked inquiringly at Harry, who had opened his mouth to speak. Here, again, was Dumbledore. He knew they did not deserve it! But then Harry remembered something. . . .

"But you didn't really trust him, sir, did you? He told me . . . the Riddle who came out of that diary said, 'Dumbledore

"Let us say that I did not take it for granted that he was trustworthy," said Dumbledore. "I had, as I have already indicated, cannot pretend that I gleaned a great deal from my observations at first. He was very guarded with me; he felt, I am sure, that he had told me a little too much. He was careful never to reveal as much again, but he could not take back what he had let me know. However, he had the sense never to try and charm me as he charmed so many of my colleagues.

"As he moved up the school, he gathered about him a group of dedicated friends; I call them that, for want of a better name. They felt no affection for any of them. This group had a kind of dark glamour within the castle. They were a motley collection of students seeking some shared glory, and the thuggish gravitating toward a leader who could show them more refined forms of magic. But, of course, they were, and indeed some of them became the first Death Eaters after leaving Hogwarts.

"Rigidly controlled by Riddle, they were never detected in open wrongdoing, although their seven years at Hogwarts were not unproblematically linked, the most serious of which was, of course, the opening of the Chamber of Secrets, which resulted in the death of that crime.

"I have not been able to find many memories of Riddle at Hogwarts," said Dumbledore, placing his withered hand on Harry's shoulder. "They are too terrified. What I know, I found out after he had left Hogwarts, after much painstaking effort, after tracing old records and questioning Muggle and wizard witnesses alike.

"Those whom I could persuade to talk told me that Riddle was obsessed with his parentage. This is understandable, for he did not know how he came to be there. It seems that he searched in vain for some trace of Tom Riddle senior on the shields of the family, even in the books of Wizarding history. Finally he was forced to accept that his father had never set foot in Hogwarts. He, however, assumed the identity of Lord Voldemort, and began his investigations into his previously despised mother's family. He wanted to be a witch if she had succumbed to the shameful human weakness of death.

"All he had to go upon was the single name 'Marvolo,' which he knew from those who ran the orphanage had been his father's. In the old books of Wizarding families, he discovered the existence of Slytherin's surviving line. In the summer of his sixteen, he set off to find his Gaunt relatives. And now, Harry, if you will stand . . ."

Dumbledore rose, and Harry saw that he was again holding a small crystal bottle filled with swirling, pearly memory.

"I was very lucky to collect this," he said, as he poured the gleaming mass into the Pensieve. "As you will understand, Harry, when you step up to the stone basin and bowed obediently until his face sank through the surface of the memory; he had landed upon a dirty stone floor in almost total darkness.

It took him several seconds to recognize the place, by which time Dumbledore had landed beside him. The Gaunts' hovel was dimly lit; the ceiling was thick with cobwebs, the floor coated in grime; moldy and rotting food lay upon the table amidst a single guttering candle placed at the feet of a man with hair and beard so overgrown Harry could see neither eyes nor mouth. Harry wondered the moment whether he was dead. But then there came a loud knock on the door and the man jerked awake, raising a voice. The door creaked open. There on the threshold, holding an old-fashioned lamp, stood a boy Harry recognized at once as Voldemort. His eyes moved slowly around the hovel and then found the man in the armchair. For a few seconds they looked at his feet clattering and tinkling across the floor.

"YOU!" he bellowed. "YOU!"

And he hurtled drunkenly at Riddle, wand and knife held aloft.

"Stop."

Riddle spoke in Parseltongue. The man skidded into the table, sending moldy pots crashing to the floor. He stared at Harry. The man broke it.

"You speak it?"

"Yes, I speak it," said Riddle. He moved forward into the room, allowing the door to swing shut behind him. Harry could see his complete lack of fear. His face merely expressed disgust and, perhaps, disappointment.

"Where is Marvolo?" he asked.

"Dead," said the other. "Died years ago, didn't he?"

Riddle frowned.

"Who are you, then?"

"I'm Morfin, ain't I?"

"Marvolo's son?"

"Course I am, then . . ."

Morfin pushed the hair out of his dirty face, the better to see Riddle, and Harry saw that he wore Marvolo's black-stone ring. "I thought you was that Muggle," whispered Morfin. "You look mighty like that Muggle."

"What Muggle?" said Riddle sharply.

"That Muggle what my sister took a fancy to, that Muggle what lives in the big house over the way," said Morfin, and he looked at Riddle like him. Riddle. But he's older now, in 'e? He's older'n you, now I think on it. . . ."

Morfin looked slightly dazed and swayed a little, still clutching the edge of the table for support. "He come back, see, see, see, Voldemort was gazing at Morfin as though appraising his possibilities. Now he moved a little closer and said, "Riddle, Riddle, Riddle. "Ar, he left her, and serve her right, marrying filth!" said Morfin, spitting on the floor again. "Robbed us, mind, before we could get our pocket?"

Voldemort did not answer. Morfin was working himself into a rage again; he brandished his knife and shouted, "Dishevelled and asking questions about all that? It's over, innit. . . . It's over. . . ."

He looked away, staggering slightly, and Voldemort moved forward. As he did so, an unnatural darkness fell, extinguishing the light. . . .

Dumbledore's fingers closed tightly around Harry's arm and they were soaring back into the present again. The soft light came back after that impenetrable darkness.

"Is that all?" said Harry at once. "Why did it go dark, what happened?"

"Because Morfin could not remember anything from that point onward," said Dumbledore, gesturing Harry back into the light. Marvolo's ring had gone.

"Meanwhile, in the village of Little Hangleton, a maid was running along the High Street, screaming that there were three men, the Senior and his mother and father.

"The Muggle authorities were perplexed. As far as I am aware, they do not know to this day how the Riddles died, for the Riddle e. . . . The exception sits before me," Dumbledore added, with a nod to Harry's scar. "The Ministry, on the other hand, knew that a convicted Muggle-hater lived across the valley from the Riddle house, a Muggle-hater who had already been in prison. "So the Ministry called upon Morfin. They did not need to question him, to use Veritaserum or Legilimency. He admitted what he would know. He was proud, he said, to have killed the Muggles, had been awaiting his chance all these years. He handed over the Riddles. And he permitted himself to be led off to Azkaban without a fight. All that disturbed him was the fact that he was not getting his ring, 'he told his captors over and over again. 'He'll kill me for losing his ring.' And that, apparently, was all he ever said. He was in Azkaban, lamenting the loss of Marvolo's last heirloom, and is buried beside the prison, alongside the other poor souls who have died there. "So Voldemort stole Morfin's wand and used it?" said Harry, sitting up straight.

"That's right," said Dumbledore. "We have no memories to show us this, but I think we can be fairly sure what happened. He crossed the valley to 'the big house over the way.' There he murdered the Muggle man who had abandoned his witch mother, ending the last of the unworthy Riddle line and revenging himself upon the father who never wanted him. Then he returned to the Riddle house and implanted a false memory in his uncle's mind, laid Morfin's wand beside its unconscious owner, pocketed the ancient wand, and fled. "And Morfin never realized he hadn't done it?"

"Never," said Dumbledore. "He gave, as I say, a full and boastful confession."

"But he had this real memory in him all the time!"

"Yes, but it took a great deal of skilled Legilimency to coax it out of him," said Dumbledore, "and why should anybody have done that to the crime? However, I was able to secure a visit to Morfin in the last weeks of his life, by which time I was attempting to extract this memory with difficulty. When I saw what it contained, I attempted to use it to secure Morfin's release, but he had already died, ver, Morfin had died."

"But how come the Ministry didn't realize that Voldemort had done all that to Morfin?" Harry asked angrily. "He was using the rage magic!"

"You are quite right — they can detect magic, but not the perpetrator: You will remember that you were blamed by the Ministry for the crime," said Harry; this injustice still rankled. "So if you're underage and you do magic inside an adult witch or wizard's house, they will certainly be unable to tell who performed the magic," said Dumbledore, smiling slightly at the look of great relief on Harry's face. "The Ministry is determined to enforce their offspring's obedience while within their walls."

"Well, that's rubbish," snapped Harry. "Look what happened here, look what happened to Morfin!"

"I agree," said Dumbledore. "Whatever Morfin was, he did not deserve to die as he did, blamed for murders he had not committed. . . ."

Dumbledore took from an inside pocket another crystal phial and Harry fell silent at once, remembering that Dumbledore had noticed that the contents proved difficult to empty into the Pensieve, as though they had congealed slightly; did memory itself have a consistency? "This will not take long," said Dumbledore, when he had finally emptied the phial. "We shall be back before you know it." And Harry fell again through the silver surface, landing this time right in front of a man he recognized at once. It was a much younger Horace Slughorn. Harry was so used to him bald that he found the sight of Slughorn with thick, wavy, grey hair, though he had had his head thatched, though there was already a shiny Galleon-sized bald patch on his crown. His mustache was not quite as rotund as the Slughorn Harry knew, though the golden buttons on his richly embroidered waistcoat were still the same. Slughorn, in a velvet pouffe, he was sitting well back in a comfortable winged armchair, one hand grasping a small glass of wine, the other resting on his knee. Harry looked around as Dumbledore appeared beside him and saw that they were standing in Slughorn's office. Half a dozen portraits of Slughorns, all of them younger than his, and all in their mid-teens. Harry recognized Voldemort at once. He was the most handsome face and he was sitting in a velvet pouffe, gently upon the arm of his chair; with a jolt, Harry saw that he was wearing Marvolo's gold-and-black ring; he had already

"Sir, is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?" he asked.

"Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you," said Slughorn, wagging a reproving, sugar-covered finger at Riddle, though Riddle knew where you get your information, boy, more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are."

Riddle smiled; the other boys laughed and cast him admiring looks.

"What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter — I'm your favorite —"

As several of the boys tittered, something very odd happened. The whole room was suddenly filled with a thick white mist, and a man who was standing beside him. Then Slughorn's voice rang out through the mist, unnaturally loudly, "You'll go wrong, Tom. The fog cleared as suddenly as it had appeared and yet nobody made any allusion to it, nor did anybody look as though they had found out as a small golden clock standing upon Slughorn's desk chimed eleven o'clock.

"Good gracious, is it that time already?" said Slughorn. "You'd better get going, boys, or we'll all be in trouble. Lestrange goes for you, Avery."

Slughorn pulled himself out of his armchair and carried his empty glass over to his desk as the boys filed out. Voldermort stood liberately, wanting to be last in the room with Slughorn.

"Look sharp, Tom," said Slughorn, turning around and finding him still present. "You don't want to be caught out of bounds."

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away. . . ."

"Sir, I wondered what you know about . . . about Horcruxes?"

And it happened all over again: The dense fog filled the room so that Harry could not see Slughorn or Voldermort at all. His voice boomed out again, just as it had done before.

"I don't know anything about Horcruxes and I wouldn't tell you if I did! Now get out of here at once and don't let me catch you!"

"Well, that's that," said Dumbledore placidly beside Harry. "Time to go."

And Harry's feet left the floor to fall, seconds later, back onto the rug in front of Dumbledore's desk.

"That's all there is?" said Harry blankly.

Dumbledore had said that this was the most important memory of all, but he could not see what was so significant about it. He noticed it, was odd, but other than that nothing seemed to have happened except that Voldermort had asked a question.

"As you might have noticed," said Dumbledore, reseating himself behind his desk, "that memory has been tampered with."

"Tampered with?" repeated Harry, sitting back down too.

"Certainly," said Dumbledore. "Professor Slughorn has meddled with his own recollections."

"But why would he do that?"

"Because, I think, he is ashamed of what he remembers," said Dumbledore. "He has tried to rework the memory to suit himself. I do not wish me to see. It is, as you will have noticed, very crudely done, and that is all to the good, for it shows that the memory is false."

"And so, for the first time, I am giving you homework, Harry. It will be your job to persuade Professor Slughorn to divulge the whole piece of information of all."

Harry stared at him.

"But surely, sir," he said, keeping his voice as respectful as possible, "you don't need me — you could use Legilimency on him."

"Professor Slughorn is an extremely able wizard who will be expecting both," said Dumbledore. "He is much more accomplished than you are. He has not carried an antidote to Veritaserum with him ever since I coerced him into giving me this travesty of a memory."

"No, I think it would be foolish to attempt to wrest the truth from Professor Slughorn by force, and might do much more harm than good. He has his weaknesses like the rest of us, and I believe that you are the one person who might be able to penetrate his defenses. . . . How important, we will only know when we have seen the real thing. So, good luck . . . and good night."

A little taken aback by the abrupt dismissal, Harry got to his feet quickly. "Good night, sir."

As he closed the study door behind him, he distinctly heard Phineas Nigellus say, "I can't see why the boy should be so clever."

"I wouldn't expect you to, Phineas," replied Dumbledore, and Fawkes gave another low, musical cry.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BIRTHDAY SURPRISES

The next day Harry confided in both Ron and Hermione the task that Dumbledore had set him, though separately, for they both looked to give him a contemptuous look.

Ron thought that Harry was unlikely to have any trouble with Slughorn at all.

"He loves you," he said over breakfast, waving an airy forkful of fried egg. "Won't refuse you anything, will he? Not his secret. Go in this afternoon and ask him."

Hermione, however, took a gloomier view. "He must be determined to hide what really happened if Dumbledore could not find out. He deserted, snowy courtyard at break. "Horcruxes . . . Horcruxes . . . I've never even heard of them. . . ."

"You haven't?" Harry was disappointed; he had hoped that Hermione might have been able to give him a clue as to what they were.

"They must be really advanced Dark Magic, or why would Voldermort have wanted to know about them? I think it's good to be very careful about how you approach Slughorn, think out a strategy. . . ."

"Ron reckons I should just hang back after Potions this afternoon. . . ."

"Oh, well, if Won-Won thinks that, you'd better do it," she said, flaring up at once. "After all, when has Won-Won's judgment been wrong?"

"Hermione, can't you — ?"

"No!" she said angrily, and stormed away, leaving Harry alone and ankle-deep in snow.

Potions lessons were uncomfortable enough these days, seeing as Harry, Ron, and Hermione had to share a desk. To make matters worse, Ernie Macmillan had been assigned to teach the class, and ignored both Harry and Ron.

"What've you done?" Ron muttered to Harry, looking at Hermione's haughty profile.

But before Harry could answer, Slughorn was calling for silence from the front of the room.

"Settle down, settle down, please! Quickly, now, lots of work to get through this afternoon! Golpalott's Third Law . . . v

Hermione recited at top speed: "Golpalott's-Third-Law-states-that-the-antidote-for-a-blended-poison-will-be-equal-to-
ponents."

"Precisely!" beamed Slughorn. "Ten points for Gryffindor! Now, if we accept Golpalott's Third Law as true . . ."

Harry was going to have to take Slughorn's word for it that Golpalott's Third Law was true, because he had not understood what Slughorn said next either.

“... which means, of course, that assuming we have achieved correct identification of the potion’s ingredients by Scamander, the one of selecting antidotes to those ingredients in and of themselves, but to find that added component that will, by itself, neutralize the poisons —”

Ron was sitting beside Harry with his mouth half open, doodling absently on his new copy of Advanced Potion-Making. He couldn't help him out of trouble when he failed to grasp what was going on.

"... and so," finished Slughorn, "I want each of you to come and take one of these phials from my desk. You are to complete the lesson. Good luck, and don't forget your protective gloves!"

Hermione had left her stool and was halfway toward Slughorn's desk before the rest of the class had realized it was the table, she had already tipped the contents of her phial into her cauldron and was kindling a fire underneath it.

"It's a shame that the Prince won't be able to help you much with this, Harry," she said brightly as she straightened up. "No shortcuts or cheats!"

Annoyed, Harry uncorked the poison he had taken from Slughorn's desk, which was a garish shade of pink, tipped it into a glass, and drank. He had the faintest idea what he was supposed to do next. He glanced around at Ron, who was now standing there looking rather

"You sure the Prince hasn't got any tips?" Ron muttered to Harry.

Harry pulled out his trusty copy of Advanced Potion-Making and turned to the chapter on antidotes. There was Golp but not a single illuminating note in the Prince's hand to explain what it meant. Apparently the Prince, like Hermione

"Nothing," said Harry gloomily.

Hermione was now waving her wand enthusiastically over her cauldron. Unfortunately, they could not copy the spell that she did not need to say the words aloud. Ernie Macmillan, however, was muttering, "Specialis Revelio!" over his o imitate him.

It took Harry only five minutes to realize that his reputation as the best potion-maker in the class was crashing around him. He had been on his first circuit of the dungeon, preparing to exclaim in delight as he usually did, and instead had withdrawn his head

Hermione's expression could not have been any smugger; she had loathed being outperformed in every Potions class for years. She had poured a drop of the poison into ten different crystal phials. More to avoid watching this irritating sight than anything else, Harry bent over

person who can determine if a particular move is to avoid watching this irritating sight than any other size, many people use unnecessary force.

And there it was, scrawled right across a long list of antidotes:

Just shove a bezoar down their throats.

Harry stared at these words for a moment. Hadn't he once, long ago, heard of bezoars? Hadn't Snape mentioned the use of a bezoar to counteract the effects of a goat, which will protect from most poisons?"

It was not an answer to the Golpalott problem, and had Snape still been their teacher, Harry would not have dared do that. He reached toward the store cupboard and rummaged within it, pushing aside unicorn horns and tangles of dried herbs until he found a small bottle. He babbled the word BEZOARS.

He opened the box just as Slughorn called, "Two minutes left, everyone!" Inside were half a dozen shriveled brown o

seized one, put the box back in the cupboard, and hurried back to his cauldron.

"Time's . . . UP!" called Slughorn genially. "Well, let's see how you've done! Blaise . . . what have you got for me?"

Slowly, Slughorn moved around the room, examining the various antidotes. Nobody had finished the task, although before Slughorn reached her. Ron had given up completely, and was merely trying to avoid breathing in the putrid fumes clutched in a slightly sweaty hand.

Slughorn reached their table last. He sniffed Ernie's potion and passed on to Ron's with a grimace. He did not linger on

"And you, Harry," he said. "What have you got to show me?"

Harry held out his hand, the bezoar sitting on his palm.

Slughorn looked down at it for a full ten seconds. Harry

"You've got nerve, boy!" he boomed, taking the bezoar and holding it up so that the class could see it. "Oh, you're like

ould certainly act as an antidote to all these potions!"

Hermione, who was sweaty-faced and had soot on her nose, looked livid. Her half-finished antidote, comprising fifty-ish behind Slughorn, who had eyes for nobody but Harry.

"And you thought of a bezoar all by yourself, did you, Harry?" she asked through gritted teeth.

"That's the individual spirit a real potion-maker needs!" said Slughorn happily, before Harry could reply. "Just like his

it's undoubtedly from Lily he gets it. . . . Yes, Harry, yes, if you've got a bezoar to hand, of course that would do the trick. Bezoars are pretty rare, it's still worth knowing how to mix antidotes. . . ."

The only person in the room looking angrier than Hermione was Malfoy, who, Harry was pleased to see, had spilled his drink. When they all could express their fury that Harry had come top of the class by not doing any work, however, the bell rang. "Time to pack up!" said Slughorn. "And an extra ten points to Gryffindor for sheer cheek!"

Still chuckling, he waddled back to his desk at the front of the dungeon.

Harry dawdled behind, taking an inordinate amount of time to do up his bag. Neither Ron nor Hermione wished him goodnight; the only two left in the room.

"Come on, now, Harry, you'll be late for your next lesson," said Slughorn affably, snapping the gold clasps shut on his bag.

"Sir," said Harry, reminding himself irresistibly of Voldemort, "I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away, then, my dear boy, ask away. . . ."

"Sir, I wondered what you know about . . . about Horcruxes?"

Slughorn froze. His round face seemed to sink in upon itself. He licked his lips and said hoarsely, "What did you say?"

"I asked whether you know anything about Horcruxes, sir. You see —"

"Dumbledore put you up to this," whispered Slughorn. His voice had changed completely. It was not genial anymore, but cold. He pulled out a handkerchief, mopping his sweating brow. "Dumbledore's shown you that — that memory. Well? Hasn't he?"

"Yes," said Harry, deciding on the spot that it was best not to lie.

"Yes, of course," said Slughorn quietly, still dabbing at his white face. "Of course . . . well, if you've seen that memory, you know —" he repeated the word forcefully — "about Horcruxes."

He seized his dragon-skin briefcase, stuffed his handkerchief back into his pocket, and marched to the dungeon door.

"Sir," said Harry desperately, "I just thought there might be a bit more to the memory —"

"Did you?" said Slughorn. "Then you were wrong, weren't you? WRONG!"

He bellowed the last word and, before Harry could say another word, slammed the dungeon door behind him.

Neither Ron nor Hermione was at all sympathetic when Harry told them of this disastrous interview. Hermione was surprised that Harry hadn't slipped him a bezoar too.

"It would've just looked stupid if we'd both done it!" said Harry irritably. "Look, I had to try and soften him up so I could get the truth out of him. It didn't work, did it?"

"rip!" he added in exasperation, as Ron winced at the sound of the name.

Infuriated by his failure and by Ron's and Hermione's attitudes, Harry brooded for the next few days over what to do. He wouldn't let Slughorn think that he had forgotten all about Horcruxes; it was surely best to lull him into a false sense of security. When Harry did not question Slughorn again, the Potions master reverted to his usual affectionate treatment of him. He invited Harry to an invitation to one of his little evening parties, determined to accept this time, even if he had to reschedule Quidditch practice. Harry checked with Hermione and Ginny: Neither of them had received an invitation and nor, as far as they knew, had Ron. Harry was not that Slughorn was not quite as forgetful as he appeared, simply determined to give Harry no additional opportunities. Meanwhile, the Hogwarts library had failed Hermione for the first time in living memory. She was so shocked, she even forgot to ask for the book.

"I haven't found one single explanation of what Horcruxes do!" she told him. "Not a single one! I've been right through the library. Here they tell you how to brew the most gruesome potions — nothing! All I could find was this, in the introduction to the book on magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction. . . . 'I mean, why mention it then?' she said impatiently, slamming the book shut. "p," she snapped, stuffing it back into her bag.

The snow melted around the school as February arrived, to be replaced by cold, dreary wetness. Purplish-gray clouds filled the sky, and the lawns slippery and muddy. The upshot of this was that the sixth years' first Apparition lesson, which was scheduled for the following week, took place in the Great Hall instead of in the grounds.

When Harry and Hermione arrived in the Hall (Ron had come down with Lavender), they found that the tables had been set and the candles were lit. The air was filled with a swirling darkly above them as they assembled in front of Professors McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, and Sprout — the Apparition instructor from the Ministry. He was oddly colorless, with transparent eyelashes, wispy hair, and an insubstantial quality. Harry wondered whether constant disappearances and reappearances had somehow diminished his substance, or whether he was just a ghost.

"Good morning," said the Ministry wizard, when all the students had arrived and the Heads of Houses had called for the Apparition instructor for the next twelve weeks. I hope to be able to prepare you for your Apparition Tests in this time —"

"Malfoy, be quiet and pay attention!" barked Professor McGonagall.

Everybody looked around. Malfoy had flushed a dull pink; he looked furious as he stepped away from Crabbe, with whom he had been talking. He glanced quickly at Snape, who also looked annoyed, though Harry strongly suspected that this was less because of Malfoy's behavior than because of his House.

"— by which time, many of you may be ready to take your tests," Twycross continued, as though there had been no interruption.

"As you may know, it is usually impossible to Apparate or Disapparate within Hogwarts. The headmaster has lifted this restriction to enable you to practice. May I emphasize that you will not be able to Apparate outside the walls of this Hall, and that you must stay within the Hall. I would like each of you to place yourselves now so that you have a clear five feet of space in front of you."

There was a great scrambling and jostling as people separated, banged into each other, and ordered others out of the way. Harry moved quickly into position and breaking up arguments.

"Harry, where are you going?" demanded Hermione.

But Harry did not answer; he was moving quickly through the crowd, past the place where Professor Flitwick was making his way.

ed to be near the front, past Professor Sprout, who was chivying the Hufflepuffs into line, until, by dodging around E of the crowd, directly behind Malfoy, who was taking advantage of the general upheaval to continue his argument. "I don't know how much longer, all right?" Malfoy shot at him, oblivious to Harry standing right behind him. "It's taking Crabbe opened his mouth, but Malfoy appeared to second-guess what he was going to say. "Look, it's none of your business and keep a lookout!"

"I tell my friends what I'm up to, if I want them to keep a lookout for me," Harry said, just loud enough for Malfoy to hear. Malfoy spun around on the spot, his hand flying to his wand, but at that precise moment the four Heads of House stepped to the front again.

"Thank you," said Twycross. "Now then . . ."

He waved his wand. Old-fashioned wooden hoops instantly appeared on the floor in front of every student.

"The important things to remember when Apparating are the three D's!" said Twycross. "Destination, Determination,

"Step one: Fix your mind firmly upon the desired destination," said Twycross. "In this case, the interior of your hoop.

Everybody looked around furtively to check that everyone else was staring into their hoop, then hastily did as they were instructed by his hoop and tried hard to think of nothing else. This proved impossible, as he couldn't stop puzzling over what

"Step two," said Twycross, "focus your determination to occupy the visualized space! Let your yearning to enter it flood

Harry glanced around surreptitiously. A little way to his left, Ernie Macmillan was contemplating his hoop so hard that he was about to lay a Quaffle-sized egg. Harry bit back a laugh and hastily returned his gaze to his own hoop.

"Step three," called Twycross, "and only when I give the command . . . Turn on the spot, feeling your way into nothing

Harry glanced around again; lots of people were looking positively alarmed at being asked to Apparate so quickly.

"— two —"

Harry tried to fix his thoughts on his hoop again; he had already forgotten what the three D's stood for.

"— THREE!"

Harry spun on the spot, lost balance, and nearly fell over. He was not the only one. The whole Hall was suddenly full of noise. Macmillan, on the other hand, had done a kind of pirouetting leap into his hoop and looked momentarily thrilled, until he collapsed.

"Never mind, never mind," said Twycross dryly, who did not seem to have expected anything better. "Adjust your hoops.

The second attempt was no better than the first. The third was just as bad. Not until the fourth did anything exciting

happened around, terrified, to see Susan Bones of Hufflepuff wobbling in her hoop with her left leg still standing five feet

The Heads of House converged on her; there was a great bang and a puff of purple smoke, which cleared to reveal Susan

"Splinching, or the separation of random body parts," said Wilkie Twycross dispassionately, "occurs when the mind is not firmly fixed on your destination, and move, without haste, but with deliberation . . . thus."

Twycross stepped forward, turned gracefully on the spot with his arms outstretched, and vanished in a swirl of robes.

"Remember the three D's," he said, "and try again . . . one — two — three —"

But an hour later, Susan's Splinching was still the most interesting thing that had happened. Twycross did not seem to mind. "Until next Saturday, everybody, and do not forget: Destination. Determination. Deliberation."

With that, he waved his wand, Vanishing the hoops, and walked out of the Hall accompanied by Professor McGonagall. The hall.

"How did you do?" asked Ron, hurrying toward Harry. "I think I felt something the last time I tried — a kind of tingling

"I expect your trainers are too small, Won-Won," said a voice behind them, and Hermione stalked past, smirking.

"I didn't feel anything," said Harry, ignoring this interruption. "But I don't care about that now —"

"What do you mean, you don't care? Don't you want to learn to Apparate?" said Ron incredulously.

"I'm not fussed, really, I prefer flying," said Harry, glancing over his shoulder to see where Malfoy was, and speeding up. "You, there's something I want to do. . . ."

Perplexed, Ron followed Harry back to the Gryffindor Tower at a run. They were temporarily detained by Peeves, who wouldn't let anyone pass until they set fire to their own pants, but Harry and Ron simply turned back and took one of their trusted shortcuts through the portrait hole.

"Are you going to tell me what we're doing, then?" asked Ron, panting slightly.

"Up here," said Harry, and he crossed the common room and led the way through the door to the boys' staircase.

Their dormitory was, as Harry had hoped, empty. He flung open his trunk and began to rummage in it, while Ron waited. "Harry . . ."

"Malfoy's using Crabbe and Goyle as lookouts. He was arguing with Crabbe just now. I want to know — aha."

He had found it, a folded square of apparently blank parchment, which he now smoothed out and tapped with the tip of his wand.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good . . . or Malfoy is anyway."

At once, the Marauder's Map appeared on the parchment's surface. Here was a detailed plan of every one of the castle's rooms, and it signified each of the castle's occupants.

"Help me find Malfoy," said Harry urgently.

He laid the map upon his bed, and he and Ron leaned over it, searching.

"There!" said Ron, after a minute or so. "He's in the Slytherin common room, look . . . with Parkinson and Zabini and Crabbe."

Harry looked down at the map, disappointed, but rallied almost at once.

"Well, I'm keeping an eye on him from now on," he said firmly. "And the moment I see him lurking somewhere with Crabbe and the Invisibility Cloak and off to find out what he's —"

He broke off as Neville entered the dormitory, bringing with him a strong smell of singed material, and began rummaging. Despite his determination to catch Malfoy out, Harry had no luck at all over the next couple of weeks. Although he could make quick visits to the bathroom between lessons to search it, he did not once see Malfoy anywhere suspicious. Admittedly, he was more often than usual, sometimes remaining stationary in deserted corridors, but at these times Malfoy was not on his most mysterious. Harry toyed with the possibility that Malfoy was actually leaving the school grounds, but could not do so of security now operating within the castle. He could only suppose that he was missing Malfoy amongst the hundreds of other students, and Goyle appeared to be going their different ways when they were usually inseparable, these things happened without a living proof.

February moved toward March with no change in the weather except that it became windy as well as wet. To general surprise, the next trip into Hogsmeade had been canceled. Ron was furious.

"It was on my birthday!" he said. "I was looking forward to that!"

"Not a big surprise, though, is it?" said Harry. "Not after what happened to Katie."

She had still not returned from St. Mungo's. What was more, further disappearances had been reported in the Daily Prophet.

"But now all I've got to look forward to is stupid Apparition!" said Ron grumpily. "Big birthday treat . . ."

Three lessons on, Apparition was proving as difficult as ever, though a few more people had managed to Splinch the head of ill-feeling toward Wilkie Twycross and his three D's, which had inspired a number of nicknames for him, the politeness of which was not to be questioned.

"Happy birthday, Ron," said Harry, when they were woken on the first of March by Seamus and Dean leaving noisily for the dormitory. He threw the package across onto Ron's bed, where it joined a small pile of them that must, Harry assumed, have been sent by the others.

"Cheers," said Ron drowsily and, as he ripped off the paper, Harry got out of bed, opened his own trunk, and began rummaging. He turfed out half the contents of his trunk before he found it hiding beneath the rolled-up socks in which he was used to keeping his wand.

"Right," he murmured, taking it back to bed with him, tapping it quietly and murmuring, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." He was alone at the time, would not hear.

"Nice one, Harry!" said Ron enthusiastically, waving the new pair of Quidditch Keeper's gloves Harry had given him.

"No problem," said Harry absentmindedly, as he searched the Slytherin dormitory closely for Malfoy. "Hey . . . I don't see him." Ron did not answer; he was too busy unwrapping presents, every now and then letting out an exclamation of pleasure.

"Seriously good haul this year!" he announced, holding up a heavy gold watch with odd symbols around the edge and a small limey, I think I'll come of age next year too. . . ."

"Cool," muttered Harry, sparing the watch a glance before peering more closely at the map. Where was Malfoy? He did not see him. Breakfast. . . . He was nowhere near Snape, who was sitting in his study. . . . He wasn't in any of the bathrooms or in the corridors.

"Want one?" said Ron thickly, holding out a box of Chocolate Cauldrons.

"No thanks," said Harry, looking up. "Malfoy's gone again!"

"Can't have done," said Ron, stuffing a second Cauldron into his mouth as he slid out of bed to get dressed. "Come on, it's a good mach. . . . Might make it easier, I suppose . . ."

Ron looked thoughtfully at the box of Chocolate Cauldrons, then shrugged. Harry tapped the map with his wand, muttered, "Mischief managed," though it hadn't been, and got dressed, thinking of the possibilities, but he simply could not think what it could be. The best way of finding out would be to tail him, but even without the lessons, Quidditch practice, homework, and Apparition; he could not follow Malfoy around school all day without being noticed.

"Ready?" he said to Ron. He was halfway to the dormitory door when he realized that Ron had not moved, but was leaning on his bedpost, staring at him with a look on his face.

"Ron? Breakfast."

"I'm not hungry."

Harry stared at him.

"I thought you just said — ?"

"Well, all right, I'll come down with you," sighed Ron, "but I don't want to eat."

Harry scrutinized him suspiciously.

"You've just eaten half a box of Chocolate Cauldrons, haven't you?"

"It's not that," Ron sighed again. "You . . . you wouldn't understand."

"Fair enough," said Harry, albeit puzzled, as he turned to open the door.

"Harry!" said Ron suddenly.

"What?"

"Harry, I can't stand it!"

"You can't stand what?" asked Harry, now starting to feel definitely alarmed. Ron was rather pale and looked as though he was about to cry.

"I can't stop thinking about her!" said Ron hoarsely.

Harry gaped at him. He had not expected this and was not sure he wanted to hear it. Friends they might be, but if Ron was like this, it was not down to him.

"Why does that stop you having breakfast?" Harry asked, trying to inject a note of common sense into the proceedings.

"I don't think she knows I exist," said Ron with a desperate gesture.

"She definitely knows you exist," said Harry, bewildered. "She keeps snogging you, doesn't she?"

Ron blinked. "Who are you talking about?"

"Who are you talking about?" said Harry, with an increasing sense that all reason had dropped out of the conversation.

"Romilda Vane," said Ron softly, and his whole face seemed to illuminate as he said it, as though hit by a ray of pure sunlight. They stared at each other for almost a whole minute, before Harry said, "This is a joke, right? You're joking."

"I think . . . Harry, I think I love her," said Ron in a strangled voice.

"Okay," said Harry, walking up to Ron to get a better look at the glazed eyes and the pallid complexion, "okay . . . Say 'I love her,'" repeated Ron breathlessly. "Have you seen her hair, it's all black and shiny and silky . . . and her eyes? Her eyes?"

"This is really funny and everything," said Harry impatiently, "but joke's over, all right? Drop it."

He turned to leave; he had got two steps toward the door when a crashing blow hit him on the right ear. Staggering, he twisted with rage; he was about to strike again.

Harry reacted instinctively; his wand was out of his pocket and the incantation sprang to mind without conscious thought. Ron yelled as his heel was wrenched upward once more; he dangled helplessly, upside down, his robes hanging off his head.

"What was that for?" Harry bellowed.

"You insulted her, Harry! You said it was a joke!" shouted Ron, who was slowly turning purple in the face as all the blood drained from him.

"This is insane!" said Harry. "What's got into — ?"

And then he saw the box lying open on Ron's bed, and the truth hit him with the force of a stampeding troll.

"Where did you get those Chocolate Cauldrons?"

"They were a birthday present!" shouted Ron, revolving slowly in midair as he struggled to get free. "I offered you one."

"You just picked them up off the floor, didn't you?"

"They'd fallen off my bed, all right? Let me go!"

