

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE SCAR

Harry lay flat on his back, breathing hard as though he had been running. He had awoken from a vivid dream with his scar, which was shaped like a bolt of lightning, was burning beneath his fingers as though someone had just pressed a white-hot iron into his skin. He sat up, one hand still on his scar, the other reaching out in the darkness for his glasses, which were on the bedside table. The room was dimly lit by a faint, misty orange light that was filtering through the curtains from the street lamp outside the window.

Harry ran his fingers over the scar again. It was still painful. He turned on the lamp beside him, scrambled out of bed, and looked through the peephole in the door. A skinny boy of fourteen looked back at him, his bright green eyes puzzled under his bushy hair. Harry looked at his reflection more closely. It looked normal, but it was still stinging.

Harry tried to recall what he had been dreaming about before he had awoken. It had seemed so real. . . . There had been a snake on a hearth rug, a small man called Wormtail, the voice of Lord Voldemort. Harry felt as though an ice cube had slipped down into his stomach at the very thought. . . .

He closed his eyes tightly and tried to remember what Voldemort had looked like, but it was impossible. . . . All Harry could remember was that when he had seen what was sitting in it, he had felt a spasm of horror, which had awoken him . . . or had it? And who had the old man been? For there had definitely been an old man; Harry had watched him fall to the ground outside his bedroom, trying to hold on to the picture of that dimly lit room, but it was like trying to keep water in his hands. . . . Voldemort and Wormtail had been talking about someone they had killed, though Harry was sure they were talking about him! . . . him!

Harry took his face out of his hands, opened his eyes, and stared around his bedroom as though expecting to see some of the unusual things in this room. A large wooden trunk stood open at the foot of his bed, revealing a cauldron, a book, and a small, empty cage in which his snowy owl, Hedwig, usually had been reading it before he fell asleep last night. The pictures in this book were all moving. Men in bright orange robes were passing a red ball to one another.

Harry walked over to the book, picked it up, and watched one of the wizards score a spectacular goal by putting the ball into the goal. Even Quidditch — in Harry's opinion, the best sport in the world — couldn't distract him at the moment. He placed the book back on the shelf, drew back the curtains to survey the street below.

Privet Drive looked exactly as a respectable suburban street would be expected to look in the early hours of Saturday morning. In the darkness, there wasn't a living creature in sight, not even a cat.

And yet . . . and yet . . . Harry went restlessly back to the bed and sat down on it, running a finger over his scar again. It hurt, but not as much as it used to. He had lost all the bones from his right arm once and had them painfully regrown in a night. That was the last time he had been hurt. Only last year Harry had fallen fifty feet from an airborne broomstick. He was used to bizarre accidents. He had been at the school of Witchcraft and Wizardry and had a knack for attracting a lot of trouble.

No, the thing that was bothering Harry was that the last time his scar had hurt him, it had been because Voldemort had been near him. The idea of Voldemort lurking in Privet Drive was absurd, impossible. . . .

Harry listened closely to the silence around him. Was he half-expecting to hear the creak of a stair or the swish of a door? He heard a tremendous grunting snore from the next room.

Harry shook himself mentally; he was being stupid. There was no one in the house with him except Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley. He was alone, safe, and untroubled and painless.

Asleep was the way Harry liked the Dursleys best; it wasn't as though they were ever any help to him awake. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley were Muggles who hated and despised magic in any form, which meant that Harry was about as welcome in their house as a troll. They had kept Harry at Hogwarts over the last three years by telling everyone that he went to St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminals. Harry wasn't allowed to use magic outside Hogwarts, but they were still apt to blame him for anything that went wrong. He had never told them anything about his life in the Wizarding world. The very idea of going to them when they awoke, and telling them about Voldemort, was laughable.

And yet it was because of Voldemort that Harry had come to live with the Dursleys in the first place. If it hadn't been for Voldemort, Harry would still have had parents. . . .

Harry had been a year old the night that Voldemort — the most powerful Dark wizard for a century, a wizard who had killed his father and mother. Voldemort had then turned his wand on Harry; he had performed the curse that was supposed to give him power — and, incredibly, it had not worked. Instead of killing the small boy, the curse had rebounded upon Voldemort, leaving him with a scar on his forehead, and Voldemort had been reduced to something barely alive. His powers gone, his life almost extinct, the wizarding world had lived for so long had lifted, Voldemort's followers had disbanded, and Harry Potter had been left alone. It had been enough of a shock for Harry to discover, on his eleventh birthday, that he was a wizard; it had been even more of a shock to find that the wizarding world knew his name. Harry had arrived at Hogwarts to find that heads turned and whispers followed him wherever he went. He would be starting his fourth year at Hogwarts, and Harry was already counting the days until he would be back at home. But there was still a fortnight to go before he went back to school. He looked hopelessly around his room again, and then he looked at his scar. It hurt him at the end of July. What would they say if Harry wrote to them and told them about his scar hurting?

At once, Hermione Granger's voice seemed to fill his head, shrill and panicky.

"Your scar hurt? Harry, that's really serious. . . . Write to Professor Dumbledore! And I'll go and check Common Magic for you. . . ."

Yes, that would be Hermione's advice: Go straight to the headmaster of Hogwarts, and in the meantime, consult a book. He doubted very much whether a book could help him now. As far as he knew, he was the only living person to have survived what he would find his symptoms listed in Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions. As for informing the headmaster, he amused himself for a moment, picturing Dumbledore, with his long silver beard, full-length wizard's robes, and pointed ears, perched onto his long crooked nose. Wherever Dumbledore was, though, Harry was sure that Hedwig would be able to find him, even without an address. But what would he write?

Dear Professor Dumbledore, Sorry to bother you, but my scar hurt this morning. Yours sincerely, Harry Potter.

Even inside his head the words sounded stupid.

And so he tried to imagine his other best friend, Ron Weasley's, reaction, and in a moment, Ron's red hair and long-nosed expression.

"Your scar hurt? But . . . but You-Know-Who can't be near you now, can he? I mean . . . you'd know, wouldn't you? He's not a curse scars always twinge a bit. . . . I'll ask Dad. . . ."

Mr. Weasley was a fully qualified wizard who worked in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, as far as Harry knew. In any case, Harry didn't like the idea of the whole Weasley family knowing that he, Harry, could fuss worse than Hermione, and Fred and George, Ron's sixteen-year-old twin brothers, might think Harry was losing his mind; he was hoping that they might invite him to stay any time now (Ron had mentioned something about the Quidditch team's anxious inquiries about his scar).

Harry kneaded his forehead with his knuckles. What he really wanted (and it felt almost shameful to admit it to himself) was some advice he could ask without feeling stupid, someone who cared about him, who had had experience with Dark Magic. And then the solution came to him. It was so simple, and so obvious, that he couldn't believe it had taken so long — Harry leapt up from the bed, hurried across the room, and sat down at his desk; he pulled a piece of parchment toward him, then paused, wondering how best to phrase his problem, still marveling at the fact that he hadn't thought of Sirius. For all that, he had only found out that Sirius was his godfather two months ago.

There was a simple reason for Sirius's complete absence from Harry's life until then — Sirius had been in Azkaban, the prison for the sightless, soul-sucking fiends who had come to search for Sirius at Hogwarts when he had escaped. Yet Sirius had been innocent, committed by Wormtail, Voldemort's supporter, whom nearly everybody now believed dead. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had known the previous year, though only Professor Dumbledore had believed their story.

For one glorious hour, Harry had believed that he was leaving the Dursleys at last, because Sirius had offered him a place to live. But it had slipped away from him — Wormtail had escaped before they could take him to the Ministry of Magic, and Sirius had been killed by a hippogriff called Buckbeak, and since then, Sirius had been on the run. The home Harry might have had if Wormtail had been caught would have been hard to return to the Dursleys knowing that he had so nearly escaped them forever.

Nevertheless, Sirius had been of some help to Harry, even if he couldn't be with him. It was due to Sirius that Harry's room at the Dursleys had never allowed this before; their general wish of keeping Harry as miserable as possible, coupled with their fear of the cupboard under the stairs every summer prior to this. But their attitude had changed since they had found out that Sirius was conveniently forgotten to tell them that Sirius was innocent.

Harry had received two letters from Sirius since he had been back at Privet Drive. Both had been delivered, not by owl, but by tropical birds. Hedwig had not approved of these flashy intruders; she had been most reluctant to allow them to drink from her hand, had liked them; they put him in mind of palm trees and white sand, and he hoped that, wherever Sirius was (Sirius was always joking himself. Somehow, Harry found it hard to imagine dementors surviving for long in bright sunlight; perhaps that was why he had hidden beneath the highly useful loose floorboard under Harry's bed, sounded cheerful, and in both of them he had found a home), he had come to now, all right. . . .

Harry's lamp seemed to grow dimmer as the cold gray light that precedes sunrise slowly crept into the room. Finally, when sounds of movement could be heard from Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's room, Harry cleared his desk and wrote:

Dear Sirius,

Thanks for your last letter. That bird was enormous; it could hardly get through my window.

Things are the same as usual here. Dudley's diet isn't going too well. My aunt found him smuggling doughnuts into his room. If he keeps doing it, so he got really angry and chucked his PlayStation out of the window. That's a sort of computer game. I even got Mega-Mutilation Part Three to take his mind off things.

I'm okay, mainly because the Dursleys are terrified you might turn up and turn them all into bats if I ask you to.

A weird thing happened this morning, though. My scar hurt again. Last time that happened it was because Voldemort was near. Can he? Do you know if curse scars sometimes hurt years afterward?

I'll send this with Hedwig when she gets back; she's off hunting at the moment. Say hello to Buckbeak for me.

Yes, thought Harry, that looked all right. There was no point putting in the dream; he didn't want it to look as though he had dreamed it. He left the parchment on his desk, ready for when Hedwig returned. Then he got to his feet, stretched, and opened his wardrobe once more before going down to breakfast.

## CHAPTER ONE THE RIDDLE HOUSE

The villagers of Little Hangleton still called it "the Riddle House," even though it had been many years since the Riddle family had lived there. The village, some of its windows boarded, tiles missing from its roof, and ivy spreading unchecked over its face. Once a fine

for miles around, the Riddle House was now damp, derelict, and unoccupied.

The Little Hangletons all agreed that the old house was "creepy." Half a century ago, something strange and horrible in the village still liked to discuss when topics for gossip were scarce. The story had been picked over so many times, and they knew what the truth was anymore. Every version of the tale, however, started in the same place: Fifty years before, at dusk, the Riddle House had been well kept and impressive, a maid had entered the drawing room to find all three Riddles dead.

The maid had run screaming down the hill into the village and roused as many people as she could.

"Lying there with their eyes wide open! Cold as ice! Still in their dinner things!"

The police were summoned, and the whole of Little Hangleton had seethed with shocked curiosity and ill-disguised excitement about the Riddles, for they had been most unpopular. Elderly Mr. and Mrs. Riddle had been rich, snobbish, and rude, and what the villagers cared about was the identity of their murderer — for plainly, three apparently healthy people did not all drop dead.

The Hanged Man, the village pub, did a roaring trade that night; the whole village seemed to have turned out to discuss the Riddles' cook arrived dramatically in their midst and announced to the suddenly silent pub that a man called

"Frank!" cried several people. "Never!"

Frank Bryce was the Riddles' gardener. He lived alone in a run-down cottage on the grounds of the Riddle House. Frank was a quiet, unassuming man, averse to the squalor and noise of crowds and loud noises, and had been working for the Riddles ever since.

There was a rush to buy the cook drinks and hear more details.

"Always thought he was odd," she told the eagerly listening villagers, after her fourth sherry. "Unfriendly, like. I'm sure he's had some hard times. Never wanted to mix, he didn't."

"Ah, now," said a woman at the bar, "he had a hard war, Frank. He likes the quiet life. That's no reason to —"

"Who else had a key to the back door, then?" barked the cook. "There's been a spare key hanging in the gardener's cottage. No broken windows! All Frank had to do was creep up to the big house while we was all sleeping. . . ."

The villagers exchanged dark looks.

"I always thought he had a nasty look about him, right enough," grunted a man at the bar.

"War turned him funny, if you ask me," said the landlord.

"Told you I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of Frank, didn't I, Dot?" said an excited woman in the corner.

"Horrible temper," said Dot, nodding fervently. "I remember, when he was a kid . . ."

By the following morning, hardly anyone in Little Hangleton doubted that Frank Bryce had killed the Riddles.

But over in the neighboring town of Great Hangleton, in the dark and dingy police station, Frank was stubbornly repeating that the person he had seen near the house on the day of the Riddles' deaths had been a teenage boy, a stranger, dark-haired and unknown. The police were quite sure that Frank had invented him.

Then, just when things were looking very serious for Frank, the report on the Riddles' bodies came back and changed everything. The police had never read an odder report. A team of doctors had examined the bodies and had concluded that none of them had been hurt, or (as far as they could tell) harmed at all. In fact (the report continued, in a tone of unmistakable bewilderment), they had died from the fact that they were all dead. The doctors did note (as though determined to find something wrong with the bodies) that the Riddles' faces were pale — but as the frustrated police said, whoever heard of three people being frightened to death?

As there was no proof that the Riddles had been murdered at all, the police were forced to let Frank go. The Riddles' bodies remained objects of curiosity for a while. To everyone's surprise, and amid a cloud of suspicion, Frank Bryce returned. "So far as I'm concerned, he killed them, and I don't care what the police say," said Dot in the Hanged Man. "And if he didn't, he should have."

But Frank did not leave. He stayed to tend the garden for the next family who lived in the Riddle House, and then the next. The cause of Frank's staying was that the new owners said there was a nasty feeling about the place, which, in the absence of inhabitants, they could not do anything about. The wealthy man who owned the Riddle House these days neither lived there nor put it to any use; they said in the village that he was a miser. The wealthy owner continued to pay Frank to do the gardening, however. Frank was nearing old age, but could be seen pottering around the flower beds in fine weather, even though the weeds were starting to grow. Weeds were not the only things Frank had to contend with either. Boys from the village made a habit of throwing stones over the lawns Frank worked so hard to keep smooth. Once or twice, they broke into the old house for a dare. They had almost to an obsession, and it amused them to see him limping across the garden, brandishing his stick and yelling at them. They hated him because they, like their parents and grandparents, thought him a murderer. So when Frank awoke one night to find the door open, he assumed that the boys had gone one step further in their attempts to punish him.

It was Frank's bad leg that woke him; it was paining him worse than ever in his old age. He got up and limped downstairs to the kitchen to ease the stiffness in his knee. Standing at the sink, filling the kettle, he looked up at the Riddle House and saw what was going on. The boys had broken into the house again, and judging by the flickering quality of the light, they were in the kitchen. Frank had no telephone, and in any case, he had deeply mistrusted the police ever since they had taken him in for questioning. He hurried back upstairs as fast as his bad leg would allow, and was soon back in his kitchen, fully dressed and removing his walking stick, which was propped against the wall, and set off into the night.

The front door of the Riddle House bore no sign of being forced, nor did any of the windows. Frank limped around to the back door, which was hidden by ivy, took out the old key, put it into the lock, and opened the door noiselessly.

He let himself into the cavernous kitchen. Frank had not entered it for many years; nevertheless, although it was very dark, he found his way toward it, his nostrils full of the smell of decay, ears pricked for any sound of footsteps or voices from the hall. He went to the large mullioned windows on either side of the front door, and started to climb the stairs, blessing the dust

f his feet and stick.

On the landing, Frank turned right, and saw at once where the intruders were: At the very end of the passage a door with a long sliver of gold across the black floor. Frank edged closer and closer, grasping his walking stick firmly. Several feet from the room beyond.

The fire, he now saw, had been lit in the grate. This surprised him. Then he stopped moving and listened intently, for a moment.

"There is a little more in the bottle, my Lord, if you are still hungry."

"Later," said a second voice. This too belonged to a man — but it was strangely high-pitched, and cold as a sudden blast of wind. "Move me closer to the fire, Wormtail."

Frank turned his right ear toward the door, the better to hear. There came the clink of a bottle being put down upon the floor, the hair being dragged across the floor. Frank caught a glimpse of a small man, his back to the door, pushing the chair in front of him. A bald patch at the back of his head. Then he went out of sight again.

"Where is Nagini?" said the cold voice.

"I — I don't know, my Lord," said the first voice nervously. "She set out to explore the house, I think. . . ."

"You will milk her before we retire, Wormtail," said the second voice. "I will need feeding in the night. The journey has been long. Brow furrowed, Frank inclined his good ear still closer to the door, listening very hard. There was a pause, and then the first voice said:

"My Lord, may I ask how long we are going to stay here?"

"A week," said the cold voice. "Perhaps longer. The place is moderately comfortable, and the plan cannot proceed yet."

Frank inserted a gnarled finger into his ear and rotated it. Owing, no doubt, to a buildup of earwax, he had heard the words of the first voice.

"The — the Quidditch World Cup, my Lord?" said Wormtail. (Frank dug his finger still more vigorously into his ear.) "For how long? The World Cup is over?"

"Because, fool, at this very moment wizards are pouring into the country from all over the world, and every meddler is busy with his own business of unusual activity, checking and double-checking identities. They will be obsessed with security, lest the Muggles notice anything. Frank stopped trying to clear out his ear. He had distinctly heard the words "Ministry of Magic," "wizards," and "Muggles," and Frank could think of only two sorts of people who would speak in code: spies and criminals. Frank tightened his fingers on the stick.

"Your Lordship is still determined, then?" Wormtail said quietly.

"Certainly I am determined, Wormtail." There was a note of menace in the cold voice now.

A slight pause followed — and then Wormtail spoke, the words tumbling from him in a rush, as though he was forcing them out.

"It could be done without Harry Potter, my Lord."

Another pause, more protracted, and then —

"Without Harry Potter?" breathed the second voice softly. "I see . . ."

"My Lord, I do not say this out of concern for the boy!" said Wormtail, his voice rising squeakily. "The boy is nothing to me. I am a servant. Any other witch or wizard — any wizard — the thing could be done so much more quickly! If you allowed me to leave you now, I could be back here in as little as two days with a suitable person —"

"I could use another wizard," said the cold voice softly, "that is true. . . ."

"My Lord, it makes sense," said Wormtail, sounding thoroughly relieved now. "Laying hands on Harry Potter would be a great service to the Ministry."

"And so you volunteer to go and fetch me a substitute? I wonder . . . perhaps the task of nursing me has become wearisome. My plan be nothing more than an attempt to desert me?"

"My Lord! I — I have no wish to leave you, none at all —"

"Do not lie to me!" hissed the second voice. "I can always tell, Wormtail! You are regretting that you ever returned to me. You shudder when you touch me. . . ."

"No! My devotion to Your Lordship —"

"Your devotion is nothing more than cowardice. You would not be here if you had anywhere else to go. How am I to trust you? How am I to milk Nagini?"

"But you seem so much stronger, my Lord —"

"Liar," breathed the second voice. "I am no stronger, and a few days alone would be enough to rob me of the little hope I have. Wormtail, who had been sputtering incoherently, fell silent at once. For a few seconds, Frank could hear nothing but the sound of his own breathing. A faint whisper that was almost a hiss.

"I have my reasons for using the boy, as I have already explained to you, and I will use no other. I have waited thirteen years for this. For the protection surrounding the boy, I believe my plan will be effective. All that is needed is a little courage from you, Wormtail. I am sure you will do it to the full extent of Lord Voldemort's wrath —"

"My Lord, I must speak!" said Wormtail, panic in his voice now. "All through our journey I have gone over the plan in my mind. I have noticed for long, and if we proceed, if I murder —"

"If?" whispered the second voice. "If? If you follow the plan, Wormtail, the Ministry need never know that anyone else was involved. I could do it myself, but in my present condition . . . Come, Wormtail, one more death and our path to Harry Potter is clear. My faithful servant will have rejoined us —"

"I am a faithful servant," said Wormtail, the merest trace of sullenness in his voice.

"Wormtail, I need somebody with brains, somebody whose loyalty has never wavered, and you, unfortunately, fulfill that need."

"I found you," said Wormtail, and there was definitely a sulky edge to his voice now. "I was the one who found you. I know that." "That is true," said the second man, sounding amused. "A stroke of brilliance I would not have thought possible from you. Useful she would be when you caught her, were you?"

"I — I thought she might be useful, my Lord —"

"Liar," said the second voice again, the cruel amusement more pronounced than ever. "However, I do not deny that he did our plan, and for that, you will have your reward, Wormtail. I will allow you to perform an essential task for me, once you are reformed. . . ."

"R-really, my Lord? What — ?" Wormtail sounded terrified again.

"Ah, Wormtail, you don't want me to spoil the surprise? Your part will come at the very end . . . but I promise you, you will not be disappointed." s."

"You . . . you . . ." Wormtail's voice suddenly sounded hoarse, as though his mouth had gone very dry. "You . . . are going to kill me?"

"Wormtail, Wormtail," said the cold voice silkily, "why would I kill you? I killed Bertha because I had to. She was fit for nothing but awkward questions would have been asked if she had gone back to the Ministry with the news that she had met you. It was not to run into Ministry of Magic witches at wayside inns. . . ."

Wormtail muttered something so quietly that Frank could not hear it, but it made the second man laugh — an entire sentence.

"We could have modified her memory? But Memory Charms can be broken by a powerful wizard, as I proved when I extracted the information I extracted from her, Wormtail."

Out in the corridor, Frank suddenly became aware that the hand gripping his walking stick was slippery with sweat. But he did not let it go. He did not let it without any kind of remorse — with amusement. He was dangerous — a madman. And he was planning more murder. Frank knew what he must do. Now, if ever, was the time to go to the police. He would creep out of the house and he would tell the police. The cold voice was speaking again, and Frank remained where he was, frozen to the spot, listening with all his might.

"One more murder . . . my faithful servant at Hogwarts . . . Harry Potter is as good as mine, Wormtail. It is decided. The snake, Nagini. . . ."

And the second man's voice changed. He started making noises such as Frank had never heard before; he was hissing and rattling, as if he was having some sort of fit or seizure.

And then Frank heard movement behind him in the dark passageway. He turned to look, and found himself paralyzed. Something was slithering toward him along the dark corridor floor, and as it drew nearer to the sliver of firelight, he saw it more clearly. It was, at least twelve feet long. Horrified, transfixed, Frank stared as its undulating body cut a wide, curving track through the darkness. What was he to do? The only means of escape was into the room where two men sat plotting murder, yet if he stayed where he was, he would be caught. But before he had made his decision, the snake was level with him, and then, incredibly, miraculously, it was passing him. The cold voice was speaking beyond the door, and in seconds, the tip of its diamond-patterned tail had vanished through the gap.

There was sweat on Frank's forehead now, and the hand on the walking stick was trembling. Inside the room, the cold voice was speaking again, an impossible idea. . . . This man could talk to snakes.

Frank didn't understand what was going on. He wanted more than anything to be back in his bed with his hot-water bottle. As he stood there shaking and trying to master himself, the cold voice switched abruptly to English again.

"Nagini has interesting news, Wormtail," it said.

"In-deed, my Lord?" said Wormtail.

"Indeed, yes," said the voice. "According to Nagini, there is an old Muggle standing right outside this room, listening to everything. Frank didn't have a chance to hide himself. There were footsteps, and then the door of the room was flung wide open. A short, balding man with graying hair, a pointed nose, and small, watery eyes stood before Frank, a mixture of fear and anger. "Invite him inside, Wormtail. Where are your manners?"

The cold voice was coming from the ancient armchair before the fire, but Frank couldn't see the speaker. The snake, Nagini, was coiled around the fireplace, some horrible travesty of a pet dog.

Wormtail beckoned Frank into the room. Though still deeply shaken, Frank took a firmer grip upon his walking stick. The fire was the only source of light in the room; it cast long, spidery shadows upon the walls. Frank stared at the back of the man's head, for Frank couldn't even see the back of his head.

"You heard everything, Muggle?" said the cold voice.

"What's that you're calling me?" said Frank defiantly, for now that he was inside the room, now that the time had come for him to act, he was no longer a Muggle in the war.

"I am calling you a Muggle," said the voice coolly. "It means that you are not a wizard."

"I don't know what you mean by wizard," said Frank, his voice growing steadier. "All I know is I've heard enough to intend to plan more! And I'll tell you this too," he added, on a sudden inspiration, "my wife knows I'm up here, and if I do, she will tell the police." "You have no wife," said the cold voice, very quietly. "Nobody knows you are here. You told nobody that you were coming. But she always knows. . . ."

"Is that right?" said Frank roughly. "Lord, is it? Well, I don't think much of your manners, my Lord. Turn 'round and face me!"

"But I am not a man, Muggle," said the cold voice, barely audible now over the crackling of the flames. "I am much, much more than a man. Wormtail, come turn my chair around."

The servant gave a whimper.

"You heard me, Wormtail."

Slowly, with his face screwed up, as though he would rather have done anything than approach his master and the

n to turn the chair. The snake lifted its ugly triangular head and hissed slightly as the legs of the chair snagged on its tail. And then the chair was facing Frank, and he saw what was sitting in it. His walking stick fell to the floor with a clatter. It rang so loudly that he never heard the words the thing in the chair spoke as it raised a wand. There was a flash of green light, and before he hit the floor.

Two hundred miles away, the boy called Harry Potter woke with a start.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE INVITATION

By the time Harry arrived in the kitchen, the three Dursleys were already seated around the table. None of them looked up. Sirius was hidden behind the morning's Daily Mail, and Aunt Petunia was cutting a grapefruit into quarters, her lips pursed over the knife. Dudley looked furious and sulky, and somehow seemed to be taking up even more space than usual. This was saying a lot for himself. When Aunt Petunia put a quarter of unsweetened grapefruit onto Dudley's plate with a tremulous "There you go, Dudley," it was the most unpleasant turn since he had come home for the summer with his end-of-year report.

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had managed to find excuses for his bad marks as usual: Aunt Petunia always insisted that Dudley was a mischievous little boy, while Uncle Vernon maintained that "he didn't want some swotty little nancy boy for a son anyway." They also said that Dudley was a mischievous little boy, but he wouldn't hurt a fly!" Aunt Petunia had said tearfully.

However, at the bottom of the report there were a few well-chosen comments from the school nurse that not even Uncle Vernon could ignore. Aunt Petunia wailed that Dudley was big-boned, and that his poundage was really puppy fat, and that he was a growing boy. The outfitters didn't stock knickerbockers big enough for him anymore. The school nurse had seen what Aunt Petunia's excuses were for, and in observing the comings and goings of the neighbors — simply refused to see: that far from needing excuses, Dudley was a young killer whale.

So — after many tantrums, after arguments that shook Harry's bedroom floor, and many tears from Aunt Petunia — the school nurse had been taped to the fridge, which had been emptied of all Dudley's favorite things — fizzy drinks, chocolate, and fruit and vegetables and the sorts of things that Uncle Vernon called "rabbit food." To make Dudley feel better about the diet too. She now passed a grapefruit quarter to Harry. He noticed that it was a lot smaller than Dudley's. Aunt Petunia's morale was to make sure that he did, at least, get more to eat than Harry.

But Aunt Petunia didn't know what was hidden under the loose floorboard upstairs. She had no idea that Harry was expecting to survive the summer on carrot sticks, Harry had sent Hedwig to his friends with pleas for help. When he returned from Hermione's house with a large box stuffed full of sugar-free snacks. (Hermione's parents were dentists, and she had a lot of her own homemade rock cakes. (Harry hadn't touched these; he had had too much experience of Hagrid's cooking, and the enormous fruitcake and assorted meat pies. Poor Errol, who was elderly and feeble, had needed a full five days to recover from the Dursleys had completely ignored) he had received four superb birthday cakes, one each from Ron, Hermione, Hagrid, and Sirius. So when he ate a real breakfast when he got back upstairs, he ate his grapefruit without complaint.

Uncle Vernon laid aside his paper with a deep sniff of disapproval and looked down at his own grapefruit quarter.

"Is this it?" he said grumpily to Aunt Petunia.

Aunt Petunia gave him a severe look, and then nodded pointedly at Dudley, who had already finished his own grapefruit quarter with his biggy little eyes.

Uncle Vernon gave a great sigh, which ruffled his large, bushy mustache, and picked up his spoon.

The doorbell rang. Uncle Vernon heaved himself out of his chair and set off down the hall. Quick as a flash, while his back was to the door, Uncle Vernon's grapefruit.

Harry heard talking at the door, and someone laughing, and Uncle Vernon answering curtly. Then the front door closed. Aunt Petunia set the teapot down on the table and looked curiously around to see where Uncle Vernon had got to. She saw his back. He looked livid.

"You," he barked at Harry. "In the living room. Now."

Bewildered, wondering what on earth he was supposed to have done this time, Harry got up and followed Uncle Vernon into the living room, closing the door sharply behind both of them.

"So," he said, marching over to the fireplace and turning to face Harry as though he were about to pronounce him unfit for service. Harry would have dearly loved to have said, "So what?" but he didn't feel that Uncle Vernon's temper should be tested. He was under a severe strain from lack of food. He therefore settled for looking politely puzzled.

"This just arrived," said Uncle Vernon. He brandished a piece of purple writing paper at Harry. "A letter. About you."

Harry's confusion increased. Who would be writing to Uncle Vernon about him? Who did he know who sent letters by owl? Uncle Vernon glared at Harry, then looked down at the letter and began to read aloud:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Dursley,

We have never been introduced, but I am sure you have heard a great deal from Harry about my son Ron.

As Harry might have told you, the final of the Quidditch World Cup takes place this Monday night, and my husband, Sirius, is going to work at the Department of Magical Games and Sports.

I do hope you will allow us to take Harry to the match, as this really is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity; Britain hasn't won the Cup for a long time. It's a hard to come by. We would of course be glad to have Harry stay for the remainder of the summer holidays, and to see him. It would be best for Harry to send us your answer as quickly as possible in the normal way, because the Muggle post is slow, and we don't know where it is.

Hoping to see Harry soon,

Yours sincerely,

P.S. I do hope we've put enough stamps on.

Uncle Vernon finished reading, put his hand back into his breast pocket, and drew out something else.

"Look at this," he growled.

He held up the envelope in which Mrs. Weasley's letter had come, and Harry had to fight down a laugh. Every bit of it to which Mrs. Weasley had squeezed the Dursleys' address in minute writing.

"She did put enough stamps on, then," said Harry, trying to sound as though Mrs. Weasley's was a mistake anyone could

"The postman noticed," he said through gritted teeth. "Very interested to know where this letter came from, he was."

Harry didn't say anything. Other people might not understand why Uncle Vernon was making a fuss about too many stamps, but touchy they were about anything even slightly out of the ordinary. Their worst fear was that someone would find out about the Weasleys.

Uncle Vernon was still glaring at Harry, who tried to keep his expression neutral. If he didn't do or say anything stupid, it was for Uncle Vernon to say something, but he merely continued to glare. Harry decided to break the silence.

"So — can I go then?" he asked.

A slight spasm crossed Uncle Vernon's large purple face. The mustache bristled. Harry thought he knew what was going on. His most fundamental instincts came into conflict. Allowing Harry to go would make Harry happy, something Uncle Vernon hated. Allowing Harry to disappear to the Weasleys' for the rest of the summer would get rid of him two weeks earlier than any other option. To give himself thinking time, it seemed, he looked down at Mrs. Weasley's letter again.

"Who is this woman?" he said, staring at the signature with distaste.

"You've seen her," said Harry. "She's my friend Ron's mother, she was meeting him off the Hog — off the school train."

He had almost said "Hogwarts Express," and that was a sure way to get his uncle's temper up. Nobody ever mentioned the school train.

Uncle Vernon screwed up his enormous face as though trying to remember something very unpleasant.

"Dumpy sort of woman?" he growled finally. "Load of children with red hair?"

Harry frowned. He thought it was a bit rich of Uncle Vernon to call anyone "dumpy," when his own son, Dudley, had fat all over his face, and was three times as tall as he was.

Uncle Vernon was perusing the letter again.

"Quidditch," he muttered under his breath. "Quidditch — what is this rubbish?"

Harry felt a second stab of annoyance.

"It's a sport," he said shortly. "Played on broom —"

"All right, all right!" said Uncle Vernon loudly. Harry saw, with some satisfaction, that his uncle looked vaguely panicked. He had said "broomsticks" in his living room. He took refuge in perusing the letter again. Harry saw his lips form the words "serious."

"What does she mean, 'the normal way'?" he spat.

"Normal for us," said Harry, and before his uncle could stop him, he added, "you know, owl post. That's what's normal for us."

Uncle Vernon looked as outraged as if Harry had just uttered a disgusting swearword. Shaking with anger, he shot a look at the neighbors with their ears pressed against the glass.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to mention that unnaturalness under my roof?" he hissed, his face now a mottled purple. "I've put it on your ungrateful back —"

"Only after Dudley finished with them," said Harry coldly, and indeed, he was dressed in a sweatshirt so large for him that he had to use his hands, and which fell past the knees of his extremely baggy jeans.

"I will not be spoken to like that!" said Uncle Vernon, trembling with rage.

But Harry wasn't going to stand for this. Gone were the days when he had been forced to take every single one of their orders. He wasn't going to let Uncle Vernon stop him from going to the Quidditch World Cup, not if he could help it. Harry took a deep breath. "I want to go to the Quidditch World Cup. Can I go now, then? Only I've got a letter to Sirius I want to finish. You know — my godfather."

He had done it. He had said the magic words. Now he watched the purple recede blotchily from Uncle Vernon's face.

"You're — you're writing to him, are you?" said Uncle Vernon, in a would-be calm voice — but Harry had seen the purple in his eyes.

"Well — yeah," said Harry, casually. "It's been a while since he heard from me, and, you know, if he doesn't, he might think I've died."

He stopped there to enjoy the effect of these words. He could almost see the cogs working under Uncle Vernon's thick skin. Sirius, Sirius would think Harry was being mistreated. If he told Harry he couldn't go to the Quidditch World Cup, Harry would be mistreated. There was only one thing for Uncle Vernon to do. Harry could see the conclusion forming in his uncle's mind. He decided not to smile, to keep his own face as blank as possible. And then —

"Well, all right then. You can go to this ruddy . . . this stupid . . . this World Cup thing. You write and tell these — these people that you're going to go dropping you off all over the country. And you can spend the rest of the summer there. And you can tell your mother that."

"Okay then," said Harry brightly.

He turned and walked toward the living room door, fighting the urge to jump into the air and whoop. He was going to the Quidditch World Cup!

Outside in the hall he nearly ran into Dudley, who had been lurking behind the door, clearly hoping to overhear Harry's conversation. He saw Harry's face.

"That was an excellent breakfast, wasn't it?" said Harry. "I feel really full, don't you?"

Laughing at the astonished look on Dudley's face, Harry took the stairs three at a time, and hurled himself back into his room.

The first thing he saw was that Hedwig was back. She was sitting in her cage, staring at Harry with her enormous amber eyes about something. Exactly what was annoying her became apparent almost at once.

"OUCH!" said Harry as what appeared to be a small, gray, feathery tennis ball collided with the side of his head. Harry rubbed his eye, and saw a minute owl, small enough to fit into the palm of his hand, whizzing excitedly around the room like a locket at his feet. Harry bent down, recognized Ron's handwriting, then tore open the envelope. Inside was a hastily scribbled note from Harry — DAD GOT THE TICKETS — Ireland versus Bulgaria, Monday night. Mum's writing to the Muggles to ask you to deliver the post is. Thought I'd send this with Pig anyway.

Harry stared at the word "Pig," then looked up at the tiny owl now zooming around the light fixture on the ceiling. He couldn't read Ron's writing. He went back to the letter:

We're coming for you whether the Muggles like it or not, you can't miss the World Cup, only Mum and Dad reckon it's a good idea, send Pig back with your answer pronto, and we'll come and get you at five o'clock on Sunday. If they say no, send Pig back anyway.

Hermione's arriving this afternoon. Percy's started work — the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Don't let the pants bored off you.

See you soon —

"Calm down!" Harry said as the small owl flew low over his head, twittering madly with what Harry could only assume was "I'm here, I need you to take my answer back!"

The owl fluttered down on top of Hedwig's cage. Hedwig looked coldly up at it, as though daring it to try and come any closer. Harry seized his eagle-feather quill once more, grabbed a fresh piece of parchment, and wrote:

Ron, it's all okay, the Muggles say I can come. See you five o'clock tomorrow. Can't wait.

He folded this note up very small, and with immense difficulty, tied it to the tiny owl's leg as it hopped on the spot with its wings flapping again; it zoomed out of the window and out of sight.

Harry turned to Hedwig.

"Feeling up to a long journey?" he asked her.

Hedwig hooted in a dignified sort of a way.

"Can you take this to Sirius for me?" he said, picking up his letter. "Hang on . . . I just want to finish it."

He unfolded the parchment and hastily added a postscript.

If you want to contact me, I'll be at my friend Ron Weasley's for the rest of the summer. His dad's got us tickets for the World Cup.

The letter finished, he tied it to Hedwig's leg; she kept unusually still, as though determined to show him how a real owl behaves.

"I'll be at Ron's when you get back, all right?" Harry told her.

She nipped his finger affectionately, then, with a soft swooshing noise, spread her enormous wings and soared out of the window.

Harry watched her out of sight, then crawled under his bed, wrenched up the loose floorboard, and pulled out a large bag of Muggle sweets, savoring the happiness that was flooding through him. He had cake, and Dudley had nothing but grapefruit; it was a brilliant idea. The car felt perfectly normal again, and he was going to watch the Quidditch World Cup. It was hard, just now, to feel worried.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### BACK TO THE BURROW

By twelve o'clock the next day, Harry's school trunk was packed with his school things and all his most prized possessions: the broomstick he had gotten from Sirius, the enchanted map of Hogwarts he had been given by Fred and George Weasley, the floorboard of all food, double-checked every nook and cranny of his bedroom for forgotten spellbooks or quills, and took the first, on which he liked to cross off the days remaining until his return to Hogwarts.

The atmosphere inside number four, Privet Drive was extremely tense. The imminent arrival at their house of an assassin's uncle Vernon had looked downright alarmed when Harry informed him that the Weasleys would be arriving at five o'clock.

"I hope you told them to dress properly, these people," he snarled at once. "I've seen the sort of stuff your lot wear. That's all."

Harry felt a slight sense of foreboding. He had rarely seen Mr. or Mrs. Weasley wearing anything that the Dursleys would approve of during the holidays, but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley usually wore long robes in varying states of shabbiness. Harry wasn't bothered by how rude the Dursleys might be to the Weasleys if they turned up looking like their worst idea of wizards.

Uncle Vernon had put on his best suit. To some people, this might have looked like a gesture of welcome, but Harry found it intimidating. Dudley, on the other hand, looked somehow diminished. This was not because the diet was at last taking effect, or because he was surrounded by a fully-grown wizard with a curly pig's tail poking out of the seat of his trousers, and Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon in London. It wasn't altogether surprising, therefore, that Dudley kept running his hand nervously over his backside, as if he was the same target to the enemy.

Lunch was an almost silent meal. Dudley didn't even protest at the food (cottage cheese and grated celery). Aunt Petunia's lips were pursed, and she seemed to be chewing her tongue, as though biting back the furious diatribe she longed to throw at them.

"They'll be driving, of course?" Uncle Vernon barked across the table.

"Er," said Harry.

He hadn't thought of that. How were the Weasleys going to pick him up? They didn't have a car anymore; the old Ford was hidden in the Forbidden Forest at Hogwarts. But Mr. Weasley had borrowed a Ministry of Magic car last year; possibly he would do the same.

"I think so," said Harry.



Uncle Vernon snorted into his mustache. Normally, Uncle Vernon would have asked what car Mr. Weasley drove; he t Harry doubted whether Uncle Vernon would have taken to Mr. Weasley even if he drove a Ferrari.

Harry spent most of the afternoon in his bedroom; he couldn't stand watching Aunt Petunia peer out through the ne ut an escaped rhinoceros. Finally, at a quarter to five, Harry went back downstairs and into the living room.

Aunt Petunia was compulsively straightening cushions. Uncle Vernon was pretending to read the paper, but his tiny th all his might for the sound of an approaching car. Dudley was crammed into an armchair, his porky hands beneath sion; he left the room and went and sat on the stairs in the hall, his eyes on his watch and his heart pumping fast fro But five o'clock came and then went. Uncle Vernon, perspiring slightly in his suit, opened the front door, peered up a "They're late!" he snarled at Harry.

"I know," said Harry. "Maybe — er — the traffic's bad, or something."

Ten past five . . . then a quarter past five . . . Harry was starting to feel anxious himself now. At half past, he heard Un n the living room.

"No consideration at all."

"We might've had an engagement."

"Maybe they think they'll get invited to dinner if they're late."

"Well, they most certainly won't be," said Uncle Vernon, and Harry heard him stand up and start pacing the living room That's if they're coming at all. Probably mistaken the day. I daresay their kind don't set much store by punctuality. Eit AAAAAARRRRRGH!"

Harry jumped up. From the other side of the living room door came the sounds of the three Dursleys scrambling, pa he hall, looking terrified.

"What happened?" said Harry. "What's the matter?"

But Dudley didn't seem able to speak. Hands still clamped over his buttocks, he waddled as fast as he could into the Loud bangings and scrapings were coming from behind the Dursleys' boarded-up fireplace, which had a fake coal fir

"What is it?" gasped Aunt Petunia, who had backed into the wall and was staring, terrified, toward the fire. "What is it But they were left in doubt barely a second longer. Voices could be heard from inside the blocked fireplace.

"Ouch! Fred, no — go back, go back, there's been some kind of mistake — tell George not to — OUCH! George, no, th

"Maybe Harry can hear us, Dad — maybe he'll be able to let us out —"

There was a loud hammering of fists on the boards behind the electric fire.

"Harry? Harry, can you hear us?"

The Dursleys rounded on Harry like a pair of angry wolverines.

"What is this?" growled Uncle Vernon. "What's going on?"

"They — they've tried to get here by Floo powder," said Harry, fighting a mad desire to laugh. "They can travel by fire He approached the fireplace and called through the boards.

"Mr. Weasley? Can you hear me?"

The hammering stopped. Somebody inside the chimney piece said, "Shh!"

"Mr. Weasley, it's Harry . . . the fireplace has been blocked up. You won't be able to get through there."

"Damn!" said Mr. Weasley's voice. "What on earth did they want to block up the fireplace for?"

"They've got an electric fire," Harry explained.

"Really?" said Mr. Weasley's voice excitedly. "Eclectic, you say? With a plug? Gracious, I must see that. . . . Let's think . . Ron's voice now joined the others'.

"What are we doing here? Has something gone wrong?"

"Oh no, Ron," came Fred's voice, very sarcastically. "No, this is exactly where we wanted to end up."

"Yeah, we're having the time of our lives here," said George, whose voice sounded muffled, as though he was squash

"Boys, boys . . ." said Mr. Weasley vaguely. "I'm trying to think what to do. . . . Yes . . . only way . . . Stand back, Harry."

Harry retreated to the sofa. Uncle Vernon, however, moved forward.

"Wait a moment!" he bellowed at the fire. "What exactly are you going to —"

BANG.

The electric fire shot across the room as the boarded-up fireplace burst outward, expelling Mr. Weasley, Fred, Georg shrieked and fell backward over the coffee table; Uncle Vernon caught her before she hit the floor, and gaped, spee ng Fred and George, who were identical to the last freckle.

"That's better," panted Mr. Weasley, brushing dust from his long green robes and straightening his glasses. "Ah — yo Tall, thin, and balding, he moved toward Uncle Vernon, his hand outstretched, but Uncle Vernon backed away severa is best suit was covered in white dust, which had settled in his hair and mustache and made him look as though he h

"Er — yes — sorry about that," said Mr. Weasley, lowering his hand and looking over his shoulder at the blasted firep

Idn't be able to get out at the other end. I had your fireplace connected to the Floo Network, you see — just for an af

en't supposed to be connected, strictly speaking — but I've got a useful contact at the Floo Regulation Panel and he f

rry. I'll light a fire to send the boys back, and then I can repair your fireplace before I Disapparate."

Harry was ready to bet that the Dursleys hadn't understood a single word of this. They were still gaping at Mr. Weasl behind Uncle Vernon.

"Hello, Harry!" said Mr. Weasley brightly. "Got your trunk ready?"

"It's upstairs," said Harry, grinning back.

"We'll get it," said Fred at once. Winking at Harry, he and George left the room. They knew where Harry's bedroom was, but suspected that Fred and George were hoping for a glimpse of Dudley; they had heard a lot about him from Harry.

"Well," said Mr. Weasley, swinging his arms slightly, while he tried to find words to break the very nasty silence. "Very sorry about the damage. As the usually spotless living room was now covered in dust and bits of brick, this remark didn't go down too well with Petunia. She started chewing her tongue again. However, they seemed too scared to actually say anything.

Mr. Weasley was looking around. He loved everything to do with Muggles. Harry could see him itching to go and examine the plug. "They run off eckeltricity, do they?" he said knowledgeably. "Ah yes, I can see the plugs. I collect plugs," he added to Uncle Vernon. "I have a whole set of batteries. My wife thinks I'm mad, but there you are."

Uncle Vernon clearly thought Mr. Weasley was mad too. He moved ever so slightly to the right, screening Aunt Petunia from Dudley's sight, but not fast enough to prevent him from tugging at them and attack.

Dudley suddenly reappeared in the room. Harry could hear the clunk of his trunk on the stairs, and knew that the soot was on the wall, gazing at Mr. Weasley with terrified eyes, and attempted to conceal himself behind his mother and father. Unfortunately, Aunt Petunia, was nowhere near enough to conceal Dudley.

"Ah, this is your cousin, is it, Harry?" said Mr. Weasley, taking another brave stab at making conversation.

"Yep," said Harry, "that's Dudley."

He and Ron exchanged glances and then quickly looked away from each other; the temptation to burst out laughing was too strong, though afraid it might fall off. Mr. Weasley, however, seemed genuinely concerned at Dudley's peculiar behavior. Indeed, he was so sure that Mr. Weasley thought Dudley was quite as mad as the Dursleys thought he was, except that Mr. Weasley felt sorry for him.

"Having a good holiday, Dudley?" he said kindly.

Dudley whimpered. Harry saw his hands tighten still harder over his massive backside.

Fred and George came back into the room carrying Harry's school trunk. They glanced around as they entered and saw the damage.

"Ah, right," said Mr. Weasley. "Better get cracking then."

He pushed up the sleeves of his robes and took out his wand. Harry saw the Dursleys draw back against the wall as Mr. Weasley raised his wand.

"Incendio!" said Mr. Weasley, pointing his wand at the hole in the wall behind him.

Flames rose at once in the fireplace, crackling merrily as though they had been burning for hours. Mr. Weasley took a pinch of the powder inside, and threw it onto the flames, which turned emerald green and roared higher than ever.

"Off you go then, Fred," said Mr. Weasley.

"Coming," said Fred. "Oh no — hang on —"

A bag of sweets had spilled out of Fred's pocket and the contents were now rolling in every direction — big, fat toffees, lollipops, and so on. Fred scrambled around, cramming them back into his pocket, then gave the Dursleys a cheery wave, stepped forward, and gave a little shuddering gasp. There was a whooshing sound, and Fred vanished.

"Right then, George," said Mr. Weasley, "you and the trunk."

Harry helped George carry the trunk forward into the flames and turn it onto its end so that he could hold it better. Then George vanished too.

"Ron, you next," said Mr. Weasley.

"See you," said Ron brightly to the Dursleys. He grinned broadly at Harry, then stepped into the fire, shouted "the Broomstick!" and vanished. Now Harry and Mr. Weasley alone remained.

"Well . . . 'bye then," Harry said to the Dursleys.

They didn't say anything at all. Harry moved toward the fire, but just as he reached the edge of the hearth, Mr. Weasley stepped forward, looking at the Dursleys in amazement.

"Harry said good-bye to you," he said. "Didn't you hear him?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry muttered to Mr. Weasley. "Honestly, I don't care."

Mr. Weasley did not remove his hand from Harry's shoulder.

"You aren't going to see your nephew till next summer," he said to Uncle Vernon in mild indignation. "Surely you're going to see him. Uncle Vernon's face worked furiously. The idea of being taught consideration by a man who had just blasted away his own nephew's head was not to his liking.

But Mr. Weasley's wand was still in his hand, and Uncle Vernon's tiny eyes darted to it once, before he said, very respectfully, "See you," said Harry, putting one foot forward into the green flames, which felt pleasantly like warm breath. At that moment, Aunt Petunia and Aunt Marge started to scream.

Harry wheeled around. Dudley was no longer standing behind his parents. He was kneeling beside the coffee table, and a long, thin, foot-long thing was protruding from his mouth. One bewildered second later, Harry realized that the foot-long thing was Dudley's tongue. It lay on the floor before him.

Aunt Petunia hurled herself onto the ground beside Dudley, seized the end of his swollen tongue, and attempted to pull it out. Dudley looked even worse than ever, trying to fight her off. Uncle Vernon was bellowing and waving his arms around, and Mr. Weasley was looking on with a grimace.

"Not to worry, I can sort him out!" he yelled, advancing on Dudley with his wand outstretched, but Aunt Petunia screamed and pulled Dudley away from Mr. Weasley.

"No, really!" said Mr. Weasley desperately. "It's a simple process — it was the toffee — my son Fred — real practical joke. It's not a big deal. It is — please, I can correct it —"

But far from being reassured, the Dursleys became more panic-stricken; Aunt Petunia was sobbing hysterically, tugging at Dudley's tongue, and Uncle Vernon, who had lost control of himself, was shouting at the top of his voice.

Harry looked at the Dursleys and then at Mr. Weasley. He saw that Mr. Weasley was looking at him with a grimace. He saw that Mr. Weasley was looking at him with a grimace. He saw that Mr. Weasley was looking at him with a grimace.

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d and threw it very hard at Mr. Weasley, who ducked, causing the ornament to shatter in the blasted fireplace.

"Now really!" said Mr. Weasley angrily, brandishing his wand. "I'm trying to help!"

Bellowing like a wounded hippo, Uncle Vernon snatched up another ornament.

"Harry, go! Just go!" Mr. Weasley shouted, his wand on Uncle Vernon. "I'll sort this out!"

Harry didn't want to miss the fun, but Uncle Vernon's second ornament narrowly missed his left ear, and on balance he decided to throw himself into the fire, looking over his shoulder as he said "the Burrow!" His last fleeting glimpse of the living room was of Fred and George with their hands on their hips, Aunt Petunia screaming and lying on top of Dudley, and Dudley's tongue lolling around like a grasshopper, and the Dursleys' living room was whipped out of sight in a rush of emerald-green flames.

#### WEASLEYS' WIZARD WHEEZES

Harry spun faster and faster, elbows tucked tightly to his sides, blurred fireplaces flashing past him, until he started to feel himself slowing down, he threw out his hands and came to a halt in time to prevent himself from falling face forward.

"Did he eat it?" said Fred excitedly, holding out a hand to pull Harry to his feet.

"Yeah," said Harry, straightening up. "What was it?"

"Ton-Tongue Toffee," said Fred brightly. "George and I invented them, and we've been looking for someone to test them."