"They didn't fall off your bed, you prat, don't you understand? They were mine, I chucked them out of my trunk when I came to school. I gave me before Christmas, and they're all spiked with love potion!"

But only one word of this seemed to have registered with Ron.

"Romilda?" he repeated. "Did you say Romilda? Harry — do you know her? Can you introduce me?"

Harry stared at the dangling Ron, whose face now looked tremendously hopeful, and fought a strong desire to laugh. He was quite keen on the idea of letting Ron down and watching him run amok until the effects of the potion wore off. . . . But he had not been himself when he had attacked, and Harry thought that he would deserve another punching if he permitted himself to laugh.

"Yeah, I'll introduce you," said Harry, thinking fast. "I'm going to let you down now, okay?"

He sent Ron crashing back to the floor (his ear did hurt quite a lot), but Ron simply bounded to his feet again, grinning.

"She'll be in Slughorn's office," said Harry confidently, leading the way to the door.

"Why will she be in there?" asked Ron anxiously, hurrying to keep up.

"Oh, she has extra Potions lessons with him," said Harry, inventing wildly.

"Maybe I could ask if I can have them with her?" said Ron eagerly.

"Great idea," said Harry.

Lavender was waiting beside the portrait hole, a complication Harry had not foreseen.

"You're late, Won-Won!" she pouted. "I've got you a birthday —"

"Leave me alone," said Ron impatiently. "Harry's going to introduce me to Romilda Vane."

And without another word to her, he pushed his way out of the portrait hole. Harry tried to make an apologetic face, but Lavender looked more offended than ever as the Fat Lady swung shut behind them.

Harry had been slightly worried that Slughorn might be at breakfast, but he answered his office door at the first knock and looking rather bleary-eyed.

"Harry," he mumbled. "This is very early for a call. . . . I generally sleep late on a Saturday. . . ."

"Professor, I'm really sorry to disturb you," said Harry as quietly as possible, while Ron stood on tiptoe, attempting to whisper into his ear. "He's got a love potion by mistake. You couldn't make him an antidote, could you? I'd take him to Madam Pomfrey, but you know . . . awkward questions . . ."

"I'd have thought you could have whipped him up a remedy, Harry, an expert potioneer like you?" asked Slughorn.

"Er," said Harry, somewhat distracted by the fact that Ron was now elbowing him in the ribs in an attempt to force him to listen. "Love potion, sir, and by the time I get it right, Ron might've done something serious —"

Helpfully, Ron chose this moment to moan, "I can't see her, Harry — is he hiding her?"

"Was this potion within date?" asked Slughorn, now eyeing Ron with professional interest. "They can strengthen, you know, but they can also make you forgetful."

"That would explain a lot," panted Harry, now positively wrestling with Ron to keep him from knocking Slughorn over.

"Oh, all right, come in, then, come in," said Slughorn, relenting. "I've got the necessary here in my bag, it's not a difficulty at all."

Ron burst through the door into Slughorn's overheated, crowded study, tripped over a tasseled footstool, regained his balance, and said, "I didn't see that, did she?"

"She's not here yet," said Harry, watching Slughorn opening his potion kit and adding a few pinches of this and that to a small bottle.

"That's good," said Ron fervently. "How do I look?"

"Very handsome," said Slughorn smoothly, handing Ron a glass of clear liquid. "Now drink that up, it's a tonic for the nerves."

"Brilliant," said Ron eagerly, and he gulped the antidote down noisily.

Harry and Slughorn watched him. For a moment, Ron beamed at them. Then, very slowly, his grin sagged and vanished.

"Back to normal, then?" said Harry, grinning. Slughorn chuckled. "Thanks a lot, Professor."

"Don't mention it, m'boy, don't mention it," said Slughorn, as Ron collapsed into a nearby armchair, looking devastated.

Slughorn bustled over to a table loaded with drinks. "I've got butterbeer, I've got wine, I've got one last bottle of this oak-maturation."

for Christmas . . . ah, well . . ." He shrugged. "He can't miss what he's never had! Why don't we open it now and celebrate away the pangs of disappointed love. . . ."

He chortled again, and Harry joined in. This was the first time he had found himself almost alone with Slughorn since m. Perhaps, if he could just keep Slughorn in a good mood . . . perhaps if they got through enough of the oak-matured "There you are then," said Slughorn, handing Harry and Ron a glass of mead each before raising his own. "Well, a ven—"

"Ron —" whispered Harry.

But Ron, who did not appear to be listening to the toast, had already thrown the mead into his mouth and swallowed. There was one second, hardly more than a heartbeat, in which Harry knew there was something terribly wrong and —

"— and may you have many more —"

"Ron!"

Ron had dropped his glass; he half-rose from his chair and then crumpled, his extremities jerking uncontrollably. Food fell from his pockets and heir sockets.

"Professor!" Harry bellowed. "Do something!"

But Slughorn seemed paralyzed by shock. Ron twitched and choked: His skin was turning blue.

"What — but —" spluttered Slughorn.

Harry leapt over a low table and sprinted toward Slughorn's open potion kit, pulling out jars and pouches, while the teacher found it — the shriveled kidneylike stone Slughorn had taken from him in Potions.

He hurtled back to Ron's side, wrenched open his jaw, and thrust the bezoar into his mouth. Ron gave a great shudder.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ELF TAILS

So, all in all, not one of Ron's better birthdays?" said Fred.

It was evening; the hospital wing was quiet, the windows curtained, the lamps lit. Ron's was the only occupied bed. He had spent all day waiting outside the double doors, trying to see inside whenever somebody went in or out. Madam Pomfrey had arrived at ten past.

"This isn't how we imagined handing over our present," said George grimly, putting down a large wrapped gift on Ron's bed.

"Yeah, when we pictured the scene, he was conscious," said Fred.

"There we were in Hogsmeade, waiting to surprise him —" said George.

"You were in Hogsmeade?" asked Ginny, looking up.

"We were thinking of buying Zonko's," said Fred gloomily. "A Hogsmeade branch, you know, but a fat lot of good it'll do now. . . . But never mind that now."

He drew up a chair beside Harry and looked at Ron's pale face.

"How exactly did it happen, Harry?"

Harry retold the story he had already recounted, it felt like a hundred times to Dumbledore, to McGonagall, to Madam Pomfrey. . . . and then I got the bezoar down his throat and his breathing eased up a bit, Slughorn ran for help, McGonagall arrived and reckon he'll be all right. Madam Pomfrey says he'll have to stay here a week or so . . . keep taking essence of rue . . ."

"Blimey, it was lucky you thought of a bezoar," said George in a low voice.

"Lucky there was one in the room," said Harry, who kept turning cold at the thought of what would have happened if there hadn't been.

Hermione gave an almost inaudible sniff. She had been exceptionally quiet all day. Having hurtled, white-faced, up to the hospital wing, she had taken almost no part in Harry and Ginny's obsessive discussion about how Ron had been poisoned. It wasn't until at last they had been allowed in to see him.

"Do Mum and Dad know?" Fred asked Ginny.

"They've already seen him, they arrived an hour ago — they're in Dumbledore's office now, but they'll be back soon. . . ."

There was a pause while they all watched Ron mumble a little in his sleep.

"So the poison was in the drink?" said Fred quietly.

"Yes," said Harry at once; he could think of nothing else and was glad for the opportunity to start discussing it again.

"Would he have been able to slip something into Ron's glass without you seeing?"

"Probably," said Harry, "but why would Slughorn want to poison Ron?"

"No idea," said Fred, frowning. "You don't think he could have mixed up the glasses by mistake? Meaning to get you?"

"Why would Slughorn want to poison Harry?" asked Ginny.

"I dunno," said Fred, "but there must be loads of people who'd like to poison Harry, mustn't there? 'The Chosen One'?"

"So you think Slughorn's a Death Eater?" said Ginny.

"Anything's possible," said Fred darkly.

"He could be under the Imperius Curse," said George.

"Or he could be innocent," said Ginny. "The poison could have been in the bottle, in which case it was probably meant for you."

"Who'd want to kill Slughorn?"

"Dumbledore reckons Voldemort wanted Slughorn on his side," said Harry. "Slughorn was in hiding for a year before he was found. . . . He had not yet been able to extract from Slughorn. "And maybe Voldemort wants him out of the way, maybe he thinks Slughorn is a traitor."

"But you said Slughorn had been planning to give that bottle to Dumbledore for Christmas," Ginny reminded him. "So he was planning to turn him in?"

"Then the poisoner didn't know Slughorn very well," said Hermione, speaking for the first time in hours and sounding

"Look," Hagrid twisted his crossbow uncomfortably in his hands; there was a loud splintering sound and it snapped in two. "I yeh ter go readin' more inter this than there is."

"Look out," said Hermione tersely.

They turned just in time to see the shadow of Argus Filch looming over the wall behind them before the man himself

"Oho!" he wheezed. "Out of bed so late, this'll mean detention!"

"No it won't, Filch," said Hagrid shortly. "They're with me, aren't they?"

"And what difference does that make?" asked Filch obnoxiously.

"I'm a ruddy teacher, aren't I, yeh sneakin' Squib!" said Hagrid, firing up at once.

There was a nasty hissing noise as Filch swelled with fury; Mrs. Norris had arrived, unseen, and was twisting herself s

"Get goin'," said Hagrid out of the corner of his mouth.

Harry did not need telling twice; he and Hermione both hurried off; Hagrid's and Filch's raised voices echoed behind

indor Tower, but he was streaking happily toward the source of the yelling, cackling and calling,

When there's strife and when there's trouble

Call on Peevsie, he'll make double!

The Fat Lady was snoozing and not pleased to be woken, but swung forward grumpily to allow them to clamber into

people knew about Ron yet; Harry was very relieved: He had been interrogated enough that day. Hermione bade him

ned behind, taking a seat beside the fire and looking down into the dying embers.

So Dumbledore had argued with Snape. In spite of all he had told Harry, in spite of his insistence that he trusted Sna

t think that Snape had tried hard enough to investigate the Slytherins . . . or, perhaps, to investigate a single Slytherin

Was it because Dumbledore did not want Harry to do anything foolish, to take matters into his own hands, that he h

ikely. It might even be that Dumbledore did not want anything to distract Harry from their lessons, or from procuring

right to confide suspicions about his staff to sixteen-year-olds. . . .

"There you are, Potter!"

Harry jumped to his feet in shock, his wand at the ready. He had been quite convinced that the common room was e
ddenly out of a distant chair. A closer look showed him that it was Cormac McLaggen.

"I've been waiting for you to come back," said McLaggen, disregarding Harry's drawn wand. "Must've fallen asleep. Lo
dn't look like he'll be fit for next week's match."

It took Harry a few moments to realize what McLaggen was talking about.

"Oh . . . right . . . Quidditch," he said, putting his wand back into the belt of his jeans and running a hand wearily thro

"Well, then, I'll be playing Keeper, won't I?" said McLaggen.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah, I suppose so. . . ."

He could not think of an argument against it; after all, McLaggen had certainly performed second-best in the trials.

"Excellent," said McLaggen in a satisfied voice. "So when's practice?"

"What? Oh . . . there's one tomorrow evening."

"Good. Listen, Potter, we should have a talk beforehand. I've got some ideas on strategy you might find useful."

"Right," said Harry unenthusiastically. "Well, I'll hear them tomorrow, then. I'm pretty tired now . . . see you . . ."

The news that Ron had been poisoned spread quickly next day, but it did not cause the sensation that Katie's attack

ent, given that he had been in the Potions master's room at the time, and that as he had been given an antidote imm

e generally much more interested in the upcoming Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, for many of them wanted to

ed soundly for his commentary during the opening match against Slytherin.

Harry, however, had never been less interested in Quidditch; he was rapidly becoming obsessed with Draco Malfoy.

imes made detours to wherever Malfoy happened to be, but had not yet detected him doing anything out of the ord

y vanished from the map. . . .

But Harry did not get a lot of time to consider the problem, what with Quidditch practice, homework, and the fact tha
d Lavender Brown.

He could not decide which of them was more annoying. McLaggen kept up a constant stream of hints that he would

t Harry was seeing him play regularly he would surely come around to this way of thinking too; he was also keen to c

ng schemes, so that more than once Harry was forced to remind him who was Captain.

Meanwhile, Lavender kept sidling up to Harry to discuss Ron, which Harry found almost more wearing than McLagge

nobody had thought to tell her that Ron was in the hospital wing — "I mean, I am his girlfriend!" — but unfortunately

as keen to have lots of in-depth chats with him about Ron's feelings, a most uncomfortable experience that Harry wo

"Look, why don't you talk to Ron about all this?" Harry asked, after a particularly long interrogation from Lavender th
er new dress robes to whether or not Harry thought that Ron considered his relationship with Lavender to be "serious

"Well, I would, but he's always asleep when I go and see him!" said Lavender fretfully.

"Is he?" said Harry, surprised, for he had found Ron perfectly alert every time he had been up to the hospital wing, b
and keen to abuse McLaggen as much as possible.

"Is Hermione Granger still visiting him?" Lavender demanded suddenly.

"Yeah, I think so. Well, they're friends, aren't they?" said Harry uncomfortably.

"Friends, don't make me laugh," said Lavender scornfully. "She didn't talk to him for weeks after he started going out
all interesting. . . ."

"Would you call getting poisoned being interesting?" asked Harry. "Anyway — sorry, got to go — there's McLaggen co
ed sideways through a door pretending to be solid wall and sprinted down the shortcut that would take him off to P

w him.

On the morning of the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, Harry dropped in on the hospital wing before heading down to watch the match, feeling it would overexcite him.

"So how's McLaggen shaping up?" he asked Harry nervously, apparently forgetting that he had already asked the same question. "I've told you," said Harry patiently, "he could be world-class and I wouldn't want to keep him. He keeps trying to tell me he's better than the rest of us. I can't wait to be shot of him. And speaking of getting shot of people," Harry added, getting up and heading toward the hospital wing, "tending to be asleep when Lavender comes to see you? She's driving me mad as well."

"Oh," said Ron, looking sheepish. "Yeah. All right."

"If you don't want to go out with her anymore, just tell her," said Harry.

"Yeah . . . well . . . it's not that easy, is it?" said Ron. He paused. "Hermione going to look in before the match?" he added.

"No, she's already gone down to the pitch with Ginny."

"Oh," said Ron, looking rather glum. "Right. Well, good luck. Hope you hammer McLag — I mean, Smith."

"I'll try," said Harry, shouldering his broom. "See you after the match."

He hurried down through the deserted corridors; the whole school was outside, either already seated in the stadium or standing, trying to gauge how much wind they were facing, when a noise ahead made him glance up and he saw Malfoy looking back at him and resentful.

Malfoy stopped short at the sight of Harry, then gave a short, humorless laugh and continued walking.

"Where're you going?" Harry demanded.

"Yeah, I'm really going to tell you, because it's your business, Potter," sneered Malfoy. "You'd better hurry up, they'll be waiting for you — whatever they call you these days."

One of the girls gave an unwilling giggle. Harry stared at her. She blushed. Malfoy pushed past Harry and she and he disappeared from his view.

Harry stood rooted on the spot and watched them disappear. This was infuriating; he was already cutting it fine to go down to the pitch while the rest of the school was absent: Harry's best chance yet of discovering what Malfoy was up to. The silent seconds dragged at the place where Malfoy had vanished. . . .

"Where have you been?" demanded Ginny, as Harry sprinted into the changing rooms. The whole team was changed and looking nervously against their legs.

"I met Malfoy," Harry told her quietly, as he pulled his scarlet robes over his head.

"So?"

"So I wanted to know how come he's up at the castle with a couple of girlfriends while everyone else is down here. . . ."

"Does it matter right now?"

"Well, I'm not likely to find out, am I?" said Harry, seizing his Firebolt and pushing his glasses straight. "Come on then! And without another word, he marched out onto the pitch to deafening cheers and boos.

There was little wind; the clouds were patchy; every now and then there were dazzling flashes of bright sunlight.

"Tricky conditions!" McLaggen said bracingly to the team. "Coote, Peakes, you'll want to fly out of the sun, so they don't see you."

"I'm the Captain, McLaggen, shut up giving them instructions," said Harry angrily. "Just get up by the goalposts!"

Once McLaggen had marched off, Harry turned to Coote and Peakes.

"Make sure you do fly out of the sun," he told them grudgingly.

He shook hands with the Hufflepuff Captain, and then, on Madam Hooch's whistle, kicked off and rose into the air, heading for the Snitch. If he could catch it good and early, there might be a chance he could get back up to the castle, seize the Quaffle.

"And that's Smith of Hufflepuff with the Quaffle," said a dreamy voice, echoing over the grounds. "He did the commentaries for the match probably on purpose, it looked like it. Smith was being quite rude about Gryffindor, I expect he regrets that now he's got it from him, I do like her, she's very nice. . . ."

Harry stared down at the commentator's podium. Surely nobody in their right mind would have let Luna Lovegood commentate on a match, with her blonde hair, nor the necklace of butterbeer corks. . . . Beside Luna, Professor McGonagall was looking slightly uncomfortable at this appointment.

". . . but now that big Hufflepuff player's got the Quaffle from her, I can't remember his name, it's something like Bibbidi."

"It's Cadwallader!" said Professor McGonagall loudly from beside Luna. The crowd laughed.

Harry stared around for the Snitch; there was no sign of it. Moments later, Cadwallader scored. McLaggen had been in a bad session, with the result that he had not noticed the large red ball soaring past his right ear.

"McLaggen, will you pay attention to what you're supposed to be doing and leave everyone else alone!" bellowed Harry.

"You're not setting a great example!" McLaggen shouted back, red-faced and furious.

"And Harry Potter's now having an argument with his Keeper," said Luna serenely, while both Hufflepuffs and Slytherins looked on help him find the Snitch, but maybe it's a clever ruse. . . ."

Swearing angrily, Harry spun round and set off around the pitch again, scanning the skies for some sign of the tiny, winged Snitch. Ginny and Demelza scored a goal apiece, giving the red-and-gold-clad supporters below something to cheer about. They didn't seem to have noticed; she appeared singularly uninterested in such mundane things as the score, and kept attempting to catch the Snitch. . . . The clouds seemed to be closing in, and the possibility that Zacharias Smith, who had so far failed to maintain possession of the Quaffle for long, was lurking.

"Seventy-fourty to Hufflepuff!" barked Professor McGonagall into Luna's megaphone.

"Is it, already?" said Luna vaguely. "Oh, look! The Gryffindor Keeper's got hold of one of the Beater's bats."

Harry spun around in midair. Sure enough, McLaggen, for reasons best known to himself, had pulled Peakes's bat from an oncoming Cadwallader.

"Will you give him back his bat and get back to the goalposts!" roared Harry, pelting toward McLaggen just as McLaggen was about to throw it. A blinding, sickening pain . . . a flash of light . . . distant screams . . . and the sensation of falling down a long tunnel . . . And the next thing Harry knew, he was lying in a remarkably warm and comfortable bed and looking up at a lamp that had just been raised. He raised his head awkwardly. There on his left was a familiar-looking, freckly, red-haired person.

"Nice of you to drop in," said Ron, grinning.

Harry blinked and looked around. Of course: He was in the hospital wing. The sky outside was indigo streaked with orange. The pe of cornering Malfoy. Harry's head felt strangely heavy; he raised a hand and felt a stiff turban of bandages.

"What happened?"

"Cracked skull," said Madam Pomfrey, bustling up and pushing him back against his pillows. "Nothing to worry about, but don't overexert yourself for a few hours."

"I don't want to stay here overnight," said Harry angrily, sitting up and throwing back his covers. "I want to find McLaggen."

"I'm afraid that would come under the heading of 'overexertion,'" said Madam Pomfrey, pushing him firmly back onto the pillows. "You may stay here until I discharge you, Potter, or I shall call the headmaster."

She bustled back into her office, and Harry sank back into his pillows, fuming.

"D'you know how much we lost by?" he asked Ron through clenched teeth.

"Well, yeah I do," said Ron apologetically. "Final score was three hundred and twenty to sixty."

"Brilliant," said Harry savagely. "Really brilliant! When I get hold of McLaggen —"

"You don't want to get hold of him, he's the size of a troll," said Ron reasonably. "Personally, I think there's a lot to be said for him. Anyway, the rest of the team might've dealt with him before you get out of here, they're not happy. . . ."

There was a note of badly suppressed glee in Ron's voice; Harry could tell he was nothing short of thrilled that McLaggen was in the hospital wing. A patch of light on the ceiling, his recently mended skull not hurting, precisely, but feeling slightly tender underneath a bandage.

"I could hear the match commentary from here," said Ron, his voice now shaking with laughter. "I hope Luna always has a good map. But Harry was still too angry to see much humor in the situation, and after a while Ron's snorts subsided.

"Ginny came in to visit while you were unconscious," he said, after a long pause, and Harry's imagination zoomed into the future. "She was over his lifeless form, confessed her feelings of deep attraction to him while Ron gave them his blessing. . . . "She really likes you. You left here early enough."

"Oh . . ." said Harry, as the scene in his mind's eye imploded. "Yeah . . . well, I saw Malfoy sneaking off with a couple of his friends and that's the second time he's made sure he isn't down on the Quidditch pitch with the rest of the school; he skipped class. . . . Now, him now, the match was such a fiasco. . . ."

"Don't be stupid," said Ron sharply. "You couldn't have missed a Quidditch match just to follow Malfoy, you're the Captain!"

"I want to know what he's up to," said Harry. "And don't tell me it's all in my head, not after what I overheard between him and Ginny."

"I never said it was all in your head," said Ron, hoisting himself up on an elbow in turn and frowning at Harry, "but there's nothing in this place! You're getting a bit obsessed with Malfoy, Harry. I mean, thinking about missing a match just because of him?"

"I want to catch him at it!" said Harry in frustration. "I mean, where's he going when he disappears off the map?"

"I dunno . . . Hogsmeade?" suggested Ron, yawning.

"I've never seen him going along any of the secret passageways on the map. I thought they were being watched now."

"Well then, I dunno," said Ron.

Silence fell between them. Harry stared up at the circle of lamplight above him, thinking. . . .

If only he had Rufus Scrimgeour's power, he would have been able to set a tail upon Malfoy, but unfortunately Harry had no such power. He ought fleetingly of trying to set something up with the D.A., but there again was the problem that people would be bound by the rules. . . .

There was a low, rumbling snore from Ron's bed. After a while Madam Pomfrey came out of her office, this time wearing a nightgown. She led over onto his side and listened to all the curtains closing themselves as she waved her wand. The lamps dimmed and she left. Harry r and knew that she was off to bed.

This was, Harry reflected in the darkness, the third time that he had been brought to the hospital wing because of a fall. The presence of dementors around the pitch, and the time before that, all the bones had been removed from his arm after his most painful injury by far . . . he remembered the agony of regrowing an armful of bones in one night, a discomfort not unlike the —

Harry sat bolt upright, his heart pounding, his bandage turban askew. He had the solution at last: There was a way to catch Malfoy. He thought of it before?

But the question was, how to call him? What did you do?

Quietly, tentatively, Harry spoke into the darkness.

"Kreacher?"

There was a very loud crack, and the sounds of scuffling and squeaks filled the silent room. Ron awoke with a yelp.

"What's going — ?"

Harry pointed his wand hastily at the door of Madam Pomfrey's office and muttered, "Muffliato!" so that she would not hear.

ter look at what was going on.

Two house-elves were rolling around on the floor in the middle of the dormitory, one wearing a shrunken maroon jumper over his hips like a loincloth. Then there was another loud bang, and Peeves the Poltergeist appeared in midair above them. "I was watching that, Potty!" he told Harry indignantly, pointing at the fight below, before letting out a loud cackle. "Let's be punchy —"

"Kreacher will not insult Harry Potter in front of Dobby, no he won't, or Dobby will shut Kreacher's mouth for him!" cried Dobby. "— kicky, scratchy!" cried Peeves happily, now pelting bits of chalk at the elves to enrage them further. "Tweaky, poke, poke!" "Kreacher will say what he likes about his master, oh yes, and what a master he is, filthy friend of Mudbloods, oh, who would have said that? Exactly what Kreacher's mistress would have said they did not find out, for at that moment Dobby sank his knobby fingers into the hair of Harry and Ron both leapt out of their beds and wrenched the two elves apart, though they continued to try and kick the lamp squealing, "Stick your fingers up his nosey, draw his cork and pull his earsies —"

Harry aimed his wand at Peeves and said, "Langlock!" Peeves clutched at his throat, gulped, then swooped from the ceiling, so that his tongue had just glued itself to the roof of his mouth.

"Nice one," said Ron appreciatively, lifting Dobby into the air so that his flailing limbs no longer made contact with Kreacher. "Yeah," said Harry, twisting Kreacher's wizened arm into a half nelson. "Right — I'm forbidding you to fight each other. Now I'm not allowed to give you orders —"

"Dobby is a free house-elf and he can obey anyone he likes and Dobby will do whatever Harry Potter wants him to do. Dobby will jump onto his jumper."

"Okay then," said Harry, and he and Ron both released the elves, who fell to the floor but did not continue fighting.

"Master called me?" croaked Kreacher, sinking into a bow even as he gave Harry a look that plainly wished him a painful death.

"Yeah, I did," said Harry, glancing toward Madam Pomfrey's office door to check that the Muffliato spell was still working. "I've got a job for you."

"Kreacher will do whatever Master wants," said Kreacher, sinking so low that his lips almost touched his gnarled toes. "I will be so glad to have such a master, yes —"

"Dobby will do it, Harry Potter!" squeaked Dobby, his tennis-ball-sized eyes still swimming in tears. "Dobby would be so happy to do it."

"Come to think of it, it would be good to have both of you," said Harry. "Okay then . . . I want you to tail Draco Malfoy. Ignoring the look of mingled surprise and exasperation on Ron's face, Harry went on, "I want to know where he's going, and when he's in, and out, around the clock."

"Yes, Harry Potter!" said Dobby at once, his great eyes shining with excitement. "And if Dobby does it wrong, Dobby will be so sorry." "There won't be any need for that," said Harry hastily.

"Master wants me to follow the youngest of the Malfoys?" croaked Kreacher. "Master wants me to spy upon the pure-bloods?"

"That's the one," said Harry, foreseeing a great danger and determining to prevent it immediately. "And you're forbidden from talking to him or to write him messages or . . . or to contact him in any way. Got it?"

He thought he could see Kreacher struggling to see a loophole in the instructions he had just been given and waited. Kreacher bowed deeply again and said, with bitter resentment, "Master thinks of everything, and Kreacher must obey him. Kreacher is a boy, oh yes. . . ."

"That's settled, then," said Harry. "I'll want regular reports, but make sure I'm not surrounded by people when you turn up. You're doing. Just stick to Malfoy like a couple of wart plasters."

CHAPTER TWENTY

LORD VOLDEMORT'S REQUEST

Harry and Ron left the hospital wing first thing on Monday morning, restored to full health by the ministrations of Madam Pomfrey. They had been knocked out and poisoned, the best of which was that Hermione was friends with Ron again. Hermione even escorted them to the hospital wing. The drowsing creature in Harry's chest suddenly raised its head, sniffing the air hopefully.

"What did they row about?" he asked, trying to sound casual as they turned onto a seventh-floor corridor that was deserted. "What about the troll?" said Hermione. "The troll? Oh, that troll. She looked terrified at the sight of the approaching sixth years and dropped the heavy brass scale." "It's all right!" said Hermione kindly, hurrying forward to help her. "Here . . ."

She tapped the broken scales with her wand and said, "Reparo." The girl did not say thank you, but remained rooted to the spot. She looked back at her.

"I swear they're getting smaller," he said.

"Never mind her," said Harry, a little impatiently. "What did Ginny and Dean row about, Hermione?"

"Oh, Dean was laughing about McLaggen hitting that Bludger at you," said Hermione.

"It must've looked funny," said Ron reasonably.

"It didn't look funny at all!" said Hermione hotly. "It looked terrible and if Coote and Peakes hadn't caught Harry he could have been hurt."

"Yeah, well, there was no need for Ginny and Dean to split up over it," said Harry, still trying to sound casual. "Or are you?"

"Yes, they are — but why are you so interested?" asked Hermione, giving Harry a sharp look.

"I just don't want my Quidditch team messed up again!" he said hastily, but Hermione continued to look suspicious, and he knew she was giving him an excuse to turn his back on her.

"Oh, hi, Luna."

"I went to the hospital wing to find you," said Luna, rummaging in her bag. "But they said you'd left. . . ."

She thrust what appeared to be a green onion, a large spotted toadstool, and a considerable amount of what looked like a scroll of parchment that she handed to Harry.

"... I've been told to give you this."

It was a small roll of parchment, which Harry recognized at once as another invitation to a lesson with Dumbledore.

"Tonight," he told Ron and Hermione, once he had unrolled it.

"Nice commentary last match!" said Ron to Luna as she took back the green onion, the toadstool, and the cat litter. Luna

"You're making fun of me, aren't you?" she said. "Everyone says I was dreadful."

"No, I'm serious!" said Ron earnestly. "I can't remember enjoying commentary more! What is this, by the way?" he asked.

"Oh, it's a Gurdyroot," she said, stuffing the cat litter and the toadstool back into her bag. "You can keep it if you like, but I'm taking off Gulping Plimpies."

And she walked away, leaving Ron chortling, still clutching the Gurdyroot.

"You know, she's grown on me, Luna," he said, as they set off again for the Great Hall. "I know she's insane, but it's in her nature. He stopped talking very suddenly. Lavender Brown was standing at the foot of the marble staircase looking thunderstruck."

"Hi," said Ron nervously.

"C'mon," Harry muttered to Hermione, and they sped past, though not before they had heard Lavender say, "Why did you do that?"

Ron looked both sulky and annoyed when he appeared at breakfast half an hour later, and though he sat with Lavender and Hermione together. Hermione was acting as though she was quite oblivious to all of this, but once or twice Harry saw an inexplicable particularly good mood, and that evening in the common room she even consented to look over (in other words, finish) his work, refusing to do up to this point, because she had known that Harry would then let Ron copy his work.

"Thanks a lot, Hermione," said Harry, giving her a hasty pat on the back as he checked his watch and saw that it was time for Dumbledore. . . ."

She did not answer, but merely crossed out a few of his feeble sentences in a weary sort of way. Grinning, Harry hurried to his office. The gargoyle leapt aside at the mention of toffee éclairs, and Harry took the spiral staircase two steps at a time.

"Enter," called Dumbledore, but as Harry put out a hand to push the door, it was wrenched open from inside. There she was.

"Aha!" she cried, pointing dramatically at Harry as she blinked at him through her magnifying spectacles. "So this is the boy who stole from Dumbledore!"

"My dear Sybill," said Dumbledore in a slightly exasperated voice, "there is no question of throwing you unceremoniously out. I really don't think there is any more to be said —"

"Very well," said Professor Trelawney, in a deeply wounded voice. "If you will not banish the usurping nag, so be it. . . . I am appreciated. . . ."

She pushed past Harry and disappeared down the spiral staircase; they heard her stumble halfway down, and Harry hurried after her.

"Please close the door and sit down, Harry," said Dumbledore, sounding rather tired.

Harry obeyed, noticing as he took his usual seat in front of Dumbledore's desk that the Pensieve lay between them and the memory.

"Professor Trelawney still isn't happy Firenze is teaching, then?" Harry asked.

"No," said Dumbledore, "Divination is turning out to be much more trouble than I could have foreseen, never having a stable home, forest, where he is now an outcast, nor can I ask Sybill Trelawney to leave. Between ourselves, she has no idea of the value of the prophecy and I think it would be unwise to enlighten her — that she made the prophecy about you and Voldemort, you see."

Dumbledore heaved a deep sigh, then said, "But never mind my staffing problems. We have much more important matters to discuss. What was the end of our previous lesson?"

"Ah," said Harry, brought up short. What with Apparition lessons and Quidditch and Ron being poisoned and getting the memory, the boy was up to, Harry had almost forgotten about the memory Dumbledore had asked him to extract from Professor Slughorn. "Yes, sir, but, er, he wouldn't give it to me."

There was a little silence.

"I see," said Dumbledore eventually, peering at Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles and giving Harry the unimpressed look he had often seen. "You have exerted your very best efforts in this matter, do you? That you have exercised all of your considerable ingenuity to retrieve the memory?"

"Well," Harry stalled, at a loss for what to say next. His single attempt to get hold of the memory suddenly seemed even more foolish. "By the way, by mistake I took him to Professor Slughorn. I thought maybe if I got Professor Slughorn in a good enough mood he would give it to me."

"And did that work?" asked Dumbledore.

"Well, no, sir, because Ron got poisoned —"

"— which, naturally, made you forget all about trying to retrieve the memory; I would have expected nothing else, what with the Weasley was going to make a full recovery, however, I would have hoped that you returned to the task I set you. I thought you would."

Indeed, I did my best to impress upon you that it is the most crucial memory of all and that we will be wasting our time if we do not retrieve it. A hot, prickly feeling of shame spread from the top of Harry's head all the way down his body. Dumbledore had not been angry; he had simply preferred him to yell; this cold disappointment was worse than anything.

"Sir," he said, a little desperately, "it isn't that I wasn't bothered or anything, I've just had other — other things . . ."

"Other things on your mind," Dumbledore finished the sentence for him. "I see."

Silence fell between them again, the most uncomfortable silence Harry had ever experienced with Dumbledore; it seemed to last for hours.

of the portrait of Armando Dippet over Dumbledore's head. Harry felt strangely diminished, as though he had shrunk. No longer he said, "Professor Dumbledore, I'm really sorry. I should have done more. . . . I should have realized you would." "Thank you for saying that, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "May I hope, then, that you will give this matter higher priority after tonight unless we have that memory."

"I'll do it, sir, I'll get it from him," he said earnestly.

"Then we shall say no more about it just now," said Dumbledore more kindly, "but continue with our story where we left off."

"Yes, sir," said Harry quickly. "Voldemort killed his father and his grandparents and made it look as though his Uncle Sirius was the traitor." "he asked Professor Slughorn about Horcruxes," he mumbled shamefacedly.

"Very good," said Dumbledore. "Now, you will remember, I hope, that I told you at the very outset of these meetings that I was not a seer. I was only a collector of facts. I am now asking you for confirmation?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thus far, as I hope you agree, I have shown you reasonably firm sources of fact for my deductions as to what Voldemort was like. Harry nodded.

"But now, Harry," said Dumbledore, "now things become murkier and stranger. If it was difficult to find evidence about Voldemort, it was even more difficult to find evidence about the man who had prepared to reminisce about the man Voldemort. In fact, I doubt whether there is a soul alive, apart from himself, who can remember the man who was. . . . However, I have two last memories that I would like to share with you." Dumbledore indicated the two little crystal balls on the table. "I am asking you for your opinion as to whether the conclusions I have drawn from them seem likely."

The idea that Dumbledore valued his opinion this highly made Harry feel even more deeply ashamed that he had failed to do so. He sat tily in his seat as Dumbledore raised the first of the two bottles to the light and examined it.

"I hope you are not tired of diving into other people's memories, for they are curious recollections, these two," he said. "The first is of Hokey. Before we see what Hokey witnessed, I must quickly recount how Lord Voldemort left Hogwarts."

"He reached the seventh year of his schooling with, as you might have expected, top grades in every examination he took. They were to pursue once they had left Hogwarts. Nearly everybody expected spectacular things from Tom Riddle, particularly from the Ministry of Magic, and from the Ministry of Magic, he was expected to be a great success. He refused all offers. The next thing the staff knew, Voldemort was working at Borgin and Burkes."

"At Borgin and Burkes?" Harry repeated, stunned.

"At Borgin and Burkes," repeated Dumbledore calmly. "I think you will see what attractions the place held for him when he was first offered the job. Hardly anyone knew of it at the time — I was one of the few in whom the then headmaster confided. He was the first to suggest that he could remain at Hogwarts as a teacher."

"He wanted to stay here? Why?" asked Harry, more amazed still.

"I believe he had several reasons, though he confided none of them to Professor Dippet," said Dumbledore. "Firstly, he had never been to this school. He had never been to a person. Hogwarts was where he had been happiest; the first and only place he had ever been to. Harry felt slightly uncomfortable at these words, for this was exactly how he felt about Hogwarts too."

"Secondly, the castle is a stronghold of ancient magic. Undoubtedly Voldemort had penetrated many more of its secrets than he had ever felt that there were still mysteries to unravel, stores of magic to tap."

"And thirdly, as a teacher, he would have had great power and influence over young witches and wizards. Perhaps he had never been on best terms, who had demonstrated how influential a role a teacher can play. I do not imagine for an instant that he was a great teacher, but I do think that he saw it as a useful recruiting ground, and a place where he might begin to build himself an empire."

"But he didn't get the job, sir?"

"No, he did not. Professor Dippet told him that he was too young at eighteen, but invited him to reapply in a few years."

"How did you feel about that, sir?" asked Harry hesitantly.

"Deeply uneasy," said Dumbledore. "I had advised Armando against the appointment — I did not give the reasons I had given you. I was unconvinced of his honesty. But I did not want Lord Voldemort back at this school, and especially not in a position of power."

"Which job did he want, sir? What subject did he want to teach?"

Somehow, Harry knew the answer even before Dumbledore gave it.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts. It was being taught at the time by an old professor by the name of Galatea Merrythought."

"So Voldemort went off to Borgin and Burkes, and all the staff who had admired him said what a waste it was, a brilliant opportunity. It was no mere assistant. Polite and handsome and clever, he was soon given particular jobs of the type that only exist at Borgin and Burkes, in objects with unusual and powerful properties. Voldemort was sent to persuade people to part with their most treasured possessions, unusually gifted at doing this."

"I'll bet he was," said Harry, unable to contain himself.

"Well, quite," said Dumbledore, with a faint smile. "And now it is time to hear from Hokey the house-elf, who worked for me. Dumbledore tapped a bottle with his wand, the cork flew out, and he tipped the swirling memory into the Pensieve. Harry got to his feet and bent once more over the rippling silver contents of the stone basin until his face touched the surface. He was in a room in front of an immensely fat old lady wearing an elaborate ginger wig and a brilliant pink set of robes that floated around her. She was looking into a small jeweled mirror and dabbing rouge onto her already scarlet cheeks with a large powder puff. She had placed her fleshy feet into tight satin slippers."

"Hurry up, Hokey!" said Hepzibah imperiously. "He said he'd come at four, it's only a couple of minutes to and he's never late. She tucked away her powder puff as the house-elf straightened up. The top of the elf's head barely reached the seat of the chair. She looked like the crisp linen sheet she wore draped like a toga."

"How do I look?" said Hepzibah, turning her head to admire the various angles of her face in the mirror.

"Lovely, madam," squeaked Hokey.

Harry could only assume that it was down in Hokey's contract that she must lie through her teeth when asked this question in her opinion.

A tinkling doorbell rang and both mistress and elf jumped.

"Quick, quick, he's here, Hokey!" cried Hepzibah and the elf scurried out of the room, which was so crammed with objects that it was a r way across it without knocking over at least a dozen things: There were cabinets full of little lacquered boxes, cases of jewelry, and many flourishing potted plants in brass containers. In fact, the room looked like a cross between a magical shop and a museum. The house-elf returned within minutes, followed by a tall young man Harry had no difficulty whatsoever in recognizing. He was a little longer than it had been at school and his cheeks were hollowed, but all of this suited him; he looked more like a man with an air that showed he had visited many times before and bowed low over Hepzibah's fat little hand, brushing her fingers with a soft, warm touch.

"I brought you flowers," he said quietly, producing a bunch of roses from nowhere.

"You naughty boy, you shouldn't have!" squealed old Hepzibah, though Harry noticed that she had an empty vase standing on the table. "Sit down, sit down. . . . Where's Hokey? Ah . . ."

The house-elf had come dashing back into the room carrying a tray of little cakes, which she set at her mistress's elbow.

"Help yourself, Tom," said Hepzibah, "I know how you love my cakes. Now, how are you? You look pale. They overworked you, didn't they? Voldemort smiled mechanically and Hepzibah simpered.

"Well, what's your excuse for visiting this time?" she asked, batting her lashes.

"Mr. Burke would like to make an improved offer for the goblin-made armor," said Voldemort. "Five hundred Galleons, if you like."

"Now, now, not so fast, or I'll think you're only here for my trinkets!" pouted Hepzibah.

"I am ordered here because of them," said Voldemort quietly. "I am only a poor assistant, madam, who must do as he is told."

"Oh, Mr. Burke, phooey!" said Hepzibah, waving a little hand. "I've something to show you that I've never shown Mr. Burke. I've got it? He'd never let me rest if he knew I'd shown it to you, and I'm not selling, not to Burke, not to anyone else, not how many Galleons you can get for it."

"I'd be glad to see anything Miss Hepzibah shows me," said Voldemort quietly, and Hepzibah gave another girlish giggle.

"I had Hokey bring it out for me. . . . Hokey, where are you? I want to show Mr. Riddle our finest treasure. . . . In fact, I've got it!"

"Here, madam," squeaked the house-elf, and Harry saw two leather boxes, one on top of the other, moving across the room. Hepzibah was holding them over her head as she wended her way between tables, pouffes, and footstools.

"Now," said Hepzibah happily, taking the boxes from the elf, laying them in her lap, and preparing to open the topmost one. "Now, now, I was showing you. . . . They can't wait to get their hands on this!"

She opened the lid. Harry edged forward a little to get a better view and saw what looked like a small golden cup with a red gemstone set in its center. "I wonder whether you know what it is, Tom? Pick it up, have a good look!" whispered Hepzibah, and Voldemort stretched out his hand, without invitation this time, and held it up to the light, staring at it. Harry thought he saw a red gleam in his dark eyes. His greedy expression was curiously different from the one he had shown upon Voldemort's handsome features.

"A badger," murmured Voldemort, examining the engraving upon the cup. "Then this was . . . ?"

"Helga Hufflepuff's, as you very well know, you clever boy!" said Hepzibah, leaning forward with a loud creaking of her joints. "You know, I was distantly descended? This has been handed down in the family for years and years. Lovely, isn't it? And all sorts of people have seen it, but I don't like to show it to anyone but you. . . . I just keep it nice and safe in here. . . ."

She hooked the cup back off Voldemort's long forefinger and restored it gently to its box, too intent upon settling it in its place to notice Voldemort's face as the cup was taken away.

"Now then," said Hepzibah happily, "where's Hokey? Oh yes, there you are — take that away now, Hokey."

The elf obediently took the boxed cup, and Hepzibah turned her attention to the much flatter box in her lap.

"I think you'll like this even more, Tom," she whispered. "Lean in a little, dear boy, so you can see. . . . Of course, Mr. Burke would resay he'd love to get it back when I'm gone. . . ."

She slid back the fine filigree clasp and flipped open the box. There upon the smooth crimson velvet lay a heavy golden locket. Voldemort reached out his hand, without invitation this time, and held it up to the light, staring at it.

"Slytherin's mark," he said quietly, as the light played upon an ornate, serpentine S.

"That's right!" said Hepzibah, delighted, apparently, at the sight of Voldemort gazing at her locket, transfixed. "I had to have it, didn't I? Not a real treasure like that, had to have it for my collection. Burke bought it, apparently, from a ragged-looking woman. . . . I don't know its value —"

There was no mistaking it this time: Voldemort's eyes flashed scarlet at the words, and Harry saw his knuckles whiten. "— I daresay Burke paid her a pittance but there you are. . . . Pretty, isn't it? And again, all kinds of powers attributed to it. . . . She reached out to take the locket back. For a moment, Harry thought Voldemort was not going to let go of it, but then he withdrew his hand and laid it on the cushion.

"So there you are, Tom, dear, and I hope you enjoyed that!"

She looked him full in the face and for the first time, Harry saw her foolish smile falter.

"Are you all right, dear?"

"Oh yes," said Voldemort quietly. "Yes, I'm very well. . . ."

"I thought — but a trick of the light, I suppose —" said Hepzibah, looking unnerved, and Harry guessed that she too had seen the red gleam in his eyes. "I'll take these away and lock them up again. . . . The usual enchantments . . ."

"Time to leave, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly, and as the little elf bobbed away bearing the boxes, Dumbledore gr

hrough oblivion and back to Dumbledore's office.

"Hepzibah Smith died two days after that little scene," said Dumbledore, resuming his seat and indicating that Harry

nistry of poisoning her mistress's evening cocoa by accident."

"No way!" said Harry angrily.

"I see we are of one mind," said Dumbledore. "Certainly, there are many similarities between this death and that of t

who had a clear memory of having caused the death —"

"Hokey confessed?"

"She remembered putting something in her mistress's cocoa that turned out not to be sugar, but a lethal and little-k

meant to do it, but being old and confused —"

"Voldemort modified her memory, just like he did with Morfin!"

"Yes, that is my conclusion too," said Dumbledore. "And, just as with Morfin, the Ministry was predisposed to suspect

"— because she was a house-elf," said Harry. He had rarely felt more in sympathy with the society Hermione had set

"Precisely," said Dumbledore. "She was old, she admitted to having tampered with the drink, and nobody at the Mini

time I traced her and managed to extract this memory, her life was almost over — but her memory, of course, prove

the locket.

"By the time Hokey was convicted, Hepzibah's family had realized that two of her greatest treasures were missing. It

aces, having always guarded her collection most jealously. But before they were sure beyond doubt that the cup and

and Burkes, the young man who had visited Hepzibah so regularly and charmed her so well, had resigned his post a

s surprised as anyone at his disappearance. And that was the last that was seen or heard of Tom Riddle for a very lo

"Now," said Dumbledore, "if you don't mind, Harry, I want to pause once more to draw your attention to certain poin

t was his first since he killed the Riddles, I do not know, but I think it was. This time, as you will have seen, he killed no

trophies that poor, besotted, old woman showed him. Just as he had once robbed the other children at his orphanage

with Hepzibah's cup and locket."

"But," said Harry, frowning, "it seems mad. . . . Risking everything, throwing away his job, just for those . . ."

"Mad to you, perhaps, but not to Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "I hope you will understand in due course exactly wh

not difficult to imagine that he saw the locket, at least, as rightfully his."

"The locket maybe," said Harry, "but why take the cup as well?"

"It had belonged to another of Hogwarts's founders," said Dumbledore. "I think he still felt a great pull toward the sch

arts history. There were other reasons, I think. . . . I hope to be able to demonstrate them to you in due course.

"And now for the very last recollection I have to show you, at least until you manage to retrieve Professor Slughorn's

ten years during which we can only guess at what Lord Voldemort was doing. . . ."

Harry got to his feet once more as Dumbledore emptied the last memory into the Pensieve.

"Whose memory is it?" he asked.

"Mine," said Dumbledore.

And Harry dived after Dumbledore through the shifting silver mass, landing in the very office he had just left. There v

e desk was Dumbledore, who looked very similar to the Dumbledore standing beside Harry, though both hands wer

e one difference between the present-day office and this one was that it was snowing in the past; bluish flecks were

ide ledge.

The younger Dumbledore seemed to be waiting for something, and sure enough, moments after their arrival, there v

Harry let out a hastily stifled gasp. Voldemort had entered the room. His features were not those Harry had seen em

not as snakelike, the eyes were not yet scarlet, the face not yet masklike, and yet he was no longer handsome Tom R

they were waxy and oddly distorted, and the whites of the eyes now had a permanently bloody look, though the pup

wearing a long black cloak, and his face was as pale as the snow glistening on his shoulders.

The Dumbledore behind the desk showed no sign of surprise. Evidently this visit had been made by appointment.

"Good evening, Tom," said Dumbledore easily. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you," said Voldemort, and he took the seat to which Dumbledore had gestured — the very seat, by the looks

had become headmaster," he said, and his voice was slightly higher and colder than it had been. "A worthy choice."

"I am glad you approve," said Dumbledore, smiling. "May I offer you a drink?"

"That would be welcome," said Voldemort. "I have come a long way."

Dumbledore stood and swept over to the cabinet where he now kept the Pensieve, but which then was full of bottles

f, he returned to the seat behind his desk.

"So, Tom . . . to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Voldemort did not answer at once, but merely sipped his wine.

"They do not call me 'Tom' anymore," he said. "These days, I am known as —"

"I know what you are known as," said Dumbledore, smiling pleasantly. "But to me, I'm afraid, you will always be Tom

am afraid that they never quite forget their charges' youthful beginnings."

He raised his glass as though toasting Voldemort, whose face remained expressionless. Nevertheless, Harry felt the

Voldemort's chosen name was a refusal to allow Voldemort to dictate the terms of the meeting, and Harry could tell

"I am surprised you have remained here so long," said Voldemort after a short pause. "I always wondered why a wiza

"Well," said Dumbledore, still smiling, "to a wizard such as myself, there can be nothing more important than passing on knowledge. I know, exactly, you once saw the attraction of teaching too."

"I see it still," said Voldemort. "I merely wondered why you — who are so often asked for advice by the Ministry, and who have been so successful — Three times at the last count, actually," said Dumbledore. "But the Ministry never attracted me as a career. Again, so I am not surprised. Voldemort inclined his head, unsmiling, and took another sip of wine. Dumbledore did not break the silence that stretched for a long time, for Voldemort to talk first.

"I have returned," he said, after a little while, "later, perhaps, than Professor Dippet expected . . . but I have returned, and I am not too young to have. I have come to you to ask that you permit me to return to this castle, to teach. I think you must be able to show and tell your students things they can gain from no other wizard."

Dumbledore considered Voldemort over the top of his own goblet for a while before speaking.

"Yes, I certainly do know that you have seen and done much since leaving us," he said quietly. "Rumors of your doing great things, half of them."

Voldemort's expression remained impassive as he said, "Greatness inspires envy, envy engenders spite, spite spawns further evil. You call it 'greatness,' what you have been doing, do you?" asked Dumbledore delicately.

"Certainly," said Voldemort, and his eyes seemed to burn red. "I have experimented; I have pushed the boundaries of magic."

"Of some kinds of magic," Dumbledore corrected him quietly. "Of some. Of others, you remain . . . forgive me . . . weak. For the first time, Voldemort smiled. It was a taut leer, an evil thing, more threatening than a look of rage.

"The old argument," he said softly. "But nothing I have seen in the world has supported your famous pronouncement. Perhaps you have been looking in the wrong places," suggested Dumbledore.

"Well, then, what better place to start my fresh researches than here, at Hogwarts?" said Voldemort. "Will you let me stay? I place myself and my talents at your disposal. I am yours to command."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "And what will become of those whom you command? What will happen to those who are loyal to you? Harry could tell that Voldemort had not expected Dumbledore to know this name; he saw Voldemort's eyes flash red.

"My friends," he said, after a moment's pause, "will carry on without me, I am sure."

"I am glad to hear that you consider them friends," said Dumbledore. "I was under the impression that they are more than that."

"You are mistaken," said Voldemort.

"Then if I were to go to the Hog's Head tonight, I would not find a group of them — Nott, Rosier, Mulciber, Dolohov — but I would find a group of men and women with you on a snowy night, merely to wish you luck as you attempted to secure a teaching post."

There could be no doubt that Dumbledore's detailed knowledge of those with whom he was traveling was even less than Harry's. "You are omniscient as ever, Dumbledore."

"Oh no, merely friendly with the local barmen," said Dumbledore lightly. "Now, Tom . . ."

Dumbledore set down his empty glass and drew himself up in his seat, the tips of his fingers together in a very characteristic gesture. "Let us speak openly. Why have you come here tonight, surrounded by henchmen, to request a job we both know you do not want?"

Voldemort looked coldly surprised. "A job I do not want? On the contrary, Dumbledore, I want it very much."

"Oh, you want to come back to Hogwarts, but you do not want to teach any more than you wanted to when you were a student here, is that so?"

Voldemort sneered. "If you do not want to give me a job —"

"Of course I don't," said Dumbledore. "And I don't think for a moment you expected me to. Nevertheless, you came here tonight, and I am not sure you will leave without a job."

Voldemort stood up. He looked less like Tom Riddle than ever, his features thick with rage. "This is your final word?"

"It is," said Dumbledore, also standing.

"Then we have nothing more to say to each other."

"No, nothing," said Dumbledore, and a great sadness filled his face. "The time is long gone when I could frighten you with my words. But I wish I could, Tom. . . . I wish I could. . . ."

For a second, Harry was on the verge of shouting a pointless warning: He was sure that Voldemort's hand had twitched. But Voldemort had turned away, the door was closing, and he was gone.

Harry felt Dumbledore's hand close over his arm again and moments later, they were standing together on almost the same spot. Dumbledore's hand was blackened and dead-looking once more.

"Why?" said Harry at once, looking up into Dumbledore's face. "Why did he come back? Did you ever find out?"

"I have ideas," said Dumbledore, "but no more than that."

"What ideas, sir?"

"I shall tell you, Harry, when you have retrieved that memory from Professor Slughorn," said Dumbledore. "When you have it, I shall tell you. . . . to both of us."

Harry was still burning with curiosity and even though Dumbledore had walked to the door and was holding it open for him, he did not go.

"Was he after the Defense Against the Dark Arts job again, sir? He didn't say. . . ."

"Oh, he definitely wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job," said Dumbledore. "The aftermath of our little meeting here, the fact that you were the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher for longer than a year since I refused the post to Lord Voldemort."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE UNKNOWABLE ROOM

Harry wracked his brains over the next week as to how he was to persuade Slughorn to hand over the true memory, the one that would tell him what Voldemort had done.

to doing what he did increasingly these days when at a loss: poring over his Potions book, hoping that the Prince would find so many times before.

"You won't find anything in there," said Hermione firmly, late on Sunday evening.

"Don't start, Hermione," said Harry. "If it hadn't been for the Prince, Ron wouldn't be sitting here now."

"He would if you'd just listened to Snape in our first year," said Hermione dismissively.

Harry ignored her. He had just found an incantation ("Sectumsempra!") scrawled in a margin above the intriguing word, but not to in front of Hermione. Instead, he surreptitiously folded down the corner of the page.

They were sitting beside the fire in the common room; the only other people awake were fellow sixth years. There had been a knock from dinner to find a new sign on the notice board that announced the date for their Apparition Test. Those who had turned up first of April, had the option of signing up for additional practice sessions, which would take place (heavily supervised) the following week. Ron had panicked on reading this notice; he had still not managed to Apparate and feared he would not be ready for the test a little more confident, but Harry, who would not be seventeen for another four months, could not take the test whether or not.

"At least you can Apparate, though!" said Ron tensely. "You'll have no trouble come July!"

"I've only done it once," Harry reminded him; he had finally managed to disappear and rematerialize inside his hoop. Having wasted a lot of time worrying aloud about Apparition, Ron was now struggling to finish a viciously difficult essay on the subject. Harry fully expected to receive low marks on his, because he had disagreed with Snape on the best way to tackle dementors. It was a pretty big thing to him now.

"I'm telling you, the stupid Prince isn't going to be able to help you with this, Harry!" said Hermione, more loudly. "The Prince isn't that smart; that's the Imperius Curse, which is illegal —"

"Yeah, I know that, thanks," said Harry, not looking up from the book. "That's why I'm looking for something different. Not something else, a potion or a spell. . . ."

"You're going about it the wrong way," said Hermione. "Only you can get the memory, Dumbledore says. That must mean the question of slipping him a potion, anyone could do that —"

"How d'you spell 'belligerent?'" said Ron, shaking his quill very hard while staring at his parchment. "It can't be B — U —"

"No, it isn't," said Hermione, pulling Ron's essay toward her. "And 'augury' doesn't begin O — R — G either. What kind of word is that?"

"It's one of Fred and George's Spell-Check ones . . . but I think the charm must be wearing off. . . ."

"Yes, it must," said Hermione, pointing at the title of his essay, "because we were asked how we'd deal with dementors. 'Roonil Wazlib' either."

"Ah no!" said Ron, staring horror-struck at the parchment. "Don't say I'll have to write the whole thing out again!"

"It's okay, we can fix it," said Hermione, pulling the essay toward her and taking out her wand.

"I love you, Hermione," said Ron, sinking back in his chair, rubbing his eyes wearily.

Hermione turned faintly pink, but merely said, "Don't let Lavender hear you saying that."

"I won't," said Ron into his hands. "Or maybe I will . . . then she'll ditch me . . ."

"Why don't you ditch her if you want to finish it?" asked Harry.

"You haven't ever chucked anyone, have you?" said Ron. "You and Cho just —"

"Sort of fell apart, yeah," said Harry.

"Wish that would happen with me and Lavender," said Ron gloomily, watching Hermione silently tapping each of his fingers on the page. "But the more I hint I want to finish it, the tighter she holds on. It's like going out with the giant squid."

"There," said Hermione, some twenty minutes later, handing back Ron's essay.

"Thanks a million," said Ron. "Can I borrow your quill for the conclusion?"

Harry, who had found nothing useful in the Half-Blood Prince's notes so far, looked around; the three of them were now up to bed cursing Snape and his essay. The only sounds were the crackling of the fire and Ron scratching out one last line. He closed the Half-Blood Prince's book, yawning, when —

Crack.

Hermione let out a little shriek; Ron spilled ink all over his freshly completed essay, and Harry said, "Kreacher!"

The house-elf bowed low and addressed his own gnarled toes.

"Master said he wanted regular reports on what the Malfoy boy is doing, so Kreacher has come to give —"

Crack.

Dobby appeared alongside Kreacher, his tea-cozy hat askew.

"Dobby has been helping too, Harry Potter!" he squeaked, casting Kreacher a resentful look. "And Kreacher ought to be helping too, their reports together!"

"What is this?" asked Hermione, still looking shocked by these sudden appearances. "What's going on, Harry?"

Harry hesitated before answering, because he had not told Hermione about setting Kreacher and Dobby to tail Malfoy.

"Well . . . they've been following Malfoy for me," he said.

"Night and day," croaked Kreacher.

"Dobby has not slept for a week, Harry Potter!" said Dobby proudly, swaying where he stood.

Hermione looked indignant.

"You haven't slept, Dobby? But surely, Harry, you didn't tell him not to —"

"No, of course I didn't," said Harry quickly. "Dobby, you can sleep, all right? But has either of you found out anything?"

"Master Malfoy moves with a nobility that befits his pure blood," croaked Kreacher at once. "His features recall the finest of the pure bloods."

"Draco Malfoy is a bad boy!" squeaked Dobby angrily. "A bad boy who — who —"

He shuddered from the tassel of his tea cozy to the toes of his socks and then ran at the fire, as though about to dive right at him around the middle and held him fast. For a few seconds Dobby struggled, then went limp.

"Thank you, Harry Potter," he panted. "Dobby still finds it difficult to speak ill of his old masters. . . ."

Harry released him; Dobby straightened his tea cozy and said defiantly to Kreacher, "But Kreacher should know that"

"Yeah, we don't need to hear about you being in love with Malfoy," Harry told Kreacher. "Let's fast forward to where I"

Kreacher bowed again, looking furious, and then said, "Master Malfoy eats in the Great Hall, he sleeps in a dormitory"

"Dobby, you tell me," said Harry, cutting across Kreacher. "Has he been going anywhere he shouldn't have?"

"Harry Potter, sir," squeaked Dobby, his great orblike eyes shining in the firelight, "the Malfoy boy is breaking no rule or regulation. He has been making regular visits to the seventh floor with a variety of other students, who keep watch for him"

"The Room of Requirement!" said Harry, smacking himself hard on the forehead with Advanced Potion-Making. "Hermione knows what's where he's doing . . . whatever he's doing! And I bet that's why he's been disappearing off the map — come to this"

"Maybe the Marauders never knew the room was there," said Ron.

"I think it'll be part of the magic of the room," said Hermione. "If you need it to be Unplottable, it will be."

"Dobby, have you managed to get in to have a look at what Malfoy's doing?" said Harry eagerly.

"No, Harry Potter, that is impossible," said Dobby.

"No, it's not," said Harry at once. "Malfoy got into our headquarters there last year, so I'll be able to get in and spy on"

"But I don't think you will, Harry," said Hermione slowly. "Malfoy already knew exactly how we were using the room, and he used the room to become the headquarters of the D.A., so it did. But you don't know what the room becomes when Malfoy"

"There'll be a way around that," said Harry dismissively. "You've done brilliantly, Dobby."

"Kreacher's done well too," said Hermione kindly; but far from looking grateful, Kreacher averted his huge, bloodshot eyes. "Kreacher, Kreacher will pretend he cannot hear —"

"Get out of it," Harry snapped at him, and Kreacher made one last deep bow and Disapparated. "You'd better go and"

"Thank you, Harry Potter, sir!" squeaked Dobby happily, and he too vanished.

"How good's this?" said Harry enthusiastically, turning to Ron and Hermione the moment the room was elf-free again.

"Yeah, it's great," said Ron glumly, who was attempting to mop up the sodden mass of ink that had recently been an attempt at phoning the ink off with her wand.

"But what's all this about him going up there with a 'variety of students'?" said Hermione. "How many people are in there? What's he doing. . . ."

"Yeah, that is weird," said Harry, frowning. "I heard him telling Crabbe it wasn't Crabbe's business what he was doing"

Harry's voice tailed away; he was staring at the fire.

"God, I've been stupid," he said quietly. "It's obvious, isn't it? There was a great vat of it down in the dungeon. . . . He could"

"Nicked what?" said Ron.

"Polyjuice Potion. He stole some of the Polyjuice Potion Slughorn showed us in our first Potions lesson. . . . There are a lot of people in there. . . . It's just Crabbe and Goyle as usual. . . . Yeah, it all fits!" said Harry, jumping up and starting to pace in front of the fireplace.

Even if he won't tell them what he's up to . . . but he doesn't want them to be seen lurking around outside the Room of Requirement like other people. . . . Those two girls I saw him with when he missed Quidditch — ha! Crabbe and Goyle!"

"Do you mean to say," said Hermione in a hushed voice, "that that little girl whose scales I repaired —?"

"Yeah, of course!" said Harry loudly, staring at her. "Of course! Malfoy must've been inside the room at the time, so she wouldn't let Malfoy not to come out, because there was someone there! And there was that girl who dropped the toadspawn too"

"He's got Crabbe and Goyle transforming into girls?" guffawed Ron. "Blimey . . . No wonder they don't look too happy now. . . ."

"Well, they wouldn't, would they, if he's shown them his Dark Mark?" said Harry.

"Hmmm . . . the Dark Mark we don't know exists," said Hermione skeptically, rolling up Ron's dried essay before it could be read.

"We'll see," said Harry confidently.

"Yes, we will," Hermione said, getting to her feet and stretching. "But, Harry, before you get all excited, I still don't think you should go in without knowing what's there first. And I don't think you should forget" — she heaved her bag onto her shoulder and got up, concentrating on getting that memory from Slughorn. Good night."

Harry watched her go, feeling slightly disgruntled. Once the door to the girls' dormitories had closed behind her he remembered. "What do you think?"

"Wish I could Disapparate like a house-elf," said Ron, staring at the spot where Dobby had vanished. "I'd have that Apparition lesson. . . . Harry did not sleep well that night. He lay awake for what felt like hours, wondering how Malfoy was using the Room of Requirement. The following day, for whatever Hermione said, Harry was sure that if Malfoy had been able to see the headquarters, it wouldn't be? A meeting place? A hideout? A storeroom? A workshop? Harry's mind worked feverishly and his dreams, when he woke up, were of a man who turned into Slughorn, who turned into Snape. . . ."

Harry was in a state of great anticipation over breakfast the following morning; he had a free period before Defense Against the Dark Arts. He went straight into the Room of Requirement. Hermione was rather ostentatiously showing no interest in his whispered plans for the night, but he thought she might be a lot of help if she wanted to.

"Look," he said quietly, leaning forward and putting a hand on the Daily Prophet, which she had just removed from a pile of books. "I haven't forgotten about Slughorn, but I haven't got a clue how to get that memory off him, and until I get a brain wa"

"Another ten points from Gryffindor," said Snape. "I would expect nothing more sophisticated from you, Ronald Weasley."

"No!" whispered Hermione, grabbing Harry's arm as he opened his mouth furiously. "There's no point, you'll just end up in detention."

"Now open your books to page two hundred and thirteen," said Snape, smirking a little, "and read the first two paragraphs." Ron was very subdued all through the class. When the bell sounded at the end of the lesson, Lavender (who had just approached) and abused Snape hotly for his jibe about Ron's Apparition, but this seemed to merely irritate Ron, and Harry.

"Snape's right, though, isn't he?" said Ron, after staring into a cracked mirror for a minute or two. "I dunno whether it's my Apparition."

"You might as well do the extra practice sessions in Hogsmeade and see where they get you," said Harry reasonably. "Anyway, then, if you're still not — you know — as good as you'd like to be, you can postpone the test, do it with me over the summer." The ghost of a girl had risen out of the toilet in a cubicle behind them and was now floating in midair, staring at them.

"Oh," she said glumly. "It's you two."

"Who were you expecting?" said Ron, looking at her in the mirror.

"Nobody," said Myrtle, picking moodily at a spot on her chin. "He said he'd come back and see me, but then you said he was a coward — and I haven't seen you for months and months. I've learned not to expect too much from boys."

"I thought you lived in that girls' bathroom?" said Harry, who had been careful to give the place a wide berth for some time.

"I do," she said, with a sulky little shrug, "but that doesn't mean I can't visit other places. I came and saw you in your bedroom."

"Vividly," said Harry.

"But I thought he liked me," she said plaintively. "Maybe if you two left, he'd come back again. . . . We had lots in common." And she looked hopefully toward the door.

"When you say you had lots in common," said Ron, sounding rather amused now, "d'you mean he lives in an S-bend in the corridor?"

"No," said Myrtle defiantly, her voice echoing loudly around the old tiled bathroom. "I mean he's sensitive, people but he's not afraid to show his feelings and cry!"

"There's been a boy in here crying?" said Harry curiously. "A young boy?"

"Never you mind!" said Myrtle, her small, leaky eyes fixed on Ron, who was now definitely grinning. "I promised I would tell you."

"— not the grave, surely?" said Ron with a snort. "The sewers, maybe . . ."

Myrtle gave a howl of rage and dived back into the toilet, causing water to slop over the sides and onto the floor. Goyle.

"You're right," he said, swinging his schoolbag back over his shoulder, "I'll do the practice sessions in Hogsmeade before the summer." And so the following weekend, Ron joined Hermione and the rest of the sixth years who would turn seventeen in time for the summer holidays; he missed making trips there, and it was a particularly fine spring day, one of the best of the year.

g them all get ready to go into the village; he missed making trips there, and it was a particularly fine spring day, one of the best of the year.

ver, he had decided to use the time to attempt another assault on the Room of Requirement.

"You'd do better," said Hermione, when he confided this plan to Ron and her in the entrance hall, "to go straight to Slytherin."

"I've been trying!" said Harry crossly, which was perfectly true. He had lagged behind after every Potions lesson that year, and always left the dungeon so fast that Harry had not been able to catch him. Twice, Harry had gone to his office and knocked on the door, but as sure he had heard the quickly stifled sounds of an old gramophone.

"He doesn't want to talk to me, Hermione! He can tell I've been trying to get him on his own again, and he's not going to talk to me!"

"Well, you've just got to keep at it, haven't you?"

The short queue of people waiting to file past Filch, who was doing his usual prodding act with the Secrecy Sensor, moved forward, and Harry overheard by the caretaker. He wished Ron and Hermione both luck, then turned and climbed the marble staircase to the Room of Requirement.

Once out of sight of the entrance hall, Harry pulled the Marauder's Map and his Invisibility Cloak from his bag. Having checked the map, he wore that I am up to no good," and scanned it carefully.

As it was Sunday morning, nearly all the students were inside their various common rooms, the Gryffindors in one tower, the Hufflepuffs in the basement near the kitchens. Here and there a stray person meandered around the library or the corridors. . . and there, alone in the seventh-floor corridor, was Gregory Goyle. There was no sign of the Room of Requirement, but outside it, the room was open, whether the map was aware of it or not. He therefore sprinted up the stairs, slowing down as he began to creep, very slowly, toward the very same little girl, clutching her heavy brass scales, that Hermione had so often seen behind her before bending very low and whispering, "Hello . . . you're very pretty, aren't you?"

Goyle gave a high-pitched scream of terror, threw the scales up into the air, and sprinted away, vanishing from sight as he ran around the corridor. Laughing, Harry turned to contemplate the blank wall behind which, he was sure, Draco Malfoy was hiding, but not daring to make an appearance. It gave Harry a most agreeable feeling of power as he tried to remember the last time he had seen Malfoy. Yet this hopeful mood did not last long. Half an hour later, having tried many more variations of his request to see Malfoy, Harry felt frustrated beyond belief; Malfoy might be just feet away from him, and there was still not the tiniest shred of success. Completely, Harry ran at the wall and kicked it.

"OUCH!"

He thought he might have broken his toe; as he clutched it and hopped on one foot, the Invisibility Cloak slipped off his head.

"Harry?"

He spun around, one-legged, and toppled over. There, to his utter astonishment, was Tonks, walking toward him as if she had just seen him.

"What're you doing here?" he said, scrambling to his feet again; why did she always have to find him lying on the floor?

"I came to see Dumbledore," said Tonks.

Harry thought she looked terrible: thinner than usual, her mouse-colored hair lank.

"His office isn't here," said Harry, "it's round the other side of the castle, behind the gargoye —"

"I know," said Tonks. "He's not there. Apparently he's gone away again."

"Has he?" said Harry, putting his bruised foot gingerly back on the floor. "Hey — you don't know where he goes, I suppose?"

"No," said Tonks.

"What did you want to see him about?"

"Nothing in particular," said Tonks, picking, apparently unconsciously, at the sleeve of her robe. "I just thought he might be getting hurt . . ."

"Yeah, I know, it's all been in the papers," said Harry. "That little kid trying to kill his —"

"The Prophet's often behind the times," said Tonks, who didn't seem to be listening to him. "You haven't had any letters from him?"

"No one from the Order writes to me anymore," said Harry, "not since Sirius —"

He saw that her eyes had filled with tears.

"I'm sorry," he muttered awkwardly. "I mean . . . I miss him, as well. . . ."

"What?" said Tonks blankly, as though she had not heard him. "Well . . . I'll see you around, Harry . . ."