The tiny kitchen exploded with laughter; Harry looked around and saw that Ron and George were sitting at the scrubbed wooden table in the foreground, though he knew immediately who they must be: Bill and Charlie, the two eldest Weasley brothers.

"How're you doing, Harry?" said the nearer of the two, grinning at him and holding out a large hand, which Harry shook. It must be Charlie, who worked with dragons in Romania. Charlie was built like the twins, shorter and stockier than Percy and with a freckled face, which was weather-beaten and so freckly that he looked almost tanned; his arms were muscular, and one of them was a little scarred.

Bill got to his feet, smiling, and also shook Harry's hand. Bill came as something of a surprise. Harry knew that he was Head Boy at Hogwarts; Harry had always imagined Bill to be an older version of Percy: fussy about rule-breaking and a bit of a snob.

Bill was tall, with long hair that he had tied back in a ponytail. He was wearing an earring with a dragon's head, which would not have looked out of place at a rock concert, except that Harry recognized his boots to be made, not of leather, but of dragonhide.

Before any of them could say anything else, there was a faint popping noise, and Mr. Weasley appeared out of thin air. Harry had never seen him.

"That wasn't funny, Fred!" he shouted. "What on earth did you give that Muggle boy?"

"I didn't give him anything," said Fred, with another evil grin. "I just dropped it. . . . It was his fault he went and ate it, I tell you."

"You dropped it on purpose!" roared Mr. Weasley. "You knew he'd eat it, you knew he was on a diet —"

"How big did his tongue get?" George asked eagerly.

"It was four feet long before his parents would let me shrink it!"

Harry and the Weasleys roared with laughter again.

"It isn't funny!" Mr. Weasley shouted. "That sort of behavior seriously undermines wizard-Muggle relations! I spend hours trying to get my own sons —"

"We didn't give it to him because he's a Muggle!" said Fred indignantly.

"No, we gave it to him because he's a great bullying git," said George. "Isn't he, Harry?"

"Yeah, he is, Mr. Weasley," said Harry earnestly.

"That's not the point!" raged Mr. Weasley. "You wait until I tell your mother —"

"Tell me what?" said a voice behind them.

Mrs. Weasley had just entered the kitchen. She was a short, plump woman with a very kind face, though her eyes were a little sharp.

"Oh hello, Harry, dear," she said, spotting him and smiling. Then her eyes snapped back to her husband. "Tell me what's going on."

Mr. Weasley hesitated. Harry could tell that, however angry he was with Fred and George, he hadn't really intended to tell her.

Mr. Weasley eyed his wife nervously. Then two girls appeared in the kitchen doorway behind Mrs. Weasley. One, with long brown hair and Ron's friend, Hermione Granger. The other, who was small and red-haired, was Ron's younger sister, Ginny. Both were smiling.

Let — she had been very taken with Harry ever since his first visit to the Burrow.

"Tell me what, Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley repeated, in a dangerous sort of voice.

"It's nothing, Molly," mumbled Mr. Weasley, "Fred and George just — but I've had words with them —"

"What have they done this time?" said Mrs. Weasley. "If it's got anything to do with Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes —"

"Why don't you show Harry where he's sleeping, Ron?" said Hermione from the doorway.

"He knows where he's sleeping," said Ron, "in my room, he slept there last —"

"We can all go," said Hermione pointedly.

"Oh," said Ron, cottoning on. "Right."

"Yeah, we'll come too," said George.

"You stay where you are!" snarled Mrs. Weasley.

Harry and Ron edged out of the kitchen, and they, Hermione, and Ginny set off along the narrow hallway and up the stairs.

"What are Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes?" Harry asked as they climbed.

Ron and Ginny both laughed, although Hermione didn't.

"Mum found this stack of order forms when she was cleaning Fred and George's room," said Ron quietly. "Great long lists of ingredients, wands and trick sweets, loads of stuff. It was brilliant, I never knew they'd been inventing all that . . ."

"We've been hearing explosions out of their room for ages, but we never thought they were actually making things,"

"Only, most of the stuff — well, all of it, really — was a bit dangerous," said Ron, "and, you know, they were planning to burn them. Told them they weren't allowed to make any more of it, and burned all the order forms. . . . She's furious at them. O.W.L.s were Ordinary Wizarding Levels, the examinations Hogwarts students took at the age of fifteen.

"And then there was this big row," Ginny said, "because Mum wants them to go into the Ministry of Magic like Dad, and just then a door on the second landing opened, and a face poked out wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a very annoyed expression.

"Hi, Percy," said Harry.

"Oh hello, Harry," said Percy. "I was wondering who was making all the noise. I'm trying to work in here, you know — it's difficult to concentrate when people keep thundering up and down the stairs."

"We're not thundering," said Ron irritably. "We're walking. Sorry if we've disturbed the top-secret workings of the Ministry."

"What are you working on?" said Harry.

"A report for the Department of International Magical Cooperation," said Percy smugly. "We're trying to standardize the walls — they're a bit too thin — leakages have been increasing at a rate of almost three percent a year —"

"That'll change the world, that report will," said Ron. "Front page of the Daily Prophet, I expect, cauldron leaks."

Percy went slightly pink.

"You might sneer, Ron," he said heatedly, "but unless some sort of international law is imposed we might well find the Ministry seriously endangered —"

"Yeah, yeah, all right," said Ron, and he started off upstairs again. Percy slammed his bedroom door shut. As Harry, Hermione, and Ginny went down the stairs, shouts from the kitchen below echoed up to them. It sounded as though Mr. Weasley had told Mrs. Weasley about the room at the top of the house where Ron slept looked much as it had the last time that Harry had come to stay: the pictures, the tapestries, the portraits, were whirling and waving on the walls and sloping ceiling, and the fish tank on the windowsill, which had previously contained Ron's old rat, Scabbers, was here no more, but instead there was the tiny gray owl that had delivered Ron's letter to Harry, and twittering madly.

"Shut up, Pig," said Ron, edging his way between two of the four beds that had been squeezed into the room. "Fred and George are in their room," he told Harry. "Percy gets to keep his room all to himself because he's got to work."

"Er — why are you calling that owl Pig?" Harry asked Ron.

"Because he's being stupid," said Ginny. "Its proper name is Pigwidgeon."

"Yeah, and that's not a stupid name at all," said Ron sarcastically. "Ginny named him," he explained to Harry. "She really likes him, and he won't answer to anything else. So now he's Pig. I've got to keep him up here because he annoys Errol and Hermion. The Pigwidgeon zoomed happily around his cage, hooting shrilly. Harry knew Ron too well to take him seriously. He had been upset when Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, appeared to have eaten him.

"Where's Crookshanks?" Harry asked Hermione now.

"Out in the garden, I expect," she said. "He likes chasing gnomes. He's never seen any before."

"Percy's enjoying work, then?" said Harry, sitting down on one of the beds and watching the Chudley Cannons zoom in.

"Enjoying it?" said Ron darkly. "I don't reckon he'd come home if Dad didn't make him. He's obsessed. Just don't get him out of the house as I was saying to Mr. Crouch . . . Mr. Crouch is of the opinion . . . Mr. Crouch was telling me . . . They'll be announcing his appointment soon."

"Have you had a good summer, Harry?" said Hermione. "Did you get our food parcels and everything?"

"Yeah, thanks a lot," said Harry. "They saved my life, those cakes."

"And have you heard from — ?" Ron began, but at a look from Hermione he fell silent. Harry knew Ron had been about to ask if he had heard from Sirius in helping Sirius escape from the Ministry of Magic that they were almost as concerned about Harry's godfather as he was about himself. Nobody but themselves and Professor Dumbledore knew about how Sirius had escaped, or believed in his innocence.

"I think they've stopped arguing," said Hermione, to cover the awkward moment, because Ginny was looking curious.

"Yeah, all right," said Ron. The four of them left Ron's room and went back downstairs to find Mrs. Weasley alone in the kitchen.

"We're eating out in the garden," she said when they came in. "There's just not room for eleven people in here. Could you try and clear up the tables. Knives and forks, please, you two," she said to Ron and Harry, pointing her wand a little more vigorously. The knives and forks shot out of their skins so fast that they ricocheted off the walls and ceiling.

"Oh for heaven's sake," she snapped, now directing her wand at a dustpan, which hopped off the sideboard and started to fly. "You two, she burst out savagely, now pulling pots and pans out of a cupboard, and Harry knew she meant Fred and George. "You two, stop messing about, unless you count making as much trouble as they possibly can. . . ."

Mrs. Weasley slammed a large copper saucepan down on the kitchen table and began to wave her wand around insistently. "It's not as though they haven't got brains," she continued irritably, taking the saucepan over to the stove and lighting it. "If they don't pull themselves together soon, they'll be in real trouble. I've had more owls from Hogwarts about the state of the house than I can count. If they're not re going, they'll end up in front of the Improper Use of Magic Office."

Mrs. Weasley jabbed her wand at the cutlery drawer, which shot open. Harry and Ron both jumped out of the way as it flew. "You two, stop chopping the potatoes, which had just been tipped back into the sink by the dustpan.

"I don't know where we went wrong with them," said Mrs. Weasley, putting down her wand and starting to pull out silverware. "You two, stop messing about, unless you count making as much trouble as they possibly can. . . ."

She had picked up her wand from the table, and it had emitted a loud squeak and turned into a giant rubber mouse.

"One of their fake wands again!" she shouted. "How many times have I told them not to leave them lying around?"

She grabbed her real wand and turned around to find that the sauce on the stove was smoking.

"C'mon," Ron said hurriedly to Harry, seizing a handful of cutlery from the open drawer, "let's go and help Bill and Charlie. They left Mrs. Weasley and headed out the back door into the yard. They had only gone a few paces when Hermione's bandy-legged ginger cat, Crookshanks, came pelting out of the garden with a muddy potato on legs. Harry recognized it instantly as a gnome. Barely ten inches high, its horny little feet pattered into one of the Wellington boots that lay scattered around the door. Harry could hear the gnome giggling madly as Crookshanks hiled, a very loud crashing noise was coming from the other side of the house. The source of the commotion was revealed: the Weasleys had their wands out, and were making two battered old tables fly high above the lawn, smashing into each other, each table with a crash. The tables were cheering, Ginny was laughing, and Hermione was hovering near the hedge, apparently torn between amusement and concern. Bill's table caught Charlie's with a huge bang and knocked one of its legs off. There was a clatter from overhead, and a crash on the second floor.

"Will you keep it down?!" he bellowed.

"Sorry, Percy," said Bill, grinning. "How're the cauldron bottoms coming on?"

"Very badly," said Percy peevishly, and he slammed the window shut. Chuckling, Bill and Charlie directed the tables to fly back to their wands, Bill reattached the table leg and conjured tablecloths from nowhere.

By seven o'clock, the two tables were groaning under dishes and dishes of Mrs. Weasley's excellent cooking, and the family was eating to eat beneath a clear, deep-blue sky. To somebody who had been living on meals of increasingly stale cake all summer, the food tasted like as he helped himself to chicken and ham pie, boiled potatoes, and salad.

At the far end of the table, Percy was telling his father all about his report on cauldron bottoms.

"I've told Mr. Crouch that I'll have it ready by Tuesday," Percy was saying pompously. "That's a bit sooner than he expected. I'm grateful I've done it in good time, I mean, it's extremely busy in our department just now, what with all the arrangements for the Cup, the need from the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Ludo Bagman —"

"I like Ludo," said Mr. Weasley mildly. "He was the one who got us such good tickets for the Cup. I did him a bit of a favor, I smoothed the whole thing over."

"Oh Bagman's likable enough, of course," said Percy dismissively, "but how he ever got to be Head of Department . . . he's not a member of our department and not trying to find out what's happened to them. You realize Bertha Jorkins has been missing for a long time, has she come back?"

"Yes, I was asking Ludo about that," said Mr. Weasley, frowning. "He says Bertha's gotten lost plenty of times before now, but I don't think he'd be worried. . . ."

"Oh Bertha's hopeless, all right," said Percy. "I hear she's been shunted from department to department for years, Mr. Crouch ought to be trying to find her. Mr. Crouch has been taking a personal interest, she worked in our department at one time. Ludo Bagman just keeps laughing and saying she probably misread the map and ended up in Australia instead of Albania. I've got elderflower wine — 'we've got quite enough on our plates at the Department of International Magical Cooperation' — well, we've got another big event to organize right after the World Cup."

Percy cleared his throat significantly and looked down toward the end of the table where Harry, Ron, and Hermione were sitting. He raised his voice slightly. "The top-secret one."

Ron rolled his eyes and muttered to Harry and Hermione, "He's been trying to get us to ask what that event is ever since we got the cauldrons."

In the middle of the table, Mrs. Weasley was arguing with Bill about his earring, which seemed to be a recent acquisition.

" . . . with a horrible great fang on it. Really, Bill, what do they say at the bank?"

"Mum, no one at the bank gives a damn how I dress as long as I bring home plenty of treasure," said Bill patiently.

"And your hair's getting silly, dear," said Mrs. Weasley, fingering her wand lovingly. "I wish you'd let me give it a trim. . . ."

"I like it," said Ginny, who was sitting beside Bill. "You're so old-fashioned, Mum. Anyway, it's nowhere near as long as yours."

Next to Mrs. Weasley, Fred, George, and Charlie were all talking spiritedly about the World Cup.

"It's got to be Ireland," said Charlie thickly, through a mouthful of potato. "They flattened Peru in the semifinals."

"Bulgaria has got Viktor Krum, though," said Fred.

"Krum's one decent player, Ireland has got seven," said Charlie shortly. "I wish England had got through. That was embarrassing."

"What happened?" said Harry eagerly, regretting more than ever his isolation from the Wizarding world when he was at school.

"Went down to Transylvania, three hundred and ninety to ten," said Charlie gloomily. "Shocking performance. And when I was at school, Harry had been on the Gryffindor House Quidditch team ever since his first year at Hogwarts and owned one of the best brooms in the world. It was a lot more fun than anything else in the magical world, and he played in the position of Seeker on the Gryffindor House team."

Mr. Weasley conjured up candles to light the darkening garden before they had their homemade strawberry ice cream. The family sat at the table, and the warm air was perfumed with the smells of grass and honeysuckle. Harry was feeling extremely well, but he was still listening through the rosebushes, laughing madly and closely pursued by Crookshanks.

Ron looked carefully up the table to check that the rest of the family were all busy talking, then he said very quietly to Harry and Hermione.

Hermione looked around, listening closely.

"Yeah," said Harry softly, "twice. He sounds okay. I wrote to him yesterday. He might write back while I'm here."

He suddenly remembered the reason he had written to Sirius, and for a moment was on the verge of telling Ron and Hermione, but he suddenly remembered that he had awoken him . . . but he really didn't want to worry them just now, not when he himself was feeling so happy and peaceful.

"Look at the time," Mrs. Weasley said suddenly, checking her wristwatch. "You really should be in bed, the whole lot of you. It's a quarter of ten. Go to bed, Harry, if you leave your school list out, I'll get your things for you tomorrow in Diagon Alley. I'm getting everyone else's."

nt on for five days last time."

"Wow — hope it does this time!" said Harry enthusiastically.

"Well, I certainly don't," said Percy sanctimoniously. "I shudder to think what the state of my in-tray would be if I was

"Yeah, someone might slip dragon dung in it again, eh, Perce?" said Fred.

"That was a sample of fertilizer from Norway!" said Percy, going very red in the face. "It was nothing personal!"

"It was," Fred whispered to Harry as they got up from the table. "We sent it."

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE PORTKEY

Harry felt as though he had barely lain down to sleep in Ron's room when he was being shaken awake by Mrs. Weasley.

"Time to go, Harry, dear," she whispered, moving away to wake Ron.

Harry felt around for his glasses, put them on, and sat up. It was still dark outside. Ron muttered indistinctly as his messy, large, disheveled shapes emerging from tangles of blankets.

"S' time already?" said Fred groggily.

They dressed in silence, too sleepy to talk, then, yawning and stretching, the four of them headed downstairs into the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley was stirring the contents of a large pot on the stove, while Mr. Weasley was sitting at the table, checking his watch. He entered and spread his arms so that they could see his clothes more clearly. He was wearing what appeared to be a new, large, disheveled shape emerging from tangles of blankets. He was wearing what appeared to be a new, large, disheveled shape emerging from tangles of blankets.

"What d'you think?" he asked anxiously. "We're supposed to go incognito — do I look like a Muggle, Harry?"

"Yeah," said Harry, smiling, "very good."

"Where're Bill and Charlie and Per-Per-Percy?" said George, failing to stifle a huge yawn.

"Well, they're Apparating, aren't they?" said Mrs. Weasley, heaving the large pot over to the table and starting to ladle porridge.

Harry knew that Apparating meant disappearing from one place and reappearing almost instantly in another, but he had never done it as very difficult.

"So they're still in bed?" said Fred grumpily, pulling his bowl of porridge toward him. "Why can't we Apparate too?"

"Because you're not of age and you haven't passed your test," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "And where have those girls gone? She bustled out of the kitchen and they heard her climbing the stairs.

"You have to pass a test to Apparate?" Harry asked.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Weasley, tucking the tickets safely into the back pocket of his jeans. "The Department of Magical Transport has a strict rule about Apparating without a license. It's not easy, Apparition, and when it's not done properly it can lead to nasty complications."

Everyone around the table except Harry winced.

"Er — Splinched?" said Harry.

"They left half of themselves behind," said Mr. Weasley, now spooning large amounts of treacle onto his porridge. "Several people have been sent to the Accident and Magic Reversal Squad to sort them out. Meant a fair old bit of paperwork, I can tell you, what with all the ..."

Harry had a sudden vision of a pair of legs and an eyeball lying abandoned on the pavement of Privet Drive.

"Were they okay?" he asked, startled.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Weasley matter-of-factly. "But they got a heavy fine, and I don't think they'll be trying it again in a hurry. Plenty of adult wizards who don't bother with it. Prefer brooms — slower, but safer."

"But Bill and Charlie and Percy can all do it?"

"Charlie had to take the test twice," said Fred, grinning. "He failed the first time, Apparated five miles south of where he was, hopping, remember?"

"Yes, well, he passed the second time," said Mrs. Weasley, marching back into the kitchen amid hearty sniggers.

"Percy only passed two weeks ago," said George. "He's been Apparating downstairs every morning since, just to prove it. There were footprints down the passageway and Hermione and Ginny came into the kitchen, both looking pale and cross."

"Why do we have to be up so early?" Ginny said, rubbing her eyes and sitting down at the table.

"We've got a bit of a walk," said Mr. Weasley.

"Walk?" said Harry. "What, are we walking to the World Cup?"

"No, no, that's miles away," said Mr. Weasley, smiling. "We only need to walk a short way. It's just that it's very difficult to attract Muggle attention. We have to be very careful about how we travel at the best of times, and on a huge occasion like this."

"George!" said Mrs. Weasley sharply, and they all jumped.

"What?" said George, in an innocent tone that deceived nobody.

"What is that in your pocket?"

"Nothing!"

"Don't you lie to me!"

Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at George's pocket and said, "Accio!"

Several small, brightly colored objects zoomed out of George's pocket; he made a grab for them but missed, and the objects fell onto the table.

"We told you to destroy them!" said Mrs. Weasley furiously, holding up what were unmistakably more Ton-Tongue Tongues than anything else. "Both of you!"

It was an unpleasant scene; the twins had evidently been trying to smuggle as many toffees out of the house as possible. They managed to find them all.

"Accio! Accio! Accio!" she shouted, and toffees zoomed from all sorts of unlikely places, including the lining of George's pockets. "We spent six months developing those!" Fred shouted at his mother as she threw the toffees away.

"Oh a fine way to spend six months!" she shrieked. "No wonder you didn't get more O.W.L.s!"

All in all, the atmosphere was not very friendly as they took their departure. Mrs. Weasley was still glowering as she looked at the twins, who had each hoisted their rucksacks onto their backs and walked out without a word to her.

"Well, have a lovely time," said Mrs. Weasley, "and behave yourselves," she called after the twins' retreating backs, but she was talking to herself. "And Percy along around midday," Mrs. Weasley said to Mr. Weasley, as he, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny set off at last.

It was chilly and the moon was still out. Only a dull, greenish tinge along the horizon to their right showed that daybreak was near. Thousands of wizards speeding toward the Quidditch World Cup, sped up to walk with Mr. Weasley.

"So how does everyone get there without all the Muggles noticing?" he asked.

"It's been a massive organizational problem," sighed Mr. Weasley. "The trouble is, about a hundred thousand wizards are coming to the Cup. It's a magical site big enough to accommodate them all. There are places Muggles can't penetrate, but imagine trying to pack a hundred thousand people into a three-quarters. So we had to find a nice deserted moor, and set up as many anti-Muggle precautions as possible. The weather's not ideal, but we have to stagger the arrivals. People with cheaper tickets have to arrive two weeks beforehand. A limited number of people can travel by air buses and trains — remember, wizards are coming from all over the world. Some Apparate, of course, but we have to make sure we can't believe there's a handy wood they're using as the Apparition point. For those who don't want to Apparate, or can't, we have to have a way for them to get from one spot to another at a prearranged time. You can do large groups at a time if you need to. There have been a few accidents, but the nearest one to us is up at the top of Stoatshead Hill, so that's where we're headed."

Mr. Weasley pointed ahead of them, where a large black mass rose beyond the village of Ottery St. Catchpole.

"What sort of objects are Portkeys?" said Harry curiously.

"Well, they can be anything," said Mr. Weasley. "Unobtrusive things, obviously, so Muggles don't go picking them up and wondering what they are."

They trudged down the dark, dank lane toward the village, the silence broken only by their footsteps. The sky lightened a little, theinky blackness diluting to deepest blue. Harry's hands and feet were freezing. Mr. Weasley kept checking his watch.

They didn't have breath to spare for talking as they began to climb Stoatshead Hill, stumbling occasionally in hidden places. The pain in Harry's chest and his legs were starting to seize up when, at last, his feet found level ground.

"Whew," panted Mr. Weasley, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his sweater. "Well, we've made good time — but it's a long way. Hermione came over the crest of the hill last, clutching a stitch in her side."

"Now we just need the Portkey," said Mr. Weasley, replacing his glasses and squinting around at the ground. "It won't be long. They spread out, searching. They had only been at it for a couple of minutes, however, when a shout rent the still air."

"Over here, Arthur! Over here, son, we've got it!"

Two tall figures were silhouetted against the starry sky on the other side of the hilltop.

"Amos!" said Mr. Weasley, smiling as he strode over to the man who had shouted. The rest of them followed.

Mr. Weasley was shaking hands with a ruddy-faced wizard with a scrubby brown beard, who was holding a moldy-looking bag.

"This is Amos Diggory, everyone," said Mr. Weasley. "He works for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Cedric Diggory was an extremely handsome boy of around seventeen. He was Captain and Seeker of the Hufflepuff team last year."

"Hi," said Cedric, looking around at them all.

Everybody said hi back except Fred and George, who merely nodded. They had never quite forgiven Cedric for beating them last year.

"Long walk, Arthur?" Cedric's father asked.

"Not too bad," said Mr. Weasley. "We live just on the other side of the village there. You?"

"Had to get up at two, didn't we, Ced? I tell you, I'll be glad when he's got his Apparition test. Still . . . not complaining. He's got a lot of Galleons — and the tickets cost about that. Mind you, looks like I got off easy. . . ." Amos Diggory peered good-naturedly at Fred and George. "All these yours, Arthur?"

"Oh no, only the redheads," said Mr. Weasley, pointing out his children. "This is Hermione, friend of Ron's — and Harry."

"Merlin's beard," said Amos Diggory, his eyes widening. "Harry? Harry Potter?"

"Er — yeah," said Harry.

Harry was used to people looking curiously at him when they met him, used to the way their eyes moved at once to his scar. It was a little uncomfortable.

"Ced's talked about you, of course," said Amos Diggory. "Told us all about playing against you last year. . . . I said to him, 'You beat Harry Potter?' and he said, 'Yes, but you didn't fall off, did you?'"

Harry couldn't think of any reply to this, so he remained silent. Fred and George were both scowling again. Cedric looked a little uncomfortable.

"Harry fell off his broom, Dad," he muttered. "I told you . . . it was an accident. . . ."

"Yes, but you didn't fall off, did you?" roared Amos genially, slapping his son on his back. "Always modest, our Ced, always. He'd say the same, wouldn't you, eh? One falls off his broom, one stays on, you don't need to be a genius to tell which one."

"Must be nearly time," said Mr. Weasley quickly, pulling out his watch again. "Do you know whether we're waiting for anyone?"

"No, the Lovegoods have been there for a week already and the Fawcetts couldn't get tickets," said Mr. Diggory. "The Longbottoms are waiting for the twins."

"Not that I know of," said Mr. Weasley. "Yes, it's a minute off. . . . We'd better get ready. . . ."

He looked around at Harry and Hermione.

"You just need to touch the Portkey, that's all, a finger will do —"

With difficulty, owing to their bulky backpacks, the nine of them crowded around the old boot held out by Amos Diggory.

They all stood there, in a tight circle, as a chill breeze swept over the hilltop. Nobody spoke. It suddenly occurred to Harry that there were now . . . nine people, two of them grown men, clutching this manky old boot in the semidarkness, waiting. . . .

"Three . . ." muttered Mr. Weasley, one eye still on his watch, "two . . . one . . ."

It happened immediately: Harry felt as though a hook just behind his navel had been suddenly jerked irresistibly forward. On either side of him, their shoulders banging into his; they were all speeding forward in a howl of wind and swirling cold air, pulling him magnetically onward and then —

His feet slammed into the ground; Ron staggered into him and he fell over; the Portkey hit the ground near his head.

Harry looked up. Mr. Weasley, Mr. Diggory, and Cedric were still standing, though looking very windswept; everybody else was on the ground.