And she turned abruptly and walked back down the corridor, leaving Harry to stare after her. After a minute or so, he tried to get into the Room of Requirement, but his heart was not in it. Finally, a hollow feeling in his stomach and the knowledge that he had abandoned the attempt and leave the corridor to Malfoy who, hopefully, would be too afraid to leave for some hours, he gave up.

He found Ron and Hermione in the Great Hall, already halfway through an early lunch.

"I did it — well, kind of!" Ron told Harry enthusiastically when he caught sight of him. "I was supposed to be Apparating to the Room of Requirement, but I got lost and ended up near Scrivenshaft's, but at least I moved!"

"Good one," said Harry. "How'd you do, Hermione?"

"Oh, she was perfect, obviously," said Ron, before Hermione could answer. "Perfect deliberation, divination, and despite the fact that she was in the Three Broomsticks after and you should've heard Twycross going on about her — I'll be surprised if he doesn't come back."

"And what about you?" asked Hermione, ignoring Ron. "Have you been up at the Room of Requirement all this time?"

"Yep," said Harry. "And guess who I ran into up there? Tonks!"

"Tonks?" repeated Ron and Hermione together, looking surprised.

"Yeah, she said she'd come to visit Dumbledore. . . ."

"If you ask me," said Ron once Harry had finished describing his conversation with Tonks, "she's cracking up a bit. Look at her!"

"It's a bit odd," said Hermione, who for some reason looked very concerned. "She's supposed to be guarding the school. What's she doing here when he's not even here?"

"I had a thought," said Harry tentatively. He felt strange about voicing it; this was much more Hermione's territory than his. "What if she's . . . in love with Sirius?"

Hermione stared at him.

"What on earth makes you say that?"

"I dunno," said Harry, shrugging, "but she was nearly crying when I mentioned his name . . . and her Patronus is a big dog. It's like . . . me . . . you know . . . him."

"It's a thought," said Hermione slowly. "But I still don't know why she'd be bursting into the castle to see Dumbledore."

"Goes back to what I said, doesn't it?" said Ron, who was now shoveling mashed potato into his mouth. "She's gone a bit mad. You're easily upset."

"And yet," said Hermione, coming out of her reverie, "I doubt you'd find a woman who sulked for half an hour because her boyfriend didn't come to the Christmas party, and the Mimbulus mimbletonia."

Ron scowled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AFTER THE BURIAL

Patches of bright blue sky were beginning to appear over the castle turrets, but these signs of approaching summer did not cheer Harry. He was determined to find out what Malfoy was doing, and in his efforts to start a conversation with Slughorn that might lead, somehow, to the truth about the events of the last few years, he had ended for decades.

"For the last time, just forget about Malfoy," Hermione told Harry firmly.

They were sitting with Ron in a sunny corner of the courtyard after lunch. Hermione and Ron were both clutching a Muggle book — the one about the history of the wizarding world — for they were taking their tests that very afternoon, but by and large the leaflets had not proved soothing. Ron gave a start and tried to hide behind Hermione as a girl came around the corner.

"It isn't Lavender," said Hermione wearily.

"Oh, good," said Ron, relaxing.

"Harry Potter?" said the girl. "I was asked to give you this."

"Thanks . . ."

Harry's heart sank as he took the small scroll of parchment. Once the girl was out of earshot he said, "Dumbledore said he was sorry about Sirius."

"Maybe he wants to check on how you're doing?" suggested Hermione, as Harry unrolled the parchment; but rather than

dy sprawl, very difficult to read due to the presence of large blotches on the parchment where the ink had run.

Dear Harry, Ron, and Hermione,

Aragog died last night. Harry and Ron, you met him, and you know how special he was. Hermione, I know you'd have I later this evening. I'm planning on doing it round dusk, that was his favorite time of day. I know you're not supposed , but I can't face it alone.

Hagrid

"Look at this," said Harry, handing the note to Hermione.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she said, scanning it quickly and passing it to Ron, who read it through looking increasingly in

"He's mental!" he said furiously. "That thing told its mates to eat Harry and me! Told them to help themselves! And no hairy body!"

"It's not just that," said Hermione. "He's asking us to leave the castle at night and he knows security's a million times t

"We've been down to see him by night before," said Harry.

"Yes, but for something like this?" said Hermione. "We've risked a lot to help Hagrid out, but after all — Aragog's dea

"— I'd want to go even less," said Ron firmly. "You didn't meet him, Hermione. Believe me, being dead will have impro

Harry took the note back and stared down at all the inky blotches all over it. Tears had clearly fallen thick and fast up

"Harry, you can't be thinking of going," said Hermione. "It's such a pointless thing to get detention for."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I know," he said. "I s'pose Hagrid'll have to bury Aragog without us."

"Yes, he will," said Hermione, looking relieved. "Look, Potions will be almost empty this afternoon, with us all off doin

"Fifty-seventh time lucky, you think?" said Harry bitterly.

"Lucky," said Ron suddenly. "Harry, that's it — get lucky!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Use your lucky potion!"

"Ron, that's — that's it!" said Hermione, sounding stunned. "Of course! Why didn't I think of it?"

Harry stared at them both. "Felix Felicis?" he said. "I dunno . . . I was sort of saving it. . . ."

"What for?" demanded Ron incredulously.

"What on earth is more important than this memory, Harry?" asked Hermione.

Harry did not answer. The thought of that little golden bottle had hovered on the edges of his imagination for some up with Dean, and Ron somehow being happy to see her with a new boyfriend, had been fermenting in the depths o etween sleeping and waking. . . .

"Harry? Are you still with us?" asked Hermione.

"Wha — ? Yeah, of course," he said, pulling himself together. "Well . . . okay. If I can't get Slughorn to talk this afternoo . . ."

"That's decided, then," said Hermione briskly, getting to her feet and performing a graceful pirouette. "Destination . . ."

"Oh, stop that," Ron begged her, "I feel sick enough as it is — quick, hide me!"

"It isn't Lavender!" said Hermione impatiently, as another couple of girls appeared in the courtyard and Ron dived be

"Cool," said Ron, peering over Hermione's shoulder to check. "Blimey, they don't look happy, do they?"

"They're the Montgomery sisters and of course they don't look happy, didn't you hear what happened to their little b

"I'm losing track of what's happening to everyone's relatives, to be honest," said Ron.

"Well, their brother was attacked by a werewolf. The rumor is that their mother refused to help the Death Eaters. Any dn't save him."

"He died?" repeated Harry, shocked. "But surely werewolves don't kill, they just turn you into one of them?"

"They sometimes kill," said Ron, who looked unusually grave now. "I've heard of it happening when the werewolf gets

"What was the werewolf's name?" said Harry quickly.

"Well, the rumor is that it was that Fenrir Greyback," said Hermione.

"I knew it — the maniac who likes attacking kids, the one Lupin told me about!" said Harry angrily.

Hermione looked at him bleakly.

"Harry, you've got to get that memory," she said. "It's all about stopping Voldemort, isn't it? These dreadful things tha

The bell rang overhead in the castle and both Hermione and Ron jumped to their feet, looking terrified.

"You'll do fine," Harry told them both, as they headed toward the entrance hall to meet the rest of the people taking

"And you too!" said Hermione with a significant look, as Harry headed off to the dungeons.

There were only three of them in Potions that afternoon: Harry, Ernie, and Draco Malfoy.

"All too young to Apparate just yet?" said Slughorn genially. "Not turned seventeen yet?"

They shook their heads.

"Ah well," said Slughorn cheerily, "as we're so few, we'll do something fun. I want you all to brew me up something an

"That sounds good, sir," said Ernie sycophantically, rubbing his hands together. Malfoy, on the other hand, did not cr

"What do you mean, 'something amusing'?" he said irritably.

"Oh, surprise me," said Slughorn airily.

Malfoy opened his copy of Advanced Potion-Making with a sulky expression. It could not have been plainer that he tl watching him over the top of his own book, Malfoy was begrudging the time he could otherwise be spending in the Was it his imagination, or did Malfoy, like Tonks, look thinner? Certainly he looked paler; his skin still had that grayish

ays. But there was no air of smugness, excitement, or superiority; none of the swagger that he had had on the Hogwarts given by Voldemort. . . . There could be only one conclusion, in Harry's opinion: The mission, whatever it was, was good. Cheered by this thought, Harry skimmed through his copy of Advanced Potion-Making and found a heavily corrected page that seemed not only to meet Slughorn's instructions, but which might (Harry's heart leapt as the thought struck him) put him over that memory if Harry could persuade him to taste some. . . .

"Well, now, this looks absolutely wonderful," said Slughorn an hour and a half later, clapping his hands together as he stirred the cauldron. "Euphoria, I take it? And what's that I smell? Mmmm . . . you've added just a sprig of peppermint, haven't you? I like that that would tend to counterbalance the occasional side effects of excessive singing and nose-tweaking. . . . I really do like it."

Harry pushed the Half-Blood Prince's book deeper into his bag with his foot.

"— it's just your mother's genes coming out in you!"

"Oh . . . yeah, maybe," said Harry, relieved.

Ernie was looking rather grumpy; determined to outshine Harry for once, he had most rashly invented his own potion to cure the tom of his cauldron. Malfoy was already packing up, sour-faced; Slughorn had pronounced his Hiccuping Solution most excellent. The bell rang and both Ernie and Malfoy left at once.

"Sir," Harry began, but Slughorn immediately glanced over his shoulder; when he saw that the room was empty but for him, he turned back.

"Professor — Professor, don't you want to taste my potion?" called Harry desperately.

But Slughorn had gone. Disappointed, Harry emptied the cauldron, packed up his things, left the dungeon, and walked back to the common room. Ron and Hermione returned in the late afternoon.

"Harry!" cried Hermione as she climbed through the portrait hole. "Harry, I passed!"

"Well done!" he said. "And Ron?"

"He — he just failed," whispered Hermione, as Ron came slouching into the room looking most morose. "It was really disappointing. If an eyebrow behind. . . . How did it go with Slughorn?"

"No joy," said Harry, as Ron joined them. "Bad luck, mate, but you'll pass next time — we can take it together."

"Yeah, I s'pose," said Ron grumpily. "But half an eyebrow! Like that matters!"

"I know," said Hermione soothingly, "it does seem really harsh. . . ."

They spent most of their dinner roundly abusing the Apparition examiner, and Ron looked fractionally more cheerful. Harry continued his continuing problem of Slughorn and the memory.

"So, Harry — you going to use the Felix Felicis or what?" Ron demanded.

"Yeah, I s'pose I'd better," said Harry. "I don't reckon I'll need all of it, not twelve hours' worth, it can't take all night. . . . I should do it."

"It's a great feeling when you take it," said Ron reminiscently. "Like you can't do anything wrong."

"What are you talking about?" said Hermione, laughing. "You've never taken any!"

"Yeah, but I thought I had, didn't I?" said Ron, as though explaining the obvious. "Same difference really. . . ."

As they had only just seen Slughorn enter the Great Hall and knew that he liked to take time over meals, they lingered. Harry would go to Slughorn's office once the teacher had had time to get back there. When the sun had sunk to the level of the battlements, and after checking carefully that Neville, Dean, and Seamus were all in the common room, sneaked up to the boy's dormitory. Harry took out the rolled-up socks at the bottom of his trunk and extracted the tiny, gleaming bottle.

"Well, here goes," said Harry, and he raised the little bottle and took a carefully measured gulp.

"What does it feel like?" whispered Hermione.

Harry did not answer for a moment. Then, slowly but surely, an exhilarating sense of infinite opportunity stole through him. . . . and getting the memory from Slughorn seemed suddenly not only possible, but positively easy. . . .

He got to his feet, smiling, brimming with confidence.

"Excellent," he said. "Really excellent. Right . . . I'm going down to Hagrid's."

"What?" said Ron and Hermione together, looking aghast.

"No, Harry — you've got to go and see Slughorn, remember?" said Hermione.

"No," said Harry confidently. "I'm going to Hagrid's, I've got a good feeling about going to Hagrid's."

"You've got a good feeling about burying a giant spider?" asked Ron, looking stunned.

"Yeah," said Harry, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his bag. "I feel like it's the place to be tonight, you know what I mean?"

"No," said Ron and Hermione together, both looking positively alarmed now.

"This is Felix Felicis, I suppose?" said Hermione anxiously, holding up the bottle to the light. "You haven't got another?"

"Essence of Insanity?" suggested Ron, as Harry swung his Cloak over his shoulders.

Harry laughed, and Ron and Hermione looked even more alarmed.

"Trust me," he said. "I know what I'm doing . . . or at least" — he strolled confidently to the door — "Felix does."

He pulled the Invisibility Cloak over his head and set off down the stairs, Ron and Hermione hurrying along behind him.

"What were you doing up there with her?" shrieked Lavender Brown, staring right through Harry at Ron and Hermione. She was entering behind him as he darted across the room away from them.

Getting through the portrait hole was simple; as he approached it, Ginny and Dean came through it, and Harry was a moment lost to them.

"Don't push me, please, Dean," she said, sounding annoyed. "You're always doing that, I can get through perfectly well."

The portrait swung closed behind Harry, but not before he had heard Dean make an angry retort. . . . His feeling of not having to creep along, for he met nobody on his way, but this did not surprise him in the slightest: This evening, he knew. Why he knew that going to Hagrid's was the right thing to do, he had no idea. It was as though the potion was illuminating his natural destination, he could not see where Slughorn came in, but he knew that he was going the right way to get that man. He had gotten to lock the front door. Beaming, Harry threw it open and breathed in the smell of clean air and grass for a moment. It was when he reached the bottom step that it occurred to him how very pleasant it would be to pass the vegetable garden. It seemed clear to Harry that this was a whim on which he should act, so he directed his feet immediately toward the garden. He realised, to find Professor Slughorn in conversation with Professor Sprout. Harry lurked behind a low stone wall, feeling awkward. "I do thank you for taking the time, Pomona," Slughorn was saying courteously, "most authorities agree that they are important." "Oh, I quite agree," said Professor Sprout warmly. "That enough for you?" "Plenty, plenty," said Slughorn, who, Harry saw, was carrying an armful of leafy plants. "This should allow for a few leeks — over-stews them. . . . Well, good evening to you, and many thanks again!" Professor Sprout headed off into the gathering darkness in the direction of her greenhouses, and Slughorn directed Harry. Seized with an immediate desire to reveal himself, Harry pulled off the Cloak with a flourish. "Good evening, Professor." "Merlin's beard, Harry, you made me jump," said Slughorn, stopping dead in his tracks and looking wary. "How did you get in?" "I think Filch must've forgotten to lock the doors," said Harry cheerfully, and was delighted to see Slughorn scowl. "I'll be reporting that man, he's more concerned about litter than proper security if you ask me. . . . But why are you out here?" "Well, sir, it's Hagrid," said Harry, who knew that the right thing to do just now was to tell the truth. "He's pretty upset about the trouble for him. . . ."

Slughorn's curiosity was evidently aroused. "Well, I can't promise that," he said gruffly. "But I know that Dumbledore is very very dreadful. . . ."

"Well, it's this giant spider, he's had it for years. . . . It lived in the forest. . . . It could talk and everything —"

"I heard rumors there were acromantulas in the forest," said Slughorn softly, looking over at the mass of black trees. "Yes," said Harry. "But this one, Aragog, the first one Hagrid ever got, it died last night. He's devastated. He wants comfort." "Touching, touching," said Slughorn absentmindedly, his large droopy eyes fixed upon the distant lights of Hagrid's castle. "Only just died it might not yet have dried out. . . . Of course, I wouldn't want to do anything insensitive if Hagrid is upset. I mean, it's almost impossible to get venom from an acromantula while it's alive. . . ."

Slughorn seemed to be talking more to himself than Harry now. ". . . seems an awful waste not to collect it . . . might get a hundred Galleons a pint. . . . To be frank, my salary is not large. And now Harry saw clearly what was to be done. "Well," he said, with a most convincing hesitancy, "well, if you wanted to come, Professor, Hagrid would probably be most pleased. . . ."

"Yes, of course," said Slughorn, his eyes now gleaming with enthusiasm. "I tell you what, Harry, I'll meet you down there tomorrow — well — not health — but we'll send it off in style, anyway, once it's buried. And I'll change my tie, this one is a little expensive. He bustled back into the castle, and Harry sped off to Hagrid's, delighted with himself.

"Yeh came," croaked Hagrid, when he opened the door and saw Harry emerging from the Invisibility Cloak in front of him. "Yeah — Ron and Hermione couldn't, though," said Harry. "They're really sorry." "Don't — don't matter . . . He'd've bin touched yeh're here, though, Harry. . . ."

Hagrid gave a great sob. He had made himself a black armband out of what looked like a rag dipped in boot polish, and was rubbing it on the elbow, which was the highest point of Hagrid he could easily reach. "Where are we burying him?" he asked. "The forest?" "Blimey, no," said Hagrid, wiping his streaming eyes on the bottom of his shirt. "The other spiders won't let me anywhere near his orders they didn't eat me! Can yeh believe that, Harry?"

The honest answer was "yes"; Harry recalled with painful ease the scene when he and Ron had come face-to-face with the giant spider. The only thing that stopped them from eating Hagrid. "Never bin an area o' the forest I couldn't go before!" said Hagrid, shaking his head. "It wasn't easy, gettin' Aragog's body out, see. . . . But I wanted ter give 'im a nice burial . . . a proper send-off . . ."

He broke into sobs again and Harry resumed the patting of his elbow, saying as he did so (for the potion seemed to be working) "Let me come down here, Hagrid."

"Not in trouble, are yeh?" said Hagrid, looking up, alarmed. "Yeh shouldn't be outta the castle in the evenin', I know it, but . . ."

"No, no, when he heard what I was doing he said he'd like to come and pay his last respects to Aragog too," said Harry. ". . . and he said he'd bring some bottles so we can drink to Aragog's memory. . . ."

"Did he?" said Hagrid, looking both astonished and touched. "Tha's — tha's righ' nice of him, that is, an' not turnin' yeh out!"

Slughorn before. . . . Comin' ter see old Aragog off, though, eh? Well . . . he'd've liked that, Aragog would. . . ."

Harry thought privately that what Aragog would have liked most about Slughorn was the ample amount of edible flesh. He went to the garden, where he saw the rather horrible sight of the enormous dead spider lying on its back outside, its legs curled and tail up. "Are we going to bury him here, Hagrid, in your garden?" "Jus' beyond the pumpkin patch, I thought," said Hagrid in a choked voice. "I've already dug the — yeh know — grave. . . . s, yeh know —"

His voice quivered and broke. There was a knock on the door, and he turned to answer it, blowing his nose on his green handkerchief, several bottles in his arms, and wearing a somber black cravat.

"Hagrid," he said, in a deep, grave voice. "So very sorry to hear of your loss."

"Tha's very nice of yeh," said Hagrid. "Thanks a lot. An' thanks fer not givin' Harry detention neither. . . ."

"Wouldn't have dreamed of it," said Slughorn. "Sad night, sad night. . . . Where is the poor creature?"

"Out here," said Hagrid in a shaking voice. "Shall we — shall we do it, then?"

The three of them stepped out into the back garden. The moon was glistening palely through the trees now, and its light fell on the pale, bony features of Aragog's body lying on the edge of a massive pit beside a ten-foot-high mound of freshly dug earth.

"Magnificent," said Slughorn, approaching the spider's head, where eight milky eyes stared blankly at the sky and two long, thin legs dangled down. He thought he heard the tinkle of bottles as Slughorn bent over the pincers, apparently examining the enormous hairy body.

"It's not ev'ryone appreciates how beau'iful they are," said Hagrid to Slughorn's back, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. "Aragog, Horace."

"Interested? My dear Hagrid, I revere them," said Slughorn, stepping back from the body. Harry saw the glint of a bottle as Slughorn reached for another, but once more, noticed nothing. "Now. . . shall we proceed to the burial?"

Hagrid nodded and moved forward. He heaved the gigantic spider into his arms and, with an enormous grunt, rolled it into the pit. A heavy thud. Hagrid started to cry again.

"Of course, it's difficult for you, who knew him best," said Slughorn, who like Harry could reach no higher than Hagrid's head. "But it's done. The words?"

He must have got a lot of good quality venom from Aragog, Harry thought, for Slughorn wore a satisfied smirk as he spoke. "Farewell, Aragog, king of arachnids, whose long and faithful friendship those who knew you won't forget! Thou shalt be remembered in the green-spun places of your forest home. May your many-eyed descendants ever flourish and your human friends find solace in the forest."

"Tha' was. . . tha' was. . . beau'iful!" howled Hagrid, and he collapsed onto the compost heap, crying harder than ever.

"There, there," said Slughorn, waving his wand so that the huge pile of earth rose up and then fell, with a muffled sound. "Let's get inside and have a drink. Get on his other side, Harry. . . . That's it. . . . Up you come, Hagrid. . . . Well done. . . ."

They deposited Hagrid in a chair at the table. Fang, who had been skulking in his basket during the burial, now came to his master's lap as usual. Slughorn uncorked one of the bottles of wine he had brought.

"I have had it all tested for poison," he assured Harry, pouring most of the first bottle into one of Hagrid's bucket-sized mugs. "I'll give you a new bottle after what happened to your poor friend Rupert."

Harry saw, in his mind's eye, the expression on Hermione's face if she ever heard about this abuse of house-elves, and he felt a little better.

"One for Harry. . . ." said Slughorn, dividing a second bottle between two mugs, ". . . and one for me. Well" — he raised his glass.

"Aragog," said Harry and Hagrid together.

Both Slughorn and Hagrid drank deeply. Harry, however, with the way ahead illuminated for him by Felix Felicis, knew better. He took a sip and then set the mug back on the table before him.

"I had him from an egg, yeh know," said Hagrid morosely. "Tiny little thing he was when he hatched. 'Bout the size of a chicken egg. Sweet," said Slughorn.

"Used ter keep him in a cupboard up at the school until. . . well. . . ."

Hagrid's face darkened and Harry knew why: Tom Riddle had contrived to have Hagrid thrown out of school, blamed for the death of the boy who lived; he was looking up at the ceiling, from which a number of brass pots hung, and also a long, silky skein of hair.

"That's never unicorn hair, Hagrid?"

"Oh, yeah," said Hagrid indifferently. "Gets pulled out of their tails, they catch it on branches an' stuff in the forest, yeh know."

"But my dear chap, do you know how much that's worth?"

"I use it fer bindin' on bandages an' stuff if a creature gets injured," said Hagrid, shrugging. "It's dead useful. . . . very so."

Slughorn took another deep draught from his mug, his eyes moving carefully around the cabin now, looking at the beautiful supply of oak-matured mead, crystalized pineapple, and velvet smoking jackets. He refilled Hagrid's mug and his own. He thought of the forest these days and how Hagrid was able to look after them all. Hagrid, becoming expansive under the influence of the drink, looked at Harry and entered happily into a long explanation of bowtruckle husbandry.

The Felix Felicis gave Harry a little nudge at this point, and he noticed that the supply of drink that Slughorn had brought was running low. He took off the Refilling Charm without saying the incantation aloud, but the idea that he might not be able to do it tonight was a relief. He looked at Hagrid and Slughorn (now swapping tales of the illegal trade in dragon eggs) he pointed his wand under the table and said "Lumos!"

After an hour or so, Hagrid and Slughorn began making extravagant toasts: to Hogwarts, to Dumbledore, to elf-made mead, to the boy who lived. "Harry Potter!" bellowed Hagrid, slopping some of his fourteenth bucket of wine down his chin as he drained it.

"Yes, indeed," cried Slughorn a little thickly, "Parry Otter, the Chosen Boy Who — well — something of that sort," he nodded. "Not long after this, Hagrid became tearful again and pressed the whole unicorn tail upon Slughorn, who pocketed it with a gasp."

And for a while after that, Hagrid and Slughorn were sitting side by side, arms around each other, singing a slow sad song. "Aaargh, the good die young," muttered Hagrid, slumping low onto the table, a little cross-eyed, while Slughorn continued to sing.

"Were yer mum an' dad, Harry. . . ."

Great fat tears oozed out of the corners of Hagrid's crinkled eyes again; he grasped Harry's arm and shook it.

"Bes' wiz and witchard o' their age I never knew. . . . terrible thing. . . . terrible thing. . . ."

And Odo the hero, they bore him back home
 To the place that he'd known as a lad,
 sang Slughorn plaintively.
 They laid him to rest with his hat inside out
 And his wand snapped in two, which was sad.
 ". . . terrible," Hagrid grunted, and his great shaggy head rolled sideways onto his arms and he fell asleep, snoring de-
 "Sorry," said Slughorn with a hiccup. "Can't carry a tune to save my life."
 "Hagrid wasn't talking about your singing," said Harry quietly. "He was talking about my mum and dad dying."
 "Oh," said Slughorn, repressing a large belch. "Oh dear. Yes, that was — was terrible indeed. Terrible . . . terrible . . ."
 He looked quite at a loss for what to say, and resorted to refilling their mugs.
 "I don't — don't suppose you remember it, Harry?" he asked awkwardly.
 "No — well, I was only one when they died," said Harry, his eyes on the flame of the candle flickering in Hagrid's hearth.
 My dad died first. Did you know that?"
 "I — I didn't," said Slughorn in a hushed voice.
 "Yeah . . . Voldemort murdered him and then stepped over his body toward my mum," said Harry.
 Slughorn gave a great shudder, but he did not seem able to tear his horrified gaze away from Harry's face.
 "He told her to get out of the way," said Harry remorselessly. "He told me she needn't have died. He only wanted me."
 "Oh dear," breathed Slughorn. "She could have . . . she needn't . . . That's awful. . . ."
 "It is, isn't it?" said Harry, in a voice barely more than a whisper. "But she didn't move. Dad was already dead, but she
 . . . but he just laughed. . . ."
 "That's enough!" said Slughorn suddenly, raising a shaking hand. "Really, my dear boy, enough . . . I'm an old man . . ."
 "I forgot," lied Harry, Felix Felicis leading him on. "You liked her, didn't you?"
 "Liked her?" said Slughorn, his eyes brimming with tears once more. "I don't imagine anyone who met her wouldn't have
 the most horrible thing. . . ."
 "But you won't help her son," said Harry. "She gave me her life, but you won't give me a memory."
 Hagrid's rumbling snores filled the cabin. Harry looked steadily into Slughorn's tear-filled eyes. The Potions master se-
 "Don't say that," he whispered. "It isn't a question . . . If it were to help you, of course . . . but no purpose can be served
 "It can," said Harry clearly. "Dumbledore needs information. I need information."
 He knew he was safe: Felix was telling him that Slughorn would remember nothing of this in the morning. Looking SL-
 "I am the Chosen One. I have to kill him. I need that memory."
 Slughorn turned paler than ever; his shiny forehead gleamed with sweat.
 "You are the Chosen One?"
 "Of course I am," said Harry calmly.
 "But then . . . my dear boy . . . you're asking a great deal . . . you're asking me, in fact, to aid you in your attempt to de-
 "You don't want to get rid of the wizard who killed Lily Evans?"
 "Harry, Harry, of course I do, but —"
 "You're scared he'll find out you helped me?"
 Slughorn said nothing; he looked terrified.
 "Be brave like my mother, Professor. . . ."
 Slughorn raised a pudgy hand and pressed his shaking fingers to his mouth; he looked for a moment like an enormo-
 "I am not proud . . ." he whispered through his fingers. "I am ashamed of what — of what that memory shows. . . . I th-
 "You'd cancel out anything you did by giving me the memory," said Harry. "It would be a very brave and noble thing to
 Hagrid twitched in his sleep and snored on. Slughorn and Harry stared at each other over the guttering candle. There
 to wait.
 Then, very slowly, Slughorn put his hand in his pocket and pulled out his wand. He put his other hand inside his cloak
 eyes, Slughorn touched the tip of his wand to his temple and withdrew it, so that a long, silver thread of memory car-
 istry stretched until it broke and swung, silvery bright, from the wand. Slughorn lowered it into the bottle where it coiled
 a trembling hand and then passed it across the table to Harry.
 "Thank you very much, Professor."
 "You're a good boy," said Professor Slughorn, tears trickling down his fat cheeks into his walrus mustache. "And you've
 've seen it. . . ."
 And he too put his head on his arms, gave a deep sigh, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

HORCRUXES

Harry could feel the Felix Felicis wearing off as he crept back into the castle. The front door had remained unlocked for
 avoided detection by diving sideways through one of his shortcuts. By the time he got up to the portrait of the Fat Lady
 to find her in a most unhelpful mood.
 "What sort of time do you call this?"
 "I'm really sorry — I had to go out for something important —"

"Well, the password changed at midnight, so you'll just have to sleep in the corridor, won't you?"

"You're joking!" said Harry. "Why did it have to change at midnight?"

"That's the way it is," said the Fat Lady. "If you're angry, go and take it up with the headmaster, he's the one who's tight."

"Fantastic," said Harry bitterly, looking around at the hard floor. "Really brilliant. Yeah, I would go and take it up with him —"

"He is here," said a voice behind Harry. "Professor Dumbledore returned to the school an hour ago."

Nearly Headless Nick was gliding toward Harry, his head wobbling as usual upon his ruff.

"I had it from the Bloody Baron, who saw him arrive," said Nick. "He appeared, according to the Baron, to be in good luck."

"Where is he?" said Harry, his heart leaping.

"Oh, groaning and clanking up on the Astronomy Tower, it's a favorite pastime of his —"

"Not the Bloody Baron — Dumbledore!"

"Oh — in his office," said Nick. "I believe, from what the Baron said, that he had business to attend to before turning in."

"Yeah, he has," said Harry, excitement blazing in his chest at the prospect of telling Dumbledore he had secured the Fat Lady who was calling after him.

"Come back! All right, I lied! I was annoyed you woke me up! The password's still 'tapeworm!'"

But Harry was already hurtling back along the corridor and within minutes, he was saying "toffee éclairs" to Dumbledore as he descended the spiral staircase.

"Enter," said Dumbledore when Harry knocked. He sounded exhausted.

Harry pushed open the door. There was Dumbledore's office, looking the same as ever, but with black, star-strewn snow on the floor.

"Good gracious, Harry," said Dumbledore in surprise. "To what do I owe this very late pleasure?"

"Sir — I've got it. I've got the memory from Slughorn."

Harry pulled out the tiny glass bottle and showed it to Dumbledore. For a moment or two, the headmaster looked startled.

"Harry, this is spectacular news! Very well done indeed! I knew you could do it!"

All thought of the lateness of the hour apparently forgotten, he hurried around his desk, took the bottle with Slughorn's memory and put it where he kept the Pensieve.

"And now," said Dumbledore, placing the stone basin upon his desk and emptying the contents of the bottle into it. "Now, Harry, tell me what you know."

Harry bowed obediently over the Pensieve and felt his feet leave the office floor. . . . Once again he fell through darkness.

There was the much younger Slughorn, with his thick, shiny, straw-colored hair and his gingery-blond mustache, sitting in a velvet pouffe, a small glass of wine in one hand, the other rummaging in a box of crystalized pineapples. Tom Riddle was there, too, sitting next to Slughorn with Tom Riddle in the midst of them, Marvolo's gold-and-black ring gleaming on his finger.

Dumbledore landed beside Harry just as Riddle asked, "Sir, is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?"

"Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you," said Slughorn, wagging his finger reprovingly at Riddle, though winking at the same time. "You're a clever boy, more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are."

Riddle smiled; the other boys laughed and cast him admiring looks.

"What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter — that's my favorite —"

Several of the boys tittered again.

"— I confidently expect you to rise to Minister of Magic within twenty years. Fifteen, if you keep sending me pineapples."

Tom Riddle merely smiled as the others laughed again. Harry noticed that he was by no means the eldest of the group.

"I don't know that politics would suit me, sir," he said when the laughter had died away. "I don't have the right kind of sense."

A couple of the boys around him smirked at each other. Harry was sure they were enjoying a private joke, undoubtedly about his famous ancestor.

"Nonsense," said Slughorn briskly, "couldn't be plainer you come from decent Wizarding stock, abilities like yours. No one could doubt it."

The small golden clock standing upon Slughorn's desk chimed eleven o'clock behind him and he looked around.

"Good gracious, is it that time already? You'd better get going, boys, or we'll all be in trouble. Lestranger, I want your essay."

One by one, the boys filed out of the room. Slughorn heaved himself out of his armchair and carried his empty glass. The headmaster was still standing there.

"Look sharp, Tom, you don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a prefect . . ."

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away. . . ."

"Sir, I wondered what you know about . . . about Horcruxes?"

Slughorn stared at him, his thick fingers absentmindedly caressing the stem of his wine glass.

"Project for Defense Against the Dark Arts, is it?"

But Harry could tell that Slughorn knew perfectly well that this was not schoolwork.

"Not exactly, sir," said Riddle. "I came across the term while reading and I didn't fully understand it."

"No . . . well . . . you'd be hard-pushed to find a book at Hogwarts that'll give you details on Horcruxes, Tom, that's very true."

"But you obviously know all about them, sir? I mean, a wizard like you — sorry, I mean, if you can't tell me, obviously"

It was very well done, thought Harry, the hesitancy, the casual tone, the careful flattery, none of it overdone. He, Harry Potter, was lioned out of reluctant people not to recognize a master at work. He could tell that Riddle wanted the information very, very much.

"I don't quite understand how that works, though, sir," said Riddle.

"Well, you split your soul, you see," said Slughorn, "and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then, even if one of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged. But of course, existence in such a form . . ."

"... few would want it, Tom, very few. Death would be preferable."

"How do you split your soul?"

"But how do you do it?"

"Encase? But how — ?"

"No, sir, of course not," said Riddle quickly. "I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to offend . . ."

"Yes, sir," said Riddle. "What I don't understand, though — just out of curiosity — I mean, would one Horcrux be much stronger, to have your soul in more pieces, I mean, for instance, isn't seven the most powerfully magical number?"

Slughorn looked deeply troubled now: He was gazing at Riddle as though he had never seen him plainly before, and on at all.

"Yes, sir, of course," said Riddle quickly.

"I won't say a word, sir," said Riddle, and he left, but not before Harry had glimpsed his face, which was full of that same old, old happiness that did not enhance his handsome features, but made them, somehow, more so.

When Harry landed back on the office floor Dumbledore was

Harry suddenly noticed that every single one of the old headmasters and headmistresses in the portraits around the t, red-nosed wizard had actually taken out an ear trumpet.

"Well, Harry," said Dumbledore, "I am sure you understood the significance of what we just heard. At the same age as he could to find out how to make himself immortal."

"A bit . . . or more," said Dumbledore. "You heard Voldemort: What he particularly wanted from Horace was an opinion. In the end, crux, what would happen to the wizard so determined to evade death that he would be prepared to murder many times over."

Dumbledore paused for a moment, marshaling his thoughts, and then said, "Four years ago, I received what I consid

"Where?" asked Harry. "How?"

"You handed it to me, Harry," said Dumbledore. "The diary, Riddle's diary, the one giving instructions on how to reop

"I don't understand, sir," said Harry.

"Well, although I did not see the Riddle who came out of the diary, what you described to me was a phenomenon I had never heard of. A mere memory, sapping the life out of the girl into whose hands it had fallen? No, something much more sinister."

t sure of it. The diary had been a Horcrux. But this raised as many questions as it answered.