"Seven past five from Stoatshead Hill," said a voice.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### BAGMAN AND CROUCH

Harry disentangled himself from Ron and got to his feet. They had arrived on what appeared to be a deserted stretch of moor, looking like a deserted moor, with a few wizened-looking wizards, one of whom was holding a large gold watch, the other a thick roll of parchment and a quill. Both were dressed in tweed suits with thigh-length galoshes; his colleague, a kilt and a poncho.

"Morning, Basil," said Mr. Weasley, picking up the boot and handing it to the kilted wizard, who threw it into a large bag. Basil took out a paper, an empty drinks can, and a punctured football.

"Hello there, Arthur," said Basil wearily. "Not on duty, eh? It's all right for some. . . . We've been here all night. . . . You're coming in from the Black Forest at five-fifteen. Hang on, I'll find your campsite. . . . Weasley . . . Weasley . . ." He consulted a list. "First field you come to. Site manager's called Mr. Roberts. Diggory . . . second field . . . ask for Mr. Payne."

"Thanks, Basil," said Mr. Weasley, and he beckoned everyone to follow him.

They set off across the deserted moor, unable to make out much through the mist. After about twenty minutes, a small light appeared. Basil just made out the ghostly shapes of hundreds and hundreds of tents, rising up the gentle slope of a large field to the left. They approached the cottage door.

A man was standing in the doorway, looking out at the tents. Harry knew at a glance that this was the only real Muggle he had seen since his head to look at them.

"Morning!" said Mr. Weasley brightly.

"Morning," said the Muggle.

"Would you be Mr. Roberts?"

"Aye, I would," said Mr. Roberts. "And who're you?"

"Weasley — two tents, booked a couple of days ago?"

"Aye," said Mr. Roberts, consulting a list tacked to the door. "You've got a space up by the wood there. Just the one night."

"That's it," said Mr. Weasley.

"You'll be paying now, then?" said Mr. Roberts.

"Ah — right — certainly —" said Mr. Weasley. He retreated a short distance from the cottage and beckoned Harry to follow him. He took a wallet from his pocket and started to peel the notes apart. "This one's a — a — a ten? Ah yes, I see the little number on the corner."

"A twenty," Harry corrected him in an undertone, uncomfortably aware of Mr. Roberts trying to catch every word.

"Ah yes, so it is. . . . I don't know, these little bits of paper . . ."

"You foreign?" said Mr. Roberts as Mr. Weasley returned with the correct notes.

"Foreign?" repeated Mr. Weasley, puzzled.

"You're not the first one who's had trouble with money," said Mr. Roberts, scrutinizing Mr. Weasley closely. "I had two people like you here a few minutes ago."

"Did you really?" said Mr. Weasley nervously.

Mr. Roberts rummaged around in a tin for some change.

"Never been this crowded," he said suddenly, looking out over the misty field again. "Hundreds of pre-bookings. People from all over."

"Is that right?" said Mr. Weasley, his hand held out for his change, but Mr. Roberts didn't give it to him.

"Aye," he said thoughtfully. "People from all over. Loads of foreigners. And not just foreigners. Weirdos, you know? They're all right, but they're a bit odd."

"Shouldn't he?" said Mr. Weasley anxiously.

"It's like some sort of . . . I dunno . . . like some sort of rally," said Mr. Roberts. "They all seem to know each other. Like a big party."

At that moment, a wizard in plus-fours appeared out of thin air next to Mr. Roberts's front door.

"Obliviate!" he said sharply, pointing his wand at Mr. Roberts.

Instantly, Mr. Roberts's eyes slid out of focus, his brows unknitted, and a look of dreamy unconcern fell over his face. He was now a Muggle, his memory modified.

"A map of the campsite for you," Mr. Roberts said placidly to Mr. Weasley. "And your change."

"Thanks very much," said Mr. Weasley.

The wizard in plus-fours accompanied them toward the gate to the campsite. He looked exhausted: His chin was blue with cold. As he stepped out of earshot of Mr. Roberts, he muttered to Mr. Weasley, "Been having a lot of trouble with him. Needs a Memory Charm."



lping. Trotting around talking about Bludgers and Quaffles at the top of his voice, not a worry about anti-Muggle security. . . .  
thurs."

He Disapparated.

"I thought Mr. Bagman was Head of Magical Games and Sports," said Ginny, looking surprised. "He should know better."  
"He should," said Mr. Weasley, smiling, and leading them through the gates into the campsite, "but Ludo's always been a more enthusiastic Head of the sports department though. He played Quidditch for England himself, you know. And he's a real expert on the rules. . . ."  
They trudged up the misty field between long rows of tents. Most looked almost ordinary; their owners had clearly tried to make them as comfortable as possible by adding chimneys, or bellpulls, or weather vanes. However, here and there was a tent so obviously magical that Harry had to look twice. Halfway up the field stood an extravagant confection of striped silk like a miniature palace, with several live peacocks perched on the roof. At the top of the field stood a tent that had three floors and several turrets; and a short way beyond that was a tent that had a front garden attached to it.  
"Always the same," said Mr. Weasley, smiling. "We can't resist showing off when we get together. Ah, here we are, look!"  
They had reached the very edge of the wood at the top of the field, and here was an empty space, with a small sign hanging from a tree.  
"Couldn't have a better spot!" said Mr. Weasley happily. "The field is just on the other side of the wood there, we're as close to the edge of the forest as we can get. . . ."  
"Right," he said excitedly, "no magic allowed, strictly speaking, not when we're out in these numbers on Muggle property. . . . Muggles do it all the time. . . . Here, Harry, where do you reckon we should start?"

Harry had never been camping in his life; the Dursleys had never taken him on any kind of holiday, preferring to leave him at home with his aunt and uncle. He had never worked out where most of the poles and pegs should go, and though Mr. Weasley was more of a hindrance than a help, they finally managed to erect a pair of shabby two-man tents.

All of them stood back to admire their handiwork. Nobody looking at these tents would guess they belonged to wizards. If the Ministry had seen them, they would be a party of ten. Hermione seemed to have spotted this problem too; she gave Harry a quick look and then turned to look at the first tent.

"We'll be a bit cramped," he called, "but I think we'll all squeeze in. Come and have a look."

Harry bent down, ducked under the tent flap, and felt his jaw drop. He had walked into what looked like an old-fashioned Muggle house. . . .  
enough, it was furnished in exactly the same sort of style as Mrs. Figg's house: There were crocheted covers on the new sofa, and a small table in the corner.

"Well, it's not for long," said Mr. Weasley, mopping his bald patch with a handkerchief and peering in at the four bunk beds.  
at the office. Doesn't camp much anymore, poor fellow, he's got lumbago."

He picked up the dusty kettle and peered inside it. "We'll need water. . . ."

"There's a tap marked on this map the Muggle gave us," said Ron, who had followed Harry inside the tent and seemed to be looking for something. . . .  
's on the other side of the field."

"Well, why don't you, Harry, and Hermione go and get us some water then" — Mr. Weasley handed over the kettle and a small fire.  
a fire?"

"But we've got an oven," said Ron. "Why can't we just —"

"Ron, anti-Muggle security!" said Mr. Weasley, his face shining with anticipation. "When real Muggles camp, they cook their food over a fire."  
After a quick tour of the girls' tent, which was slightly smaller than the boys', though without the smell of cats, Harry, Ron, and Hermione returned to the tent and saucepans.

Now, with the sun newly risen and the mist lifting, they could see the city of tents that stretched in every direction. The tents were of all shapes and sizes, and it was only just dawning on Harry how many witches and wizards there must be in the world; he had never realized that. . . .  
Their fellow campers were starting to wake up. First to stir were the families with small children; Harry had never seen so many children in one place. . . .  
han two was crouched outside a large pyramid-shaped tent, holding a wand and poking happily at a slug in the grass. . . .  
level with him, his mother came hurrying out of the tent.

"How many times, Kevin? You don't — touch — Daddy's — wand — yecchh!"

She had trodden on the giant slug, which burst. Her scolding carried after them on the still air, mingling with the little voices of the children.

A short way farther on, they saw two little witches, barely older than Kevin, who were riding toy broomsticks that rose into the air.

A Ministry wizard had already spotted them; as he hurried past Harry, Ron, and Hermione he muttered distractedly, "Watch it, you two!"  
Here and there adult wizards and witches were emerging from their tents and starting to cook breakfast. Some, with a look of concentration, were striking matches with dubious looks on their faces, as though sure this couldn't work. Three African wizards sat on a bench, roasting what looked like a rabbit on a bright purple fire, while a group of middle-aged American witches sat gossiping under a large tent that read: THE SALEM WITCHES' INSTITUTE. Harry caught snatches of conversation in strange languages from the tents all around him. . . .  
word, the tone of every single voice was excited.

"Er — is it my eyes, or has everything gone green?" said Ron.

It wasn't just Ron's eyes. They had walked into a patch of tents that were all covered with a thick growth of shamrock. . . .  
sprouted out of the earth. Grinning faces could be seen under those that had their flaps open. Then, from behind the tent flaps, a pair of eyes stared out.

"Harry! Ron! Hermione!"

It was Seamus Finnigan, their fellow Gryffindor fourth year. He was sitting in front of his own shamrock-covered tent. . . .  
st friend, Dean Thomas, also of Gryffindor.

"Like the decorations?" said Seamus, grinning. "The Ministry's not too happy."

"Ah, why shouldn't we show our colors?" said Mrs. Finnigan. "You should see what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over their tents."  
added, eyeing Harry, Ron, and Hermione beadily. When they had assured her that they were indeed supporting Ireland, she turned back to her tent.  
else surrounded by that lot."

"I wonder what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over their tents?" said Hermione.



Bagman did the smallest of double takes when he heard Harry's name, and his eyes performed the familiar flick up and down.

"Everyone," Mr. Weasley continued, "this is Ludo Bagman, you know who he is, it's thanks to him we've got such good luck."

Bagman beamed and waved his hand as if to say it had been nothing.

"Fancy a flutter on the match, Arthur?" he said eagerly, jingling what seemed to be a large amount of gold in the pocket.

"I'm not betting me Bulgaria will score first — I offered him nice odds, considering Ireland's front three are the strongest in the league."

"Shares in her eel farm on a week-long match."

"Oh . . . go on then," said Mr. Weasley. "Let's see . . . a Galleon on Ireland to win?"

"A Galleon?" Ludo Bagman looked slightly disappointed, but recovered himself. "Very well, very well . . . any other take?"

"They're a bit young to be gambling," said Mr. Weasley. "Molly wouldn't like —"

"We'll bet thirty-seven Galleons, fifteen Sickles, three Knuts," said Fred as he and George quickly pooled all their money.

"and we'll throw in a fake wand."

"You don't want to go showing Mr. Bagman rubbish like that —" Percy hissed, but Bagman didn't seem to think the wands were exciting.

Excitement as he took it from Fred, and when the wand gave a loud squawk and turned into a rubber chicken, Bagman clucked.

"Excellent! I haven't seen one that convincing in years! I'd pay five Galleons for that!"

Percy froze in an attitude of stunned disapproval.

"Boys," said Mr. Weasley under his breath, "I don't want you betting. . . . That's all your savings. . . . Your mother —"

"Don't be a spoilsport, Arthur!" boomed Ludo Bagman, rattling his pockets excitedly. "They're old enough to know what they're doing."

"ch? Not a chance, boys, not a chance. . . . I'll give you excellent odds on that one. . . . We'll add five Galleons for the fun."

Mr. Weasley looked on helplessly as Ludo Bagman whipped out a notebook and quill and began jotting down the two bets.

"Cheers," said George, taking the slip of parchment Bagman handed him and tucking it away carefully. Bagman turned to Percy.

"Couldn't do me a brew, I suppose? I'm keeping an eye out for Barty Crouch. My Bulgarian opposite number's making a bet on him."

"He's able to sort it out. He speaks about a hundred and fifty languages."

"Mr. Crouch?" said Percy, suddenly abandoning his look of poker-stiff disapproval and positively writhing with excitement.

"Troll . . ."

"Anyone can speak Troll," said Fred dismissively. "All you have to do is point and grunt."

Percy threw Fred an extremely nasty look and stoked the fire vigorously to bring the kettle back to the boil.

"Any news of Bertha Jorkins yet, Ludo?" Mr. Weasley asked as Bagman settled himself down on the grass beside them.

"Not a dicky bird," said Bagman comfortably. "But she'll turn up. Poor old Bertha . . . memory like a leaky cauldron and a wandering back into the office sometime in October, thinking it's still July."

"You don't think it might be time to send someone to look for her?" Mr. Weasley suggested tentatively as Percy handed him the book.

"Barty Crouch keeps saying that," said Bagman, his round eyes widening innocently, "but we really can't spare anyone."

A wizard had just Apparated at their fireside, and he could not have made more of a contrast with Ludo Bagman, spry and

upright, elderly man, dressed in an impeccably crisp suit and tie. The parting in his short gray hair was almost unnatural.

though he trimmed it using a slide rule. His shoes were very highly polished. Harry could see at once why Percy idolized

and Mr. Crouch had complied with the rule about Muggle dressing so thoroughly that he could have passed for a banker

or what he really was.

"Pull up a bit of grass, Barty," said Ludo brightly, patting the ground beside him.

"No thank you, Ludo," said Crouch, and there was a bite of impatience in his voice. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

"Oh is that what they're after?" said Bagman. "I thought the chap was asking to borrow a pair of tweezers. Bit of a strong

"Mr. Crouch!" said Percy breathlessly, sunk into a kind of half-bow that made him look like a hunchback. "Would you

"Oh," said Mr. Crouch, looking over at Percy in mild surprise. "Yes — thank you, Weatherby."

Fred and George choked into their own cups. Percy, very pink around the ears, busied himself with the kettle.

"Oh and I've been wanting a word with you too, Arthur," said Mr. Crouch, his sharp eyes falling upon Mr. Weasley. "About

the embargo on flying carpets."

Mr. Weasley heaved a deep sigh.

"I sent him an owl about that just last week. If I've told him once I've told him a hundred times: Carpets are defined as

objects, but will he listen?"

"I doubt it," said Mr. Crouch, accepting a cup from Percy. "He's desperate to export here."

"Well, they'll never replace brooms in Britain, will they?" said Bagman.

"Ali thinks there's a niche in the market for a family vehicle," said Mr. Crouch. "I remember my grandfather had an Avro

re banned, of course."

He spoke as though he wanted to leave nobody in any doubt that all his ancestors had abided strictly by the law.

"So, been keeping busy, Barty?" said Bagman breezily.

"Fairly," said Mr. Crouch dryly. "Organizing Portkeys across five continents is no mean feat, Ludo."

"I expect you'll both be glad when this is over?" said Mr. Weasley.

Ludo Bagman looked shocked.

"Glad! Don't know when I've had more fun. . . . Still, it's not as though we haven't got anything to look forward to, eh, Arthur?"

Mr. Crouch raised his eyebrows at Bagman.

"We agreed not to make the announcement until all the details —"

"Oh details!" said Bagman, waving the word away like a cloud of midges. "They've signed, haven't they? They've agreed to it anyway. I mean, it's happening at Hogwarts —"

"Ludo, we need to meet the Bulgarians, you know," said Mr. Crouch sharply, cutting Bagman's remarks short. "Thank you very much. He pushed his undrunk tea back at Percy and waited for Ludo to rise; Bagman struggled to his feet, swigging down the last of his drink. "See you all later!" he said. "You'll be up in the Top Box with me — I'm commentating!" He waved, Barty Crouch nodded. "What's happening at Hogwarts, Dad?" said Fred at once. "What were they talking about?"

"You'll find out soon enough," said Mr. Weasley, smiling.

"It's classified information, until such time as the Ministry decides to release it," said Percy stiffly. "Mr. Crouch was quite clear."

"Oh shut up, Weatherby," said Fred.

A sense of excitement rose like a palpable cloud over the campsite as the afternoon wore on. By dusk, the still summer night had spread like a curtain over the thousands of waiting wizards, the last vestiges of pretense disappeared: The Ministry was no longer the signs of blatant magic now breaking out everywhere.

Salesmen were Apparating every few feet, carrying trays and pushing carts full of extraordinary merchandise. There were stalls where they were squealing the names of the players, pointed green hats bedecked with dancing shamrocks, Bulgarian scarves, and at played their national anthems as they were waved; there were tiny models of Firebolts that really flew, and collectors of your hand, preening themselves.

"Been saving my pocket money all summer for this," Ron told Harry as they and Hermione strolled through the sales area. And a large green rosette, he also bought a small figure of Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker. The miniature Krum was on a rosette above him.

"Wow, look at these!" said Harry, hurrying over to a cart piled high with what looked like brass binoculars, except that they were "Omnioculars," said the saleswizard eagerly. "You can replay action . . . slow everything down . . . and they flash up a picture of each."

"Wish I hadn't bought this now," said Ron, gesturing at his dancing shamrock hat and gazing longingly at the Omnioculars.

"Three pairs," said Harry firmly to the wizard.

"No — don't bother," said Ron, going red. He was always touchy about the fact that Harry, who had inherited a small fortune, was not getting anything for Christmas.

"You won't be getting anything for Christmas," Harry told him, thrusting Omnioculars into his and Hermione's hands.

"Fair enough," said Ron, grinning.

"Oooh, thanks, Harry," said Hermione. "And I'll get us some programs, look —"

Their money bags considerably lighter, they went back to the tents. Bill, Charlie, and Ginny were all sporting green robes, and George had no souvenirs as they had given Bagman all their gold.

And then a deep, booming gong sounded somewhere beyond the woods, and at once, green and red lanterns blazed. "It's time!" said Mr. Weasley, looking as excited as any of them. "Come on, let's go!"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP

Clutching their purchases, Mr. Weasley in the lead, they all hurried into the wood, following the lantern-lit trail. They heard them, shouts and laughter, snatches of singing. The atmosphere of feverish excitement was highly infectious; Harry and the others, talking and joking loudly, until at last they emerged on the other side and found themselves in the shadow of the immense gold walls surrounding the field, he could tell that ten cathedrals would fit comfortably inside it.

"Seats a hundred thousand," said Mr. Weasley, spotting the awestruck look on Harry's face. "Ministry task force of five hundred wizards on every inch of it. Every time Muggles have got anywhere near here all year, they've suddenly remembered our existence, added fondly, leading the way toward the nearest entrance, which was already surrounded by a swarm of shouting wizards."

"Prime seats!" said the Ministry witch at the entrance when she checked their tickets. "Top Box! Straight upstairs, Arthur!" The stairs into the stadium were carpeted in rich purple. They clambered upward with the rest of the crowd, which swarmed in all directions. Mr. Weasley's party kept climbing, and at last they reached the top of the staircase and found themselves in a box. It was exactly halfway between the golden goalposts. About twenty purple-and-gilt chairs stood in two rows here, and Harry had never seen on a scene the likes of which he could never have imagined.

A hundred thousand witches and wizards were taking their places in the seats, which rose in levels around the long oval field, which seemed to come from the stadium itself. The field looked smooth as velvet from their lofty position. At either end of the field, opposite them, almost at Harry's eye level, was a gigantic blackboard. Gold writing kept dashing across it as though it were being written on and then wiping it off again; watching it, Harry saw that it was flashing advertisements across the field.

The Bluebottle: A Broom for All the Family — Safe, Reliable, and with Built-in Anti-Burglar Buzzer . . . Mrs. Skower's All-in-One Wizardwear — London, Paris, Hogsmeade . . .

Harry tore his eyes away from the sign and looked over his shoulder to see who else was sharing the box with them. He found from last seat at the end of the row behind them. The creature, whose legs were so short they stuck out in front of its body and it had its face hidden in its hands. Yet those long, batlike ears were oddly familiar. . . .

"Dobby?" said Harry incredulously.

The tiny creature looked up and stretched its fingers, revealing enormous brown eyes and a nose the exact size and shape of a house-elf, as Harry's friend Dobby had been. Harry had set Dobby free from his old owners, the Malfoy family, and now he was back. "Did sir just call me Dobby?" squeaked the elf curiously from between its fingers. Its voice was higher even than Dobby's.

unsuspected — though it was very hard to tell with a house-elf — that this one might just be female. Ron and Hermione  
 out Dobby from Harry, they had never actually met him. Even Mr. Weasley looked around in interest.  
 "Sorry," Harry told the elf, "I just thought you were someone I knew."  
 "But I knows Dobby too, sir!" squeaked the elf. She was shielding her face, as though blinded by light, though the Top  
 r —" Her dark brown eyes widened to the size of side plates as they rested upon Harry's scar. "You is surely Harry Po  
 "Yeah, I am," said Harry.  
 "But Dobby talks of you all the time, sir!" she said, lowering her hands very slightly and looking awestruck.  
 "How is he?" said Harry. "How's freedom suiting him?"  
 "Ah, sir," said Winky, shaking her head, "ah sir, meaning no disrespect, sir, but I is not sure you did Dobby a favor, sir,  
 "Why?" said Harry, taken aback. "What's wrong with him?"  
 "Freedom is going to Dobby's head, sir," said Winky sadly. "Ideas above his station, sir. Can't get another position, sir.  
 "Why not?" said Harry.  
 Winky lowered her voice by a half-octave and whispered, "He is wanting paying for his work, sir."  
 "Paying?" said Harry blankly. "Well — why shouldn't he be paid?"  
 Winky looked quite horrified at the idea and closed her fingers slightly so that her face was half-hidden again.  
 "House-elves is not paid, sir!" she said in a muffled squeak. "No, no, no. I says to Dobby, I says, go find yourself a nice  
 rts of high jinks, sir, what is unbecoming to a house-elf. You goes racketing around like this, Dobby, I says, and next t  
 lation and Control of Magical Creatures, like some common goblin."  
 "Well, it's about time he had a bit of fun," said Harry.  
 "House-elves is not supposed to have fun, Harry Potter," said Winky firmly, from behind her hands. "House-elves doe  
 — she glanced toward the edge of the box and gulped — "but my master sends me to the Top Box and I comes, sir."  
 "Why's he sent you up here, if he knows you don't like heights?" said Harry, frowning.  
 "Master — master wants me to save him a seat, Harry Potter. He is very busy," said Winky, tilting her head toward th  
 's tent, Harry Potter, but Winky does what she is told. Winky is a good house-elf."  
 She gave the edge of the box another frightened look and hid her eyes completely again. Harry turned back to the o  
 "So that's a house-elf?" Ron muttered. "Weird things, aren't they?"  
 "Dobby was weirder," said Harry fervently.  
 Ron pulled out his Omnioculars and started testing them, staring down into the crowd on the other side of the stadi  
 "Wild!" he said, twiddling the replay knob on the side. "I can make that old bloke down there pick his nose again . . . a  
 Hermione, meanwhile, was skimming eagerly through her velvet-covered, tasseled program.  
 "'A display from the team mascots will precede the match,'" she read aloud.  
 "Oh that's always worth watching," said Mr. Weasley. "National teams bring creatures from their native land, you know  
 The box filled gradually around them over the next half hour. Mr. Weasley kept shaking hands with people who were  
 that he looked as though he were trying to sit on a hedgehog. When Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself,  
 ed. Highly embarrassed, he repaired them with his wand and thereafter remained in his seat, throwing jealous looks  
 y had met before, and Fudge shook Harry's hand in a fatherly fashion, asked how he was, and introduced him to the  
 "Harry Potter, you know," he told the Bulgarian minister loudly, who was wearing splendid robes of black velvet trim  
 arry Potter . . . oh come on now, you know who he is . . . the boy who survived You-Know-Who . . . you do know who  
 The Bulgarian wizard suddenly spotted Harry's scar and started gabbling loudly and excitedly, pointing at it.  
 "Knew we'd get there in the end," said Fudge wearily to Harry. "I'm no great shakes at languages; I need Barty Crouch  
 seat. . . . Good job too, these Bulgarian blighters have been trying to cadge all the best places . . . ah, and here's Luciu  
 Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned quickly. Edging along the second row to three still-empty seats right behind Mr. W  
 cius Malfoy; his son, Draco; and a woman Harry supposed must be Draco's mother.  
 Harry and Draco Malfoy had been enemies ever since their very first journey to Hogwarts. A pale boy with a pointed  
 mother was blonde too; tall and slim, she would have been nice-looking if she hadn't been wearing a look that sugg  
 "Ah, Fudge," said Mr. Malfoy, holding out his hand as he reached the Minister of Magic. "How are you? I don't think yo  
 "How do you do, how do you do?" said Fudge, smiling and bowing to Mrs. Malfoy. "And allow me to introduce you to  
 Magic, and he can't understand a word I'm saying anyway, so never mind. And let's see who else — you know Arthur  
 It was a tense moment. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy looked at each other and Harry vividly recalled the last time they  
 op, and they had had a fight. Mr. Malfoy's cold gray eyes swept over Mr. Weasley, and then up and down the row.  
 "Good lord, Arthur," he said softly. "What did you have to sell to get seats in the Top Box? Surely your house wouldn't  
 Fudge, who wasn't listening, said, "Lucius has just given a very generous contribution to St. Mungo's Hospital for Mag  
 "How — how nice," said Mr. Weasley, with a very strained smile.  
 Mr. Malfoy's eyes had returned to Hermione, who went slightly pink, but stared determinedly back at him. Harry kne  
 oys prided themselves on being purebloods; in other words, they considered anyone of Muggle descent, like Hermio  
 r. Malfoy didn't dare say anything. He nodded sneeringly to Mr. Weasley and continued down the line to his seats. Dr  
 tled himself between his mother and father.  
 "Slimy gits," Ron muttered as he, Harry, and Hermione turned to face the field again. Next moment, Ludo Bagman ch  
 "Everyone ready?" he said, his round face gleaming like a great, excited Edam. "Minister — ready to go?"  
 "Ready when you are, Ludo," said Fudge comfortably.