"What intrigued and alarmed me most was that that diary had been intended as a weapon as much as a safeguard."

"I still don't understand," said Harry.

"Well, it worked as a Horcrux is supposed to work — in other words, the fragment of soul concealed inside it was kept

h of its owner. But there could be no doubt that Riddle really wanted that diary read, wanted the piece of his soul to be unleashed again."

"Well, he didn't want his hard work to be wasted," said Harry. "He wanted people to know he was Slytherin's heir, because..."

"Quite correct," said Dumbledore, nodding. "But don't you see, Harry, that if he intended the diary to be passed to, or at least to be seen by, somebody who was probably blasé about that precious fragment of his soul concealed within it. The point of a Horcrux is, as Professor Slughorn would say, to be passing it into somebody else's path and run the risk that they might destroy it — as indeed happened: That particular carelessness of his first would not be so detrimental. I did not wish to believe it, but nothing else seemed to make sense. Then you told me, two years later, that on the night that Voldemort returned to his body, he made a most illuminating discovery further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality.' That was what you told me he said. 'Further than any wizard before him. He was referring to his Horcruxes, Horcruxes in the plural, Harry, which I do not believe any other wizard would do. A wizard less human with the passing years, and the transformation he has undergone seemed to me to be only explicable in terms of a magical, or even a magical evil' . . ."

"So he's made himself impossible to kill by murdering other people?" said Harry. "Why couldn't he make a Sorcerer's Stone?"

"Well, we know that he tried to do just that, five years ago," said Dumbledore. "But there are several reasons why, I think, he failed. Lord Voldemort."

"While the Elixir of Life does indeed extend life, it must be drunk regularly, for all eternity, if the drinker is to maintain it. He is completely dependent on the Elixir, and if it ran out, or was contaminated, or if the Stone was stolen, he would die just like a mortal. I believe that he would have found the thought of being dependent, even on the Elixir, intolerable. Of course he was prepared to die — a life to which he was condemned after attacking you, but only to regain a body. Thereafter, I am convinced, he intended to live as a spirit, or at least as a shadow, if only he could regain a human form. He was already immortal, you see . . . or as close to immortal as any man could be. But now, Harry, armed with this information, the crucial memory you have succeeded in procuring for us, we are closer to the truth than we have been before. You heard him, Harry: 'Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces . . . is it not? Seven is the most powerfully magical number. Yes, I think the idea of a seven-part soul would greatly appeal to Lord Voldemort.' He made seven Horcruxes?" said Harry, horror-struck, while several of the portraits on the walls made similar noises — hidden — buried or invisible —"

"I am glad to see you appreciate the magnitude of the problem," said Dumbledore calmly. "But firstly, no, Harry, not all of his soul resides inside his regenerated body. That was the part of him that lived a spectral existence for so many years during which he was without a body. The last piece of soul will be the last that anybody wishing to kill Voldemort must attack — the piece that lives in his body." "But the six Horcruxes, then," said Harry, a little desperately, "how are we supposed to find them?"

"You are forgetting . . . you have already destroyed one of them. And I have destroyed another." "You have?" said Harry eagerly.

"Yes indeed," said Dumbledore, and he raised his blackened, burned-looking hand. "The ring, Harry. Marvolo's ring. A small price to pay for me the lack of seemly modesty — for my own prodigious skill, and for Professor Snape's timely action when I returned to the world to tell the tale. However, a withered hand does not seem an unreasonable exchange for a seventh of Voldemort's soul." "But how did you find it?"

"Well, as you now know, for many years I have made it my business to discover as much as I can about Voldemort's past. I stumbled across the ring hidden in the ruin of the Gaunts' house. It seems that once Voldemort had succeeded in creating his Horcruxes, he hid it, protected by many powerful enchantments, in the shack where his ancestors had once lived (Mum told me that I might one day take the trouble to visit the ruin, or that I might be keeping an eye open for traces of magical connections). "However, we should not congratulate ourselves too heartily. You destroyed the diary and I the ring, but if we are right, there are still five more Horcruxes out there. "And they could be anything?" said Harry. "They could be old tin cans or, I dunno, empty potion bottles. . . ." "You are thinking of Portkeys, Harry, which must be ordinary objects, easy to overlook. But would Lord Voldemort use such things? You are forgetting what I have showed you. Lord Voldemort liked to collect trophies, and he preferred objects with a personal history, his determination to carve for himself a startling place in magical history; these things suggest to me that Voldemort would choose objects worthy of the honor."

"The diary wasn't that special." "The diary, as you have said yourself, was proof that he was the Heir of Slytherin; I am sure that Voldemort considered it a most precious object. "So, the other Horcruxes?" said Harry. "Do you think you know what they are, sir?"

"I can only guess," said Dumbledore. "For the reasons I have already given, I believe that Lord Voldemort would prefer to have a large number of small objects, rather than a few large ones. Therefore I have been trawling back through Voldemort's past to see if I can find evidence that such artifacts have disappeared around the time of his escape from Azkaban. "The locket!" said Harry loudly. "Hufflepuff's cup!"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, smiling, "I would be prepared to bet — perhaps not my other hand — but a couple of fingers. I am sure that he would be willing to hazard a guess that, having secured objects owned by Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. Four objects from the four founders would, I am sure, have exerted a powerful influence. I am confident, however, that the only known relic of Ravenclaw's. I am confident, however, that the only known relic of Gryffindor remains in the hands of the Hogwarts staff. Dumbledore pointed his blackened fingers to the wall behind him, where a ruby-encrusted sword reposed within a glass case. "Do you think that's why he really wanted to come back to Hogwarts, sir?" said Harry. "To try and find something from the past?" "My thoughts precisely," said Dumbledore. "But unfortunately, that does not advance us much further, for he was too clever to do that. I am forced to conclude that he never fulfilled his ambition of collecting four founders' objects. He definitely had two."

now."

"Even if he got something of Ravenclaw's or of Gryffindor's, that leaves a sixth Horcrux," said Harry, counting on his fingers. "I don't think so," said Dumbledore. "I think I know what the sixth Horcrux is. I wonder what you will say when I confess it's the snake, Nagini?"

"The snake?" said Harry, startled. "You can use animals as Horcruxes?"

"Well, it is inadvisable to do so," said Dumbledore, "because to confide a part of your soul to something that can think for itself is to risk the loss of a part of yourself. However, if my calculations are correct, Voldemort was still at least one Horcrux short of his goal of six when he entered your world."

"He seems to have reserved the process of making Horcruxes for particularly significant deaths. You would certainly understand the danger the prophecy had outlined. He believed he was making himself invincible. I am sure that he was intend

"As we know, he failed. After an interval of some years, however, he used Nagini to kill an old Muggle man, and it might be said that he was a Slytherin to the end. She underlines the Slytherin connection, which enhances Lord Voldemort's mystique; I think he is perhaps as fond of her as she is of him. He is a man of great power, and he seems to have an unusual amount of control over her, even for a Parselmouth."

"So," said Harry, "the diary's gone, the ring's gone. The cup, the locket, and the snake are still intact, and you think the Andor's?"

"An admirably succinct and accurate summary, yes," said Dumbledore, bowing his head.

"So . . . are you still looking for them, sir? Is that where you've been going when you've been leaving the school?"

"Correct," said Dumbledore. "I have been looking for a very long time. I think . . . perhaps . . . I may be close to finding

"And if you do," said Harry quickly, "can I come with you and help get rid of it?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry very intently for a moment before saying, "Yes, I think so."

"I can?" said Harry, thoroughly taken aback.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore, smiling slightly. "I think you have earned that right."

Harry felt his heart lift. It was very good not to hear words of caution and protection for once. The headmasters and dore's decision; Harry saw a few of them shaking their heads and Phineas Nigellus actually snorted.

"Does Voldemort know when a Horcrux is destroyed, sir? Can he feel it?" Harry asked, ignoring the portraits.

"A very interesting question, Harry. I believe not. I believe that Voldemort is now so immersed in evil, and these cruci feel as we do. Perhaps, at the point of death, he might be aware of his loss . . . but he was not aware, for instance,

out of Lucius Malfoy. When Voldemort discovered that the diary had been mutilated and robbed of all its powers, I said, "But I thought he meant Lucius Malfoy to smuggle it into Hogwarts?"

"Yes, he did, years ago, when he was sure he would be able to create

"No doubt he thought that Lucius would not dare do anything with the Horcrux other than guard it carefully, but he

gone for years and whom Lucius believed dead. Of course, Lucius did not know what the diary really was. I understood the diary's purpose was to keep the Secrets to reopen because it was cleverly enchanted. Had Lucius known he held a portion of his master's soul in his

— but instead he went ahead and carried out the old plan for his own ends: By planting the diary upon Arthur Weasley, he made the diary an incriminating magical object in one stroke. Ah, poor Lucius . . . what with Voldemort's fury about the fact that he threw

Harry sat in thought for a moment, then asked, "So if all of his Horcruxes are destroyed, Voldemort could be killed?"

Yes, I think so," said Dumbledore. "Without his Horcruxes, Voldemort will be a mortal man with a maimed and diminished body and beyond repair, his brain and his magical powers remain intact. It will take uncommon skill and power to kill a wizard without his Horcruxes."

"But I haven't got uncommon skill and power," said Harry, before he could stop himself.

"Yes, you have," said Dumbledore firmly. "You have a power that Voldemort has never had. You can —"

"I know!" said Harry impatiently. "I can love!" It was only with difficulty that he stopped himself adding, "Big deal!"

"Yes, Harry, you can love," said Dumbledore, who looked as though he knew perfectly well what Harry had just refrained from saying. "Love is a great and remarkable thing. You are still too young to understand how unusual you are, Harry."

"So, when the prophecy says that I'll have 'power the Dark Lord knows not,' it just means — love?" asked Harry, feeling a little better.

"Yes — just love," said Dumbledore. "But Harry, never forget that what the prophecy says is only significant because of the choices we make."

"But it comes to the same —"

"No, it doesn't!" said Dumbledore, sounding impatient now. Pointing at Harry with his black, withered hand, he said, "But," spluttered Harry, "but you said the prophecy means —"

"But," said Harry, bewildered, "but last year, you said one of us would have to kill the other."

"But," said Harry, bewildered, "but last year, you said one of us would have to kill the other —"

"Harry, Harry, only because Voldemort made a grave error, and acted on Professor Trelawney's words! If Voldemort had listened to me, he would have never tried to kill you! He would have never tried to kill you because of his own desire for revenge? Of course not! If he had not forced your mother to die for you, would he have given you a moment's peace? Voldemort himself created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much I love you? How much I love you?"

Don't you see? Voldemort himself created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much I love you, amongst their many victims, there is sure to be one who rises against them and strikes back! Voldemort is no different, he's longed for the prophecy, and he leapt into action with the result that he not only handicapped the man who

"But —"

It is essential that you understand this!" said Dumbledore, standing up and striding about the room, his glittering robes

But she's ditched Dean!
She's still Ron's sister.
I'm his best mate!
That'll make it worse.
If I talked to him first —
He'd hit you.

What if I don't care?
He's your best mate!

Harry barely noticed that they were climbing through the portrait hole into the sunny common room, and only vaguely aware, until Hermione cried, "Katie! You're back! Are you okay?"

Harry stared: It was indeed Katie Bell, looking completely healthy and surrounded by her jubilant friends.

"I'm really well!" she said happily. "They let me out of St. Mungo's on Monday, I had a couple of days at home with Mum, and she was telling me about McLaggen and the last match, Harry. . . ."

"Yeah," said Harry, "well, now you're back and Ron's fit, we'll have a decent chance of thrashing Ravenclaw, which means we can win the cup. . . ."

He had to put the question to her at once; his curiosity even drove Ginny temporarily from his brain. He dropped his book and hurriedly they were late for Transfiguration.

". . . that necklace . . . can you remember who gave it to you now?"

"No," said Katie, shaking her head ruefully. "Everyone's been asking me, but I haven't got a clue. The last thing I remember is being in Mungo's."

"You definitely went into the bathroom, then?" said Hermione.

"Well, I know I pushed open the door," said Katie, "so I suppose whoever Imperiused me was standing just behind it."

Mungo's. Listen, I'd better go, I wouldn't put it past McGonagall to give me lines even if it is my first day back. . . ."

She caught up her bag and books and hurried after her friends, leaving Harry, Ron, and Hermione to sit down at a table.

"So it must have been a girl or a woman who gave Katie the necklace," said Hermione, "to be in the ladies' bathroom."

"Or someone who looked like a girl or a woman," said Harry. "Don't forget, there was a cauldron full of Polyjuice Potions in the Room of Requirement."

In his mind's eye, he watched a parade of Crabbes and Goyles prance past, all transformed into girls.

"I think I'm going to take another swig of Felix," said Harry, "and have a go at the Room of Requirement again."

"That would be a complete waste of potion," said Hermione flatly, putting down the copy of Spellman's Syllabary she had just bought.

The situation with Slughorn was different; you always had the ability to persuade him, you just needed to tweak the right powerful enchantment, though. Don't go wasting the rest of that potion! You'll need all the luck you can get if Dumbledore's going to be a disaster.

whisper.

"Couldn't we make some more?" Ron asked Harry, ignoring Hermione. "It'd be great to have a stock of it. . . . Have a lot of it."

Harry pulled his copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag and looked up Felix Felicis.

"Blimey, it's seriously complicated," he said, running an eye down the list of ingredients. "And it takes six months . . . to brew."

"Typical," said Ron.

Harry was about to put his book away again when he noticed the corner of a page folded down; turning to it, he saw that he had read a few weeks previously. He had still not found out what it did, mainly because he did not want to test it around Hermione. He had come up behind him unawares.

The only person who was not particularly pleased to see Katie Bell back at school was Dean Thomas, because he would not stoically enough when Harry told him, merely grunting and shrugging, but Harry had the distinct feeling as he walked back.

The following fortnight saw the best Quidditch practices Harry had known as Captain. His team was so pleased to be flying extremely well.

Ginny did not seem at all upset about the breakup with Dean; on the contrary, she was the life and soul of the team. She was the goalposts as the Quaffle sped toward him, or of Harry bellowing orders at McLaggen before being knocked out cold.

as glad to have an innocent reason to look at Ginny; he had received several more Bludger injuries during practice because of her.

The battle still raged inside his head: Ginny or Ron? Sometimes he thought that the post-Lavender Ron might not miss her.

ression when he had seen her kissing Dean, and was sure that Ron would consider it base treachery if Harry so much as mentioned her.

Yet Harry could not help himself talking to Ginny, laughing with her, walking back from practice with her; however much he tried to get her on her own.

It would have been ideal if Slughorn had given another of his little parties, for Ron would not be able to resist.

up. Once or twice Harry considered asking for Hermione's help, but he did not think he could stand seeing the smug look on her face.

spotted him staring at Ginny or laughing at her jokes. And to complicate matters, he had the nagging worry that if he did not, Ron and Hermione would.

and Ron were at least agreed on the fact that she was too popular for her own good.

All in all, the temptation to take another gulp of Felix Felicis was becoming stronger by the day, for surely this was a chance.

The balmy days slid gently through May, and Ron seemed to be there at Harry's shoulder every time he saw Ginny. He had to

ause Ron to realize that nothing would make him happier than his best friend and his sister falling for each other and leaving him out.

ere seemed no chance of either while the final Quidditch game of the season was looming; Ron wanted to talk tactics and strategy.

Ron was not unique in this respect; interest in the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw game was running extremely high throughout the school.

s still wide open. If Gryffindor beat Ravenclaw by a margin of three hundred points (a tall order, and yet Harry had no doubt about it).

pionship. If they won by less than three hundred points, they would come second to Ravenclaw; if they lost by a hundred or more, they would be

by more than a hundred, they would be in fourth place and nobody, Harry thought, would ever, ever let him forget the tom-of-the-table defeat in two centuries.

The run-up to this crucial match had all the usual features: members of rival Houses attempting to intimidate opponents being rehearsed loudly as they passed; the team members themselves either swaggering around enjoying all the hype. Somehow, the game had become inextricably linked in Harry's mind with success or failure in his plans for Ginny. A hundred points, the scenes of euphoria and a nice loud after-match party might be just as good as a hearty swig of Felix. In the midst of all his preoccupations, Harry had not forgotten his other ambition: finding out what Malfoy was up to on the Map, and as he was unable to locate Malfoy on it, deduced that Malfoy was still spending plenty of time within the castle. In getting inside the Room of Requirement, he attempted it whenever he was in the vicinity, but no matter how he repeated the incantation. A few days before the match against Ravenclaw, Harry found himself walking down to dinner alone from the common room, and Hermione having dashed off to see Professor Vector about a mistake she thought she might have made in her essay. On his usual detour along the seventh-floor corridor, checking the Marauder's Map as he went. For a moment he could not find the Room of Requirement again, but then he saw Malfoy's tiny, labeled dot standing in a boys' bathroom on the floor below. Harry only stopped staring at this unlikely coupling when he walked right into a suit of armor. The loud crash brought him up, he dashed down the marble staircase and along the passageway below. Outside the bathroom, he pressed his hand against the door.

Draco Malfoy was standing with his back to the door, his hands clutching either side of the sink, his white-blond head bowed. "Don't," crooned Moaning Myrtle's voice from one of the cubicles. "Don't . . . tell me what's wrong . . . I can help you. . . . No one can help me," said Malfoy. His whole body was shaking. "I can't do it. . . . I can't. . . . It won't work . . . and unless I can't. . . . And Harry realized, with a shock so huge it seemed to root him to the spot, that Malfoy was crying — actually crying. Malfoy gasped and gulped and then, with a great shudder, looked up into the cracked mirror and saw Harry staring at him. Malfoy wheeled around, drawing his wand. Instinctively, Harry pulled out his own. Malfoy's hex missed Harry by inches, he fell sideways, thought Levicorpus! and flicked his wand, but Malfoy blocked the jinx and raised his wand for another — "No! No! Stop it!" squealed Moaning Myrtle, her voice echoing loudly around the tiled room. "Stop! STOP!"

There was a loud bang and the bin behind Harry exploded; Harry attempted a Leg-Locker Curse that backfired off the wall. Myrtle, who screamed loudly; water poured everywhere and Harry slipped as Malfoy, his face contorted, cried, "Crucio!" "SECTUMSEMPRA!" bellowed Harry from the floor, waving his wand wildly.

Blood spurted from Malfoy's face and chest as though he had been slashed with an invisible sword. He staggered backward, his wand falling from his limp right hand.

"No —" gasped Harry.

Slipping and staggering, Harry got to his feet and plunged toward Malfoy, whose face was now shining scarlet, his whole body convulsing.

"No — I didn't —"

Harry did not know what he was saying; he fell to his knees beside Malfoy, who was shaking uncontrollably in a pool of blood. "MURDER! MURDER! MURDER! MURDER! MURDER! MURDER! MURDER!"

The door banged open behind Harry and he looked up, terrified: Snape had burst into the room, his face livid. Pushing his way through the water, he raced it over the deep wounds Harry's curse had made, muttering an incantation that sounded almost like song. The water stopped flowing. Snape's face and repeated his spell. Now the wounds seemed to be knitting.

Harry was still watching, horrified by what he had done, barely aware that he too was soaked in blood and water. Malfoy, who had performed his countercurse for the third time, he half-lifted Malfoy into a standing position.

"You need the hospital wing. There may be a certain amount of scarring, but if you take dittany immediately we might be able to save your face. He supported Malfoy across the bathroom, turning at the door to say in a voice of cold fury, "And you, Potter . . . You are a disgrace. It did not occur to Harry for a second to disobey. He stood up slowly, shaking, and looked down at the wet floor. The water was still. He could not even find it in himself to tell Moaning Myrtle to be quiet, as she continued to wail and sob with increasing volume. Snape returned ten minutes later. He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

"Go," he said to Myrtle, and she swooped back into her toilet at once, leaving a ringing silence behind her.

"I didn't mean it to happen," said Harry at once. His voice echoed in the cold, watery space. "I didn't know what that spell did. But Snape ignored this. "Apparently I underestimated you, Potter," he said quietly. "Who would have thought you knew so much about magic?"

"I — read about it somewhere."

"Where?"

"It was — a library book," Harry invented wildly. "I can't remember what it was called —"

"Liar," said Snape. Harry's throat went dry. He knew what Snape was going to do and he had never been able to prevent it. The bathroom seemed to shimmer before his eyes; he struggled to block out all thought, but try as he might, the face of Malfoy was in the forefront of his mind.

And then he was staring at Snape again, in the midst of this wrecked, soaked bathroom. He stared into Snape's black eyes, but —

"Bring me your schoolbag," said Snape softly, "and all of your schoolbooks. All of them. Bring them to me here. Now! There was no point arguing. Harry turned at once and splashed out of the bathroom. Once in the corridor, he broke through the crowd; they gaped at him, drenched in water and blood, but he answered none of the questions fired at him as he went. He felt stunned; it was as though a beloved pet had turned suddenly savage; what had the Prince been thinking to do to him? Would he tell Slughorn — Harry's stomach churned — how Harry had been achieving such good results in Potions?"

Harry so much . . . the book that had become a kind of guide and friend? Harry could not let it happen. . . . He could not.

"Where've you — ? Why are you soaking — ? Is that blood?"

Ron was standing at the top of the stairs, looking bewildered at the sight of Harry.

"I need your book," Harry panted. "Your Potions book. Quick . . . give it to me . . ."

"But what about the Half-Blood —"

"I'll explain later!"

Ron pulled his copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag and handed it over; Harry sprinted off past him and beyond the amazed looks of several people who had already finished their dinner, threw himself back out of the portrait hole, and ran.

He skidded to a halt beside the tapestry of dancing trolls, closed his eyes, and began to walk.

I need a place to hide my book. . . . I need a place to hide my book. . . . I need a place to hide my book. . . .

Three times he walked up and down in front of the stretch of blank wall. When he opened his eyes, there it was at last. He flung himself inside, and slammed it shut.

He gasped. Despite his haste, his panic, his fear of what awaited him back in the bathroom, he could not help but be amazed by the size of a large cathedral, whose high windows were sending shafts of light down upon what looked like a city with thousands of generations of Hogwarts inhabitants. There were alleyways and roads bordered by teetering piles of broken and discarded magic, or else hidden by castle-proud house-elves. There were thousands and thousands of books, no doubt, and Frisbees, some still with enough life in them to hover halfheartedly over the mountains of other forbidden items; there were oaks; there were what looked like dragon eggshells, corked bottles whose contents still shimmered evilly, several rusty swords. Harry hurried forward into one of the many alleyways between all this hidden treasure. He turned right past an enormous Vanishing Cabinet in which Montague had got lost the previous year, finally pausing beside a large cupboard that seemed to be one of the cupboard's creaking doors: It had already been used as a hiding place for something in a cage that had long since disappeared. Harry hid Lord Prince's book behind the cage and slammed the door. He paused for a moment, his heart thumping horribly, gazing at it again amidst all this junk? Seizing the chipped bust of an ugly old warlock from on top of a nearby crate, he stood it on the door, added a dusty old wig and a tarnished tiara on the statue's head to make it more distinctive, then sprinted back through the door, back out onto the corridor, where he slammed the door behind him, and it turned at once back into stone.

Harry ran flat-out toward the bathroom on the floor below, cramming Ron's copy of Advanced Potion-Making into his bag. He held out his hand wordlessly for Harry's schoolbag. Harry handed it over, panting, a searing pain in his chest, and went back to his room. One by one, Snape extracted Harry's books and examined them. Finally, the only book left was the Potions book, which he handed back.

"This is your copy of Advanced Potion-Making, is it, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, still breathing hard.

"You're quite sure of that, are you, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, with a touch more defiance.

"This is the copy of Advanced Potion-Making that you purchased from Flourish and Blotts?"

"Yes," said Harry firmly.

"Then why," asked Snape, "does it have the name 'Roonil Wazlib' written inside the front cover?"

Harry's heart missed a beat. "That's my nickname," he said.

"Your nickname," repeated Snape.

"Yeah . . . that's what my friends call me," said Harry.

"I understand what a nickname is," said Snape. The cold, black eyes were boring once more into Harry's; he tried not to look away. But he had never learned how to do it properly. . . .

"Do you know what I think, Potter?" said Snape, very quietly. "I think that you are a liar and a cheat and that you deserve to be punished. What do you think, Potter?"

"I — I don't agree, sir," said Harry, still refusing to look into Snape's eyes.

"Well, we shall see how you feel after your detentions," said Snape. "Ten o'clock Saturday morning, Potter. My office."

"But sir . . ." said Harry, looking up desperately. "Quidditch . . . the last match of the . . ."

"Ten o'clock," whispered Snape, with a smile that showed his yellow teeth. "Poor Gryffindor . . . fourth place this year. And he left the bathroom without another word, leaving Harry to stare into the cracked mirror, feeling sicker, he was than he had ever felt before.

"I won't say 'I told you so,'" said Hermione, an hour later in the common room.

"Leave it, Hermione," said Ron angrily.

Harry had never made it to dinner; he had no appetite at all. He had just finished telling Ron, Hermione, and Ginny what had happened. The news had traveled very fast: Apparently Moaning Myrtle had taken it upon herself to pop up in every bathroom in the hospital wing by Pansy Parkinson, who had lost no time in vilifying Harry far and wide, and Snape had told the story out of the common room to endure fifteen highly unpleasant minutes in the company of Professor McGonagall, who had laughed and laughed wholeheartedly at Snape's punishment of detention every Saturday until the end of term.

"I told you there was something wrong with that Prince person," Hermione said, evidently unable to stop herself. "And you didn't believe me."

"No, I don't think you were," said Harry stubbornly.

He was having a bad enough time without Hermione lecturing him; the looks on the Gryffindor team's faces when he had been punished were the worst punishment of all. He could feel Ginny's eyes on him now but did not meet them; he did not want to see disappointment. He was saying Seeker on Saturday and that Dean would be rejoining the team as Chaser in her place. Perhaps, if they won, Ginny would be happy. He thought went through Harry like an icy knife. . . .

"Harry," said Hermione, "how can you still stick up for that book when that spell —"

"Will you stop harping on about the book!" snapped Harry. "The Prince only copied it out! It's not like he was advising something that had been used against him!"

"I don't believe this," said Hermione. "You're actually defending —"

"I'm not defending what I did!" said Harry quickly. "I wish I hadn't done it, and not just because I've got about a dozen not even on Malfoy, but you can't blame the Prince, he hadn't written 'try this out, it's really good' — he was just making

"Are you telling me," said Hermione, "that you're going to go back —?"

"And get the book? Yeah, I am," said Harry forcefully. "Listen, without the Prince I'd never have won the Felix Felicis. I never have —"

"— got a reputation for Potions brilliance you don't deserve," said Hermione nastily.

"Give it a rest, Hermione!" said Ginny, and Harry was so amazed, so grateful, he looked up. "By the sound of it, Malfoy's got Harry had something good up his sleeve!"

"Well, of course I'm glad Harry wasn't cursed!" said Hermione, clearly stung. "But you can't call that Sectumsempra spell a cheat, seeing what this has done to your chances in the match —"

"Oh, don't start acting as though you understand Quidditch," snapped Ginny, "you'll only embarrass yourself."

Harry and Ron stared: Hermione and Ginny, who had always got on together very well, were now sitting with their arms crossed. Harry, then snatched up a book at random and hid behind it. Harry, however, little though he knew he deserved it, for the first time spoke again for the rest of the evening.

His lightheartedness was short-lived. There were Slytherin taunts to be endured next day, not to mention much anger. Harry had got himself banned from the final match of the season. By Saturday morning, whatever he might have told Hermione, the world to be walking down to the Quidditch pitch with Ron, Ginny, and the others. It was almost unbearable to turn a corner and see all of them wearing rosettes and hats and brandishing banners and scarves, to descend the stone steps into the dungeons, to be separated, knowing that he would not be able to hear a word of commentary or a cheer or groan.

"Ah, Potter," said Snape, when Harry had knocked on his door and entered the unpleasantly familiar office that Snape had made so dimly lit as ever and the same slimy dead objects were suspended in colored potions all around the walls. Ominously, the candles were clearly supposed to sit; they had an aura of tedious, hard, and pointless work about them.

"Mr. Filch has been looking for someone to clear out these old files," said Snape softly. "They are the records of other students who have grown faint, or the cards have suffered damage from mice, we would like you to copy out the crimes and punishments and place them in the boxes. You will not use magic."

"Right, Professor," said Harry, with as much contempt as he could put into the last three syllables.

"I thought you could start," said Snape, a malicious smile on his lips, "with boxes one thousand and twelve to one thousand and thirteen, which should add interest to the task. Here, you see . . ."

He pulled out a card from one of the topmost boxes with a flourish and read, "'James Potter and Sirius Black. Apprehended. Sentence normal size. Double detention.'" Snape sneered. "It must be such a comfort to think that, though they are gone, a part of them remains." Harry felt the familiar boiling sensation in the pit of his stomach. Biting his tongue to prevent himself retaliating, he sat down. It was, as Harry had anticipated, useless, boring work, punctuated (as Snape had clearly planned) with the regular job of copying names, usually coupled together in various petty misdeeds, occasionally accompanied by those of Remus Lupin. As he copied sentences and punishments, he wondered what was going on outside, where the match would have just started . . . Ginny poked her head in. Harry glanced again and again at the large clock ticking on the wall. It seemed to be moving half as fast as a regular clock. It could not have been here for only half an hour . . . an hour . . . an hour and a half. . . .

Harry's stomach started rumbling when the clock showed half past twelve. Snape, who had not spoken at all since he had entered, said "I think that will do," he said coldly. "Mark the place you have reached. You will continue at ten o'clock next Saturday."

"Yes, sir."

Harry stuffed a bent card into the box at random and hurried out of the door before Snape could change his mind, not to return from the pitch, but all was quiet. . . . It was over, then. . . .

He hesitated outside the crowded Great Hall, then ran up the marble staircase; whether Gryffindor had won or lost, he did not know.

"Quid agis?" he said tentatively to the Fat Lady, wondering what he would find inside.

Her expression was unreadable as she replied, "You'll see."

And she swung forward.

A roar of celebration erupted from the hole behind her. Harry gaped as people began to scream at the sight of him; "We won!" yelled Ron, bounding into sight and brandishing the silver Cup at Harry. "We won! Four hundred and fifty points!" Harry looked around; there was Ginny running toward him; she had a hard, blazing look in her face as she threw her arms around him. Not worrying about the fact that fifty people were watching, Harry kissed her.

After several long moments — or it might have been half an hour — or possibly several sunlit days — they broke apart and there was an outbreak of nervous giggling. Harry looked over the top of Ginny's head to see Dean Thomas holding a book as if she might throw something. Hermione was beaming, but Harry's eyes sought Ron. At last he found him, still clutching the Cup, and rubbed over the head. For a fraction of a second they looked at each other, then Ron gave a tiny jerk of the head that Harry understood. The creature in his chest roaring in triumph, he grinned down at Ginny and gestured wordlessly out of the portrait hole. If they had time — they might discuss the match.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE SEER OVERHEARD

The fact that Harry Potter was going out with Ginny Weasley seemed to interest a great number of people, most of the time, rather than because he had been involved in horrific scenes of Dark Magic.

"You'd think people had better things to gossip about," said Ginny, as she sat on the common room floor, leaning against the wall. "You've got a hippogriff tattooed across your chest."

Ron and Hermione both roared with laughter. Harry ignored them.

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her it's a Hungarian Horntail," said Ginny, turning a page of the newspaper idly. "Much more macho."

"Thanks," said Harry, grinning. "And what did you tell her Ron's got?"

"A Pygmy Puff, but I didn't say where."

Ron scowled as Hermione rolled around laughing.

"Watch it," he said, pointing warningly at Harry and Ginny. "Just because I've given my permission doesn't mean I can't tell you off."

"Your permission," scoffed Ginny. "Since when did you give me permission to do anything? Anyway, you said yourself you were a Gryffindor."

"Yeah, I would," said Ron grudgingly. "And just as long as you don't start snogging each other in public —"

"You filthy hypocrite! What about you and Lavender, thrashing around like a pair of eels all over the place?" demanded Hermione.

But Ron's tolerance was not to be tested much as they moved into June, for Harry and Ginny's time together was becoming more and more difficult. She was therefore forced to study for hours into the night. On one such evening, when Ginny had retired to the library to supposedly finish his Herbology homework but in reality reliving a particularly happy hour he had spent down by the lake with her, she was therefore forced to study for hours into the night. On one such evening, when Ginny had retired to the library to supposedly finishing his Herbology homework but in reality reliving a particularly happy hour he had spent down by the lake with her, she was therefore forced to study for hours into the night.

"I want to talk to you, Harry."

"What about?" said Harry suspiciously. Only the previous day, Hermione had told him off for distracting Ginny when she was studying.

"The so-called Half-Blood Prince."

"Oh, not again," he groaned. "Will you please drop it?"

He had not dared to return to the Room of Requirement to retrieve his book, and his performance in Potions was suffering (though he was usually attributed this to Harry being lovesick). But Harry was sure that Snape had not yet given up hope of laying hands on the book. It was while Snape remained on the lookout.

"I'm not dropping it," said Hermione firmly, "until you've heard me out. Now, I've been trying to find out a bit about you."

"He didn't make a hobby of it —"

"He, he — who says it's a he?"

"We've been through this," said Harry crossly. "Prince, Hermione, Prince!"

"Right!" said Hermione, red patches blazing in her cheeks as she pulled a very old piece of newsprint out of her pocket. "Look at the picture!"

Harry picked up the crumbling piece of paper and stared at the moving photograph, yellowed with age; Ron leaned over his shoulder. She was not pretty; she looked simultaneously cross and sullen, with heavy brows and a long, pallid face. Underneath the hair was E HOGWARTS GOBSTONES TEAM.

"So?" said Harry, scanning the short news item to which the picture belonged; it was a rather dull story about inter-school chess.

"Her name was Eileen Prince. Prince, Harry."

They looked at each other, and Harry realized what Hermione was trying to say. He burst out laughing.

"No way."

"What?"

"You think she was the Half-Blood . . . ? Oh, come on."

"Well, why not? Harry, there aren't any real princes in the Wizarding world! It's either a nickname, a made-up title someone gave her, or she couldn't it? No, listen! If, say, her father was a wizard whose surname was Prince, and her mother was a Muggle, then she'd be a Half-Blood."

"Yeah, very ingenious, Hermione . . ."

"But it would! Maybe she was proud of being half a Prince!"

"Listen, Hermione, I can tell it's not a girl. I can just tell."

"The truth is that you don't think a girl would have been clever enough," said Hermione angrily.

"How can I have hung round with you for five years and not think girls are clever?" said Harry, stung by this. "It's the way you think. This girl hasn't got anything to do with it. Where did you get this anyway?"

"The library," said Hermione predictably. "There's a whole collection of old Prophets up there. Well, I'm going to find out who she was."

"Enjoy yourself," said Harry irritably.

"I will," said Hermione. "And the first place I'll look," she shot at him, as she reached the portrait hole, "is records of old Hogwarts."

Harry scowled after her for a moment, then continued his contemplation of the darkening sky.

"She's just never got over you outperforming her in Potions," said Ron, returning to his copy of One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi.