Ludo whipped out his wand, directed it at his own throat, and said "Sonorus!" and then spoke over the roar of sound, booming into every corner of the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen . . . welcome! Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup! The spectators screamed and clapped. Thousands of flags waved, adding their discordant national anthems to the raucous message (Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans — A Risk with Every Mouthful!) and now showed BULGARIA: 0, IRELAND: 0. "And now, without further ado, allow me to introduce . . . the Bulgarian National Team Mascots!"

The right-hand side of the stands, which was a solid block of scarlet, roared its approval.

"I wonder what they've brought," said Mr. Weasley, leaning forward in his seat. "Aaah!" He suddenly whipped off his glasses. "What are veela — ?"

But a hundred veela were now gliding out onto the field, and Harry's question was answered for him. Veela were women, that they weren't — they couldn't be — human. This puzzled Harry for a moment while he tried to guess what exactly they had, or their white-gold hair fan out behind them without wind . . . but then the music started, and Harry stopped wondering about anything at all.

The veela had started to dance, and Harry's mind had gone completely and blissfully blank. All that mattered in the world was dancing, terrible things would happen. . . .

And as the veela danced faster and faster, wild, half-formed thoughts started chasing through Harry's dazed mind. Hiding the box into the stadium seemed a good idea . . . but would it be good enough?

"Harry, what are you doing?" said Hermione's voice from a long way off.

The music stopped. Harry blinked. He was standing up, and one of his legs was resting on the wall of the box. Next to him, Hermione was about to dive from a springboard.

Angry yells were filling the stadium. The crowd didn't want the veela to go. Harry was with them; he would, of course. A large green shamrock pinned to his chest. Ron, meanwhile, was absentmindedly shredding the shamrocks on his hat with his teeth out of his hands.

"You'll be wanting that," he said, "once Ireland have had their say."

"Huh?" said Ron, staring openmouthed at the veela, who had now lined up along one side of the field.

Hermione made a loud tutting noise. She reached up and pulled Harry back into his seat. "Honestly!" she said.

"And now," roared Ludo Bagman's voice, "kindly put your wands in the air . . . for the Irish National Team Mascots!"

Next moment, what seemed to be a great green-and-gold comet came zooming into the stadium. It did one circuit of the goalposts. A rainbow arced suddenly across the field, connecting the two balls of light. The crowd oooohed and ahaahed and the balls of light reunited and merged; they had formed a great shimmering shamrock, which rose up into the sky and seemed to be falling from it —

"Excellent!" yelled Ron as the shamrock soared over them, and heavy gold coins rained from it, bouncing off their heads. It was actually comprised of thousands of tiny little bearded men with red vests, each carrying a minute lamp of gold.

"Leprechauns!" said Mr. Weasley over the tumultuous applause of the crowd, many of whom were still fighting and running.

"There you go," Ron yelled happily, stuffing a fistful of gold coins into Harry's hand, "for the Omnioculars! Now you've got them!"

The great shamrock dissolved, the leprechauns drifted down onto the field on the opposite side from the veela, and

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, kindly welcome — the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team! I give you — Dimitrov!"

A scarlet-clad figure on a broomstick, moving so fast it was blurred, shot out onto the field from an entrance far below the stands. "Ivanova!"

A second scarlet-robed player zoomed out.

"Zografi! Levski! Vulchanov! Volkov! Aaaaaaand — Krum!"

"That's him, that's him!" yelled Ron, following Krum with his Omnioculars. Harry quickly focused his own.

Viktor Krum was thin, dark, and sallow-skinned, with a large curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He looked like an angry, dark-skinned teen.

"And now, please greet — the Irish National Quidditch Team!" yelled Bagman. "Presenting — Connolly! Ryan! Troy! Moran! Seven green blurs swept onto the field; Harry spun a small dial on the side of his Omnioculars and slowed the players down and see their names, embroidered in silver, upon their backs.

"And here, all the way from Egypt, our referee, acclaimed Chairwizard of the International Association of Quidditch, Hagrid! A small and skinny wizard, completely bald but with a mustache to rival Uncle Vernon's, wearing robes of pure gold that were protruding from under the mustache, and he was carrying a large wooden crate under one arm, his broomstick tucked under the other. He was normal, watching closely as Mostafa mounted his broomstick and kicked the crate open — four balls burst into the air (for the briefest moment, before it sped out of sight) the minuscule, winged Golden Snitch. With a sharp blast on his wand, he said, "Theeeeeeeeeey're OFF!" screamed Bagman. "And it's Mullet! Troy! Moran! Dimitrov! Back to Mullet! Troy! Levski! Moran!"

It was Quidditch as Harry had never seen it played before. He was pressing his Omnioculars so hard to his glasses that his fingers were sore. The players was incredible — the Chasers were throwing the Quaffle to one another so fast that Bagman only had time to focus his Omnioculars again, pressed the play-by-play button on the top, and he was immediately watching in slow motion, while the rest of the crowd pounded against his eardrums.

Hawkshead Attacking Formation, he read as he watched the three Irish Chasers zoom closely together, Troy in the center, the Bulgarians. Porskoff Ploy flashed up next, as Troy made as though to dart upward with the Quaffle, drawing away the Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov, swung hard at a passing Bludger with his small club, knocking it into Moran's path; Moran

ki, soaring beneath, caught it —

"TROY SCORES!" roared Bagman, and the stadium shuddered with a roar of applause and cheers. "Ten zero to Ireland!" "What?" Harry yelled, looking wildly around through his Omnioculars. "But Levski's got the Quaffle!"

"Harry, if you're not going to watch at normal speed, you're going to miss things!" shouted Hermione, who was dancing in honor around the field. Harry looked quickly over the top of his Omnioculars and saw that the leprechauns watching were a great, glittering shamrock. Across the field, the veela were watching them sulkily.

Furious with himself, Harry spun his speed dial back to normal as play resumed.

Harry knew enough about Quidditch to see that the Irish Chasers were superb. They worked as a seamless team, the one reading another's minds as they positioned themselves, and the rosette on Harry's chest kept squeaking their names: "Troy, Troy, Troy" — and more, bringing their lead to thirty-zero and causing a thunderous tide of roars and applause from the green-clad supporters. The match became still faster, but more brutal. Volkov and Vulchanov, the Bulgarian Beaters, were whacking the Bluebirds, trying to prevent them from using some of their best moves; twice they were forced to scatter, and then, finally, Ivanova scored Bulgaria's first goal.

"Fingers in your ears!" bellowed Mr. Weasley as the veela started to dance in celebration. Harry screwed up his eyes, but, he chanced a glance at the field. The veela had stopped dancing, and Bulgaria was again in possession of the Quaffle.

"Dimitrov! Levski! Dimitrov! Ivanova — oh I say!" roared Bagman.

One hundred thousand wizards gasped as the two Seekers, Krum and Lynch, plummeted through the center of the circle of hoops without parachutes. Harry followed their descent through his Omnioculars, squinting to see where the Snitch was.

"They're going to crash!" screamed Hermione next to Harry.

She was half right — at the very last second, Viktor Krum pulled out of the dive and spiraled off. Lynch, however, hit the ground. A huge groan rose from the Irish seats.

"Fool!" moaned Mr. Weasley. "Krum was feinting!"

"It's time-out!" yelled Bagman's voice, "as trained mediwizards hurry onto the field to examine Aidan Lynch!"

"He'll be okay, he only got ploughed!" Charlie said reassuringly to Ginny, who was hanging over the side of the box, looking down at the field.

Harry hastily pressed the replay and play-by-play buttons on his Omnioculars, twiddled the speed dial, and put them on slow motion. He watched as Krum and Lynch dived again in slow motion. Wronski Defensive Feint — dangerous Seeker diversion — Krum contorted with concentration as he pulled out of the dive just in time, while Lynch was flattened, and he understood how Krum could copy him. Harry had never seen anyone fly like that; Krum hardly looked as though he was using a broomstick at all; he was weightless. Harry turned his Omnioculars back to normal and focused them on Krum. He was now circling high above the field, focusing still more closely upon Krum's face, saw his dark eyes darting all over the ground a hundred feet below. The Snitch without interference.

Lynch got to his feet at last, to loud cheers from the green-clad supporters, mounted his Firebolt, and kicked back off. When Mostafa blew his whistle again, the Chasers moved into action with a skill unrivaled by anything Harry had seen before. After fifteen more fast and furious minutes, Ireland had pulled ahead by ten more goals. They were now leading by one, but the pitch was getting dirtier.

As Mullet shot toward the goalposts yet again, clutching the Quaffle tightly under her arm, the Bulgarian Keeper, Zogov, tried to catch it. Harry didn't catch it, but a scream of rage from the Irish crowd, and Mostafa's long, shrill whistle blast, told him it had.

"And Mostafa takes the Bulgarian Keeper to task for cobbing — excessive use of elbows!" Bagman informed the roar of the crowd. The leprechauns, who had risen angrily into the air like a swarm of glittering hornets when Mullet had been fouled, now on the other side of the field leapt to their feet, tossed their hair angrily, and started to dance again.

As one, the Weasley boys and Harry stuffed their fingers into their ears, but Hermione, who hadn't bothered, was so shocked he pulled his fingers impatiently out of his ears.

"Look at the referee!" she said, giggling.

Harry looked down at the field. Hassan Mostafa had landed right in front of the dancing veela, and was acting very odd. He was excitedly.

"Now, we can't have that!" said Ludo Bagman, though he sounded highly amused. "Somebody slap the referee!"

A mediwizard came tearing across the field, his fingers stuffed into his own ears, and kicked Mostafa hard in the shin. Harry, through his Omnioculars again, saw that he looked exceptionally embarrassed and had started shouting at the veela, who had been dancing.

"And unless I'm much mistaken, Mostafa is actually attempting to send off the Bulgarian team mascots!" said Bagman. "This could turn nasty. . . ."

It did: The Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov and Vulchanov, landed on either side of Mostafa and began arguing furiously with him. He only formed the words "HEE, HEE, HEE." Mostafa was not impressed by the Bulgarians' arguments, however; he was jabbing them with his wand, and when they refused, he gave two short blasts on his whistle.

"Two penalties for Ireland!" shouted Bagman, and the Bulgarian crowd howled with anger. "And Volkov and Vulchanov are out. . . and Troy takes the Quaffle. . . ."

Play now reached a level of ferocity beyond anything they had yet seen. The Beaters on both sides were acting without mercy. Neither their clubs made contact with Bludger or human as they swung them violently through the air. Dimitrov shot his opponent with his broom.

"Foul!" roared the Irish supporters as one, all standing up in a great wave of green.





ing in a bemused sort of way), Bagman pointed his wand at his throat and muttered, "Quietus."

"They'll be talking about this one for years," he said hoarsely, "a really unexpected twist, that. . . . shame it couldn't have been . . . how much?"

For Fred and George had just scrambled over the backs of their seats and were standing in front of Ludo Bagman with

## CHAPTER NINE

### THE DARK MARK

"Don't tell your mother you've been gambling," Mr. Weasley implored Fred and George as they all made their way slowly

"Don't worry, Dad," said Fred gleefully, "we've got big plans for this money. We don't want it confiscated."

Mr. Weasley looked for a moment as though he was going to ask what these big plans were, but seemed to decide, un-

They were soon caught up in the crowds now flooding out of the stadium and back to their campsites. Raucous singing

ps along the lantern-lit path, and leprechauns kept shooting over their heads, cackling and waving their lanterns. When

all, and given the level of noise around them, Mr. Weasley agreed that they could all have one last cup of cocoa together

he match; Mr. Weasley got drawn into a disagreement about cobbling with Charlie, and it was only when Ginny fell asleep

floor that Mr. Weasley called a halt to the verbal replays and insisted that everyone go to bed. Hermione and Ginny

changed into pajamas and clambered into their bunks. From the other side of the campsite they could still hear music

"Oh I am glad I'm not on duty," muttered Mr. Weasley sleepily. "I wouldn't fancy having to go and tell the Irish they've

Harry, who was on a top bunk above Ron, lay staring up at the canvas ceiling of the tent, watching the glow of an occa-

some of Krum's more spectacular moves. He was itching to get back on his own Firebolt and try out the Wronski Feint

is wriggling diagrams what that move was supposed to look like. . . . Harry saw himself in robes that had his name on

and-strong crowd roar, as Ludo Bagman's voice echoed throughout the stadium, "I give you . . . Potter!"

Harry never knew whether or not he had actually dropped off to sleep — his fantasies of flying like Krum might well have. Suddenly, Mr. Weasley was shouting.

"Get up! Ron — Harry — come on now, get up, this is urgent!"

Harry sat up quickly and the top of his head hit canvas.

"S' matter?" he said.

Dimly, he could tell that something was wrong. The noises in the campsite had changed. The singing had stopped. He woke up from the bunk and reached for his clothes, but Mr. Weasley, who had pulled on his jeans over his own pajamas, was shouting, "Look!"

Harry did as he was told and hurried out of the tent, Ron at his heels.

By the light of the few fires that were still burning, he could see people running away into the woods, fleeing something. The air was emitting odd flashes of light and noises like gunfire. Loud jeering, roars of laughter, and drunken yells were drifting through the dark, which illuminated the scene.

A crowd of wizards, tightly packed and moving together with wands pointing straight upward, was marching slowly across the field. They all had pale faces. . . . Then he realized that their heads were hooded and their faces masked. High above them, floating along in grotesque shapes. It was as though the masked wizards on the ground were puppeteers, and the people above them were puppets. Two of the figures were very small.

More wizards were joining the marching group, laughing and pointing up at the floating bodies. Tents crumpled and collapsed. One wizard blasted a tent out of his way with his wand. Several caught fire. The screaming grew louder.

The floating people were suddenly illuminated as they passed over a burning tent and Harry recognized one of them. It was a woman, whom he thought might be his wife and children. One of the marchers below flipped Mrs. Roberts upside down with his wand; she fell and led to cover herself up as the crowd below her screeched and hooted with glee.

"That's sick," Ron muttered, watching the smallest Muggle child, who had begun to spin like a top, sixty feet above the ground. "That's really sick. . . ."

Hermione and Ginny came hurrying toward them, pulling coats over their nightdresses, with Mr. Weasley right behind them. They went to the boys' tent, fully dressed, with their sleeves rolled up and their wands out.

"We're going to help the Ministry!" Mr. Weasley shouted over all the noise, rolling up his own sleeves. "You lot — get ready. When we've sorted this out!"

Bill, Charlie, and Percy were already sprinting away toward the oncoming marchers; Mr. Weasley tore after them. Mr. Weasley was the first of the trouble. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was coming ever closer.

"C'mon," said Fred, grabbing Ginny's hand and starting to pull her toward the wood. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and George followed. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was larger than ever; they could see the Ministry wizards trying to get through it to the tent. It was a difficulty. It looked as though they were scared to perform any spell that might make the Roberts family fall.

The colored lanterns that had lit the path to the stadium had been extinguished. Dark figures were blundering through the darkness. Echoes were reverberating around them in the cold night air. Harry felt himself being pushed hither and thither by people. He was alone.

"What happened?" said Hermione anxiously, stopping so abruptly that Harry walked into her. "Ron, where are you? Come on. She illuminated her wand and directed its narrow beam across the path. Ron was lying sprawled on the ground.

"Tripped over a tree root," he said angrily, getting to his feet again.

"Well, with feet that size, hard not to," said a drawling voice from behind them.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned sharply. Draco Malfoy was standing alone nearby, leaning against a tree, looking out over the scene at the campsite through a gap in the trees.

Ron told Malfoy to do something that Harry knew he would never have dared say in front of Mrs. Weasley.

"Language, Weasley," said Malfoy, his pale eyes glittering. "Hadn't you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn't like to be late, would you?"

He nodded at Hermione, and at the same moment, a blast like a bomb sounded from the campsite, and a flash of green light.

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Hermione defiantly.

"Granger, they're after Muggles," said Malfoy. "D'you want to be showing off your knickers in midair? Because if you do, we'll all have a laugh."

"Hermione's a witch," Harry snarled.

"Have it your own way, Potter," said Malfoy, grinning maliciously. "If you think they can't spot a Mudblood, stay where you are."

"You watch your mouth!" shouted Ron. Everybody present knew that "Mudblood" was a very offensive term for a witch.

"Never mind, Ron," said Hermione quickly, seizing Ron's arm to restrain him as he took a step toward Malfoy.

There came a bang from the other side of the trees that was louder than anything they had heard. Several people nearby started.

"Scare easily, don't they?" he said lazily. "I suppose your daddy told you all to hide? What's he up to — trying to rescue the prisoners?"

"Where're your parents?" said Harry, his temper rising. "Out there wearing masks, are they?"

Malfoy turned his face to Harry, still smiling.

"Well . . . if they were, I wouldn't be likely to tell you, would I, Potter?"

"Oh come on," said Hermione, with a disgusted look at Malfoy, "let's go and find the others."

"Keep that big bushy head down, Granger," sneered Malfoy.

"Come on," Hermione repeated, and she pulled Harry and Ron up the path again.

"I'll bet you anything his dad is one of that masked lot!" said Ron hotly.

"Well, with any luck, the Ministry will catch him!" said Hermione fervently. "Oh I can't believe this. Where have the others gone? Fred, George, and Ginny were nowhere to be seen, though the path was packed with plenty of other people, all looking for them."

A huddle of teenagers in pajamas was arguing vociferously a little way along the path. When they saw Harry and his friends, they broke up quickly.

"Où est Madame Maxime? Nous l'avons perdue —"

"Er — what?" said Ron.

"Oh . . ." The girl who had spoken turned her back on him, and as they walked on they distinctly heard her say, "'Ogwadda!'

"Beauxbatons," muttered Hermione.

"Sorry?" said Harry.

"They must go to Beauxbatons," said Hermione. "You know . . . Beauxbatons Academy of Magic . . . I read about it in the book."

"Oh . . . yeah . . . right," said Harry.

"Fred and George can't have gone that far," said Ron, pulling out his wand, lighting it like Hermione's, and squinting up at the sky.

n wand — but it wasn't there. The only thing he could find was his Omnioculars.

"Ah, no, I don't believe it . . . I've lost my wand!"

"You're kidding!"

Ron and Hermione raised their wands high enough to spread the narrow beams of light farther on the ground; Harry followed.

"Maybe it's back in the tent," said Ron.

"Maybe it fell out of your pocket when we were running?" Hermione suggested anxiously.

"Yeah," said Harry, "maybe . . ."

He usually kept his wand with him at all times in the Wizarding world, and finding himself without it in the midst of a search was a disaster.

A rustling noise nearby made all three of them jump. Winky the house-elf was fighting her way out of a clump of bushes.

with great difficulty; it was as though someone invisible were trying to hold her back.

"There is bad wizards about!" she squeaked distractedly as she leaned forward and labored to keep running. "People are after her!"

And she disappeared into the trees on the other side of the path, panting and squeaking as she fought the force that was holding her back.

"What's up with her?" said Ron, looking curiously after Winky. "Why can't she run properly?"

"Bet she didn't ask permission to hide," said Harry. He was thinking of Dobby: Every time he had tried to do something without permission, he had ended up beating himself up.

"You know, house-elves get a very raw deal!" said Hermione indignantly. "It's slavery, that's what it is! That Mr. Crouch bewitched her, and he's got her bewitched so she can't even run when they start trampling tents! Why doesn't anyone do something?"

"Well, the elves are happy, aren't they?" Ron said. "You heard old Winky back at the match . . . 'House-elves is not supposed to be free'."

"It's people like you, Ron," Hermione began hotly, "who prop up rotten and unjust systems, just because they're too lazy to change them."

Another loud bang echoed from the edge of the wood.

"Let's just keep moving, shall we?" said Ron, and Harry saw him glance edgily at Hermione. Perhaps there was truth in what she was saying.

They set off again, Harry still searching his pockets, even though he knew his wand wasn't there.

They followed the dark path deeper into the wood, still keeping an eye out for Fred, George, and Ginny. They passed several groups of people, some of whom they recognized as being from the Gryffindor and Slytherin houses.

y had undoubtedly won betting on the match, and who seemed quite unperturbed by the trouble at the campsite. Finally, after about ten minutes, they reached a clearing.

and when they looked through the trees, they saw three tall and beautiful veela standing in a clearing, surrounded by a low wall.

y.

"I pull down about a hundred sacks of Galleons a year!" one of them shouted. "I'm a dragon killer for the Committee

"No, you're not!" yelled his friend. "You're a dishwasher at the Leaky Cauldron. . . . but I'm a vampire hunter, I've killed—" A third young wizard, whose pimples were visible even by the dim, silvery light of the veela, now cut in, "I'm about to—" Harry snorted with laughter. He recognized the pimply wizard: His name was Stan Shunpike, and he was in fact a coward, but Ron's face had gone oddly slack, and next second Ron was yelling, "Did I tell you I've invented a broomstick that'll fly!" "Honestly!" said Hermione, and she and Harry grabbed Ron firmly by the arms, wheeled him around, and marched him away. Completely, they were in the very heart of the wood. They seemed to be alone now; everything was much quieter. Harry looked around. "I reckon we can just wait here, you know. We'll hear anyone coming a mile off."

The words were hardly out of his mouth, when Ludo Bagman emerged from behind a tree right ahead of them. Even by the feeble light of the two wands, Harry could see that a great change had come over Bagman. He no longer looked like himself. He looked very white and strained.

"Who's that?" he said, blinking down at them, trying to make out their faces. "What are you doing in here, all alone?" They looked at one another, surprised.

"Well — there's a sort of riot going on," said Ron.

Bagman stared at him.

"What?"

"At the campsite . . . some people have got hold of a family of Muggles. . . ."

Bagman swore loudly.

"Damn them!" he said, looking quite distracted, and without another word, he Disapparated with a small pop!

"Not exactly on top of things, Mr. Bagman, is he?" said Hermione, frowning.

"He was a great Beater, though," said Ron, leading the way off the path into a small clearing, and sitting down on a pile of leaves on the league three times in a row while he was with them."

He took his small figure of Krum out of his pocket, set it down on the ground, and watched it walk around. Like the real Krum, much less impressive on his splayed feet than on his broomstick. Harry was listening for noise from the campsite.

"I hope the others are okay," said Hermione after a while.

"They'll be fine," said Ron.

"Imagine if your dad catches Lucius Malfoy," said Harry, sitting down next to Ron and watching the small figure of Krum walk. "I bet he'll try to get something on him."

"That'd wipe the smirk off old Draco's face, all right," said Ron.

"Those poor Muggles, though," said Hermione nervously. "What if they can't get them down?"

"They will," said Ron reassuringly. "They'll find a way."

"Mad, though, to do something like that when the whole Ministry of Magic's out here tonight!" said Hermione. "I mean, they're even drinking, or are they just —"

But she broke off abruptly and looked over her shoulder. Harry and Ron looked quickly around too. It sounded as though they were listening to the sounds of the uneven steps behind the dark trees. But the footsteps came to a sudden halt.

"Hello?" called Harry.

There was silence. Harry got to his feet and peered around the tree. It was too dark to see very far, but he could sense something. "Who's there?" he said.

And then, without warning, the silence was rent by a voice unlike any they had heard in the wood; and it uttered, not a word, but a sound —

"MORSMORDRE!"

And something vast, green, and glittering erupted from the patch of darkness Harry's eyes had been struggling to peer into. "What the — ?" gasped Ron as he sprang to his feet again, staring up at the thing that had appeared.

For a split second, Harry thought it was another leprechaun formation. Then he realized that it was a colossal skull, coming out of the ground, protruding from its mouth like a tongue. As they watched, it rose higher and higher, blazing in a haze of greenish smoke. Suddenly, the wood all around them erupted with screams. Harry didn't understand why, but the only possible cause was the thing that had appeared. It was bright enough to illuminate the entire wood like some grisly neon sign. He scanned the darkness for the person who had conjured it.

"Who's there?" he called again.

"Harry, come on, move!" Hermione had seized the collar of his jacket and was tugging him backward.

"What's the matter?" Harry said, startled to see her face so white and terrified.

"It's the Dark Mark, Harry!" Hermione moaned, pulling him as hard as she could. "You-Know-Who's sign!"

"Voldemort's — ?"

"Harry, come on!"

Harry turned — Ron was hurriedly scooping up his miniature Krum — the three of them started across the clearing — and a series of loud noises announced the arrival of twenty wizards, appearing from thin air, surrounding them.

Harry whirled around, and in an instant, he registered one fact: Each of these wizards had his wand out, and every wand was pointed at them. Without pausing to think, he yelled, "DUCK!"

He seized the other two and pulled them down onto the ground.

"STUPEFY!" roared twenty voices — there was a blinding series of flashes and Harry felt the hair on his head ripple as a fraction of an inch he saw jets of fiery red light flying over them from the wizards' wands, crossing one another, but not hitting anything.

"Stop!" yelled a voice he recognized. "STOP! That's my son!"

Harry's hair stopped blowing about. He raised his head a little higher. The wizard in front of him had lowered his wand.

king terrified.

"Ron — Harry" — his voice sounded shaky — "Hermione — are you all right?"

"Out of the way, Arthur," said a cold, curt voice.

It was Mr. Crouch. He and the other Ministry wizards were closing in on them. Harry got to his feet to face them. Mr.

"Which of you did it?" he snapped, his sharp eyes darting between them. "Which of you conjured the Dark Mark?"

"We didn't do that!" said Harry, gesturing up at the skull.

"We didn't do anything!" said Ron, who was rubbing his elbow and looking indignantly at his father. "What did you want?"

"Do not lie, sir!" shouted Mr. Crouch. His wand was still pointing directly at Ron, and his eyes were popping — he looked like a crime!"

"Barty," whispered a witch in a long woolen dressing gown, "they're kids, Barty, they'd never have been able to —"

"Where did the Mark come from, you three?" said Mr. Weasley quickly.

"Over there," said Hermione shakily, pointing at the place where they had heard the voice. "There was someone behind the door."

"Oh, stood over there, did they?" said Mr. Crouch, turning his popping eyes on Hermione now, disbelief etched all over his face. "I was informed about how that Mark is summoned, missy —"

But none of the Ministry wizards apart from Mr. Crouch seemed to think it remotely likely that Harry, Ron, or Hermione had done it. They had all raised their wands again and were pointing in the direction she had indicated, squinting through the darkness.

"We're too late," said the witch in the woolen dressing gown, shaking her head. "They'll have Disapparated."

"I don't think so," said a wizard with a scrubby brown beard. It was Amos Diggory, Cedric's father. "Our Stunners went off, but they didn't disappear. . . ."

"Amos, be careful!" said a few of the wizards warningly as Mr. Diggory squared his shoulders, raised his wand, and marched forward. He watched him vanish with her hands over her mouth.

A few seconds later, they heard Mr. Diggory shout.

"Yes! We got them! There's someone here! Unconscious! It's — but — blimey . . ."

"You've got someone?" shouted Mr. Crouch, sounding highly disbelieving. "Who? Who is it?"

They heard snapping twigs, the rustling of leaves, and then crunching footsteps as Mr. Diggory reemerged from behind the door. He recognized the tea towel at once. It was Winky.

Mr. Crouch did not move or speak as Mr. Diggory deposited his elf on the ground at his feet. The other Ministry wizards stood transfixed, his eyes blazing in his white face as he stared down at Winky. Then he appeared to come to life again.

"This — cannot — be," he said jerkily. "No —"

He moved quickly around Mr. Diggory and strode off toward the place where he had found Winky.

"No point, Mr. Crouch," Mr. Diggory called after him. "There's no one else there."

But Mr. Crouch did not seem prepared to take his word for it. They could hear him moving around and the rustling of his robes.

"Bit embarrassing," Mr. Diggory said grimly, looking down at Winky's unconscious form. "Barty Crouch's house-elf . . ."

"Come off it, Amos," said Mr. Weasley quietly, "you don't seriously think it was the elf? The Dark Mark's a wizard's signature!"

"Yeah," said Mr. Diggory, "and she had a wand."

"What?" said Mr. Weasley.

"Here, look." Mr. Diggory held up a wand and showed it to Mr. Weasley. "Had it in her hand. So that's clause three of the International Wizarding Statute of Secrecy: no one is permitted to carry or use a wand."

Just then there was another pop, and Ludo Bagman Apparated right next to Mr. Weasley. Looking breathless and disheveled, he stared at the skull.

"The Dark Mark!" he panted, almost trampling Winky as he turned inquiringly to his colleagues. "Who did it? Did you see? Did you see?"

Mr. Crouch had returned empty-handed. His face was still ghostly white, and his hands and his toothbrush mustache were shaking. "Where have you been, Barty?" said Bagman. "Why weren't you at the match? Your elf was saving you a seat too — go on, tell us. What happened to her?"

"I have been busy, Ludo," said Mr. Crouch, still talking in the same jerky fashion, barely moving his lips. "And my elf has been busy too."

"Stunned? By you lot, you mean? But why — ?"

Comprehension dawned suddenly on Bagman's round, shiny face; he looked up at the skull, down at Winky, and then back at Mr. Crouch.

"No!" he said. "Winky? Conjure the Dark Mark? She wouldn't know how! She'd need a wand, for a start!"

"And she had one," said Mr. Diggory. "I found her holding one, Ludo. If it's all right with you, Mr. Crouch, I think we should let her go."

Mr. Crouch gave no sign that he had heard Mr. Diggory, but Mr. Diggory seemed to take his silence for assent. He raised his wand. Winky stirred feebly. Her great brown eyes opened and she blinked several times in a bemused sort of way. Watched her.

She caught sight of Mr. Diggory's feet, and slowly, tremulously, raised her eyes to stare up into his face; then, for the first time, she saw the floating skull reflected twice in her enormous, glassy eyes. She gave a gasp, looked wildly around the crowd.

"Elf!" said Mr. Diggory sternly. "Do you know who I am? I'm a member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

Winky began to rock backward and forward on the ground, her breath coming in sharp bursts. Harry was reminded of a fish out of water.

"As you see, elf, the Dark Mark was conjured here a short while ago," said Mr. Diggory. "And you were discovered most conveniently."

"I — I — I is not doing it, sir!" Winky gasped. "I is not knowing how, sir!"

"You were found with a wand in your hand!" barked Mr. Diggory, brandishing it in front of her. And as the wand caught the light, Harry recognized it.

"Hey — that's mine!" he said.

Everyone in the clearing looked at him.

"Excuse me?" said Mr. Diggory, incredulously.

"That's my wand!" said Harry. "I dropped it!"

"You dropped it?" repeated Mr. Diggory in disbelief. "Is this a confession? You threw it aside after you conjured the Mark?"

"Amos, think who you're talking to!" said Mr. Weasley, very angrily. "Is Harry Potter likely to conjure the Dark Mark?"

"Er — of course not," mumbled Mr. Diggory. "Sorry . . . carried away . . ."

"I didn't drop it there, anyway," said Harry, jerking his thumb toward the trees beneath the skull. "I missed it right after."

"So," said Mr. Diggory, his eyes hardening as he turned to look at Winky again, cowering at his feet. "You found this wand. You had fun with it, did you?"

"I is not doing magic with it, sir!" squealed Winky, tears streaming down the sides of her squashed and bulbous nose. "I is not knowing how!"

"It wasn't her!" said Hermione. She looked very nervous, speaking up in front of all these Ministry wizards, yet determined. "The voice we heard doing the incantation was much deeper!" She looked around at Harry and Ron, appealing for their support.

"No," said Harry, shaking his head. "It definitely didn't sound like an elf."

"Yeah, it was a human voice," said Ron.

"Well, we'll soon see," growled Mr. Diggory, looking unimpressed. "There's a simple way of discovering the last spell a wizard used. Winky trembled and shook her head frantically, her ears flapping, as Mr. Diggory raised his own wand again and placed it on the ground.

"Prior Incantato!" roared Mr. Diggory.

Harry heard Hermione gasp, horrified, as a gigantic serpent-tongued skull erupted from the point where the two wands had touched; it looked as though it were made of thick gray smoke: the ghost of a spell.

"Deletrius!" Mr. Diggory shouted, and the smoky skull vanished in a wisp of smoke.

"So," said Mr. Diggory with a kind of savage triumph, looking down upon Winky, who was still shaking convulsively.

"I is not doing it!" she squealed, her eyes rolling in terror. "I is not, I is not, I is not knowing how! I is a good elf, I isn't u—"

"You've been caught red-handed, elf!" Mr. Diggory roared. "Caught with the guilty wand in your hand!"

"Amos," said Mr. Weasley loudly, "think about it . . . precious few wizards know how to do that spell. . . . Where would she have learned it?"

"Perhaps Amos is suggesting," said Mr. Crouch, cold anger in every syllable, "that I routinely teach my servants to conjure the Dark Mark?"

There was a deeply unpleasant silence. Amos Diggory looked horrified. "Mr. Crouch . . . not . . . not at all . . ."

"You have now come very close to accusing the two people in this clearing who are least likely to conjure that Mark!" said Mr. Diggory. "Do you know the boy's story, Amos?"

"Of course — everyone knows —" muttered Mr. Diggory, looking highly discomforted.

"And I trust you remember the many proofs I have given, over a long career, that I despise and detest the Dark Arts and anything connected with them?" said Mr. Crouch. "I am not a wizard, but I am a man of law, and I will not be g again."

"Mr. Crouch, I — I never suggested you had anything to do with it!" Amos Diggory muttered again, now reddening beneath his beard.

"If you accuse my elf, you accuse me, Diggory!" shouted Mr. Crouch. "Where else would she have learned to conjure the Dark Mark?"

"She — she might've picked it up anywhere —"

"Precisely, Amos," said Mr. Weasley. "She might have picked it up anywhere. . . . Winky?" he said kindly, turning to the elf.

"Where exactly did you find Harry's wand?"

Winky was twisting the hem of her tea towel so violently that it was fraying beneath her fingers.

"I — I is finding it . . . finding it there, sir. . . ." she whispered, "there . . . in the trees, sir. . . ."

"You see, Amos?" said Mr. Weasley. "Whoever conjured the Mark could have Disapparated right after they'd done it, leaving their own wand, which could have betrayed them. And Winky here had the misfortune to come across the wand moments after it was dropped."

"But then, she'd have been only a few feet away from the real culprit!" said Mr. Diggory impatiently. "Elf? Did you see her?" Winky began to tremble worse than ever. Her giant eyes flickered from Mr. Diggory, to Ludo Bagman, and onto Mr. Crouch. "I am not a wizard, but I am a man of law, and I will not be g again."

"Amos," said Mr. Crouch curtly, "I am fully aware that, in the ordinary course of events, you would want to take Winky's place. Allow me to deal with her."

Mr. Diggory looked as though he didn't think much of this suggestion at all, but it was clear to Harry that Mr. Crouch was determined to refuse him.

"You may rest assured that she will be punished," Mr. Crouch added coldly.

"M-m-master . . ." Winky stammered, looking up at Mr. Crouch, her eyes brimming with tears. "M-m-master, p-p-please!" Mr. Crouch stared back, his face somehow sharpened, each line upon it more deeply etched. There was no pity in his eyes.

"Winky has behaved tonight in a manner I would not have believed possible," he said slowly. "I told her to remain in the kitchen. She disobeyed me. This means clothes."

"No!" shrieked Winky, prostrating herself at Mr. Crouch's feet. "No, master! Not clothes, not clothes!"

Harry knew that the only way to turn a house-elf free was to present it with proper garments. It was pitiful to see the elf cowering at Mr. Crouch's feet.

"But she was frightened!" Hermione burst out angrily, glaring at Mr. Crouch. "Your elf's scared of heights, and those wands are so close to her, she's wanting to get out of their way!"

Mr. Crouch took a step backward, freeing himself from contact with the elf, whom he was surveying as though she were a dangerous animal. He turned to Mr. Diggory and said, "I am not a wizard, but I am a man of law, and I will not be g again."

"I have no use for a house-elf who disobeys me," he said coldly, looking over at Hermione. "I have no use for a servant with a bad reputation."

Winky was crying so hard that her sobs echoed around the clearing. There was a very nasty silence, which was ended by the sound of the tent flap being pulled back to the tent, if nobody's got any objections. Amos, that wand's told us all it can — if Harry could have it back, please," said Mr. Diggory handed Harry his wand and Harry pocketed it.

"Come on, you three," Mr. Weasley said quietly. But Hermione didn't seem to want to move; her eyes were still upon the ground. She turned and followed Harry and Ron out of the clearing and off through the trees.

"What's going to happen to Winky?" said Hermione, the moment they had left the clearing.

"I don't know," said Mr. Weasley.

"The way they were treating her!" said Hermione furiously. "Mr. Diggory, calling her 'elf' all the time . . . and Mr. Crouch, calling her a witch! He didn't care how frightened she'd been, or how upset she was — it was like she wasn't even human!"

"Well, she's not," said Ron.

Hermione rounded on him.

"That doesn't mean she hasn't got feelings, Ron. It's disgusting the way —"

"Hermione, I agree with you," said Mr. Weasley quickly, beckoning her on, "but now is not the time to discuss elf rights. What's happened to the others?"

"We lost them in the dark," said Ron. "Dad, why was everyone so uptight about that skull thing?"

"I'll explain everything back at the tent," said Mr. Weasley tensely.

But when they reached the edge of the wood, their progress was impeded. A large crowd of frightened-looking witches and wizards was coming toward them, many of them surged forward.

"What's going on in there?"

"Who conjured it?"

"Arthur — it's not — Him?"

"Of course it's not Him," said Mr. Weasley impatiently. "We don't know who it was; it looks like they Disapparated. No one's seen him since. He led Harry, Ron, and Hermione through the crowd and back into the campsite. All was quiet now; there was no sign of the thing."

Charlie's head was poking out of the boys' tent.

"Dad, what's going on?" he called through the dark. "Fred, George, and Ginny got back okay, but the others —"

"I've got them here," said Mr. Weasley, bending down and entering the tent. Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered after him. Bill was sitting at the small kitchen table, holding a bedsheet to his arm, which was bleeding profusely. Charlie had a look of relief. Fred, George, and Ginny looked unhurt, though shaken.

"Did you get them, Dad?" said Bill sharply. "The person who conjured the Mark?"

"No," said Mr. Weasley. "We found Barty Crouch's elf holding Harry's wand, but we're none the wiser about who actually did it."

"What?" said Bill, Charlie, and Percy together.

"Harry's wand?" said Fred.

"Mr. Crouch's elf?" said Percy, sounding thunderstruck.

With some assistance from Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Mr. Weasley explained what had happened in the woods. When he finished, there was a long silence.

"Well, Mr. Crouch is quite right to get rid of an elf like that!" he said. "Running away when he'd expressly told her not to. . . how would that have looked, if she'd been brought up in front of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures?"

"She didn't do anything — she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time!" Hermione snapped at Percy, who looked uncomfortable. "That's a lot better, indeed, than any of the others."

"Hermione, a wizard in Mr. Crouch's position can't afford a house-elf who's going to run amok with a wand!" said Percy.

"She didn't run amok!" shouted Hermione. "She just picked it up off the ground!"

"Look, can someone just explain what that skull thing was?" said Ron impatiently. "It wasn't hurting anyone. . . . Why's everyone so uptight about it?"

"I told you, it's You-Know-Who's symbol, Ron," said Hermione, before anyone else could answer. "I read about it in The Daily Prophet."

"And it hasn't been seen for thirteen years," said Mr. Weasley quietly. "Of course people panicked . . . it was almost like a prophecy."

"I don't get it," said Ron, frowning. "I mean . . . it's still only a shape in the sky. . . ."

"Ron, You-Know-Who and his followers sent the Dark Mark into the air whenever they killed," said Mr. Weasley. "The picture coming home and finding the Dark Mark hovering over your house, and knowing what you're about to find in the future. . . . It's the worst . . ."

There was silence for a moment. Then Bill, removing the sheet from his arm to check on his cut, said, "Well, it didn't hurt me. I was away the moment they saw it. They all Disapparated before we'd got near enough to unmask any of them. We caught them before their memories modified right now."

"Death Eaters?" said Harry. "What are Death Eaters?"

"It's what You-Know-Who's supporters called themselves," said Bill. "I think we saw what's left of them tonight — the ones who survived."

"We can't prove it was them, Bill," said Mr. Weasley. "Though it probably was," he added hopelessly.

"Yeah, I bet it was!" said Ron suddenly. "Dad, we met Draco Malfoy in the woods, and he as good as told us his dad was a Death Eater. . . . It's right in with You-Know-Who!"

"But what were Voldemort's supporters —" Harry began. Everybody flinched — like most of the Wizarding world, they were afraid of the name. "What were You-Know-Who's supporters up to, levitating Muggles? I mean, what was the point?"

"The point?" said Mr. Weasley with a hollow laugh. "Harry, that's their idea of fun. Half the Muggle killings back when I had a few drinks tonight and couldn't resist reminding us all that lots of them are still at large. A nice little reunion for them. But if they were the Death Eaters, why did they Disapparate when they saw the Dark Mark?" said Ron. "They'd have used their brains, Ron," said Bill. "If they really were Death Eaters, they worked very hard to keep out of Azkaban when they were forcing them to kill and torture people. I bet they'd be even more frightened than the rest of us to see him come back with his powers, and went back to their daily lives. . . . I don't reckon he'd be over-pleased with them, do you?"

"So . . . whoever conjured the Dark Mark . . ." said Hermione slowly, "were they doing it to show support for the Death Eaters?"

"Your guess is as good as ours, Hermione," said Mr. Weasley. "But I'll tell you this . . . it was only the Death Eaters who did it. No person who did it hadn't been a Death Eater once, even if they're not now. . . . Listen, it's very late, and if your mother wants a few more hours sleep and then try and get an early Portkey out of here."

Harry got back into his bunk with his head buzzing. He knew he ought to feel exhausted: It was nearly three in the morning. Three days ago — it felt like much longer, but it had only been three days — he had awoken with his scar burning. And the Dark Mark had appeared in the sky. What did these things mean?

He thought of the letter he had written to Sirius before leaving Privet Drive. Would Sirius have gotten it yet? When would his fantasies come to him now to ease him to sleep, and it was a long time after Charlie's snores filled the tent that Harry fell asleep.

## CHAPTER TEN

### MAYHEM AT THE MINISTRY

Mr. Weasley woke them after only a few hours sleep. He used magic to pack up the tents, and they left the campsite before dawn. Mr. Roberts had a strange, dazed look about him, and he waved them off with a vague "Merry Christmas."

"He'll be all right," said Mr. Weasley quietly as they marched off onto the moor. "Sometimes, when a person's memory is wiped, they don't remember that was a big thing they had to make him forget."

They heard urgent voices as they approached the spot where the Portkeys lay, and when they reached it, they found a large number of Portkeys, all clamoring to get away from the campsite as quickly as possible. Mr. Weasley had a hurried look as he took an old rubber tire back to Stoatshead Hill before the sun had really risen. They walked back through Ottery St. Catchpole, talking very little because they were so exhausted, and thinking longingly of their breakfast. As they rounded the corner, they saw Mrs. Weasley.

"Oh thank goodness, thank goodness!"

Mrs. Weasley, who had evidently been waiting for them in the front yard, came running toward them, still wearing her nightgown. The Daily Prophet clutched in her hand.

"Arthur — I've been so worried — so worried —"

She flung her arms around Mr. Weasley's neck, and the Daily Prophet fell out of her limp hand onto the ground. Look at the WORLD CUP, complete with a twinkling black-and-white photograph of the Dark Mark over the treetops.

"You're all right," Mrs. Weasley muttered distractedly, releasing Mr. Weasley and staring around at them all with red-rimmed eyes. And to everybody's surprise, she seized Fred and George and pulled them both into such a tight hug that their heads bumped.

"Ouch! Mum — you're strangling us —"

"I shouted at you before you left!" Mrs. Weasley said, starting to sob. "It's all I've been thinking about! What if You-Know-Who was as that you didn't get enough O.W.L.s? Oh Fred . . . George . . ."

"Come on, now, Molly, we're all perfectly okay," said Mr. Weasley soothingly, prising her off the twins and leading her back into the house. "Pick up that paper, I want to see what it says. . . ."

When they were all crammed into the tiny kitchen, and Hermione had made Mrs. Weasley a cup of very strong tea, in which, of course, there was no whisky, Bill handed his father the newspaper. Mr. Weasley scanned the front page while Percy looked over his shoulder.

"I knew it," said Mr. Weasley heavily. "Ministry blunders . . . culprits not apprehended . . . lax security . . . Dark wizards loose! Note this? Ah . . . of course . . . Rita Skeeter."

"That woman's got it in for the Ministry of Magic!" said Percy furiously. "Last week she was saying we're wasting our time by trying to wipe out vampires! As if it wasn't specifically stated in paragraph twelve of the Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Vampires!"

"Do us a favor, Perce," said Bill, yawning, "and shut up."

"I'm mentioned," said Mr. Weasley, his eyes widening behind his glasses as he reached the bottom of the Daily Prophet.

"Where?" spluttered Mrs. Weasley, choking on her tea and whisky. "If I'd seen that, I'd have known you were alive!"

"Not by name," said Mr. Weasley. "Listen to this: 'If the terrified wizards and witches who waited breathlessly for news of the Ministry of Magic, they were sadly disappointed. A Ministry official emerged some time after the appearance of the Dark Mark to give more information. Whether this statement will be enough to quash the rumors that several bodies were removed from the Ministry grounds, only time will tell.'"

Mr. Weasley, in exasperation, handing the paper to Percy. "Nobody was hurt. What was I supposed to say? Rumors that several people were killed will be rumors now she's printed that."

He heaved a deep sigh. "Molly, I'm going to have to go into the office; this is going to take some smoothing over."

"I'll come with you, Father," said Percy importantly. "Mr. Crouch will need all hands on deck. And I can give him my cauldron as a gift."

He bustled out of the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley looked most upset.

"Arthur, you're supposed to be on holiday! This hasn't got anything to do with your office; surely they can handle this!"

"I've got to go, Molly," said Mr. Weasley. "I've made things worse. I'll just change into my robes and I'll be off. . . ."

"Mrs. Weasley," said Harry suddenly, unable to contain himself, "Hedwig hasn't arrived with a letter for me, has she?"

"Hedwig, dear?" said Mrs. Weasley distractedly. "No . . . no, there hasn't been any post at all."

Ron and Hermione looked curiously at Harry. With a meaningful look at both of them he said, "All right if I go and du

"Yeah . . . think I will too," said Ron at once. "Hermione?"

"Yes," she said quickly, and the three of them marched out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

"What's up, Harry?" said Ron, the moment they had closed the door of the attic room behind them.

"There's something I haven't told you," Harry said. "On Saturday morning, I woke up with my scar hurting again."

Ron's and Hermione's reactions were almost exactly as Harry had imagined them back in his bedroom on Privet Drive

a number of reference books, and everybody from Albus Dumbledore to Madam Pomfrey, the Hogwarts nurse. Ron

"But — he wasn't there, was he? You-Know-Who? I mean — last time your scar kept hurting, he was at Hogwarts, was

"I'm sure he wasn't on Privet Drive," said Harry. "But I was dreaming about him . . . him and Peter — you know, Worm  
ill . . . someone."

He had teetered for a moment on the verge of saying "me," but couldn't bring himself to make Hermione look any m

"It was only a dream," said Ron bracingly. "Just a nightmare."

"Yeah, but was it, though?" said Harry, turning to look out of the window at the brightening sky. "It's weird, isn't it? . . .

re on the march, and Voldemort's sign's up in the sky again."

"Don't — say — his — name!" Ron hissed through gritted teeth.

"And remember what Professor Trelawney said?" Harry went on, ignoring Ron. "At the end of last year?"

Professor Trelawney was their Divination teacher at Hogwarts. Hermione's terrified look vanished as she let out a de

"Oh Harry, you aren't going to pay attention to anything that old fraud says?"

"You weren't there," said Harry. "You didn't hear her. This time was different. I told you, she went into a trance — a re

eater and more terrible than ever before . . . and he'd manage it because his servant was going to go back to him . . .

There was a silence in which Ron fidgeted absentmindedly with a hole in his Chudley Cannons bedspread.

"Why were you asking if Hedwig had come, Harry?" Hermione asked. "Are you expecting a letter?"

"I told Sirius about my scar," said Harry, shrugging. "I'm waiting for his answer."

"Good thinking!" said Ron, his expression clearing. "I bet Sirius'll know what to do!"

"I hoped he'd get back to me quickly," said Harry.

"But we don't know where Sirius is . . . he could be in Africa or somewhere, couldn't he?" said Hermione reasonably. "

"Yeah, I know," said Harry, but there was a leaden feeling in his stomach as he looked out of the window at the Hedw

"Come and have a game of Quidditch in the orchard, Harry," said Ron. "Come on — three on three, Bill and Charlie a  
nt. . . ."

"Ron," said Hermione, in an I-don't-think-you're-being-very-sensitive sort of voice, "Harry doesn't want to play Quiddit  
I need to go to bed. . . ."

"Yeah, I want to play Quidditch," said Harry suddenly. "Hang on, I'll get my Firebolt."

Hermione left the room, muttering something that sounded very much like "Boys."

Neither Mr. Weasley nor Percy was at home much over the following week. Both left the house each morning before  
ight.

"It's been an absolute uproar," Percy told them importantly the Sunday evening before they were due to return to Ho  
Howlers, and of course, if you don't open a Howler straight away, it explodes. Scorch marks all over my desk and my

"Why are they all sending Howlers?" asked Ginny, who was mending her copy of One Thousand Magical Herbs and F

"Complaining about security at the World Cup," said Percy. "They want compensation for their ruined property. Munn  
-suite Jacuzzi, but I've got his number. I know for a fact he was sleeping under a cloak propped on sticks."

Mrs. Weasley glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. Harry liked this clock. It was completely useless if you w  
nine golden hands, and each of them was engraved with one of the Weasley family's names. There were no numera

be. "Home," "school," and "work" were there, but there was also "traveling," "lost," "hospital," "prison," and, in the pos  
mortal peril."

Eight of the hands were currently pointing to the "home" position, but Mr. Weasley's, which was the longest, was still

"Your father hasn't had to go into the office on weekends since the days of You-Know-Who," she said. "They're workin  
come home soon."

"Well, Father feels he's got to make up for his mistake at the match, doesn't he?" said Percy. "If truth be told, he was a  
with his Head of Department first —"

"Don't you dare blame your father for what that wretched Skeeter woman wrote!" said Mrs. Weasley, flaring up at on

"If Dad hadn't said anything, old Rita would just have said it was disgraceful that nobody from the Ministry had com  
never makes anyone look good. Remember, she interviewed all the Gringotts Charm Breakers once, and called me "

"Well, it is a bit long, dear," said Mrs. Weasley gently. "If you'd just let me —"

"No, Mum."

Rain lashed against the living room window. Hermione was immersed in The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, copie  
Alley. Charlie was darning a fireproof balaclava. Harry was polishing his Firebolt, the broomstick servicing kit Hermio

Fred and George were sitting in a far corner, quills out, talking in whispers, their heads bent over a piece of parchme

"What are you two up to?" said Mrs. Weasley sharply, her eyes on the twins.

"Homework," said Fred vaguely.



"Don't be ridiculous, you're still on holiday," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Yeah, we've left it a bit late," said George.