"You don't think I'm mad, wanting that book back, do you?"

"Course not," said Ron robustly. "He was a genius, the Prince. Anyway . . . without his bezoar tip . . ." He drew his finger to his lips. "I mean, I'm not saying that spell you used on Malfoy was great —"

"Nor am I," said Harry quickly.

"But he healed all right, didn't he? Back on his feet in no time."

"Yeah," said Harry; this was perfectly true, although his conscience squirmed slightly all the same. "Thanks to Snape."

"You still got detention with Snape this Saturday?" Ron continued.

"Yeah, and the Saturday after that, and the Saturday after that," sighed Harry. "And he's hinting now that if I don't get year."

He was finding these detentions particularly irksome because they cut into the already limited time he could have been with his friends. He was sure that whether Snape did not know this, for he was keeping Harry later and later every time, while making pointed asides about the importance of the duties and responsibilities it offered.

Harry was shaken from these bitter reflections by the appearance at his side of Jimmy Peakes, who was holding out a parchment. "Thanks, Jimmy . . . Hey, it's from Dumbledore!" said Harry excitedly, unrolling the parchment and scanning it. "He wa

They stared at each other.

"Blimey," whispered Ron. "You don't reckon . . . he hasn't found . . .?"

"Better go and see, hadn't I?" said Harry, jumping to his feet.

He hurried out of the common room and along the seventh floor as fast as he could, passing nobody but Peeves, who was busy in a routine sort of way and cackling loudly as he dodged Harry's defensive jinx. Once Peeves had vanished, there was no one else to be seen. Until curfew, most people had already returned to their common rooms.

And then Harry heard a scream and a crash. He stopped in his tracks, listening.

"How — dare — you — aaaaargh!"

The noise was coming from a corridor nearby; Harry sprinted toward it, his wand at the ready, hurtled around another head covered in one of her many shawls, several sherry bottles lying beside her, one broken.

"Professor —"

Harry hurried forward and helped Professor Trelawney to her feet. Some of her glittering beads had become entangled herself up on Harry's helping arm.

"What happened, Professor?"

"You may well ask!" she said shrilly. "I was strolling along, brooding upon certain dark portents I happen to have glimpsed. But Harry was not paying much attention. He had just noticed where they were standing: There on the right was the long, straight stretch of stone wall that concealed —

"Professor, were you trying to get into the Room of Requirement?"

"...omens I have been vouchsafed — what?" She looked suddenly shifty.

"The Room of Requirement," repeated Harry. "Were you trying to get in there?"

"I — well — I didn't know students knew about —"

"Not all of them do," said Harry. "But what happened? You screamed. . . . It sounded as though you were hurt. . . ."

"I — well," said Professor Trelawney, drawing her shawls around her defensively and staring down at him with her various personal items in the room. . . ." And she muttered something about "nasty accusations."

"Right," said Harry, glancing down at the sherry bottles. "But you couldn't get in and hide them?"

He found this very odd; the room had opened for him, after all, when he had wanted to hide the Half-Blood Prince's

"Oh, I got in all right," said Professor Trelawney, glaring at the wall. "But there was somebody already in there."

"Somebody in — ? Who?" demanded Harry. "Who was in there?"

"I have no idea," said Professor Trelawney, looking slightly taken aback at the urgency in Harry's voice. "I walked into e in all my years of hiding — of using the room, I mean."

"A voice? Saying what?"

"I don't know that it was saying anything," said Professor Trelawney. "It was . . . whooping."

“Whooping?”

"Gleefully," she said, nodding.

Harry stared at her.

"Was it male or female?"

"I would hazard a guess at male," said Professor Trelawney.

"And it sounded happy?"

"Very happy," said Professor Trelawney sniffily.

"As though it was celebrating?"

"Most definitely."

"And then — ?"

"And then I called out 'Who's there?'"

"You couldn't have found out who it was without asking?" Harry asked her, slightly frustrated.

"The Inner Eye," said Professor Trelawney with dignity, straightening her shawls and many strands of glittering beads.
oping voices."

"Right," said Harry hastily; he had heard about Professor Trelawney's Inner Eye all too often before. "And did the voice

"No, it did not," she said. "Everything went pitch-black and the next thing I knew, I was being hurled headfirst out of t

"And you didn't see that coming?" said Harry, unable to help himself.

"No, I did not, as I say, it was pitch —" She stopped and glared at him suspiciously.

"I think you'd better tell Professor Dumbledore," said Harry. "He ought to know Malfoy's celebrating — I mean, that's all." To his surprise, Professor Trelawney drew herself up at this suggestion, looking haughty.

"The headmaster has intimated that he would prefer fewer visits from me," she said coldly. "I am not one to press my luck. I will ignore the warnings the cards show —" Her bony hand closed suddenly around Harry's wrist. "Again and again, no more visits — underneath her shawls. — the lightning-struck tower," she whispered. "Calamity. Disaster. Coming nearer all the time."

"Right," said Harry again. "Well . . . I still think you should tell Dumbledore about this voice, and everything going dark."

"You think so?" Professor Trelawney seemed to consider the matter for a moment, but Harry could tell that she liked his advice.

"I'm going to see him right now," said Harry. "I've got a meeting with him. We could go together."

"Oh, well, in that case," said Professor Trelawney with a smile. She bent down, scooped up her sherry bottles, and disappeared into a nearby niche.

"I miss having you in my classes, Harry," she said soulfully as they set off together. "You were never much of a Seer . . . but I am sure you will be. Harry did not reply; he had loathed being the Object of Professor Trelawney's continual predictions of doom.

"I am afraid," she went on, "that the nag — I'm sorry, the centaur — knows nothing of cartomancy. I asked him — once — about the possibility of coming catastrophe? But he seemed to find me almost comical. Yes, comical!"

Her voice rose rather hysterically, and Harry caught a powerful whiff of sherry even though the bottles had been left behind.

"Perhaps the horse has heard people say that I have not inherited my great-great-grandmother's gift. Those rumors are true, aren't they, Harry? Would Dumbledore have let me teach at this great school, put so much trust in me all these years, if he had known that I was a fraud? Harry mumbled something indistinct.

"I will remember my first interview with Dumbledore," went on Professor Trelawney, in throaty tones. "He was deeply disappointed that I did not live in the Hog's Head, which I do not advise, incidentally — bedbugs, dear boy — but funds were low. Dumbledore did me the honor to tell me that, at first, I thought he seemed ill-disposed toward Divination . . . and I remember I was starting to feel . . ."

And now Harry was paying attention properly for the first time, for he knew what had happened then: Professor Trelawney's prediction of his life, the prophecy about him and Voldemort.

". . . but then we were rudely interrupted by Severus Snape!"

"What?"

"Yes, there was a commotion outside the door and it flew open, and there was that rather uncouth barman standing in the doorway, on the stairs, although I'm afraid that I myself rather thought he had been apprehended eavesdropping on my interview with the headmaster. And no doubt hoped to pick up tips! Well, after that, you know, Dumbledore seemed much more disposed to give me a chance. I appreciated the stark contrast between my own unassuming manners and quiet talent, compared to the pushing, thrusting of the other teachers. She looked back over her shoulder, having only just realized that Harry was no longer with her; he had stopped walking."

"Harry?" she repeated uncertainly.

Perhaps his face was white to make her look so concerned and frightened. Harry was standing stock-still as waves of memory came back to him, except the information that had been kept from him for so long. . . .

It was Snape who had overheard the prophecy. It was Snape who had carried the news of the prophecy to Voldemort, to Lily and James and their son. . . .

Nothing else mattered to Harry just now.

"Harry?" said Professor Trelawney again. "Harry — I thought we were going to see the headmaster together?"

"You stay here," said Harry through numb lips.

"But dear . . . I was going to tell him how I was assaulted in the Room of —"

"You stay here!" Harry repeated angrily.

She looked alarmed as he ran past her, around the corner into Dumbledore's corridor, where the lone gargoyle stood guard over the moving spiral staircase three steps at a time. He did not knock upon Dumbledore's door, he hammered; and the calm of the room.

Fawkes the phoenix looked around, his bright black eyes gleaming with reflected gold from the sunset beyond the window. He wore a long, black traveling cloak in his arms.

"Well, Harry, I promised that you could come with me."

For a moment or two, Harry did not understand; the conversation with Trelawney had driven everything else out of his mind.

"Come . . . with you . . . ?"

"Only if you wish it, of course."

"If I . . ."

And then Harry remembered why he had been eager to come to Dumbledore's office in the first place. "You've found him."

"I believe so."

Rage and resentment fought shock and excitement: For several moments, Harry could not speak.

"It is natural to be afraid," said Dumbledore.

"I'm not scared!" said Harry at once, and it was perfectly true; fear was one emotion he was not feeling at all. "Which is it?"

"I am not sure which it is — though I think we can rule out the snake — but I believe it to be hidden in a cave on the coast of Norway for a very long time: the cave in which Tom Riddle once terrorized two children from his orphanage on their annual visit."

"Yes," said Harry. "How is it protected?"

of the waves. No, I think it was only ever Tom Riddle and his youthful victims who visited this spot. No Muggle could and boats cannot approach the cliffs, the waters around them are too dangerous. I imagine that Riddle climbed down all children with him, probably for the pleasure of terrorizing them. I think the journey alone would have done it, don't you think?" Harry looked up at the cliff again and felt goose bumps.

"But his final destination — and ours — lies a little farther on. Come."

Dumbledore beckoned Harry to the very edge of the rock where a series of jagged niches made footholds leading down the cliff. It was a treacherous descent and Dumbledore, hampered slightly by his withered hand, moved slowly. The lower the he went, the salt spray hitting his face.

"Lumos," said Dumbledore, as he reached the boulder closest to the cliff face. A thousand flecks of golden light sparkled on the rock; the black wall of rock beside him was illuminated too.

"You see?" said Dumbledore quietly, holding his wand a little higher. Harry saw a fissure in the cliff into which dark water dripped.

"You will not object to getting a little wet?"

"No," said Harry.

"Then take off your Invisibility Cloak — there is no need for it now — and let us take the plunge."

And with the sudden agility of a much younger man, Dumbledore slid from the boulder, landed in the sea, and began to swim. Harry's face, his lit wand held in his teeth. Harry pulled off his Cloak, stuffed it into his pocket, and followed.

The water was icy; Harry's waterlogged clothes billowed around him and weighed him down. Taking deep breaths through his nose, he kept swimming. The shimmering, shrinking light now moving deeper into the cliff.

The fissure soon opened into a dark tunnel that Harry could tell would be filled with water at high tide. The slimy walls were lit by the passing light of Dumbledore's wand. A little way in, the passageway curved to the left, and Harry saw that it extended into the distance. He kept swimming, the tips of his benumbed fingers brushing the rough, wet rock.

Then he saw Dumbledore rising out of the water ahead, his silver hair and dark robes gleaming. When Harry reached him, water streaming from his soaking clothes, and emerged, shivering uncontrollably, into the still and freezing air. Dumbledore was standing in the middle of the cave, his wand held high as he turned slowly on the spot, examining the walls.

"Yes, this is the place," said Dumbledore.

"How can you tell?" Harry spoke in a whisper.

"It has known magic," said Dumbledore simply.

Harry could not tell whether the shivers he was experiencing were due to his spine-deep coldness or to the same awe that had gripped him on the spot, evidently concentrating on things Harry could not see.

"This is merely the antechamber, the entrance hall," said Dumbledore after a moment or two. "We need to penetrate deeper, and in our way, rather than those nature made. . . ."

Dumbledore approached the wall of the cave and caressed it with his blackened fingertips, murmuring words in a strange language. He walked right around the cave, touching as much of the rough rock as he could, occasionally pausing, running his fingers back and forth. Finally, his hand pressed flat against the wall.

"Here," he said. "We go on through here. The entrance is concealed."

Harry did not ask how Dumbledore knew. He had never seen a wizard work things out like this, simply by looking and touching. It was more often the marks of ineptitude than expertise.

Dumbledore stepped back from the cave wall and pointed his wand at the rock. For a moment, an arched outline appeared in the crack.

"You've done it!" said Harry through chattering teeth, but before the words had left his lips the outline had gone, leaving only a dark opening.

"Harry, I'm so sorry, I forgot," he said; he now pointed his wand at Harry and at once, Harry's clothes were as warm as a blanket.

"Thank you," said Harry gratefully, but Dumbledore had already turned his attention back to the solid cave wall. He did not touch it intently, as though something extremely interesting was written on it. Harry stayed quite still; he did not want to breathe on it. Dumbledore said quietly, "Oh, surely not. So crude."

"What is it, Professor?"

"I rather think," said Dumbledore, putting his uninjured hand inside his robes and drawing out a short silver knife of the type required to make payment to pass."

"Payment?" said Harry. "You've got to give the door something?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Blood, if I am not much mistaken."

"Blood?"

"I said it was crude," said Dumbledore, who sounded disdainful, even disappointed, as though Voldemort had fallen. "But you will have gathered, is that your enemy must weaken him- or herself to enter. Once again, Lord Voldemort fails to understand the subtlety of the matter. . . ."

"Yeah, but still, if you can avoid it . . ." said Harry, who had experienced enough pain not to be keen for more.

"Sometimes, however, it is unavoidable," said Dumbledore, shaking back the sleeve of his robes and exposing the forearm.

"Professor!" protested Harry, hurrying forward as Dumbledore raised his knife. "I'll do it, I'm —"

He did not know what he was going to say — younger, fitter? But Dumbledore merely smiled. There was a flash of silver and a shower of glistening drops.

"You are very kind, Harry," said Dumbledore, now passing the tip of his wand over the deep cut he had made in his own arm.

oy's wounds. "But your blood is worth more than mine. Ah, that seems to have done the trick, doesn't it?"

The blazing silver outline of an arch had appeared in the wall once more, and this time it did not fade away: The blood had fallen into what seemed total darkness.

"After me, I think," said Dumbledore, and he walked through the archway with Harry on his heels, lighting his own wand. An eerie sight met their eyes: They were standing on the edge of a great black lake, so vast that Harry could not make the other side was out of sight. A misty greenish light shone far away in what looked like the middle of the lake; it was reflected in the water. The light from the two wands were the only things that broke the otherwise velvety blackness, though their rays did not seem somehow denser than normal darkness.

"Let us walk," said Dumbledore quietly. "Be very careful not to step into the water. Stay close to me."

He set off around the edge of the lake, and Harry followed close behind him. Their footsteps made echoing, slapping sounds on the ground they walked, but the view did not vary: on one side of them, the rough cavern wall, on the other, the boundless darkness. It was that mysterious greenish glow. Harry found the place and the silence oppressive, unnerving.

"Professor?" he said finally. "Do you think the Horcrux is here?"

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore. "Yes, I'm sure it is. The question is, how do we get to it?"

"We couldn't . . . we couldn't just try a Summoning Charm?" Harry said, sure that it was a stupid suggestion. But he was determined to reach this place as soon as possible.

"Certainly we could," said Dumbledore, stopping so suddenly that Harry almost walked into him. "Why don't you do it?"

"Me? Oh . . . okay . . ."

Harry had not expected this, but cleared his throat and said loudly, wand aloft, "Accio Horcrux!"

With a noise like an explosion, something very large and pale erupted out of the dark water some twenty feet away; it came with a rushing splash that made great, deep ripples on the mirrored surface. Harry leapt backward in shock and hit the wall.

"What was that?"

"Something, I think, that is ready to respond should we attempt to seize the Horcrux."

Harry looked back at the water. The surface of the lake was once more shining black glass: The ripples had vanished.

"Did you think that would happen, sir?"

"I thought something would happen if we made an obvious attempt to get our hands on the Horcrux. That was a very obvious attempt."

"But we don't know what the thing was," said Harry, looking at the sinisterly smooth water.

"What the things are, you mean," said Dumbledore. "I doubt very much that there is only one of them. Shall we walk?"

"Professor?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Do you think we're going to have to go into the lake?"

"Into it? Only if we are very unfortunate."

"You don't think the Horcrux is at the bottom?"

"Oh no . . . I think the Horcrux is in the middle."

And Dumbledore pointed toward the misty green light in the center of the lake.

"So we're going to have to cross the lake to get to it?"

"Yes, I think so."

Harry did not say anything. His thoughts were all of water monsters, of giant serpents, of demons, kelpies, and sprites.

"Aha," said Dumbledore, and he stopped again; this time, Harry really did walk into him; for a moment he toppled over and landed tightly around his upper arm, pulling him back. "So sorry, Harry, I should have given warning. Stand back against the wall."

Harry had no idea what Dumbledore meant; this patch of dark bank was exactly like every other bit as far as he could tell. He was running his hand, not over the rocky wall, but through the thin air, as though expecting to find something.

"Oho," said Dumbledore happily, seconds later. His hand had closed in midair upon something Harry could not see. The tips of Dumbledore's buckled shoes found the utmost edge of the rock rim. Keeping his hand clenched in midair, Dumbledore stepped back.

Immediately a thick coppery green chain appeared out of thin air, extending from the depths of the water into Dumbledore's hand. It slid through his fist like a snake, coiling itself on the ground with a clinking sound that echoed noisily off the rocky wall. Harry gasped as the ghostly prow of a tiny boat broke the surface, glowing as green as the chain, and floated, with Dumbledore standing on it.

"How did you know that was there?" Harry asked in astonishment.

"Magic always leaves traces," said Dumbledore, as the boat hit the bank with a gentle bump, "sometimes very distinct ones."

"Is . . . is this boat safe?"

"Oh yes, I think so. Voldemort needed to create a means to cross the lake without attracting the wrath of those creatures that guard it. To remove his Horcrux."

"So the things in the water won't do anything to us if we cross in Voldemort's boat?"

"I think we must resign ourselves to the fact that they will, at some point, realize we are not Lord Voldemort. Thus far, they have not found the boat."

"But why have they let us?" asked Harry, who could not shake off the vision of tentacles rising out of the dark water to seize them.

"Voldemort would have been reasonably confident that none but a very great wizard would have been able to find the way in."

sk what was, to his mind, the most unlikely possibility that somebody else would find it, knowing that he had set other people to look for it. He would see whether he is right."

Harry looked down into the boat. It really was very small.

"It doesn't look like it was built for two people. Will it hold both of us? Will we be too heavy together?"

Dumbledore chuckled.

"Voldemort will not have cared about the weight, but about the amount of magical power that crossed his lake. I rather think that only one wizard at a time will be able to sail in it."

"But then — ?"

"I do not think you will count, Harry: You are underage and unqualified. Voldemort would never have expected a sixth year's power compared to mine."

These words did nothing to raise Harry's morale; perhaps Dumbledore knew it, for he added, "Voldemort's mistake, but it underestimates youth. . . . Now, you first this time, and be careful not to touch the water."

Dumbledore stood aside and Harry climbed carefully into the boat. Dumbledore stepped in too, coiling the chain on his hands. He was unable to sit, but crouched, his knees jutting over the edge of the boat, which began to move at once. There was no sound of oars; it moved without their help, as though an invisible rope was pulling it onward toward the light in the center. Soon they were in the open lake, have been at sea except that there were no waves.

Harry looked down and saw the reflected gold of his wandlight sparkling and glittering on the black water as they passed over the grooves in the dark mirror. . . .

And then Harry saw it, marble white, floating inches below the surface.

"Professor!" he said, and his startled voice echoed loudly over the silent water.

"Harry?"

"I think I saw a hand in the water — a human hand!"

"Yes, I am sure you did," said Dumbledore calmly.

Harry stared down into the water, looking for the vanished hand, and a sick feeling rose in his throat.

"So that thing that jumped out of the water — ?"

But Harry had his answer before Dumbledore could reply; the wandlight had slid over a fresh patch of water and shown a pale face, his open eyes misted as though with cobwebs, his hair and his robes swirling around him like smoke.

"There are bodies in here!" said Harry, and his voice sounded much higher than usual and most unlike his own.

"Yes," said Dumbledore placidly, "but we do not need to worry about them at the moment."

"At the moment?" Harry repeated, tearing his gaze from the water to look at Dumbledore.

"Not while they are merely drifting peacefully below us," said Dumbledore. "There is nothing to be feared from a body in the darkness. Lord Voldemort, who of course secretly fears both, disagrees. But once again he reveals his own lack of wisdom. . . . ss, nothing more."

Harry said nothing; he did not want to argue, but he found the idea that there were bodies floating around them and that they were not dangerous.

"But one of them jumped," he said, trying to make his voice as level and calm as Dumbledore's. "When I tried to Summon it, it came out of the water. . . ."

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "I am sure that once we take the Horcrux, we shall find them less peaceable. However, like rain and warmth, which we shall therefore call to our aid should the need arise. Fire, Harry," Dumbledore added with a smile.

"Oh . . . right . . ." said Harry quickly. He turned his head to look at the greenish glow toward which the boat was still moving. He was not scared. The great black lake, teeming with the dead . . . It seemed hours and hours ago that he had met Professor Dumbledore. . . . He suddenly wished he had said a better good-bye to them . . . and he hadn't seen Ginny at all. . . .

"Nearly there," said Dumbledore cheerfully.

Sure enough, the greenish light seemed to be growing larger at last, and within minutes, the boat had come to a halt. . . ., but when he raised his illuminated wand he saw that they had reached a small island of smooth rock in the center of the lake.

"Careful not to touch the water," said Dumbledore again as Harry climbed out of the boat.

The island was no larger than Dumbledore's office, an expanse of flat dark stone on which stood nothing but the source of the light, close to. Harry squinted at it; at first, he thought it was a lamp of some kind, but then he saw that the light was coming from a small object on top of a pedestal.

Dumbledore approached the basin and Harry followed. Side by side, they looked down into it. The basin was full of a dark, shimmering liquid.

"What is it?" asked Harry quietly.

"I am not sure," said Dumbledore. "Something more worrisome than blood and bodies, however."

Dumbledore pushed back the sleeve of his robe over his blackened hand, and stretched out the tips of his burned fingers.

"Sir, no, don't touch — !"

"I cannot touch," said Dumbledore, smiling faintly. "See? I cannot approach any nearer than this. You try."

Staring, Harry put his hand into the basin and attempted to touch the potion. He met an invisible barrier that prevented him from doing so. . . .d, his fingers encountered nothing but what seemed to be solid and inflexible air.

"Out of the way, please, Harry," said Dumbledore. He raised his wand and made complicated movements over the surface of the liquid. Perhaps that the potion glowed a little brighter. Harry remained silent while Dumbledore worked, but after a while Dumbledore stopped.

"You think the Horcrux is in there, sir?"

"Oh yes." Dumbledore peered more closely into the basin. Harry saw his face reflected, upside down, in the smooth surface. It could not be penetrated by hand, Vanished, parted, scooped up, or siphoned away, nor can it be Transfigured, Charmed, or otherwise tampered with. Almost absentmindedly, Dumbledore raised his wand again, twirled it once in midair, and then caught the crystal goblet. "I can only conclude that this potion is supposed to be drunk."

"What?" said Harry. "No!"

"Yes, I think so: Only by drinking it can I empty the basin and see what lies in its depths."

"But what if — what if it kills you?"

"Oh, I doubt that it would work like that," said Dumbledore easily. "Lord Voldemort would not want to kill the person who could tell him where the Horcruxes are. Harry couldn't believe it. Was this more of Dumbledore's insane determination to see good in everyone?"

"Sir," said Harry, trying to keep his voice reasonable, "sir, this is Voldemort we're —"

"I'm sorry, Harry; I should have said, he would not want to immediately kill the person who reached this island," Dumbledore said. "It was good enough to find out how they managed to penetrate so far through his defenses and, most importantly of all, why they failed. Voldemort believes that he alone knows about his Horcruxes."

Harry made to speak again, but this time Dumbledore raised his hand for silence, frowning slightly at the emerald light. "Undoubtedly," he said, finally, "this potion must act in a way that will prevent me taking the Horcrux. It might paralyze me, or cause me pain I am distracted, or render me incapable in some other way. This being the case, Harry, it will be your job to make sure I can use my protesting mouth. You understand?"

Their eyes met over the basin, each pale face lit with that strange, green light. Harry did not speak. Was this why he had been given a potion that might cause him unendurable pain?

"You remember," said Dumbledore, "the condition on which I brought you with me?"

Harry hesitated, looking into the blue eyes that had turned green in the reflected light of the basin.

"But what if — ?"

"You swore, did you not, to follow any command I gave you?"

"Yes, but —"

"I warned you, did I not, that there might be danger?"

"Yes," said Harry, "but —"

"Well, then," said Dumbledore, shaking back his sleeves once more and raising the empty goblet, "you have my order."

"Why can't I drink the potion instead?" asked Harry desperately.

"Because I am much older, much cleverer, and much less valuable," said Dumbledore. "Once and for all, Harry, do I have your word?"

"Couldn't — ?"

"Do I have it?"

"But —"

"Your word, Harry."

"I — all right, but —"

Before Harry could make any further protest, Dumbledore lowered the crystal goblet into the potion. For a split second he saw the reflection of the goblet, but the crystal sank into the surface as nothing else had; when the glass was full to the brim, Dumbledore said, "Your good health, Harry."

And he drained the goblet. Harry watched, terrified, his hands gripping the rim of the basin so hard that his fingertips were white. "Professor?" he said anxiously, as Dumbledore lowered the empty glass. "How do you feel?"

Dumbledore shook his head, his eyes closed. Harry wondered whether he was in pain. Dumbledore plunged the glass back into the basin. In silence, Dumbledore drank three gobletsful of the potion. Then, halfway through the fourth goblet, he staggered and fell back, his breathing heavy.

"Professor Dumbledore?" said Harry, his voice strained. "Can you hear me?"

Dumbledore did not answer. His face was twitching as though he was deeply asleep, but dreaming a horrible dream. Harry reached forward and grasped the crystal cup, holding it steady.

"Professor, can you hear me?" he repeated loudly, his voice echoing around the cavern.

Dumbledore panted and then spoke in a voice Harry did not recognize, for he had never heard Dumbledore frightened. "I don't want . . . Don't make me . . ."

Harry stared into the whitened face he knew so well, at the crooked nose and half-moon spectacles, and did not know what to say. ". . . don't like . . . want to stop . . ." moaned Dumbledore.

"You . . . you can't stop, Professor," said Harry. "You've got to keep drinking, remember? You told me you had to keep drinking."

Hating himself, repulsed by what he was doing, Harry forced the goblet back toward Dumbledore's mouth and tipped it. "No . . ." he groaned, as Harry lowered the goblet back into the basin and refilled it for him. "I don't want to. . . I don't want to."

"It's all right, Professor," said Harry, his hand shaking. "It's all right, I'm here —"

"Make it stop, make it stop," moaned Dumbledore.

"Yes . . . yes, this'll make it stop," lied Harry. He tipped the contents of the goblet into Dumbledore's open mouth. Dumbledore screamed; the noise echoed all around the vast chamber, across the dead black water.

"No, no, no, no, I can't, I can't, don't make me, I don't want to. . ."

"It's all right, Professor, it's all right!" said Harry loudly, his hands shaking so badly he could hardly scoop up the sixth goblet.

thing's happening to you, you're safe, it isn't real, I swear it isn't real — take this, now, take this. . . ."

And obediently, Dumbledore drank, as though it was an antidote Harry offered him, but upon draining the goblet, he

"It's all my fault, all my fault," he sobbed. "Please make it stop, I know I did wrong, oh please make it stop and I'll never

"This will make it stop, Professor," Harry said, his voice cracking as he tipped the seventh glass of potion into Dumble

Dumbledore began to cower as though invisible torturers surrounded him; his flailing hand almost knocked the refill

hem, don't hurt them, please, please, it's my fault, hurt me instead . . ."

"Here, drink this, drink this, you'll be all right," said Harry desperately, and once again Dumbledore obeyed him, open

om head to foot.

And now he fell forward, screaming again, hammering his fists upon the ground, while Harry filled the ninth goblet.

"Please, please, please, no . . . not that, not that, I'll do anything . . ."

"Just drink, Professor, just drink . . ."

Dumbledore drank like a child dying of thirst, but when he had finished, he yelled again as though his insides were o

Harry scooped up a tenth gobletful of potion and felt the crystal scrape the bottom of the basin.

"We're nearly there, Professor. Drink this, drink it. . . ."

He supported Dumbledore's shoulders and again, Dumbledore drained the glass; then Harry was on his feet once m

than ever, "I want to die! I want to die! Make it stop, make it stop, I want to die!"

"Drink this, Professor. Drink this. . . ."

Dumbledore drank, and no sooner had he finished than he yelled, "KILL ME!"

"This — this one will!" gasped Harry. "Just drink this . . . It'll be over . . . all over!"

Dumbledore gulped at the goblet, drained every last drop, and then, with a great, rattling gasp, rolled over onto his f

"No!" shouted Harry, who had stood to refill the goblet again; instead he dropped the cup into the basin, flung himse

mbledore's glasses were askew, his mouth agape, his eyes closed. "No," said Harry, shaking Dumbledore, "no, you're

!" he cried, his wand pointing at Dumbledore's chest; there was a flash of red light but nothing happened. "Rennervat

Dumbledore's eyelids flickered; Harry's heart leapt.

"Sir, are you — ?"

"Water," croaked Dumbledore.

"Water," panted Harry. "Yes —"

He leapt to his feet and seized the goblet he had dropped in the basin; he barely registered the golden locket lying c

"Aguamenti!" he shouted, jabbing the goblet with his wand.

The goblet filled with clear water; Harry dropped to his knees beside Dumbledore, raised his head, and brought the j

to pant.

"But I had some — wait — Aguamenti!" said Harry again, pointing his wand at the goblet. Once more, for a second, cl

th, the water vanished again.

"Sir, I'm trying, I'm trying!" said Harry desperately, but he did not think that Dumbledore could hear him; he had rolle

sounded agonizing. "Aguamenti — Aguamenti — AGUAMENTI!"

The goblet filled and emptied once more. And now Dumbledore's breathing was fading. His brain whirling in panic, H

oldemort had planned it so . . .

He flung himself over to the edge of the rock and plunged the goblet into the lake, bringing it up full to the brim of ic

"Sir — here!" Harry yelled, and lunging forward, he tipped the water clumsily over Dumbledore's face.

It was the best he could do, for the icy feeling on his arm not holding the cup was not the lingering chill of the water.

to whom it belonged was pulling him, slowly, backward across the rock. The surface of the lake was no longer mirror

and hands were emerging from the dark water, men and women and children with sunken, sightless eyes were mov

"Petrificus Totalus!" yelled Harry, struggling to cling to the smooth, soaked surface of the island as he pointed his wa

backward into the water with a splash; he scrambled to his feet, but many more Inferi were already climbing onto th

lank, frosted eyes upon him, trailing waterlogged rags, sunken faces leering.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Harry bellowed again, backing away as he swiped his wand through the air; six or seven of them

rous!"

A few of them stumbled, one or two of them bound in ropes, but those climbing onto the rock behind them merely s

is wand, Harry yelled, "Sectumsempra! SECTUMSEMPRA!"

But though gashes appeared in their sodden rags and their icy skin, they had no blood to spill: They walked on, unfe

cked away still farther, he felt arms enclose him from behind, thin, fleshless arms cold as death, and his feet left the

surely, back to the water, and he knew there would be no release, that he would be drowned, and become one mor

But then, through the darkness, fire erupted: crimson and gold, a ring of fire that surrounded the rock so that the In

ot dare pass through the flames to get to the water. They dropped Harry; he hit the ground, slipped on the rock, and

and staring around.

Dumbledore was on his feet again, pale as any of the surrounding Inferi, but taller than any too, the fire dancing in h

nated the flames, like a vast lasso, encircling them all with warmth.

The Inferi bumped into each other, attempting, blindly, to escape the fire in which they were enclosed. . . .

Dumbledore scooped the locket from the bottom of the stone basin and stowed it inside his robes. Wordlessly, he g

Inferi seemed unaware that their quarry was leaving as Dumbledore led Harry back to the boat, the ring of fire movi

to the water's edge, where they slipped gratefully back into their dark waters.

Harry, who was shaking all over, thought for a moment that Dumbledore might not be able to climb into the boat; he was going into maintaining the ring of protective flame around them. Harry seized him and helped him back to his seat, so he could move back across the black water, away from the rock, still encircled by that ring of fire, and it seemed that the Inferi were coming back.

"Sir," panted Harry, "sir, I forgot — about fire — they were coming at me and I panicked —"

"Quite understandable," murmured Dumbledore. Harry was alarmed to hear how faint his voice was.

They reached the bank with a little bump and Harry leapt out, then turned quickly to help Dumbledore. The moment the ring of fire vanished, but the Inferi did not emerge again from the water. The little boat sank into the water once more; and Harry and Dumbledore were left on the bank.

oo. Dumbledore gave a great sigh and leaned against the cavern wall.

"I am weak. . . ." he said.

"Don't worry, sir," said Harry at once, anxious about Dumbledore's extreme pallor and by his air of exhaustion. "Don't worry, sir. And pulling Dumbledore's uninjured arm around his shoulders, Harry guided his headmaster back around the lake, to the protection of the stone archway.

"The protection was . . . after all . . . well-designed," said Dumbledore faintly. "One alone could not have done it. . . . You did it."

"Don't talk now," said Harry, fearing how slurred Dumbledore's voice had become, how much his feet dragged. "Save your strength."

"The archway will have sealed again. . . . My knife . . ."

"There's no need, I got cut on the rock," said Harry firmly. "Just tell me where. . . ."

"Here . . ."

Harry wiped his grazed forearm upon the stone: Having received its tribute of blood, the archway reopened instantly, and they stepped to the icy seawater that filled the crevice in the cliff.

"It's going to be all right, sir," Harry said over and over again, more worried by Dumbledore's silence than he had been before. "I'll rate us both back. . . . Don't worry. . . ."

"I am not worried, Harry," said Dumbledore, his voice a little stronger despite the freezing water. "I am with you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE LIGHTNING-STRUCK TOWER

Once back under the starry sky, Harry heaved Dumbledore onto the top of the nearest boulder and then to his feet. He concentrated harder than he had ever done upon his destination: Hogsmeade. Closing his eyes, gripping Dumbledore's arm, he felt the terrible, horrible compression.

He knew it had worked before he opened his eyes: The smell of salt, the sea breeze had gone. He and Dumbledore were in Hogsmeade. For one horrible moment Harry's imagination showed him more Inferi creeping toward him around the street, still, the darkness complete but for a few streetlamps and lit upper windows.

"We did it, Professor!" Harry whispered with difficulty; he suddenly realized that he had a searing stitch in his chest. "We did it!"

Dumbledore staggered against him. For a moment, Harry thought that his inexpert Apparition had thrown Dumbledore into the distance, but a distant light of a streetlamp.

"Sir, are you all right?"

"I've been better," said Dumbledore weakly, though the corners of his mouth twitched. "That potion . . . was no health tonic."

And to Harry's horror, Dumbledore sank onto the ground.

"Sir — it's okay, sir, you're going to be all right, don't worry —"

He looked around desperately for help, but there was nobody to be seen and all he could think was that he must soon get to Hogsmeade.

"We need to get you up to the school, sir. . . . Madam Pomfrey . . ."