"You're not by any chance writing out a new order form, are you?" said Mrs. Weasley shrewdly. "You wouldn't be thin

"Now, Mum," said Fred, looking up at her, a pained look on his face. "If the Hogwarts Express crashed tomorrow, and we ever heard from you was an unfounded accusation?"

Everyone laughed, even Mrs. Weasley.

"Oh your father's coming!" she said suddenly, looking up at the clock again.

Mr. Weasley's hand had suddenly spun from "work" to "traveling"; a second later it had shuddered to a halt on "home

"Coming, Arthur!" called Mrs. Weasley, hurrying out of the room.

A few moments later, Mr. Weasley came into the warm living room carrying his dinner on a tray. He looked complete

"Well, the fat's really in the fire now," he told Mrs. Weasley as he sat down in an armchair near the hearth and toyed ita Skeeter's been ferreting around all week, looking for more Ministry mess-ups to report. And now she's found out n the Prophet tomorrow. I told Bagman he should have sent someone to look for her ages ago."

"Mr. Crouch has been saying it for weeks and weeks," said Percy swiftly.

"Crouch is very lucky Rita hasn't found out about Winky," said Mr. Weasley irritably. "There'd be a week's worth of hea jured the Dark Mark."

"I thought we were all agreed that that elf, while irresponsible, did not conjure the Mark?" said Percy hotly.

"If you ask me, Mr. Crouch is very lucky no one at the Daily Prophet knows how mean he is to elves!" said Hermione a

"Now look here, Hermione!" said Percy. "A high-ranking Ministry official like Mr. Crouch deserves unswerving obedien

"His slave, you mean!" said Hermione, her voice rising passionately, "because he didn't pay Winky, did he?"

"I think you'd all better go upstairs and check that you've packed properly!" said Mrs. Weasley, breaking up the argum

Harry repacked his broomstick servicing kit, put his Firebolt over his shoulder, and went back upstairs with Ron. The y loud whistlings and moans from the wind, not to mention sporadic howls from the ghoul who lived in the attic. Pigw

ered. The sight of the half-packed trunks seemed to have sent him into a frenzy of excitement.

"Bung him some Owl Treats," said Ron, throwing a packet across to Harry. "It might shut him up."

Harry poked a few Owl Treats through the bars of Pigwidgeon's cage, then turned to his trunk. Hedwig's cage stood n

"It's been over a week," Harry said, looking at Hedwig's deserted perch. "Ron, you don't reckon Sirius has been caught

"Nah, it would've been in the Daily Prophet," said Ron. "The Ministry would want to show they'd caught someone, wo

"Yeah, I suppose. . . ."

"Look, here's the stuff Mum got for you in Diagon Alley. And she's got some gold out of your vault for you . . . and she

He heaved a pile of parcels onto Harry's camp bed and dropped the money bag and a load of socks next to it. Harry ells, Grade 4, by Miranda Goshawk, he had a handful of new quills, a dozen rolls of parchment, and refills for his poti nd essence of belladonna. He was just piling underwear into his cauldron when Ron made a loud noise of disgust be

"What is that supposed to be?"

He was holding up something that looked to Harry like a long, maroon velvet dress. It had a moldy-looking lace frill a

There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Weasley entered, carrying an armful of freshly laundered Hogwarts robes.

"Here you are," she said, sorting them into two piles. "Now, mind you pack them properly so they don't crease."

"Mum, you've given me Ginny's new dress," said Ron, handing it out to her.

"Of course I haven't," said Mrs. Weasley. "That's for you. Dress robes."

"What?" said Ron, looking horror-struck.

"Dress robes!" repeated Mrs. Weasley. "It says on your school list that you're supposed to have dress robes this year

"You've got to be kidding," said Ron in disbelief. "I'm not wearing that, no way."

"Everyone wears them, Ron!" said Mrs. Weasley crossly. "They're all like that! Your father's got some for smart parties

"I'll go starkers before I put that on," said Ron stubbornly.

"Don't be so silly," said Mrs. Weasley. "You've got to have dress robes, they're on your list! I got some for Harry too . .

In some trepidation, Harry opened the last parcel on his camp bed. It wasn't as bad as he had expected, however; his were more or less the same as his school ones, except that they were bottle green instead of black.

"I thought they'd bring out the color of your eyes, dear," said Mrs. Weasley fondly.

"Well, they're okay!" said Ron angrily, looking at Harry's robes. "Why couldn't I have some like that?"

"Because . . . well, I had to get yours secondhand, and there wasn't a lot of choice!" said Mrs. Weasley, flushing.

Harry looked away. He would willingly have split all the money in his Gringotts vault with the Weasleys, but he knew

"I'm never wearing them," Ron was saying stubbornly. "Never."

"Fine," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "Go naked. And, Harry, make sure you get a picture of him. Goodness knows I could d

She left the room, slamming the door behind her. There was a funny spluttering noise from behind them. Pigwidgeon

"Why is everything I own rubbish?" said Ron furiously, striding across the room to unstick Pigwidgeon's beak.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### ABOARD THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS

There was a definite end-of-the-holidays gloom in the air when Harry awoke next morning. Heavy rain was still splatt irt; they would change into their school robes on the Hogwarts Express.

He, Ron, Fred, and George had just reached the first-floor landing on their way down to breakfast, when Mrs. Weasley "Arthur!" she called up the staircase. "Arthur! Urgent message from the Ministry!"

Harry flattened himself against the wall as Mr. Weasley came clattering past with his robes on back-to-front and hurtling down. They saw Mrs. Weasley rummaging anxiously in the drawers — "I've got a quill here somewhere!" — and Mr. Weasley, who had just opened his eyes, Harry shut his eyes hard and opened them again to make sure that they were working properly.

Amos Diggory's head was sitting in the middle of the flames like a large, bearded egg. It was talking very fast, completely ignoring the fire, licking its ears.

"... Muggle neighbors heard bangs and shouting, so they went and called those what-d'you-call-'ems — please-men. Here!" said Mrs. Weasley breathlessly, pushing a piece of parchment, a bottle of ink, and a crumpled quill into Mr. Weasley's hands. "— it's a real stroke of luck I heard about it," said Mr. Diggory's head. "I had to come into the office early to send a couple of letters setting off — if Rita Skeeter gets hold of this one, Arthur —"

"What does Mad-Eye say happened?" asked Mr. Weasley, unscrewing the ink bottle, loading up his quill, and preparing to write. Mr. Diggory's head rolled its eyes. "Says he heard an intruder in his yard. Says he was creeping toward the house, but he didn't see him. What did the dustbins do?" asked Mr. Weasley, scribbling frantically.

"Made one hell of a noise and fired rubbish everywhere, as far as I can tell," said Mr. Diggory. "Apparently one of them was Mr. Weasley groaned.

"And what about the intruder?"

"Arthur, you know Mad-Eye," said Mr. Diggory's head, rolling its eyes again. "Someone creeping into his yard in the dead of the night, ring around somewhere, covered in potato peelings. But if the Improper Use of Magic lot get their hands on Mad-Eye, it's a minor charge, something in your department — what are exploding dustbins worth?"

"Might be a caution," said Mr. Weasley, still writing very fast, his brow furrowed. "Mad-Eye didn't use his wand? He didn't see him?"

"I'll bet he leapt out of bed and started jinxing everything he could reach through the window," said Mr. Diggory, "but he didn't see him." "All right, I'm off," Mr. Weasley said, and he stuffed the parchment with his notes on it into his pocket and dashed out. Mr. Diggory's head looked around at Mrs. Weasley.

"Sorry about this, Molly," it said, more calmly, "bothering you so early and everything . . . but Arthur's the only one who can get his new job today. Why he had to choose last night . . ."

"Never mind, Amos," said Mrs. Weasley. "Sure you won't have a bit of toast or anything before you go?"

"Oh go on, then," said Mr. Diggory.

Mrs. Weasley took a piece of buttered toast from a stack on the kitchen table, put it into the fire tongs, and transferred it to a plate. "Fanks," he said in a muffled voice, and then, with a small pop, vanished.

Harry could hear Mr. Weasley calling hurried good-byes to Bill, Charlie, Percy, and the girls. Within five minutes, he was back, running a comb through his hair.

"I'd better hurry — you have a good term, boys," said Mr. Weasley to Harry, Ron, and the twins, fastening a cloak over his shoulders. "I'm going to be all right taking the kids to King's Cross?"

"Of course I will," she said. "You just look after Mad-Eye, we'll be fine."

As Mr. Weasley vanished, Bill and Charlie entered the kitchen.

"Did someone say Mad-Eye?" Bill asked. "What's he been up to now?"

"He says someone tried to break into his house last night," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Mad-Eye Moody?" said George thoughtfully, spreading marmalade on his toast. "Isn't he that nutter —"

"Your father thinks very highly of Mad-Eye Moody," said Mrs. Weasley sternly.

"Yeah, well, Dad collects plugs, doesn't he?" said Fred quietly as Mrs. Weasley left the room. "Birds of a feather . . ."

"Moody was a great wizard in his time," said Bill.

"He's an old friend of Dumbledore's, isn't he?" said Charlie.

"Dumbledore's not what you'd call normal, though, is he?" said Fred. "I mean, I know he's a genius and everything . . ."

"Who is Mad-Eye?" asked Harry.

"He's retired, used to work at the Ministry," said Charlie. "I met him once when Dad took me in to work with him. He was a bit of a nutcase, added, seeing Harry's blank look. "Half the cells in Azkaban are full because of him. He made himself loads of enemies, and I heard he's been getting really paranoid in his old age. Doesn't trust anyone anymore. Sees Dark wizards everywhere." Bill and Charlie decided to come and see everyone off at King's Cross station, but Percy, apologizing most profusely, "I just can't justify taking more time off at the moment," he told them. "Mr. Crouch is really starting to rely on me."

"Yeah, you know what, Percy?" said George seriously. "I reckon he'll know your name soon."

Mrs. Weasley had braved the telephone in the village post office to order three ordinary Muggle taxis to take them in to London. "Arthur tried to borrow Ministry cars for us," Mrs. Weasley whispered to Harry as they stood in the rain-washed yard waiting for their cars. "But there weren't any to spare. . . . Oh dear, they don't look happy, do they?"

Harry didn't like to tell Mrs. Weasley that Muggle taxi drivers rarely transported overexcited owls, and Pigwidgeon was a bit of a nuisance. But when Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks went off unexpectedly when Fred's trunk sprang open, causing it to clawed his way up the man's leg.

The journey was uncomfortable, owing to the fact that they were jammed in the back of the taxis with their trunks. Crouching by the time they entered London, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were all severely scratched. They were very relieved to get home, more than ever, and they got soaked carrying their trunks across the busy road and into the station.

Harry was used to getting onto platform nine and three-quarters by now. It was a simple matter of walking straight through the barrier. The only tricky part was doing this in an unobtrusive way, so as to avoid attracting Muggle attention. They did it in a very unobtrusive way, since they were accompanied by Pigwidgeon and Crookshanks) went first; they leaned casually against the barrier, and when they did so, platform nine and three-quarters materialized in front of them.

The Hogwarts Express, a gleaming scarlet steam engine, was already there, clouds of steam billowing from it, through which appeared like dark ghosts. Pigwidgeon became noisier than ever in response to the hooting of many owls through the morning rain, towing their luggage in a compartment halfway along the train. They then hopped back down onto the platform to say good-bye. "I might be seeing you all sooner than you think," said Charlie, grinning, as he hugged Ginny good-bye.

"Why?" said Fred keenly.

"You'll see," said Charlie. "Just don't tell Percy I mentioned it . . . it's 'classified information, until such time as the Ministry decides otherwise.'"

"Yeah, I sort of wish I were back at Hogwarts this year," said Bill, hands in his pockets, looking almost wistfully at the train.

"Why?" said George impatiently.

"You're going to have an interesting year," said Bill, his eyes twinkling. "I might even get time off to come and watch a game."

"A bit of what?" said Ron.

But at that moment, the whistle blew, and Mrs. Weasley chivvied them toward the train doors.

"Thanks for having us to stay, Mrs. Weasley," said Hermione as they climbed on board, closed the door, and leaned over the side.

"Yeah, thanks for everything, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry.

"Oh it was my pleasure, dears," said Mrs. Weasley. "I'd invite you for Christmas, but . . . well, I expect you're all going to be too busy to do another."

"Mum!" said Ron irritably. "What d'you three know that we don't?"

"You'll find out this evening, I expect," said Mrs. Weasley, smiling. "It's going to be very exciting — mind you, I'm very glad."

"What rules?" said Harry, Ron, Fred, and George together.

"I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will tell you. . . . Now, behave, won't you? Won't you, Fred? And you, George?"

The pistons hissed loudly and the train began to move.

"Tell us what's happening at Hogwarts!" Fred bellowed out of the window as Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie sped away.

But Mrs. Weasley only smiled and waved. Before the train had rounded the corner, she, Bill, and Charlie had disappeared.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went back to their compartment. The thick rain splattering the windows made it very difficult to see. They took out their robes, and flung them over Pigwidgeon's cage to muffle his hooting.

"Bagman wanted to tell us what's happening at Hogwarts," he said grumpily, sitting down next to Harry. "At the World Cup."

"Shh!" Hermione whispered suddenly, pressing her finger to her lips and pointing toward the compartment next to them. "Someone's listening in through the open door."

" . . . Father actually considered sending me to Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts, you know. He knows the headmaster is a Mudblood-lover — and Durmstrang doesn't admit that sort of riffraff. But Mother didn't like the idea of me going to a school with a less reputable line than Hogwarts about the Dark Arts. Durmstrang students actually learn them, not just the defense rubbish. Hermione got up, tiptoed to the compartment door, and slid it shut, blocking out Malfoy's voice.

"So he thinks Durmstrang would have suited him, does he?" she said angrily. "I wish he had gone, then we wouldn't have had to go."

"Durmstrang's another Wizarding school?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Hermione sniffily, "and it's got a horrible reputation. According to An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe."

"I think I've heard of it," said Ron vaguely. "Where is it? What country?"

"Well, nobody knows, do they?" said Hermione, raising her eyebrows.

"Er — why not?" said Harry.

"There's traditionally been a lot of rivalry between all the magic schools. Durmstrang and Beauxbatons like to conceal their differences. It's a matter of fact."

"Come off it," said Ron, starting to laugh. "Durmstrang's got to be about the same size as Hogwarts — how are you going to hide it?"

"But Hogwarts is hidden," said Hermione, in surprise. "Everyone knows that . . . well, everyone who's read Hogwarts: The Book of Secrets."

"Just you, then," said Ron. "So go on — how d'you hide a place like Hogwarts?"

"It's bewitched," said Hermione. "If a Muggle looks at it, all they see is a moldering old ruin with a sign over the entrance that says 'No Entry'."

"So Durmstrang'll just look like a ruin to an outsider too?"

"Maybe," said Hermione, shrugging, "or it might have Muggle-repelling charms on it, like the World Cup stadium. And it's a very small place."

"Come again?"

"Well, you can enchant a building so it's impossible to plot on a map, can't you?"

"Er . . . if you say so," said Harry.

"But I think Durmstrang must be somewhere in the far north," said Hermione thoughtfully. "Somewhere very cold, because it's a school for dark wizards."

"Ah, think of the possibilities," said Ron dreamily. "It would've been so easy to push Malfoy off a glacier and make it look like an accident."

The rain became heavier and heavier as the train moved farther north. The sky was so dark and the windows so steamy that it was difficult to see. Harry bought a large stack of Cauldron Cakes for them to share.

Several of their friends looked in on them as the afternoon progressed, including Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Paddy. Paddy had been brought up by his formidable witch of a grandmother. Seamus was still wearing his Ireland rosette. Some of the other friends were also looking in.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT

Professor McGonagall, deputy headmistress and Head of Gryffindor House, had come dashing out of the Great Hall; stop herself from falling.

"Ouch — sorry, Miss Granger —"

"That's all right, Professor!" Hermione gasped, massaging her throat.

"Peeves, get down here NOW!" barked Professor McGonagall, straightening her pointed hat and glaring upward through the ceiling.

"Not doing nothing!" cackled Peeves, lobbing a water bomb at several fifth-year girls, who screamed and dived into the air. "eeeeee!" And he aimed another bomb at a group of second years who had just arrived.

"I shall call the headmaster!" shouted Professor McGonagall. "I'm warning you, Peeves —"

Peeves stuck out his tongue, threw the last of his water bombs into the air, and zoomed off up the marble staircase, leaving a trail of water.

"Well, move along, then!" said Professor McGonagall sharply to the bedraggled crowd. "Into the Great Hall, come on!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione slipped and slid across the entrance hall and through the double doors on the right, Ron mumbled a curse under his breath, and off his face.

The Great Hall looked its usual splendid self, decorated for the start-of-term feast. Golden plates and goblets gleamed on the tables in midair. The four long House tables were packed with chattering students; at the top of the Hall, the staff table.

It was much warmer in here. Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked past the Slytherins, the Ravenclaws, and the Hufflepuffs. At the end of the Hall, next to Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost. Pearly white and semitransparent, Nick was dressed in a black suit, which served the dual purpose of looking extra-festive, and insuring that his head didn't wobble too much on his post.

"Good evening," he said, beaming at them.

"Says who?" said Harry, taking off his sneakers and emptying them of water. "Hope they hurry up with the Sorting. I'm a bit late."

The Sorting of the new students into Houses took place at the start of every school year, but by an unlucky combination of circumstances, it was often delayed. Harry was quite looking forward to it. Just then, a highly excited, breathless voice called down the table.

"Hiya, Harry!"

It was Colin Creevey, a third year to whom Harry was something of a hero.

"Hi, Colin," said Harry warily.

"Harry, guess what? Guess what, Harry? My brother's starting! My brother Dennis!"

"Er — good," said Harry.

"He's really excited!" said Colin, practically bouncing up and down in his seat. "I just hope he's in Gryffindor! Keep you up to date!"

"Er — yeah, all right," said Harry. He turned back to Hermione, Ron, and Nearly Headless Nick. "Brothers and sisters up to you, by the Weasleys, all seven of whom had been put into Gryffindor.

"Oh no, not necessarily," said Hermione. "Parvati Patil's twin's in Ravenclaw, and they're identical. You'd think they'd be in the same House."

Harry looked up at the staff table. There seemed to be rather more empty seats there than usual. Hagrid, of course, was absent. Professor McGonagall was presumably supervising the drying of the entrance hall floor, but there was another empty seat.

"Where's the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?" said Hermione, who was also looking up at the teachers.

They had never yet had a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who had lasted more than three terms. Harry's favorite teacher, Albus Dumbledore, had been the first. He had looked up and down the staff table. There was definitely no new face there.

"Maybe they couldn't get anyone!" said Hermione, looking anxious.

Harry scanned the table more carefully. Tiny little Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was sitting on a large pile of books. His pointed hat was askew over her flyaway gray hair. She was talking to Professor Sinistra of the Astronomy department. On the other side of the table, the greasy-haired Potions master, Snape — Harry's least favorite person at Hogwarts. Harry's loathing of Snape was made more intense, intensified last year, when Harry had helped Sirius escape right under Snape's overlarge nose — Snape and Sirius were identical.

On Snape's other side was an empty seat, which Harry guessed was Professor McGonagall's. Next to it, and in the very center of the table, was a man with long, sweeping silver hair and beard shining in the candlelight, his magnificent deep green robes embroidered with many stars and stripes. He was sitting together and he was resting his chin upon them, staring up at the ceiling through his half-moon spectacles as though he was

enchanted to look like the sky outside, and he had never seen it look this stormy. Black and purple clouds were swirling in the sky, and lightning flashed across it.

"Oh hurry up," Ron moaned, beside Harry, "I could eat a hippogriff."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the doors of the Great Hall opened and silence fell. Professor McGonagall stepped forward. The Great Hall. If Harry, Ron, and Hermione were wet, it was nothing to how these first years looked. They appeared to have survived the journey with a combination of cold and nerves as they filed along the staff table and came to a halt in a line facing the rest of the students.

At the front of the line was a boy with mousy hair, who was wrapped in what Harry recognized as Hagrid's moleskin overcoat. The coat was so big that it hid his face. He was looking up at the ceiling with a look of intense excitement. He had lined up with the rest of the first years, and he was giving them a double thumbs-up, and mouthed, I fell in the lake! He looked positively delighted about it.

Professor McGonagall now placed a four-legged stool on the ground before the first years and, on top of it, an extremely tall chair. So did everyone else. For a moment, there was silence. Then a long tear near the brim opened wide like a mouth, and a voice came out of it.

A thousand years or more ago,

When I was newly sewn,

There lived four wizards of renown,

Whose names are still well known:

Bold Gryffindor, from wild moor,

Fair Ravenclaw, from glen,

Sweet Hufflepuff, from valley broad,  
Shrewd Slytherin, from fen.  
They shared a wish, a hope, a dream,  
They hatched a daring plan  
To educate young sorcerers  
Thus Hogwarts School began.  
Now each of these four founders  
Formed their own House, for each  
Did value different virtues  
In the ones they had to teach.  
By Gryffindor, the bravest were  
Prized far beyond the rest;  
For Ravenclaw, the cleverest  
Would always be the best;  
For Hufflepuff, hard workers were  
Most worthy of admission;  
And power-hungry Slytherin  
Loved those of great ambition.  
While still alive they did divide  
Their favorites from the throng,  
Yet how to pick the worthy ones  
When they were dead and gone?  
'Twas Gryffindor who found the way,  
He whipped me off his head  
The founders put some brains in me  
So I could choose instead!  
Now slip me snug about your ears,  
I've never yet been wrong,  
I'll have a look inside your mind  
And tell where you belong!

The Great Hall rang with applause as the Sorting Hat finished.

"That's not the song it sang when it Sorted us," said Harry, clapping along with everyone else.

"Sings a different one every year," said Ron. "It's got to be a pretty boring life, hasn't it, being a hat? I suppose it spends its time singing to itself."  
Professor McGonagall was now unrolling a large scroll of parchment.

"When I call out your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool," she told the first years. "When the hat announces your name, you will hear it call your name aloud to the whole school."

"Ackerley, Stewart!"

A boy walked forward, visibly trembling from head to foot, picked up the Sorting Hat, put it on, and sat down on the stool.  
"RAVENCLAW!" shouted the hat.

Stewart Ackerley took off the hat and hurried into a seat at the Ravenclaw table, where everyone was applauding him.  
Stewart Ackerley as he sat down. For a fleeting second, Harry had a strange desire to join the Ravenclaw table too.

"Baddock, Malcolm!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

The table on the other side of the hall erupted with cheers; Harry could see Malfoy clapping as Baddock joined the Slytherins.  
The house had turned out more Dark witches and wizards than any other. Fred and George hissed Malcolm Baddock as he sat down.

"Branstone, Eleanor!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Cauldwell, Owen!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Creevey, Dennis!"

Tiny Dennis Creevey staggered forward, tripping over Hagrid's moleskin, just as Hagrid himself sidled into the Hall through the portrait of the fat lady.  
A normal man, and at least three times as broad, Hagrid, with his long, wild, tangled black hair and beard, looked slightly different from the way Hermione knew Hagrid to possess a very kind nature. He winked at them as he sat down at the end of the staff table.  
The hat's brim opened wide —

"GRYFFINDOR!" the hat shouted.

Hagrid clapped along with the Gryffindors as Dennis Creevey, beaming widely, took off the hat, placed it back on the stool, and sat down.  
"Colin, I fell in!" he said shrilly, throwing himself into an empty seat. "It was brilliant! And something in the water grabbed me!"

"Cool!" said Colin, just as excitedly. "It was probably the giant squid, Dennis!"

"Wow!" said Dennis, as though nobody in their wildest dreams could hope for more than being thrown into a storm-tossed boat.  
monster.



sure you will all enjoy it immensely. I have great pleasure in announcing that this year at Hogwarts —"

But at that moment, there was a deafening rumble of thunder and the doors of the Great Hall banged open.

A man stood in the doorway, leaning upon a long staff, shrouded in a black traveling cloak. Every head in the Great Hall was turned by a fork of lightning that flashed across the ceiling. He lowered his hood, shook out a long mane of grizzled, dark gray hair. A dull clunk echoed through the Hall on his every other step. He reached the end of the top table, turned right, and looked up at the ceiling. Hermione gasped.

The lightning had thrown the man's face into sharp relief, and it was a face unlike any Harry had ever seen. It looked like a face who had only the vaguest idea of what human faces are supposed to look like, and was none too skilled with a chisel. There was a diagonal gash, and a large chunk of the nose was missing. But it was the man's eyes that made him frightening.

One of them was small, dark, and beady. The other was large, round as a coin, and a vivid, electric blue. The blue eye rolled up and down, and from side to side, quite independently of the normal eye — and then it rolled right over, pointing into the ceiling.

The stranger reached Dumbledore. He stretched out a hand that was as badly scarred as his face, and Dumbledore shook it. The stranger made some inquiry of the stranger, who shook his head unsmilingly and replied in an undertone. Dumbledore nodded and the stranger sat down, shook his mane of dark gray hair out of his face, pulled a plate of sausages toward him, raised a small knife out of his pocket, speared a sausage on the end of it, and began to eat. His normal eye was fixed upon the stranger and in its socket, taking in the Hall and the students.

"May I introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?" said Dumbledore brightly into the silence. "Professor Moody." It was usual for new staff members to be greeted with applause, but none of the staff or students clapped except Dumbledore. He smiled, but the sound echoed dismally into the silence, and they stopped fairly quickly. Everyone else seemed too transfixed to move.

"Moody?" Harry muttered to Ron. "Mad-Eye Moody? The one your dad went to help this morning?"

"Must be," said Ron in a low, awed voice.

"What happened to him?" Hermione whispered. "What happened to his face?"

"Dunno," Ron whispered back, watching Moody with fascination.