"No," said Dumbledore. "It is . . . Professor Snape whom I need. . . . But I do not think . . . I can walk very far just yet. . . ."

"Right — sir, listen — I'm going to knock on a door, find a place you can stay — then I can run and get Madam —"

"Severus," said Dumbledore clearly. "I need Severus. . . ."

"All right then, Snape — but I'm going to have to leave you for a moment so I can —"

Before Harry could make a move, however, he heard running footsteps. His heart leapt: Somebody had seen, somebody was coming. He hurriedly turned to see a woman hurrying down the dark street toward them on high-heeled, fluffy slippers, wearing a silk dressing gown embroidered with flowers.

"I saw you Apparate as I was pulling my bedroom curtains! Thank goodness, thank goodness, I couldn't think what to do!"

She came to a halt, panting, and stared down, wide-eyed, at Dumbledore.

"He's hurt," said Harry. "Madam Rosmerta, can he come into the Three Broomsticks while I go up to the school and get Madam Pomfrey?"

"You can't go up there alone! Don't you realize — haven't you seen — ?"

"If you help me support him," said Harry, not listening to her, "I think we can get him inside —"

"What has happened?" asked Dumbledore. "Rosmerta, what's wrong?"

"The — the Dark Mark, Albus."

And she pointed into the sky, in the direction of Hogwarts. Dread flooded Harry at the sound of the words. . . . He turned to look at the sky.

There it was, hanging in the sky above the school: the blazing green skull with a serpent tongue, the mark Death Eaters used to mark the places where they had murdered. . . .

"When did it appear?" asked Dumbledore, and his hand clenched painfully upon Harry's shoulder as he struggled to keep his headmaster steady.

"Must have been minutes ago, it wasn't there when I put the cat out, but when I got upstairs —"

"We need to return to the castle at once," said Dumbledore. "Rosmerta" — and though he staggered a little, he seemed to steady himself —

"I've got a couple behind the bar," she said, looking very frightened. "Shall I run and fetch — ?"

"No, Harry can do it."

Harry raised his wand at once.

"Accio Rosmerta's Brooms!"

A second later they heard a loud bang as the front door of the pub burst open; two brooms had shot out into the street dead, quivering slightly at waist height.

"Rosmerta, please send a message to the Ministry," said Dumbledore, as he mounted the broom nearest him. "It might be . . . Harry, put on your Invisibility Cloak."

Harry pulled his Cloak out of his pocket and threw it over himself before mounting his broom: Madam Rosmerta was off from the ground and rose up into the air. As they sped toward the castle, Harry glanced sideways at Dumbledore, who seemed to have acted upon Dumbledore like a stimulant: He was bent low over his broom, his eyes fixed upon the castle in the distance. And Harry too looked ahead at the skull, and fear swelled inside him like a venomous bubble, compressing his lungs. How long had they been away? Had Ron, Hermione, and Ginny's luck run out by now? Was it one of them who had caught some other member of the D.A.? And if it was . . . he was the one who had told them to patrol the corridors, he had been responsible, again, for the death of a friend?

As they flew over the dark, twisting lane down which they had walked earlier, Harry heard, over the whistling of the wind, a voice again. He thought he understood why as he felt his broom shudder when they flew over the boundary wall into the grounds set around the castle so they could enter at speed. The Dark Mark was glittering directly above the Astronomy Tower — where was it there?

Dumbledore had already crossed the crenellated ramparts and was dismounting; Harry landed next to him seconds later. The ramparts were deserted. The door to the spiral staircase that led back into the castle was closed. There was no sound. "What does it mean?" Harry asked Dumbledore, looking up at the green skull with its serpent's tongue glinting evilly in the dark. "Professor?"

In the dim green glow from the Mark, Harry saw Dumbledore clutching at his chest with his blackened hand.

"Go and wake Severus," said Dumbledore faintly but clearly. "Tell him what has happened and bring him to me. Do not let him wait here."

"But —"

"You swore to obey me, Harry — go!"

Harry hurried over to the door leading to the spiral staircase, but his hand had only just closed upon the iron ring of the door when he looked around at Dumbledore, who gestured him to retreat. Harry backed away, drawing his wand as he did so. The door burst open and somebody erupted through it and shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

Harry's body became instantly rigid and immobile, and he felt himself fall back against the tower wall, propped like a statue. He did not know how it had happened — Expelliarmus was not a Freezing Charm —

Then, by the light of the Mark, he saw Dumbledore's wand flying in an arc over the edge of the ramparts and understood the condition he had taken to perform the spell had cost him the chance of defending himself.

Standing against the ramparts, very white in the face, Dumbledore still showed no sign of panic or distress. He merely watched as Draco Malfoy stepped forward, glancing around quickly to check that he and Dumbledore were alone. His eyes fell upon the Mark. "Who else is here?"

"A question I might ask you. Or are you acting alone?"

Harry saw Malfoy's pale eyes shift back to Dumbledore in the greenish glare of the Mark.

"No," he said. "I've got backup. There are Death Eaters here in your school tonight."

"Well, well," said Dumbledore, as though Malfoy was showing him an ambitious homework project. "Very good indeed."

"Yeah," said Malfoy, who was panting. "Right under your nose and you never realized!"

"Ingenious," said Dumbledore. "Yet . . . forgive me . . . where are they now? You seem unsupported."

"They met some of your guards. They're having a fight down below. They won't be long. . . . I came on ahead. I — I've got them!"

"Well, then, you must get on and do it, my dear boy," said Dumbledore softly.

There was silence. Harry stood imprisoned within his own invisible, paralyzed body, staring at the two of them, his ears ringing. And in front of him, Draco Malfoy did nothing but stare at Albus Dumbledore, who, incredibly, smiled.

"Draco, Draco, you are not a killer."

"How do you know?" said Malfoy at once.

He seemed to realize how childish the words had sounded; Harry saw him flush in the Mark's greenish light.

"You don't know what I'm capable of," said Malfoy more forcefully. "You don't know what I've done!"

"Oh yes, I do," said Dumbledore mildly. "You almost killed Katie Bell and Ronald Weasley. You have been trying, with great effort, but they have been feeble attempts. . . . So feeble, to be honest, that I wonder whether your heart has been really in it."

"It has been in it!" said Malfoy vehemently. "I've been working on it all year, and tonight —"

Somewhere in the depths of the castle below Harry heard a muffled yell. Malfoy stiffened and glanced over his shoulder. "Somebody is putting up a good fight," said Dumbledore conversationally. "But you were saying . . . yes, you have made great progress, but it is still thought impossible. . . . How did you do it?"

But Malfoy said nothing: He was still listening to whatever was happening below and seemed almost as paralyzed as Harry.

"Perhaps you ought to get on with the job alone," suggested Dumbledore. "What if your backup has been thwarted by the time you get there?"

der of the Phoenix here tonight too. And after all, you don't really need help. . . . I have no wand at the moment. . . . I Malfoy merely stared at him.

"I see," said Dumbledore kindly, when Malfoy neither moved nor spoke. "You are afraid to act until they join you."

"I'm not afraid!" snarled Malfoy, though he still made no move to hurt Dumbledore. "It's you who should be scared!"

"But why? I don't think you will kill me, Draco. Killing is not nearly as easy as the innocent believe. . . . So tell me, while you are in here? It seems to have taken you a long time to work out how to do it."

Malfoy looked as though he was fighting down the urge to shout, or to vomit. He gulped and took several deep breaths to steady his heart. Then, as though he could not help himself, he said, "I had to mend that broken Vanishing Cabinet that no one could open."

"Aaaah," Dumbledore's sigh was half a groan. He closed his eyes for a moment. "That was clever. . . . There is a pair, I believe, in Borgin and Burkes."

"In Borgin and Burkes," said Malfoy, "and they make a kind of passage between them. Montague told me that when I was in there he could hear what was going on at school, and sometimes what was going on in the shop, as if the cabinet was transparent. In the end, he managed to Apparate out, even though he'd never passed his test. He nearly died doing it. Everyone thought he was dead. I realized what it meant — even Borgin didn't know — I was the one who realized there could be a way into Hogwarts through the cabinet."

"Very good," murmured Dumbledore. "So the Death Eaters were able to pass from Borgin and Burkes into the school through the cabinet, right under my nose."

"Yeah," said Malfoy, who bizarrely seemed to draw courage and comfort from Dumbledore's praise. "Yeah, it was!"

"But there were times," Dumbledore went on, "weren't there, when you were not sure you would succeed in mending the cabinet, as sending me a cursed necklace that was bound to reach the wrong hands. . . . poisoning mead there was only the start of it."

"Yeah, well, you still didn't realize who was behind that stuff, did you?" sneered Malfoy, as Dumbledore slid a little down the wall and Harry struggled fruitlessly, mutely, against the enchantment binding him.

"As a matter of fact, I did," said Dumbledore. "I was sure it was you."

"Why didn't you stop me, then?" Malfoy demanded.

"I tried, Draco. Professor Snape has been keeping watch over you on my orders —"

"He hasn't been doing your orders, he promised my mother —"

"Of course that is what he would tell you, Draco, but —"

"He's a double agent, you stupid old man, he isn't working for you, you just think he is!"

"We must agree to differ on that, Draco. It so happens that I trust Professor Snape —"

"Well, you're losing your grip, then!" sneered Malfoy. "He's been offering me plenty of help — wanting all the glory for himself."

"Did you do the necklace, that was stupid, it could have blown everything —" But I haven't told him what I've been doing, and it'll all be over and he won't be the Dark Lord's favorite anymore, he'll be nothing compared to me, nothing!"

"Very gratifying," said Dumbledore mildly. "We all like appreciation for our own hard work, of course. But you must have known someone who was able to slip Katie the — the — aaaah . . ."

Dumbledore closed his eyes again and nodded, as though he was about to fall asleep. ". . . of course . . . Rosmerta. Harry saw her slip the necklace to Filch."

"Got there at last, have you?" Malfoy taunted.

There was another yell from below, rather louder than the last. Malfoy looked nervously over his shoulder again, then he saw a girl come to lurk in her own bathroom and pass that necklace to any Hogwarts student who entered the room unaccompanied. He thought of it for you before she sent the bottle to Slughorn, believing that it was to be my Christmas present. . . . Yes, very near the end, think to check a bottle of Rosmerta's. Tell me, how have you been communicating with Rosmerta? I thought we had agreed to use enchanted coins."

"Enchanted coins," said Malfoy, as though he was compelled to keep talking, though his wand hand was shaking badly. "Isn't that the secret method of communication the group that called themselves Dumbledore's Army used last year?"

Harry saw him slip an inch lower down the wall as he said it.

"Yeah, I got the idea from them," said Malfoy, with a twisted smile. "I got the idea of poisoning the mead from the Ministry. I thought Filch not recognizing potions."

"Please do not use that offensive word in front of me," said Dumbledore.

Malfoy gave a harsh laugh. "You care about me saying 'Mudblood' when I'm about to kill you?"

"Yes, I do," said Dumbledore, and Harry saw his feet slide a little on the floor as he struggled to remain upright. "But you are alone now, we are quite alone, I am more defenseless than you can have dreamed of finding me, and still you are talking. Malfoy's mouth contorted involuntarily, as though he had tasted something very bitter.

"Now, about tonight," Dumbledore went on, "I am a little puzzled about how it happened. . . . You knew that I had left the room, Rosmerta saw me leaving, she tipped you off using your ingenious coins, I'm sure."

"That's right," said Malfoy. "But she said you were just going for a drink, you'd be back. . . ."

"Well, I certainly did have a drink . . . and I came back . . . after a fashion," mumbled Dumbledore. "So you decided to go back?"

"We decided to put the Dark Mark over the tower and get you to hurry up here, to see who'd been killed," said Malfoy.

"Well . . . yes and no . . ." said Dumbledore. "But am I to take it, then, that nobody has been murdered?"

"Someone's dead," said Malfoy, and his voice seemed to go up an octave as he said it. "One of your people . . . I don't know who. It was supposed to be waiting up here when you got back, only your Phoenix lot got in the way. . . ."

"Yes, they do that," said Dumbledore.

There was a bang and shouts from below, louder than ever; it sounded as though people were fighting on the actual ground, and Harry's heart thundered unheard in his invisible chest. . . . Someone was dead. . . . Malfoy had stepped over the wall.

"There is little time, one way or another," said Dumbledore. "So let us discuss your options, Draco."

"My options!" said Malfoy loudly. "I'm standing here with a wand — I'm about to kill you —"

"My dear boy, let us have no more pretense about that. If you were going to kill me, you would have done it when you first came to school. . . . We can chat about ways and means."

"I haven't got any options!" said Malfoy, and he was suddenly white as Dumbledore. "I've got to do it! He'll kill me! He'll kill me!"

"I appreciate the difficulty of your position," said Dumbledore. "Why else do you think I have not confronted you before? . . . I had suspected you."

Malfoy winced at the sound of the name.

"I did not dare speak to you of the mission with which I knew you had been entrusted, in case he used Legilimency against you. . . . No harm has been done, you have hurt nobody, though you are very lucky that your unintentional actions have not done so."

"No, you can't," said Malfoy, his wand hand shaking very badly indeed. "Nobody can. He told me to do it or he'll kill me!"

"Come over to the right side, Draco, and we can hide you more completely than you can possibly imagine. What is more, your father is safe at the moment in Azkaban. . . . When the time comes, we can protect him too. . . . Come now."

Malfoy stared at Dumbledore.

"But I got this far, didn't I?" he said slowly. "They thought I'd die in the attempt, but I'm here . . . and you're in my power. . . . Show me your mercy. . . ."

"No, Draco," said Dumbledore quietly. "It is my mercy, and not yours, that matters now."

Malfoy did not speak. His mouth was open, his wand hand still trembling. Harry thought he saw it drop by a fraction of an inch.

But suddenly footsteps were thundering up the stairs, and a second later Malfoy was buffeted out of the way as four strangers came pouring in. . . .

till paralyzed, his eyes staring unblinkingly, Harry gazed in terror upon four strangers: It seemed the Death Eaters had come.

A lumpy-looking man with an odd lopsided leer gave a wheezy giggle.

"Dumbledore cornered!" he said, and he turned to a stocky little woman who looked as though she could be his sister.

"Well done, Draco, well done!"

"Good evening, Amicus," said Dumbledore calmly, as though welcoming the man to a tea party. "And you've brought your friends."

The woman gave an angry little titter. "Think your little jokes'll help you on your deathbed then?" she jeered.

"Jokes? No, no, these are manners," replied Dumbledore.

"Do it," said the stranger standing nearest to Harry, a big, rangy man with matted gray hair and whiskers, whose black voice was like none that Harry had ever heard: a rasping bark of a voice. Harry could smell a powerful mixture of dirt, sweat, and blood.

long yellowish nails.

"Is that you, Fenrir?" asked Dumbledore.

"That's right," rasped the other. "Pleased to see me, Dumbledore?"

"No, I cannot say that I am."

Greyback grinned, showing pointed teeth. Blood trickled down his chin and he licked his lips slowly, obscenely.

"But you know how much I like kids, Dumbledore."

"Am I to take it that you are attacking even without the full moon now? This is most unusual. . . . You have developed a new tactic."

"That's right," said Fenrir Greyback. "Shocks you that, does it, Dumbledore? Frightens you?"

"Well, I cannot pretend it does not disgust me a little," said Dumbledore. "And, yes, I am a little shocked that Draco has been brought here. . . ."

"I didn't," breathed Malfoy. He was not looking at Fenrir; he did not seem to want to even glance at him. "I didn't know you were here."

"I wouldn't want to miss a trip to Hogwarts, Dumbledore," rasped Greyback. "Not when there are throats to be ripped out."

And he raised a yellow fingernail and picked at his front teeth, leering at Dumbledore. "I could do you for afters, Dumbledore."

"No," said the fourth Death Eater sharply. He had a heavy, brutal-looking face. "We've got orders. Draco's got to do it."

Malfoy was showing less resolution than ever. He looked terrified as he stared into Dumbledore's face, which was even more terrifying than the rampart wall.

"He's not long for this world anyway, if you ask me!" said the lopsided man, to the accompaniment of his sister's wheezy giggle.

"Oh, weaker resistance, slower reflexes, Amicus," said Dumbledore. "Old age, in short. . . . One day, perhaps, it will happen to me."

"What's that mean, then, what's that mean?" yelled the Death Eater, suddenly violent. "Always the same, weren't yeh, Dumbledore? The Dark Lord's bothering to kill yer! Come on, Draco, do it!"

But at that moment there were renewed sounds of scuffling from below and a voice shouted, "They've blocked the stairs!" Harry's heart leapt: So these four had not eliminated all opposition, but merely broken through the fight to the top of the tower.

Now, Draco, quickly!" said the brutal-faced man angrily. But Malfoy's hand was shaking so badly that he could barely aim.

"I'll do it," snarled Fenrir, moving toward Dumbledore with his hands outstretched, his teeth bared.

"I said no!" shouted the brutal-faced man; there was a flash of light and the werewolf was blasted out of the way; he was hammering so hard it seemed impossible that nobody could hear him standing there, imprisoned by Dumbledore's spell. . . .

"Draco, do it or stand aside so one of us —" screeched the woman, but at that precise moment, the door to the rampart wall opened.

in his hand as his black eyes swept the scene, from Dumbledore slumped against the wall, to the four Death Eaters, "We've got a problem, Snape," said the lumpy Amycus, whose eyes and wand were fixed alike upon Dumbledore, "th But somebody else had spoken Snape's name, quite softly.

"Severus . . ."

The sound frightened Harry beyond anything he had experienced all evening. For the first time, Dumbledore was ple Snape said nothing, but walked forward and pushed Malfoy roughly out of the way. The three Death Eaters fell back Snape gazed for a moment at Dumbledore, and there was revulsion and hatred etched in the harsh lines of his face.

"Severus . . . please . . ."

Snape raised his wand and pointed it directly at Dumbledore.

"Avada Kedavra!"

A jet of green light shot from the end of Snape's wand and hit Dumbledore squarely in the chest. Harry's scream of h as Dumbledore was blasted into the air. For a split second, he seemed to hang suspended beneath the shining skull battlements and out of sight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

FLIGHT OF THE PRINCE

Harry felt as though he too were hurtling through space; it had not happened. . . . It could not have happened. . . .

"Out of here, quickly," said Snape.

He seized Malfoy by the scruff of the neck and forced him through the door ahead of the rest; Greyback and the squ

As they vanished through the door, Harry realized he could move again. What was now holding him paralyzed again? lity Cloak aside as the brutal-faced Death Eater, last to leave the tower top, was disappearing through the door.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

The Death Eater buckled as though hit in the back with something solid and fell to the ground, rigid as a waxwork, bu and running down the darkened staircase.

Terror tore at Harry's heart. . . . He had to get to Dumbledore and he had to catch Snape. . . . Somehow the two thing ad them both together. . . . Dumbledore could not have died. . . .

He leapt the last ten steps of the spiral staircase and stopped where he landed, his wand raised: The dimly lit corrido and a battle was raging before him, but even as he attempted to make out who was fighting whom, he heard the ha around the corner at the far end of the corridor; he and Malfoy seemed to have forced their way through the fight u d themselves from the fray and flew at him: It was the werewolf, Fenrir. He was on top of Harry before Harry could r s face, the stench of sweat and blood filling his nose and mouth, hot greedy breath at his throat —

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Harry felt Fenrir collapse against him; with a stupendous effort he pushed the werewolf off and onto the floor as a je dfirst, into the fight. His feet met something squashy and slippery on the floor and he stumbled: There were two bod no time to investigate. Harry now saw red hair flying like flames in front of him: Ginny was locked in combat with the her while she dodged them: Amycus was giggling, enjoying the sport: "Crucio — Crucio — you can't dance forever, pr "Impedimenta!" yelled Harry.

His jinx hit Amycus in the chest: He gave a piglike squeal of pain, was lifted off his feet and slammed into the opposit ssor McGonagall, and Lupin, each of whom was battling a separate Death Eater. Beyond them, Harry saw Tonks fight ections, so that they ricocheted off the walls around them, cracking stone, shattering the nearest window —

"Harry, where did you come from?" Ginny cried, but there was no time to answer her. He put his head down and spr showering them all in bits of wall. Snape must not escape, he must catch up with Snape —

"Take that!" shouted Professor McGonagall, and Harry glimpsed the female Death Eater, Alecko, sprinting away down her. He launched himself after them but his foot caught on something, and next moment he was lying across someo nst the floor.

"Neville, are you — ?"

"M'all right," muttered Neville, who was clutching his stomach, "Harry . . . Snape 'n' Malfoy . . . ran past . . ."

"I know, I'm on it!" said Harry, aiming a hex from the floor at the enormous blond Death Eater who was causing most the face: He wheeled around, staggered, and then pounded away after the brother and sister. Harry scrambled up f ang's issuing from behind him, the yells of the others to come back, and the mute call of the figures on the ground w He skidded around the corner, his trainers slippery with blood; Snape had an immense head start. Was it possible th or had the Order made steps to secure it, to prevent the Death Eaters retreating that way? He could hear nothing bu ong the next empty corridor, but then spotted a bloody footprint that showed at least one of the fleeing Death Eater ement was indeed blocked —

He skidded around another corner and a curse flew past him; he dived behind a suit of armor that exploded. He saw aimed jinxes at them, but merely hit several bewigged witches in a portrait on the landing, who ran screeching into r eard more shouts and screams; other people within the castle seemed to have awoken. . . .

He pelted toward a shortcut, hoping to overtake the brother and sister and close in on Snape and Malfoy, who must ishing step halfway down the concealed staircase, he burst through a tapestry at the bottom and out into a corridor "Harry! We heard a noise, and someone said something about the Dark Mark —" began Ernie Macmillan.

He stumbled toward the burning house as an enormous figure emerged from out of the flames carrying Fang on his back. Harry was in every limb, his body ached all over, and his breath came in painful stabs.

"Yeh all righ', Harry? Yeh all righ'? Speak ter me, Harry. . . ."

Hagrid's huge, hairy face was swimming above Harry, blocking out the stars. Harry could smell burnt wood and dog food. His body quivering beside him.

"I'm all right," panted Harry. "Are you?"

"Course I am . . . take more'n that ter finish me."

Hagrid put his hands under Harry's arms and raised him up with such force that Harry's feet momentarily left the ground. Hagrid's cheek from a deep cut under one eye, which was swelling rapidly.

"We should put out your house," said Harry, "the charm's 'Aguamenti' . . ."

"Knew it was summat like that," mumbled Hagrid, and he raised a smoldering pink, flowery umbrella and said, "Aguamenti!" A jet of water flew out of the umbrella tip. Harry raised his wand arm, which felt like lead, and murmured "Aguamenti!" The last flame was extinguished.

"S'not too bad," said Hagrid hopefully a few minutes later, looking at the smoking wreck. "Nothin' Dumbledore won't be able to fix." Harry felt a searing pain in his stomach at the sound of the name. In the silence and the stillness, horror rose inside him.

"Hagrid . . ."

"I was bindin' up a couple o' bowtruckle legs when I heard 'em comin'," said Hagrid sadly, still staring at his wrecked castle. . . ."

"Hagrid . . ."

"But what happened, Harry? I jus' saw them Death Eaters runnin' down from the castle, but what the ruddy hell was it?"

"He . . ." Harry cleared his throat; it was dry from panic and the smoke. "Hagrid, he killed . . ."

"Killed?" said Hagrid loudly, staring down at Harry. "Snape killed? What're yeh on about, Harry?"

"Dumbledore," said Harry. "Snape killed . . . Dumbledore."

Hagrid simply looked at him, the little of his face that could be seen completely blank, uncomprehending.

"Dumbledore wha', Harry?"

"He's dead. Snape killed him. . . ."

"Don' say that," said Hagrid roughly. "Snape kill Dumbledore — don' be stupid, Harry. Wha's made yeh say tha'?"

"I saw it happen."

"Yeh couldn' have."

"I saw it, Hagrid."

Hagrid shook his head; his expression was disbelieving but sympathetic, and Harry knew that Hagrid thought he had seen the aftereffects of a jinx. . . .

"What musta happened was, Dumbledore musta told Snape ter go with them Death Eaters," Hagrid said confidently. "He's the school. Come on, Harry. . . ."

Harry did not attempt to argue or explain. He was still shaking uncontrollably. Hagrid would find out soon enough, though. Harry saw that many of its windows were lit now. He could imagine, clearly, the scenes inside as people moved from room to room. That the Mark was shining over Hogwarts, that somebody must have been killed. . . .

The oak front doors stood open ahead of them, light flooding out onto the drive and the lawn. Slowly, uncertainly, dreadfully, Harry moved nervously for some sign of the Death Eaters who had fled into the night. Harry's eyes, however, were fixed upon the spot where Dumbledore's body must lie, however, he saw people beginning to move toward it.

"What're they all lookin' at?" said Hagrid, as he and Harry approached the castle front, Fang keeping as close as he could. Harry added sharply, heading now toward the foot of the Astronomy Tower, where a small crowd was congregating. "See it? Limey . . . yeh don' think someone got thrown — ?"

Hagrid fell silent, the thought apparently too horrible to express aloud. Harry walked alongside him, feeling the ache in his chest. The last half hour had hit him, though in an oddly detached way, as though somebody near him was suffering them. . . .

He and Hagrid moved, dreamlike, through the murmuring crowd to the very front, where the dumbstruck students were gathered. Harry heard Hagrid's moan of pain and shock, but he did not stop; he walked slowly forward until he reached the place where there was no hope from the moment that the full Body-Bind Curse Dumbledore had placed upon him lifted, known as the Avada Kedavra. There was still no preparation for seeing him here, spread-eagled, broken: the greatest wizard Harry had ever, or would ever, know. Dumbledore's eyes were closed; but for the strange angle of his arms and legs, he might have been sleeping. Harry reached out, touched his nose, and wiped a trickle of blood from the mouth with his own sleeve. Then he gazed down at the wise old face and knew that never again would Dumbledore speak to him, never again could he help. . . .

The crowd murmured behind Harry. After what seemed like a long time, he became aware that he was kneeling upon the ground. The locket they had managed to steal so many hours before had fallen out of Dumbledore's pocket. It had opened, and Harry could not feel more shock or horror or sadness than he felt already, Harry knew, as he picked it up, that there was nothing inside. He turned the locket over in his hands. This was neither as large as the locket he remembered seeing in the Pensieve, nor was it supposed to be Slytherin's mark. Moreover, there was nothing inside but for a scrap of folded parchment with a single word. Automatically, without really thinking about what he was doing, Harry pulled out the fragment of parchment, opened it, and read the word.

behind him:

To the Dark Lord

I know I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have no other way to tell you.

I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more.

R.A.B.

Harry neither knew nor cared what the message meant. Only one thing mattered: This was not a Horcrux. Dumbledore crumpled the parchment in his hand, and his eyes burned with tears as behind him Fang began to howl.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE PHOENIX LAMENT

C'mere, Harry . . ."

"No."

"Yeh can' stay here, Harry. . . . Come on, now. . . ."

"No."

He did not want to leave Dumbledore's side, he did not want to move anywhere. Hagrid's hand on his shoulder was a much smaller and warmer hand had enclosed his and was pulling him upward. He obeyed its pressure without realizing, from a trace of flowery scent on the air, that it was Ginny who was leading him back into the castle. In the darkness of the night, but Harry and Ginny walked on, back up the steps into the entrance hall. Faces swam on the edges of his vision, and Gryffindor rubies glistened on the floor like drops of blood as they made their way toward the marble staircase.

"We're going to the hospital wing," said Ginny.

"I'm not hurt," said Harry.

"It's McGonagall's orders," said Ginny. "Everyone's up there, Ron and Hermione and Lupin and everyone —"

Fear stirred in Harry's chest again: He had forgotten the inert figures he had left behind.

"Ginny, who else is dead?"

"Don't worry, none of us."

"But the Dark Mark — Malfoy said he stepped over a body —"

"He stepped over Bill, but it's all right, he's alive."

There was something in her voice, however, that Harry knew boded ill.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure . . . he's a — a bit of a mess, that's all. Greyback attacked him. Madam Pomfrey says he won't — well, he's not dead." Ginny's voice trembled a little.

"We don't really know what the aftereffects will be — I mean, Greyback being a werewolf, but not transformed at the time."

"But the others . . . There were other bodies on the ground. . . ."

"Neville and Professor Flitwick are both hurt, but Madam Pomfrey says they'll be all right. And a Death Eater's dead, but not everyone — Harry, if we hadn't had your Felix potion, I think we'd all have been killed, but everything seemed to go all right."

They had reached the hospital wing. Pushing open the doors, Harry saw Neville lying, apparently asleep, in a bed near the end of the ward. At the sound of the doors opening, they all looked up. Hermione raised her head.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

"I'm fine. . . . How's Bill?"

Nobody answered. Harry looked over Hermione's shoulder and saw an unrecognizable face lying on Bill's pillow, so badly bruised that he was dabbing at his wounds with some harsh-smelling green ointment. Harry remembered how Snape had mended Malfoy's forehead.

"Can't you fix them with a charm or something?" he asked the matron.

"No charm will work on these," said Madam Pomfrey. "I've tried everything I know, but there is no cure for werewolf bites."

"But he wasn't bitten at the full moon," said Ron, who was gazing down into his brother's face as though he could somehow sense what was going on. "He's not a werewolf, is he?"

He looked uncertainly at Lupin.

"No, I don't think that Bill will be a true werewolf," said Lupin, "but that does not mean that there won't be some consequences. He won't heal fully, and — and Bill might have some wolfish characteristics from now on."

"Dumbledore might know something that'd work, though," Ron said. "Where is he? Bill fought those maniacs on Dumbledore's orders —"

"Ron — Dumbledore's dead," said Ginny.

"No!" Lupin looked wildly from Ginny to Harry, as though hoping the latter might contradict her, but when Harry did not, he turned his face. Harry had never seen Lupin lose control before; he felt as though he was intruding upon something private. Lupin was giving in silence a look that confirmed what Ginny had said.

"How did he die?" whispered Tonks. "How did it happen?"

"Snape killed him," said Harry. "I was there, I saw it. We arrived back on the Astronomy Tower because that's where they were. He realized it was a trap when we heard footsteps running up the stairs. He immobilized me, I couldn't do anything, I was the door and disarmed him —"

Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth and Ron groaned. Luna's mouth trembled.

"— more Death Eaters arrived — and then Snape — and Snape did it. The Avada Kedavra." Harry couldn't go on.

Madam Pomfrey burst into tears. Nobody paid her any attention except Ginny, who whispered, "Shh! Listen!"

Gulping, Madam Pomfrey pressed her fingers to her mouth, her eyes wide. Somewhere out in the darkness, a phoenix of terrible beauty. And Harry felt, as he had felt about phoenix song before, that the music was inside him, not without across the grounds and through the castle windows.

How long they all stood there, listening, he did not know, nor why it seemed to ease their pain a little to listen to the music that the hospital door opened again and Professor McGonagall entered the ward. Like all the rest, she bore marks of where ere ripped.

"Molly and Arthur are on their way," she said, and the spell of the music was broken: Everyone roused themselves as if to rub their own eyes, shake their heads. "Harry, what happened? According to Hagrid you were with Professor Dumbledore involved in some —"

"Snape killed Dumbledore," said Harry.

She stared at him for a moment, then swayed alarmingly; Madam Pomfrey, who seemed to have pulled herself together, rushed to her. Professor McGonagall.

"Snape," repeated McGonagall faintly, falling into the chair. "We all wondered . . . but he trusted . . . always . . . Snape."

"Snape was a highly accomplished Occlumens," said Lupin, his voice uncharacteristically harsh. "We always knew that."

"But Dumbledore swore he was on our side!" whispered Tonks. "I always thought Dumbledore must know something."

"He always hinted that he had an ironclad reason for trusting Snape," muttered Professor McGonagall, now dabbing her eyes.

"I mean . . . with Snape's history . . . of course people were bound to wonder . . . but Dumbledore told me explicitly that he wouldn't hear a word against him!"

"I'd love to know what Snape told him to convince him," said Tonks.

"I know," said Harry, and they all turned to look at him. "Snape passed Voldemort the information that made Voldemort realize what he was doing, he was really sorry he'd done it, sorry that they were dead."

They all stared at him.

"And Dumbledore believed that?" said Lupin incredulously. "Dumbledore believed Snape was sorry James was dead?"

"And he didn't think my mother was worth a damn either," said Harry, "because she was Muggle-born. . . . 'Mudblood'."

Nobody asked how Harry knew this. All of them seemed to be lost in horrified shock, trying to digest the monstrous truth.

"This is all my fault," said Professor McGonagall suddenly. She looked disoriented, twisting her wet handkerchief in her hands. "I actually sent for him to come and help us! If I hadn't alerted Snape to what was going on, he might never have joined the fight before Filius told him, I don't think he knew they were coming."

"It isn't your fault, Minerva," said Lupin firmly. "We all wanted more help, we were glad to think Snape was on his way."

"So when he arrived at the fight, he joined in on the Death Eaters' side?" asked Harry, who wanted every detail of Snape's life to hate him, to swear vengeance.

"I don't know exactly how it happened," said Professor McGonagall distractedly. "It's all so confusing. . . . Dumbledore trusted us and that we were to patrol the corridors just in case . . . Remus, Bill, and Nymphadora were to join us . . . and so on. . . . The whole of the school was covered. We knew nobody could fly in. There were powerful enchantments on every entrance into the castle. . . ."

"I do," said Harry, and he explained, briefly, about the pair of Vanishing Cabinets and the magical pathway they formed. Almost against his will he glanced from Ron to Hermione, both of whom looked devastated.

"I messed up, Harry," said Ron bleakly. "We did like you told us: We checked the Marauder's Map and we couldn't see anything, so me, Ginny, and Neville went to keep watch on it . . . but Malfoy got past us."

"He came out of the room about an hour after we started keeping watch," said Ginny. "He was on his own, clutching his wand."

"His Hand of Glory," said Ron. "Gives light only to the holder, remember?"

"Anyway," Ginny went on, "he must have been checking whether the coast was clear to let the Death Eaters out, because the light went pitch-black —"

"— Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder," said Ron bitterly. "Fred and George's. I'm going to be having a word with them about that."

"We tried everything, Lumos, Incendio," said Ginny. "Nothing would penetrate the darkness; all we could do was grope our way through people rushing past us. Obviously Malfoy could see because of that hand thing and was guiding them, but we didn't get far. . . . The time we'd reached a corridor that was light, they'd gone."

"Luckily," said Lupin hoarsely, "Ron, Ginny, and Neville ran into us almost immediately and told us what had happened. . . . The fall of the Astronomy Tower. Malfoy obviously hadn't expected more people to be on the watch; he seemed to have panicked, they scattered and we gave chase. One of them, Gibbon, broke away and headed up the tower stairs —"

"To set off the Mark?" asked Harry.

"He must have done, yes, they must have arranged that before they left the Room of Requirement," said Lupin. "But Dumbledore, because he came running back downstairs to rejoin the fight and was hit by a Killing Curse that just missed him."

"So if Ron was watching the Room of Requirement with Ginny and Neville," said Harry, turning to Hermione, "were you there?"

"Outside Snape's office, yes," whispered Hermione, her eyes sparkling with tears, "with Luna. We hung around for ages, waiting for something to go on upstairs, Ron had taken the map. . . . It was nearly midnight when Professor Flitwick came sprinting down in a panic, I don't think he really registered that Luna and I were there at all, he just burst his way into Snape's office and we had to hide."

p and then we heard a loud thump and Snape came hurtling out of his room and he saw us and — and —”

“What?” Harry urged her.

“I was so stupid, Harry!” said Hermione in a high-pitched whisper. “He said Professor Flitwick had collapsed and that we had to help fight the Death Eaters —” She covered her face in shame and continued to talk into her fingers, so that her voice was muffled. “Professor Flitwick and found him unconscious on the floor . . . and oh, it’s so obvious now, Snape must have Stupefied him. We must let Snape go!”

“It’s not your fault,” said Lupin firmly. “Hermione, had you not obeyed Snape and got out of the way, he probably would have killed you.”

“So then he came upstairs,” said Harry, who was watching Snape running up the marble staircase in his mind’s eye, “and he found the place where you were all fighting. . . .”

“We were in trouble, we were losing,” said Tonks in a low voice. “Gibbon was down, but the rest of the Death Eaters seemed to have been savaged by Greyback . . . It was all dark . . . curses flying everywhere . . . The Malfoy boy had vanished, he must have run after him, but one of them blocked the stair behind them with some kind of curse. . . . Neville ran at it and got through. . . .”

“None of us could break through,” said Ron, “and that massive Death Eater was still firing off jinxes all over the place. . . .”

“And then Snape was there,” said Tonks, “and then he wasn’t —”

“I saw him running toward us, but that huge Death Eater’s jinx just missed me right afterward and I ducked and lost him.”

“I saw him run straight through the cursed barrier as though it wasn’t there,” said Lupin. “I tried to follow him, but was too late.”

“He must have known a spell we didn’t,” whispered McGonagall. “After all — he was the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. . . .”

“He was,” said Harry savagely, “but to help them, not to stop them . . . and I’ll bet you had to have a Dark Mark to get away with this?”

“Well, the big Death Eater had just fired off a hex that caused half the ceiling to fall in, and also broke the curse blocking the entrance to the hospital wing — and then Snape and the boy emerged out of the dust — obviously, none of us could have done that.”

“We just let them pass,” said Tonks in a hollow voice. “We thought they were being chased by the Death Eaters — and then they turned around and were fighting again — I thought I heard Snape shout something, but I don’t know what —”

“He shouted, ‘It’s over,’” said Harry. “He’d done what he’d meant to do.”

They all fell silent. Fawkes’s lament was still echoing over the dark grounds outside. As the music reverberated upon the walls of the tower, Harry thought of the night when he had first seen the phoenix. . . . Had they taken Dumbledore’s body from the foot of the tower yet? What would happen to it next? Where would it go? He touched the small cold lump of the fake Horcrux against the knuckles of his right hand.

The doors of the hospital wing burst open, making them all jump: Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were striding up the ward, Fawkes following them.

“Molly — Arthur —” said Professor McGonagall, jumping up and hurrying to greet them. “I am so sorry —”

“Bill,” whispered Mrs. Weasley, darting past Professor McGonagall as she caught sight of Bill’s mangled face. “Oh, Bill!” She turned back to look at the professor. “Lupin and Tonks had got up hastily and retreated so that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could get nearer to the bed. Mrs. Weasley was crying.”

“You said Greyback attacked him?” Mr. Weasley asked Professor McGonagall distractedly. “But he hadn’t transformed yet.”

“We don’t yet know,” said Professor McGonagall, looking helplessly at Lupin.

“There will probably be some contamination, Arthur,” said Lupin. “It is an odd case, possibly unique. . . . We don’t know what to do.”

Mrs. Weasley took the nasty-smelling ointment from Madam Pomfrey and began dabbing at Bill’s wounds.

“And Dumbledore . . .” said Mr. Weasley. “Minerva, is it true . . . Is he really . . . ?”

As Professor McGonagall nodded, Harry felt Ginny move beside him and looked at her. Her slightly narrowed eyes were full of grief. . . .

“Dumbledore gone,” whispered Mr. Weasley, but Mrs. Weasley had eyes only for her eldest son; she began to sob, tears falling on his face. . . .

“Of course, it doesn’t matter how he looks. . . . It’s not r-really important . . . but he was a very handsome little b-boy, wasn’t he? He was married!”

“And what do you mean by zat?” said Fleur suddenly and loudly. “What do you mean, ‘e was going to be married?’”

Mrs. Weasley raised her tear-stained face, looking startled. “Well — only that —”

“You theenk Bill will not wish to marry me anymore?” demanded Fleur. “You theenk, because of these bites, he will not?”

“No, that’s not what I —”

“Because ‘e will!” said Fleur, drawing herself up to her full height and throwing back her long mane of silver hair. “It was his choice!”

“Well, yes, I’m sure,” said Mrs. Weasley, “but I thought perhaps — given how — how he —”

“You thought I would not weesh to marry him? Or per’aps, you hoped?” said Fleur, her nostrils flaring. “What do I care? He was a brave man! All these scars show is zat my husband is brave! And I shall do zat!” she added fiercely, pushing Mrs. Weasley aside.

Mrs. Weasley fell back against her husband and watched Fleur mopping up Bill’s wounds with a most curious expression. . . . He was waiting for the explosion.

“Our Great-Auntie Muriel,” said Mrs. Weasley after a long pause, “has a very beautiful tiara — goblin-made — which I think would look lovely with your hair.”

“Thank you,” said Fleur stiffly. “I am sure zat will be lovely.”

And then, Harry did not quite see how it happened, both women were crying and hugging each other. Completely bewildered, Ron looked as stunned as he felt and Ginny and Hermione were exchanging startled looks.

“You see!” said a strained voice. Tonks was glaring at Lupin. “She still wants to marry him, even though he’s been bitten!”

"It's different," said Lupin, barely moving his lips and looking suddenly tense. "Bill will not be a full werewolf. The case is different. But I don't care either, I don't care!" said Tonks, seizing the front of Lupin's robes and shaking them. "I've told you a million times. And the meaning of Tonks's Patronus and her mouse-colored hair, and the reason she had come running to find Dumbledore, all suddenly became clear to Harry; it had not been Sirius that Tonks had fallen in love with after all. "And I've told you a million times," said Lupin, refusing to meet her eyes, staring at the floor, "that I am too old for you. "I've said all along you're taking a ridiculous line on this, Remus," said Mrs. Weasley over Fleur's shoulder as she patted his arm. "I am not being ridiculous," said Lupin steadily. "Tonks deserves somebody young and whole." "But she wants you," said Mr. Weasley, with a small smile. "And after all, Remus, young and whole men do not necessarily last long." He gestured sadly at his son, lying between them. "This is . . . not the moment to discuss it," said Lupin, avoiding everybody's eyes as he looked around distractedly. "Dumbledore would have been happier than anybody to think that there was a little more love in the world," said Professor McGonagall, and Hagrid walked in. The little of his face that was not obscured by hair or beard was soaking and swollen; he was shaking with tears, a vast, pale, and weary face. "I've . . . I've done it, Professor," he choked. "M-moved him. Professor Sprout's got the kids back in bed. Professor Flitwick is safe, an' Professor Slughorn says the Ministry's bin informed." "Thank you, Hagrid," said Professor McGonagall, standing up at once and turning to look at the group around Bill's body. "Please please please tell the Heads of Houses — Slughorn can represent Slytherin — that I want to see them in my office forthwith." As Hagrid nodded, turned, and shuffled out of the room again, she looked down at Harry. "Before I meet them I would like to see you. Harry stood up, murmured "See you in a bit" to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, and followed Professor McGonagall back to her office. It was the distant phoenix song. It was several minutes before Harry became aware that they were not heading for Professor McGonagall's office. Seconds before he realized that of course, she had been deputy headmistress. . . . Apparently she was now headmistress. In silence they ascended the moving spiral staircase and entered the circular office. He did not know what he had expected, but not that Dumbledore's body might be lying there. In fact, it looked almost exactly as it had done when he and Dumbledore had been sitting at the long and puffing on their spindle-legged tables, Gryffindor's sword in its glass case gleaming in the moonlight, the Sorting Hat on the wall, empty, he was still crying his lament to the grounds. And a new portrait had joined the ranks of the dead headmasters, a young man in a golden frame over the desk, his half-moon spectacles perched upon his crooked nose, looking peaceful and untroubled. After glancing once at this portrait, Professor McGonagall made an odd movement as though steeling herself, then turned to Harry. "Harry," she said, "I would like to know what you and Professor Dumbledore were doing this evening when you left the castle. "I can't tell you that, Professor," said Harry. He had expected the question and had his answer ready. It had been her right to confide the contents of their lessons to nobody but Ron and Hermione. "Harry, it might be important," said Professor McGonagall. "It is," said Harry, "very, but he didn't want me to tell anyone." Professor McGonagall glared at him. "Potter" — Harry registered the renewed use of his surname — "in the light of Professor Dumbledore's death, your name has changed somewhat —" "I don't think so," said Harry, shrugging. "Professor Dumbledore never told me to stop following his orders if he died." "But —" "There's one thing you should know before the Ministry gets here, though. Madam Rosmerta's under the Imperius Curse, and the poisoned mead —" "Rosmerta?" said Professor McGonagall incredulously, but before she could go on, there was a knock on the door and Professor Sprout entered, followed by Hagrid, who was still weeping copiously, his huge frame trembling with grief. "Snape!" ejaculated Slughorn, who looked the most shaken, pale and sweating. "Snape! I taught him! I thought I knew him! But before any of them could respond to this, a sharp voice spoke from high on the wall: A sawn-faced wizard with a high forehead, "Minerva, the Minister will be here within seconds, he has just Disapparated from the Ministry." "Thank you, Everard," said Professor McGonagall, and she turned quickly to her teachers. "I want to talk about what happens to Hogwarts before he gets here," she said quickly. "Personally, I am not convinced that the death of a headmaster at the hands of one of our colleagues is a terrible stain upon Hogwarts's history. It is horrible." "I am sure Dumbledore would have wanted the school to remain open," said Professor Sprout. "I feel that if a single pupil is left without a teacher, it is a terrible loss to the school." "But will we have a single pupil after this?" said Slughorn, now dabbing his sweating brow with a silken handkerchief. "I don't say I blame them. Personally, I don't think we're in more danger at Hogwarts than we are anywhere else, but you can't keep the families together, it's only natural." "I agree," said Professor McGonagall. "And in any case, it is not true to say that Dumbledore never envisaged a situation in which the school would be reopened he considered the closure of the school — and I must say that Professor Dumbledore's murder is more disturbing than anything that has happened in the bowels of the castle. . . ." "We must consult the governors," said Professor Flitwick in his squeaky little voice; he had a large bruise on his forehead. "We must follow the established procedures. A decision should not be made hastily." "Hagrid, you haven't said anything," said Professor McGonagall. "What are your views, ought Hogwarts to remain open or should we close it?" Hagrid, who had been weeping silently into his large, spotted handkerchief throughout this conversation, now raised his head and looked at the Heads of House an' the headmistress to decide. . . . "Professor Dumbledore always valued your views," said Professor McGonagall kindly, "and so do I."

"Well, I'm stayin'," said Hagrid, fat tears still leaking out of the corners of his eyes and trickling down into his tangled beard. "An' if there's kids who wan' me ter teach 'em, I'll do it. But . . . I dunno . . . Hogwarts without Dumbledore . . ." He e, and there was silence.

"Very well," said Professor McGonagall, glancing out of the window at the grounds, checking to see whether the Minister's right thing to do is to consult the governors, who will make the final decision.

"Now, as to getting students home . . . there is an argument for doing it sooner rather than later. We could arrange for a train."

"What about Dumbledore's funeral?" said Harry, speaking at last.

"Well . . ." said Professor McGonagall, losing a little of her briskness as her voice shook. "I — I know that it was Dumbledore's wish."

"Then that's what'll happen, isn't it?" said Harry fiercely.

"If the Ministry thinks it appropriate," said Professor McGonagall. "No other headmaster or headmistress has ever been buried here."

"No other headmaster or headmistress ever gave more to this school," growled Hagrid.

"Hogwarts should be Dumbledore's final resting place," said Professor Flitwick.

"Absolutely," said Professor Sprout.

"And in that case," said Harry, "you shouldn't send the students home until the funeral's over. They'll want to say —"

The last word caught in his throat, but Professor Sprout completed the sentence for him.

"Good-bye."

"Well said," squeaked Professor Flitwick. "Well said indeed! Our students should pay tribute, it is fitting. We can arrange for a train."

"Seconded," barked Professor Sprout.

"I suppose . . . yes . . ." said Slughorn in a rather agitated voice, while Hagrid let out a strangled sob of assent.

"He's coming," said Professor McGonagall suddenly, gazing down into the grounds. "The Minister . . . and by the look of it, the Minister."

"Can I leave, Professor?" said Harry at once.

He had no desire at all to see, or be interrogated by, Rufus Scrimgeour tonight.

"You may," said Professor McGonagall. "And quickly."

She strode toward the door and held it open for him. He sped down the spiral staircase and off along the deserted corridor toward the Astronomy Tower, but it did not matter; there was nobody in the corridors to see him pass, not even Filch, Mrs. Norris, or even the Fat Lady. The passage leading to the Gryffindor common room.

"Is it true?" whispered the Fat Lady as he approached her. "It is really true? Dumbledore — dead?"

"Yes," said Harry.

She let out a wail and, without waiting for the password, swung forward to admit him.

As Harry had suspected it would be, the common room was jam-packed. The room fell silent as he climbed through the crowd. It meant that the dormitory must be empty, or nearly so. Without speaking to anybody, without making eye contact with anybody, he slipped into the boys' dormitories.

As he had hoped, Ron was waiting for him, still fully dressed, sitting on his bed. Harry sat down on his own four-poster bed.

"They're talking about closing the school," said Harry.

"Lupin said they would," said Ron.

There was a pause.

"So?" said Ron in a very low voice, as though he thought the furniture might be listening in. "Did you find one? Did you find the one?"

Harry shook his head. All that had taken place around that black lake seemed like an old nightmare now; had it really happened?

"You didn't get it?" said Ron, looking crestfallen. "It wasn't there?"

"No," said Harry. "Someone had already taken it and left a fake in its place."

"Already taken — ?"

Wordlessly, Harry pulled the fake locket from his pocket, opened it, and passed it to Ron. The full story could wait. . . .

At the end, the end of their pointless adventure, the end of Dumbledore's life. . . .

"R.A.B.," whispered Ron, "but who was that?"

"Dunno," said Harry, lying back on his bed fully clothed and staring blankly upwards. He felt no curiosity at all about the name.

As he lay there, he became aware suddenly that the grounds were silent. Fawkes had stopped singing.

And he knew, without knowing how he knew it, that the phoenix had gone, had left Hogwarts for good, just as Dumbledore had.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE WHITE TOMB

All lessons were suspended, all examinations postponed. Some students were hurried away from Hogwarts by their parents. Some stayed. The morning following Dumbledore's death, and Zacharias Smith was escorted from the castle by his parents. He was point-blank to accompany his mother home; they had a shouting match in the entrance hall that was resolved when the Ministry in finding a bed in Hogsmeade, Seamus told Harry and Ron, for wizards and witches were pouring into the village. Some excitement was caused among the younger students, who had never seen it before, when a powder-blue carriage was seen soaring out of the sky in the late afternoon before the funeral and landed on the edge of the forest. Harry watched for a moment as a red woman descended the carriage steps and threw herself into the waiting Hagrid's arms. Meanwhile a delegation of students was being accommodated within the castle. Harry was diligently avoiding contact with any of them; he was sure that, soon after the funeral, he would be on a short excursion from Hogwarts.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were spending all of their time together. The beautiful weather seemed to mock them.

died, and they had had this time together at the very end of the year, Ginny's examinations finished, the pressure of the thing that he knew he must say, doing what he knew was right to do, because it was too hard to forgo his best source. They visited the hospital wing twice a day: Neville had been discharged, but Bill remained under Madam Pomfrey's care. He had a close resemblance to Mad-Eye Moody, though thankfully with both eyes and legs — but in personality he seemed just the opposite. He had a great liking for very rare steaks.

"... so eet ees lucky 'e is marrying me," said Fleur happily, plumping up Bill's pillows, "because ze British overcook the meat." "I suppose I'm just going to have to accept that he really is going to marry her," sighed Ginny later that evening, as she sat in the Gryffindor common room, looking out over the twilit grounds.

"She's not that bad," said Harry. "Ugly, though," he added hastily, as Ginny raised her eyebrows, and she let out a reluctant laugh. "Well, I suppose if Mum can stand it, I can."

"Anyone else we know died?" Ron asked Hermione, who was perusing the Evening Prophet.

Hermione winced at the forced toughness in his voice. "No," she said reprovingly, folding up the newspaper. "They're not dead." "Of course there isn't," said Harry, who became angry every time this subject cropped up. "They won't find Snape till he's dead, that in all this time..."

"I'm going to go to bed," yawned Ginny. "I haven't been sleeping that well since... well... I could do with some sleep." She kissed Harry (Ron looked away pointedly), waved at the other two, and departed for the girls' dormitories. The morning after, she found Harry with a most Hermione-ish look on her face.

"Harry, I found something out this morning, in the library."

"R.A.B.?" said Harry, sitting up straight.

He did not feel the way he had so often felt before, excited, curious, burning to get to the bottom of a mystery; he simply knew that the Horcrux had to be completed before he could move a little farther along the dark and winding path stretching ahead of him, and which he now knew he would have to journey alone. There might still be as many as four Horcruxes out there, but there was even a possibility that Voldemort could be killed. He kept reciting their names to himself, as though by listing them he could destroy them: the cup... the snake... something of Gryffindor's or Ravenclaw's... the locket... the cup... the snake... something of Gryffindor's... This mantra seemed to pulse through Harry's mind as he fell asleep at night, and his dreams were thick with cups, locket, snake, and something of Gryffindor's. He had shown Hermione the note inside the locket the morning after Dumbledore's death, and although she had not said a word about whom she had been reading, she had since been rushing off to the library a little more often than was strictly necessary.

"No," she said sadly, "I've been trying, Harry, but I haven't found anything... There are a couple of reasonably well-known names... Rupert 'Axe-banger' Brookstanton... but they don't seem to fit at all. Judging by that note, the person who stole the locket had a close resemblance to Bungs or Axe-banger ever had anything to do with him... No, actually, it's about... well, Snape." She looked nervous even saying the name again.

"What about him?" asked Harry heavily, slumping back in his chair.

"Well, it's just that I was sort of right about the Half-Blood Prince business," she said tentatively.

"D'you have to rub it in, Hermione? How d'you think I feel about that now?"

"No — no — Harry, I didn't mean that!" she said hastily, looking around to check that they were not being overheard. "It's just a book. You see... she was Snape's mother!"

"I thought she wasn't much of a looker," said Ron. Hermione ignored him.

"I was going through the rest of the old Prophets and there was a tiny announcement about Eileen Prince marrying a wizard, and that she'd given birth to a —"

"— murderer," spat Harry.

"Well... yes," said Hermione. "So... I was sort of right. Snape must have been proud of being 'half a Prince,' you see. It fits, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, that fits," said Harry. "He'd play up the pure-blood side so he could get in with Lucius Malfoy and the rest of the old guard. He was ashamed of his parentage, trying to make himself feared using the Dark Arts, gave himself an impressive name. It's what Dumbledore would have missed —?"

He broke off, looking out the window. He could not stop himself dwelling upon Dumbledore's inexcusable trust in Snape. He knew Harry had been taken in just the same... In spite of the increasing nastiness of those scribbled spells, he had refused to let Snape help him so much...

Helped him... it was an almost unendurable thought now.

"I still don't get why he didn't turn you in for using that book," said Ron. "He must've known where you were getting it from." "He knew," said Harry bitterly. "He knew when I used Sectumsempra. He didn't really need Legilimency... He might have known I was at Potions... Shouldn't have left his old book in the bottom of that cupboard, should he?"

"But why didn't he turn you in?"

"I don't think he wanted to associate himself with that book," said Hermione. "I don't think Dumbledore would have believed it wasn't his, Slughorn would have recognized his writing at once. Anyway, the book was left in Snape's old classroom." "I should've shown the book to Dumbledore," said Harry. "All that time he was showing me how Voldemort was evil and how I should fight him."

"Evil is a strong word," said Hermione quietly.

"You were the one who kept telling me the book was dangerous!"

"I'm trying to say, Harry, that you're putting too much blame on yourself. I thought the Prince seemed to have a nasty temper."

ial killer. . . .”

“None of us could’ve guessed Snape would . . . you know,” said Ron.

Silence fell between them, each of them lost in their own thoughts, but Harry was sure that they, like him, were thinking of the day when Sirius had died. He had never attended a funeral before; there had been no body to bury when Sirius had died. He did not know what he would feel, about how he would feel. He wondered whether Dumbledore’s death would be more real to him once it was over, once it was over, when there were blank stretches of numbness where, despite the fact that nobody was talking about anything, he knew that Dumbledore had really gone. Admittedly he had not, as he had with Sirius, looked desperately for some kind of talisman, but he had a pocket for the cold chain of the fake Horcrux, which he now carried with him everywhere, not as a talisman, but as a reminder to do.

Harry rose early to pack the next day; the Hogwarts Express would be leaving an hour after the funeral. Downstairs, the Gryffindors were getting their dress robes and no one seemed very hungry. Professor McGonagall had left the throne-like chair in the middle of the Hall; Harry thought that perhaps he had not been able to face breakfast, but Snape’s place had been unceremoniously filled by the Slytherins. Harry had the uncomfortable feeling that Scrimgeour was looking for him. Among Scrimgeour’s entourage, however, Ron gave no sign that he was aware of Percy, apart from stabbing pieces of kipper with unwonted venom.

Over at the Slytherin table Crabbe and Goyle were muttering together. Hulking boys though they were, they looked nervous about the funeral. Harry had not spared Malfoy much thought. His animosity was all for Snape, but he had not forgotten that he had lowered his wand before the other Death Eaters arrived. Harry did not believe that Malfoy would have killed Dumbledore, but now the tiniest drop of pity mingled with his dislike. Where, Harry wondered, was Malfoy now, and what about his parents?

Harry’s thoughts were interrupted by a nudge in the ribs from Ginny. Professor McGonagall had risen to her feet, and she was saying, “It is nearly time,” she said. “Please follow your Heads of Houses out into the grounds. Gryffindors, after me.”

They filed out from behind their benches in near silence. Harry glimpsed Slughorn at the head of the Slytherin column, looking so clean; there was not a single patch of silver on his hair. He had never seen Professor Sprout, Head of the Hufflepuffs, looking so clean; there was not a single patch of silver on her hair. Madam Pince standing beside Filch, she in a thick black veil that fell to her knees, he in an ancient black suit and tie. They were heading, as Harry saw when he stepped out onto the stone steps from the front doors, toward the lake. The castle was silent, as if in silence to the place where hundreds of chairs had been set out in rows. An aisle ran down the center of the grounds, facing it. It was the most beautiful summer’s day.

An extraordinary assortment of people had already settled into half of the chairs; shabby and smart, old and young. Among them were members of the Order of the Phoenix: Kingsley Shacklebolt; Mad-Eye Moody; Tonks, her hair miraculously returned to vividest red; and Mrs. Weasley; Bill supported by Fleur and followed by Fred and George, who were wearing jackets of black dragonhide; Sirius, with his hair on her own; Tom, the landlord of the Leaky Cauldron in London; Arabella Figg, Harry’s Squib neighbor; the hairdresser, Mrs. Weasley; the Knight Bus; Madam Malkin, of the robe shop in Diagon Alley; and some people whom Harry merely recognized. The castle ghosts were there too, barely visible in the bright sunlight on the gleaming air.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny filed into seats at the end of a row beside the lake. People were whispering to each other, but not as loudly as before. The crowd continued to swell; with a great rush of affection for both of them, Harry saw Neville being embraced by Hermione. He had responded to Hermione’s summons the night that Dumbledore had died, and Harry knew why: They were the only ones who had their coins regularly in the hope that there would be another meeting.

Cornelius Fudge walked past toward the front rows, his expression miserable, twirling his green bowler hat as usual; he had a notebook clutched in her red-taloned hand, and then, with a worse jolt of fury, Dolores Umbridge, an unconquerable woman, bow set atop her iron-colored curls. At the sight of the centaur Firenze, who was standing like a sentinel near the water, she turned away a good distance away.

The staff was seated at last. Harry could see Scrimgeour looking grave and dignified in the front row with Professor McGonagall. Many of the important people were really sorry that Dumbledore was dead. But then he heard music, strange, otherworldly music, and he knew the source of it. He was not the only one: Many heads were turning, searching, a little alarmed.

“In there,” whispered Ginny in Harry’s ear.

And he saw them in the clear green sunlit water, inches below the surface, reminding him horribly of the Inferi: a chorus of voices, their pallid faces rippling, their purplish hair flowing all around them. The music made the hair on Harry’s neck stand on end, a feeling of loss and of despair. As he looked down into the wild faces of the singers, he had the feeling that they, at least, were not dead. He gained and he looked around.

Hagrid was walking slowly up the aisle between the chairs. He was crying quite silently, his face gleaming with tears, his hair as white as stars, was what Harry knew to be Dumbledore’s body. A sharp pain rose in Harry’s throat at this sight: For a moment, the body so close seemed to take all warmth from the day. Ron looked white and shocked. Tears were falling thick and fast into his eyes. They could not see clearly what was happening at the front. Hagrid seemed to have placed the body carefully upon the bier, and he heard trumpet noises that drew scandalized looks from some, including, Harry saw, Dolores Umbridge . . . but Harry did not mind. He only gestured to Hagrid as he passed, but Hagrid’s eyes were so swollen it was a wonder he could see where he was going. He realized what was guiding him, for there, dressed in a jacket and trousers each the size of a small marquee, was the most human. Hagrid sat down next to his half-brother, and Grawp patted Hagrid hard on the head, so that his chair legs rattled. Hagrid coughed. But then the music stopped, and he turned to face the front again.

A little tufty-haired man in plain black robes had got to his feet and stood now in front of Dumbledore’s body. Harry

em over the hundreds of heads. "Nobility of spirit" . . . "intellectual contribution" . . . "greatness of heart" . . . It did not matter as Harry had known him. He suddenly remembered Dumbledore's idea of a few words, "nitwit," "oddment," "blubber" . . . matter with him?

There was a soft splashing noise to his left and he saw that the merpeople had broken the surface to listen too. He remembered, very close to where Harry now sat, and conversing in Mermish with the Merchieftainess. Harry wondered where Dumbledore was, so much he should have said. . . .

And then, without warning, it swept over him, the dreadful truth, more completely and undeniably than it had until now. It was in his hand so tightly that it hurt, but he could not prevent hot tears spilling from his eyes: He looked away from Ginny, the best, as the little man in black droned on. . . . There was movement among the trees. The centaurs had come to pay tribute to them standing quite still, half hidden in shadow, watching the wizards, their bows hanging at their sides. And Harry remembered the first time he had ever encountered the thing that was then Voldemort, and how he had faced him, and how he and Dumbledore had decided it was so important, Dumbledore said, to fight, and fight again, and keep fighting, for only then could evil be kept at bay, though it cost lives. And Harry saw very clearly as he sat there under the hot sun how people who cared about him had stood in front of him, Dumbledore, all determined to protect him; but now that was over. He could not let anybody else stand between him and his fate. He was lost at the age of one, that the shelter of a parent's arms meant that nothing could hurt him. There was no waking up to find it safe really, that it was all in his imagination; the last and greatest of his protectors had died, and he was more alone than ever. The little man in black had stopped speaking at last and resumed his seat. Harry waited for somebody else to get to his feet, but nobody moved.

Then several people screamed. Bright, white flames had erupted around Dumbledore's body and the table upon which he had rested spiraled into the air and made strange shapes: Harry thought, for one heart-stopping moment, that he saw a phoenix rising from the ashes. In its place was a white marble tomb, encasing Dumbledore's body and the table on which he had rested.

There were a few more cries of shock as a shower of arrows soared through the air, but they fell far short of the crowd and disappeared back into the cool trees. Likewise, the merpeople sank slowly back into the green water and were no longer visible. Harry looked at Ginny, Ron, and Hermione: Ron's face was screwed up as though the sunlight were blinding him. Hermione looked at him, she met Harry's gaze with the same hard, blazing look that he had seen when she had hugged him after winning the tournament. They understood each other perfectly, and that when he told her what he was going to do now, she would not say, "Be careful, you've not had time to rest," but she would not have expected anything less of him. And so he steeled himself to say what he had known he must say ever since he had seen the light. "Ginny, listen . . ." he said very quietly, as the buzz of conversation grew louder around them and people began to get up. "I don't want to stop seeing each other. We can't be together."

She said, with an oddly twisted smile, "It's for some stupid, noble reason, isn't it?"

"It's been like . . . like something out of someone else's life, these last few weeks with you," said Harry. "But I can't . . ."

She did not cry, she simply looked at him.

"Voldemort uses people his enemies are close to. He's already used you as bait once, and that was just because you're important. We keep this up. He'll know, he'll find out. He'll try and get to me through you."

"What if I don't care?" said Ginny fiercely.

"I care," said Harry. "How do you think I'd feel if this was your funeral . . . and it was my fault. . . ."

She looked away from him, over the lake.

"I never really gave up on you," she said. "Not really. I always hoped. . . . Hermione told me to get on with life, maybe that's why I never used to be able to talk if you were in the room, remember? And she thought you might take a bit more notice of me."

"Smart girl, that Hermione," said Harry, trying to smile. "I just wish I'd asked you sooner. We could've had ages . . . more time together."

"But you've been too busy saving the Wizarding world," said Ginny, half laughing. "Well . . . I can't say I'm surprised. I like you, Harry. I'm happy unless you were hunting Voldemort. Maybe that's why I like you so much."

Harry could not bear to hear these things, nor did he think his resolution would hold if he remained sitting beside her. He turned away while she sobbed into his shoulder, tears dripping from the end of his own long nose. With a miserable gesture, Harry walked away around the lake. Moving felt much more bearable than sitting still, just as setting out as soon as possible was better than waiting to do it. . . .

"Harry!"

He turned. Rufus Scrimgeour was limping rapidly toward him around the bank, leaning on his walking stick.

"I've been hoping to have a word . . . do you mind if I walk a little way with you?"

"No," said Harry indifferently, and set off again.

"Harry, this was a dreadful tragedy," said Scrimgeour quietly. "I cannot tell you how appalled I was to hear of it. Dumbledore was a great man, you know, but no one knows better than I —"

"What do you want?" asked Harry flatly.

Scrimgeour looked annoyed, but as before, hastily modified his expression to one of sorrowful understanding.

"You are, of course, devastated," he said. "I know that you were very close to Dumbledore. I think you may have been very close to him."

"What do you want?" Harry repeated, coming to a halt.

Scrimgeour stopped too, leaned on his stick, and stared at Harry, his expression shrewd now.

"The word is that you were with him when he left the school the night that he died."

"Whose word?" said Harry.

"Somebody Stupefied a Death Eater on top of the tower after Dumbledore died. There were also two broomsticks up there."

"Glad to hear it," said Harry. "Well, where I went with Dumbledore and what we did is my business. He didn't want pe

"Such loyalty is admirable, of course," said Scrimgeour, who seemed to be restraining his irritation with difficulty, "bu

"He will only be gone from the school when none here are loyal to him," said Harry, smiling in spite of himself.

"My dear boy . . . even Dumbledore cannot return from the —"

"I am not saying he can. You wouldn't understand. But I've got nothing to tell you."

Scrimgeour hesitated, then said, in what was evidently supposed to be a tone of delicacy, "The Ministry can offer you

to place a couple of my Aurors at your service —"

Harry laughed. "Voldemort wants to kill me himself, and Aurors won't stop him. So thanks for the offer, but no thank

"So," said Scrimgeour, his voice cold now, "the request I made of you at Christmas —"

"What request? Oh yeah . . . the one where I tell the world what a great job you're doing in exchange for —"

"— for raising everyone's morale!" snapped Scrimgeour.

Harry considered him for a moment.

"Released Stan Shunpike yet?"

Scrimgeour turned a nasty purple color highly reminiscent of Uncle Vernon.

"I see you are —"

"Dumbledore's man through and through," said Harry. "That's right."

Scrimgeour glared at him for another moment, then turned and limped away without another word. Harry could see

nervous glances at the sobbing Hagrid and Grawp, who were still in their seats. Ron and Hermione were hurrying to

ry turned and walked slowly on, waiting for them to catch up, which they finally did in the shade of a beech tree unde

"What did Scrimgeour want?" Hermione whispered.

"Same as he wanted at Christmas," shrugged Harry. "Wanted me to give him inside information on Dumbledore and

Ron seemed to struggle with himself for a moment, then he said loudly to Hermione, "Look, let me go back and hit P

"No," she said firmly, grabbing his arm.

"It'll make me feel better!"

Harry laughed. Even Hermione grinned a little, though her smile faded as she looked up at the castle.

"I can't bear the idea that we might never come back," she said softly. "How can Hogwarts close?"

"Maybe it won't," said Ron. "We're not in any more danger here than we are at home, are we? Everywhere's the same

to defend the place. What d'you reckon, Harry?"

"I'm not coming back even if it does reopen," said Harry.

Ron gaped at him, but Hermione said sadly, "I knew you were going to say that. But then what will you do?"

"I'm going back to the Dursleys' once more, because Dumbledore wanted me to," said Harry. "But it'll be a short visit,

"But where will you go if you don't come back to school?"

"I thought I might go back to Godric's Hollow," Harry muttered. He had had the idea in his head ever since the night o

e just got a feeling I need to go there. And I can visit my parents' graves, I'd like that."

"And then what?" said Ron.

"Then I've got to track down the rest of the Horcruxes, haven't I?" said Harry, his eyes upon Dumbledore's white tomb

what he wanted me to do, that's why he told me all about them. If Dumbledore was right — and I'm sure he was — t

roy them, and then I've got to go after the seventh bit of Voldemort's soul, the bit that's still in his body, and I'm the o

long the way," he added, "so much the better for me, so much the worse for him."

There was a long silence. The crowd had almost dispersed now, the stragglers giving the monumental figure of Grawp

echoing across the water.

"We'll be there, Harry," said Ron.

"What?"

"At your aunt and uncle's house," said Ron. "And then we'll go with you wherever you're going."

"No —" said Harry quickly; he had not counted on this, he had meant them to understand that he was undertaking th

"You said to us once before," said Hermione quietly, "that there was time to turn back if we wanted to. We've had tim

"We're with you whatever happens," said Ron. "But mate, you're going to have to come round my mum and dad's ho

"Why?"

"Bill and Fleur's wedding, remember?"

Harry looked at him, startled; the idea that anything as normal as a wedding could still exist seemed incredible and y

"Yeah, we shouldn't miss that," he said finally.

His hand closed automatically around the fake Horcrux, but in spite of everything, in spite of the dark and twisting p

meeting with Voldemort he knew must come, whether in a month, in a year, or in ten, he felt his heart lift at the thou

njoy with Ron and Hermione.