Moody seemed totally indifferent to his less-than-warm welcome. Ignoring the jug of pumpkin juice in front of him, he picked up the goblet and took a long draught from it. As he lifted his arm to drink, his cloak was pulled a few inches from the ground, and a clawed foot emerged, ending in a clawed foot.

Dumbledore cleared his throat.

"As I was saying," he said, smiling at the sea of students before him, all of whom were still gazing transfixed at Mad-Eye Moody, "this is a most important event over the coming months, an event that has not been held for over a century. It is my very great pleasure to introduce you to the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts this year."

"You're JOKING!" said Fred Weasley loudly.

The tension that had filled the Hall ever since Moody's arrival suddenly broke. Nearly everyone laughed, and Dumbledore smiled. "I am not joking, Mr. Weasley," he said, "though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer holidays."

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

"Er — but maybe this is not the time . . . no . . ." said Dumbledore, "where was I? Ah yes, the Triwizard Tournament . . . yes, so I hope those who do know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander to the subject at hand."

"The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three schools of magic — Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of establishing ties between young witches and wizards. However, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued."

"Death toll?" Hermione whispered, looking alarmed. But her anxiety did not seem to be shared by the majority of students. They were all looking at Moody with interest, and Harry himself was far more interested in hearing about the tournament than in worrying about deaths.

"There have been several attempts over the centuries to reinstate the tournament," Dumbledore continued, "none of which have succeeded. The International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another attempt. We are confident that our champion will find himself or herself in mortal danger."

"The Heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving with their shortlisted contenders in October, and the impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and the honor of their country."

"I'm going for it!" Fred Weasley hissed down the table, his face lit with enthusiasm at the prospect of such glory and recognition. He was already imagining himself as the Hogwarts champion. At every House table, Harry could see people either gazing raptly at Dumbledore or looking at each other with interest.

Dumbledore spoke again, and the Hall quieted once more. "Eager though I know all of you will be to bring the Triwizard Cup to Hogwarts," he said, "the Heads of the participating schools have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age — that is to say, seventeen years or older — are eligible to compete. This" — Dumbledore raised his voice slightly, for several people had made noises of outrage at these words, and he felt it necessary, given that the tournament tasks will still be difficult and dangerous, whatever precautions we take — "I therefore beg you not to waste your time and energy. By the end of the seventh year will be able to cope with them. I will personally be ensuring that no underage student hoodwinks our impartial judge. My eyes twinkled as they flickered over Fred's and George's mutinous faces. "I therefore beg you not to waste your time and energy."

"The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving in October and remaining with us for the greater part of the year. We will give our whole-hearted support to the Hogwarts champion while they are with us, and will give your whole-hearted support to the Hogwarts champion while they are with us."



tant it is to you all to be alert and rested as you enter your lessons tomorrow morning. Bedtime! Chop chop!"

Dumbledore sat down again and turned to talk to Mad-Eye Moody. There was a great scraping and banging as all the students moved toward the entrance hall.

"They can't do that!" said George Weasley, who had not joined the crowd moving toward the door, but was standing back. "We've got to have a shot?"

"They're not stopping me entering," said Fred stubbornly, also scowling at the top table. "The champions'll get to do a thousand Galleons prize money!"

"Yeah," said Ron, a faraway look on his face. "Yeah, a thousand Galleons . . ."

"Come on," said Hermione, "we'll be the only ones left here if you don't move."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George set off for the entrance hall, Fred and George debating the ways in which Dumbledore might win the tournament.

"Who's this impartial judge who's going to decide who the champions are?" said Harry.

"Dunno," said Fred, "but it's them we'll have to fool. I reckon a couple of drops of Aging Potion might do it, George. . ."

"Dumbledore knows you're not of age, though," said Ron.

"Yeah, but he's not the one who decides who the champion is, is he?" said Fred shrewdly. "Sounds to me like once they're in school and never mind how old they are. Dumbledore's trying to stop us giving our names."

"People have died, though!" said Hermione in a worried voice as they walked through a door concealed behind a tapestry.

"Yeah," said Fred airily, "but that was years ago, wasn't it? Anyway, where's the fun without a bit of risk? Hey, Ron, what do you think?"

"What d'you reckon?" Ron asked Harry. "Be cool to enter, wouldn't it? But I s'pose they might want someone older. . ."

"I definitely haven't," came Neville's gloomy voice from behind Fred and George.

"I expect my gran'd want me to try, though. She's always going on about how I should be upholding the family honor."

Neville's foot had sunk right through a step halfway up the staircase. There were many of these trick stairs at Hogwarts, but Neville's memory was notoriously poor. Harry and Ron seized him under the armpits and pulled him up. He landed with a thud and clanked, laughing wheezily.

"Shut it, you," said Ron, banging down its visor as they passed.

They made their way up to the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, which was concealed behind a large portrait of a fat lady.

"Password?" she said as they approached.

"Balderdash," said George, "a prefect downstairs told me."

The portrait swung forward to reveal a hole in the wall through which they all climbed. A crackling fire warmed the cold walls. Hermione cast the merrily dancing flames a dark look, and Harry distinctly heard her mutter "Slave labor," before she disappeared into the girls' dormitory.

Harry, Ron, and Neville climbed up the last, spiral staircase until they reached their own dormitory, which was situated at the top of the tower. Tapestries and hangings stood against the walls, each with its owner's trunk at the foot. Dean and Seamus were already getting into their beds, and Dean had tacked up a poster of Viktor Krum over his bedside table. His old poster of the West Ham football team was still there.

"Mental," Ron sighed, shaking his head at the completely stationary soccer players.

Harry, Ron, and Neville got into their pajamas and into bed. Someone — a house-elf, no doubt — had placed warm blankets over them and was now in bed and listening to the storm raging outside.

"I might go in for it, you know," Ron said sleepily through the darkness, "if Fred and George find out how to . . . the tower. . ."

"S'pose not. . ."

Harry rolled over in bed, a series of dazzling new pictures forming in his mind's eye. . . . He had hoodwinked the impertinent champion. . . . he was standing on the grounds, his arms raised in triumph in front of the whole school, at the Triwizard Tournament. . . . Cho's face stood out particularly clearly in the blurred crowd, her face glowing with admiration. Harry grinned into his pillow, exceptionally glad that Ron couldn't see what he could.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### MAD-EYE MOODY

The storm had blown itself out by the following morning, though the ceiling in the Great Hall was still gloomy; heavy clouds were still hanging over the castle. One examined their new course schedules at breakfast. A few seats along, Fred, George, and Lee Jordan were discussing the Triwizard Tournament.

"Today's not bad . . . outside all morning," said Ron, who was running his finger down his schedule. "Herbology with the Slytherins. . ."

"Double Divination this afternoon," Harry groaned, looking down. Divination was his least favorite subject, apart from Potions, which he found extremely annoying.

"You should have given it up like me, shouldn't you?" said Hermione briskly, buttering herself some toast. "Then you'd be eating again, I notice," said Ron, watching Hermione add liberal amounts of jam to her toast too.

"I've decided there are better ways of making a stand about elf rights," said Hermione haughtily.

"Yeah . . . and you were hungry," said Ron, grinning.

There was a sudden rustling noise above them, and a hundred owls came soaring through the open windows carrying letters. The owls circled the tables, looking for the people to whom their letters were addressed.

Neville Longbottom and deposited a parcel into his lap — Neville almost always forgot to pack something. On the other shoulder, carrying what looked like his usual supply of sweets and cakes from home. Trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach. Was it possible that something had happened to Hedwig, and that Sirius hadn't even got his letter? His preoccupation lasted all the way across the sodden vegetable patch until they arrived in greenhouse three, but he was greeted by the strangest plants Harry had ever seen. Indeed, they looked less like plants than thick, black, giant slugs, protruding vertical number of large, shiny swellings upon it, which appeared to be full of liquid.

"Bubotubers," Professor Sprout told them briskly. "They need squeezing. You will collect the pus —"

"The what?" said Seamus Finnigan, sounding revolted.

"Pus, Finnigan, pus," said Professor Sprout, "and it's extremely valuable, so don't waste it. You will collect the pus, I said. Pus does funny things to the skin when undiluted, bubotuber pus."

Squeezing the bubotubers was disgusting, but oddly satisfying. As each swelling was popped, a large amount of thick, black, slimy pus oozed out. They caught it in the bottles as Professor Sprout had indicated, and by the end of the lesson had collected several bottles.

"This'll keep Madam Pomfrey happy," said Professor Sprout, stoppering the last bottle with a cork. "An excellent remedy for all those pop students resorting to desperate measures to rid themselves of pimples."

"Like poor Eloise Midgen," said Hannah Abbott, a Hufflepuff, in a hushed voice. "She tried to curse hers off."

"Silly girl," said Professor Sprout, shaking her head. "But Madam Pomfrey fixed her nose back on in the end."

A booming bell echoed from the castle across the wet grounds, signaling the end of the lesson, and the class separated. The Gryffindors heading in the other direction, down the sloping lawn toward Hagrid's small wooden cabin, which was just behind the greenhouse.

Hagrid was standing outside his hut, one hand on the collar of his enormous black boarhound, Fang. There were several other people gathered around him, peering and straining at his collar, apparently keen to investigate the contents more closely. As they drew nearer, an odd, bubbling sound came from the collar, like minor explosions.

"Mornin'!" Hagrid said, grinning at Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Be'er wait fer the Slytherins, they won' want ter miss th' show."

"Come again?" said Ron.

Hagrid pointed down into the crates.

"Eurgh!" squealed Lavender Brown, jumping backward.

"Eurgh" just about summed up the Blast-Ended Skrewts in Harry's opinion. They looked like deformed, shell-less lobsters, with long, thin, jointed legs, and no visible heads. There were about a hundred of them in each crate, each about six inches long, and as thick as a finger.

oxes. They were giving off a very powerful smell of rotting fish. Every now and then, sparks would fly out of the end of their legs, and the sound of their legs hitting the ground would sound like several inches.

"On'y jus' hatched," said Hagrid proudly, "so yeh'll be able ter raise 'em yerselves! Thought we'd make a bit of a project out of 'em."

"And why would we want to raise them?" said a cold voice.

The Slytherins had arrived. The speaker was Draco Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle were chuckling appreciatively at his words.

Hagrid looked stumped at the question.

"I mean, what do they do?" asked Malfoy. "What is the point of them?"

Hagrid opened his mouth, apparently thinking hard; there was a few seconds' pause, then he said roughly, "Tha's ne'er knowin' what they can do. I've never had 'em before, not sure what they'll go fer — I got ant eggs an' frog live an' ter see what they can do."

"First pus and now this," muttered Seamus.

Nothing but deep affection for Hagrid could have made Harry, Ron, and Hermione pick up squelchy handfuls of frogspawn. Harry couldn't suppress the suspicion that the whole thing was entirely pointless, because the skrewts didn't seem to be doing anything.

"Ouch!" yelled Dean Thomas after about ten minutes. "It got me!"

Hagrid hurried over to him, looking anxious.

"Its end exploded!" said Dean angrily, showing Hagrid a burn on his hand.

"Ah, yeah, that can happen when they blast off," said Hagrid, nodding.

"Eurgh!" said Lavender Brown again. "Eurgh, Hagrid, what's that pointy thing on it?"

"Ah, some of 'em have got stings," said Hagrid enthusiastically (Lavender quickly withdrew her hand from the box). "I think they might be ter suck blood."

"Well, I can certainly see why we're trying to keep them alive," said Malfoy sarcastically. "Who wouldn't want pets that can sting?"

"Just because they're not very pretty, it doesn't mean they're not useful," Hermione snapped. "Dragon blood's amazing for a lot of things."

Harry and Ron grinned at Hagrid, who gave them a furtive smile from behind his bushy beard. Hagrid would have liked to show them his pet dragon, but he knew only too well — he had owned one for a brief period during their first year, a vicious Norwegian Ridgeback by the name of Norbert. It was a very dangerous animal, but it was also lethal, the better.

"Well, at least the skrewts are small," said Ron as they made their way back up to the castle for lunch an hour later.

"They are now," said Hermione in an exasperated voice, "but once Hagrid's found out what they eat, I expect they'll be a lot bigger."

"Well, that won't matter if they turn out to cure seasickness or something, will it?" said Ron, grinning slyly at her.

"You know perfectly well I only said that to shut Malfoy up," said Hermione. "As a matter of fact I think he's right. The skrewts are dangerous. They might start attacking us all."

They sat down at the Gryffindor table and helped themselves to lamb chops and potatoes. Hermione began to eat slowly, while Ron and Harry ate more heartily.

"Er — is this the new stand on elf rights?" said Ron. "You're going to make yourself puke instead?"

"No," said Hermione, with as much dignity as she could muster with her mouth bulging with sprouts. "I just want to go home."

"What?" said Ron in disbelief. "Hermione — it's the first day back! We haven't even got homework yet!"

Hermione shrugged and continued to shovel down her food as though she had not eaten for days. Then she leapt to her feet. When the bell rang to signal the start of afternoon lessons, Harry and Ron set off for North Tower where, at the top of a spiral staircase, was a small circular trapdoor in the ceiling, and the room where Professor Trelawney lived.

The familiar sweet perfume spreading from the fire met their nostrils as they emerged at the top of the stepladder. A fire burned in a dim reddish light cast by the many lamps, which were all draped with scarves and shawls. Harry and Ron walked into the room, and sat down at the same small circular table.

"Good day," said the misty voice of Professor Trelawney right behind Harry, making him jump.

A very thin woman with enormous glasses that made her eyes appear far too large for her face, Professor Trelawney stared at him whenever she saw him. The usual large amount of beads, chains, and bangles glittered upon her person in the firelight.

"You are preoccupied, my dear," she said mournfully to Harry. "My inner eye sees past your brave face to the trouble in your mind. I see difficult times ahead for you, alas . . . most difficult . . . I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass . . ."

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. Ron rolled his eyes at Harry, who looked stonily back. Professor Trelawney stood by the fire, facing the class. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil, who deeply admired Professor Trelawney, were sitting next to her.

"My dears, it is time for us to consider the stars," she said. "The movements of the planets and the mysterious portents of the celestial dance. Human destiny may be deciphered by the planetary rays, which intermingle . . ."

But Harry's thoughts had drifted. The perfumed fire always made him feel sleepy and dull-witted, and Professor Trelawney's predictions were so pellbound — though he couldn't help thinking about what she had just said to him. "I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass . . ."

But Hermione was right, Harry thought irritably, Professor Trelawney really was an old fraud. He wasn't dreading anything. He knew Sirius had been caught . . . but what did Professor Trelawney know? He had long since come to the conclusion that the prophecy was a guesswork and a spooky manner.

Except, of course, for that time at the end of last term, when she had made the prediction about Voldemort rising again. That prediction had been genuine, when Harry had described it to him. . . .

"Harry!" Ron muttered.

"What?"

Harry looked around; the whole class was staring at him. He sat up straight; he had been almost dozing off, lost in thought.

"I was saying, my dear, that you were clearly born under the baleful influence of Saturn," said Professor Trelawney, and Harry obviously not been hanging on her words.

"Born under — what, sorry?" said Harry.

"Saturn, dear, the planet Saturn!" said Professor Trelawney, sounding definitely irritated that he wasn't riveted by this.

"What power in the heavens at the moment of your birth. . . . Your dark hair . . . your mean stature . . . tragic losses so young. . . . Did you know that you were born in midwinter?"

"No," said Harry, "I was born in July."

Ron hastily turned his laugh into a hacking cough.

Half an hour later, each of them had been given a complicated circular chart, and was attempting to fill in the positions of the planets, requiring much consultation of timetables and calculation of angles.

"I've got two Neptunes here," said Harry after a while, frowning down at his piece of parchment, "that can't be right, can it?"

"Aaaaah," said Ron, imitating Professor Trelawney's mystical whisper, "when two Neptunes appear in the sky, it is a sign of great trouble." Seamus and Dean, who were working nearby, sniggered loudly, though not loudly enough to mask the excited squeal of the excited planet! Oooh, which one's that, Professor?"

"It is Uranus, my dear," said Professor Trelawney, peering down at the chart.

"Can I have a look at Uranus too, Lavender?" said Ron.

Most unfortunately, Professor Trelawney heard him, and it was this, perhaps, that made her give them so much homework.

"A detailed analysis of the way the planetary movements in the coming month will affect you, with reference to your horoscope. . . . It is more than a GONAGALL than her usual airy-fairy self. "I want it ready to hand in next Monday, and no excuses!"

"Miserable old bat," said Ron bitterly as they joined the crowds descending the staircases back to the Great Hall and the Great Hall.

"Lots of homework?" said Hermione brightly, catching up with them. "Professor Vector didn't give us any at all!"

"Well, bully for Professor Vector," said Ron moodily.

They reached the entrance hall, which was packed with people queuing for dinner. They had just joined the end of the queue.

"Weasley! Hey, Weasley!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing there, each looking thoroughly pleased.

"What?" said Ron shortly.

"Your dad's in the paper, Weasley!" said Malfoy, brandishing a copy of the Daily Prophet and speaking very loudly, so that everyone could hear.

o this!

### FURTHER MISTAKES AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

It seems as though the Ministry of Magic's troubles are not yet at an end, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. . . . After the World Cup, and still unable to account for the disappearance of one of its witches, the Ministry was plunged into further trouble by the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office."

Malfoy looked up.

"Imagine them not even getting his name right, Weasley. It's almost as though he's a complete nonentity, isn't it?" he said. Everyone in the entrance hall was listening now. Malfoy straightened the paper with a flourish and read on: Arnold Weasley, who was charged with possession of a flying car two years ago, was yesterday involved in a tussle with aggressively aggressive dustbins. Mr. Weasley appears to have rushed to the aid of "Mad-Eye" Moody, the aged ex-Auror who ran between a handshake and attempted murder. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Weasley found, upon arrival at Mr. Moody's heavenly residence, that Mr. Weasley was forced to modify several memories before he could escape from the policemen, but refused to answer questions about such an undignified and potentially embarrassing scene.

"And there's a picture, Weasley!" said Malfoy, flipping the paper over and holding it up. "A picture of your parents out of control. Would you do with losing a bit of weight, couldn't she?"

Ron was shaking with fury. Everyone was staring at him.

"Get stuffed, Malfoy," said Harry. "C'mon, Ron. . . ."

"Oh yeah, you were staying with them this summer, weren't you, Potter?" sneered Malfoy. "So tell me, is his mother really so fat?"

"You know your mother, Malfoy?" said Harry — both he and Hermione had grabbed the back of Ron's robes to stop him. "Is she's got dung under her nose? Has she always looked like that, or was it just because you were with her?"

Malfoy's pale face went slightly pink.

"Don't you dare insult my mother, Potter."

"Keep your fat mouth shut, then," said Harry, turning away.

BANG!

Several people screamed — Harry felt something white-hot graze the side of his face — he plunged his hand into his pocket and felt a loud BANG, and a roar that echoed through the entrance hall.

"OH NO YOU DON'T, LADDIE!"

Harry spun around. Professor Moody was limping down the marble staircase. His wand was out and it was pointing at the floor, exactly where Malfoy had been standing.

There was a terrified silence in the entrance hall. Nobody but Moody was moving a muscle. Moody turned to look at Harry. He was pointing into the back of his head.

"Did he get you?" Moody growled. His voice was low and gravelly.

"No," said Harry, "missed."

"LEAVE IT!" Moody shouted.

"Leave — what?" Harry said, bewildered.

"Not you — him!" Moody growled, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at Crabbe, who had just frozen, about to pick up his wand and could see out of the back of his head.

Moody started to limp toward Crabbe, Goyle, and the ferret, which gave a terrified squeak and took off, streaking toward the ceiling.

"I don't think so!" roared Moody, pointing his wand at the ferret again — it flew ten feet into the air, fell with a smack, and landed on the floor.

"I don't like people who attack when their opponent's back's turned," growled Moody as the ferret bounced higher and higher. "Do it properly, do. . . ."

The ferret flew through the air, its legs and tail flailing helplessly.

"Never — do — that — again —" said Moody, speaking each word as the ferret hit the stone floor and bounced up again.

"Professor Moody!" said a shocked voice.

Professor McGonagall was coming down the marble staircase with her arms full of books.

"Hello, Professor McGonagall," said Moody calmly, bouncing the ferret still higher.

"What — what are you doing?" said Professor McGonagall, her eyes following the bouncing ferret's progress through the air.

"Teaching," said Moody.

"Teach — Moody, is that a student?" shrieked Professor McGonagall, the books spilling out of her arms.

"Yep," said Moody.

"No!" cried Professor McGonagall, running down the stairs and pulling out her wand; a moment later, with a loud snarl, she hit the floor with his sleek blond hair all over his now brilliantly pink face. He got to his feet, wincing.

"Moody, we never use Transfiguration as a punishment!" said Professor McGonagall weakly. "Surely Professor Dumbledore would have mentioned it."

"He might've mentioned it, yeah," said Moody, scratching his chin unconcernedly, "but I thought a good sharp shock would do the trick."

"We give detentions, Moody! Or speak to the offender's Head of House!"

"I'll do that, then," said Moody, staring at Malfoy with great dislike.

Malfoy, whose pale eyes were still watering with pain and humiliation, looked malevolently up at Moody and muttered, "Oh yeah?"

"Oh yeah?" said Moody quietly, limping forward a few steps, the dull clunk of his wooden leg echoing around the hall. "You're keeping a close eye on his son . . . you tell him that from me. . . . Now, your Head of House'll be Snape, will it?"

"Yes," said Malfoy resentfully.

"Another old friend," growled Moody. "I've been looking forward to a chat with old Snape. . . . Come on, you. . . ."

And he seized Malfoy's upper arm and marched him off toward the dungeons.

Professor McGonagall stared anxiously after them for a few moments, then waved her wand at her fallen books, causing them to fly back into the air.

"Don't talk to me," Ron said quietly to Harry and Hermione as they sat down at the Gryffindor table a few minutes later. "It's happened."

"Why not?" said Hermione in surprise.

“Because I want to fix that in my memory forever,” said Ron, his eyes closed and an uplifted expression on his face. “Harry and Hermione both laughed, and Hermione began doling beef casserole onto each of their plates. “He could have really hurt Malfoy, though,” she said. “It was good, really, that Professor McGonagall stopped it —” “Hermione!” said Ron furiously, his eyes snapping open again, “you’re ruining the best moment of my life!” Hermione made an impatient noise and began to eat at top speed again. “Don’t tell me you’re going back to the library this evening?” said Harry, watching her. “Got to,” said Hermione thickly. “Loads to do.” “But you told us Professor Vector —” “It’s not schoolwork,” she said. Within five minutes, she had cleared her plate and departed. No sooner had she gone “Moody!” he said. “How cool is he?” “Beyond cool,” said George, sitting down opposite Fred. “Supercool,” said the twins’ best friend, Lee Jordan, sliding into the seat beside George. “We had him this afternoon,” “What was it like?” said Harry eagerly. Fred, George, and Lee exchanged looks full of meaning. “Never had a lesson like it,” said Fred. “He knows, man,” said Lee. “Knows what?” said Ron, leaning forward. “Knows what it’s like to be out there doing it,” said George impressively. “Doing what?” said Harry. “Fighting the Dark Arts,” said Fred. “He’s seen it all,” said George. “Mazing,” said Lee. Ron dived into his bag for his schedule. “We haven’t got him till Thursday!” he said in a disappointed voice.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## THE UNFORGIVABLE CURSES

The next two days passed without great incident, unless you counted Neville melting his sixth cauldron in Potions. Pity over the summer, gave Neville detention, and Neville returned from it in a state of nervous collapse, having learned that he had failed. “You know why Snape’s in such a foul mood, don’t you?” said Ron to Harry as they watched Hermione teaching Neville his lesson. “Of course,” said Harry. “He failed his Potions test.”

"Yeah," said Harry. "Moody."

It was common knowledge that Snape really wanted the Dark Arts job, and he had now failed to get it for the fourth year, and shown it — but he seemed strangely wary of displaying overt animosity to Mad-Eye Moody. Indeed, when he passed in the corridors — he had the distinct impression that Snape was avoiding Moody's eye, whether magical or not. "I reckon Snape's a bit scared of him, you know," Harry said thoughtfully.

"Imagine if Moody turned Snape into a horned toad," said Ron, his eyes misting over, "and bounced him all around h  
The Gryffindor fourth years were looking forward to Moody's first lesson so much that they arrived early on Thursda  
d even rung. The only person missing was Hermione, who turned up just in time for the lesson.

"Been in the —"

"Library." Harry finished her sentence for her. "C'mon, quick, or we won't get decent seats."

They hurried into three chairs right in front of the teacher's desk, took out their copies of *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Evil*, and waited. They heard Mr. Moody's distinctive clunking footsteps coming down the corridor, and he entered the room, looking as strange and menacing as ever, his long, thin, protruding nose and pointed ears protruding from underneath his robes.

"You can put those away," he growled, stumping over to his desk and sitting down, "those books. You won't need them. They returned the books to their bags, Ron looking excited.

Moody took out a register, shook his long mane of grizzled gray hair out of his twisted and scarred face, and began to write. While his magical eye swiveled around, fixing upon each student as he or she answered.

"Right then," he said, when the last person had declared themselves present, "I've had a letter from Professor Lupin about tackling Dark creatures — you've covered boggarts, Red Caps, hinkypunks, grindylows, Kappas, and werewolves, is that right?" There was a general murmur of assent.

"But you're behind — very behind — on dealing with curses," said Moody. "So I'm here to bring you up to scratch on how to deal with Dark —"

"What, aren't you staying?" Ron blurted out.

Moody's magical eye spun around to stare at Ron; Ron looked extremely apprehensive, but after a moment Moody saw his heavily scarred face look more twisted and contorted than ever, but it was nevertheless good to know that he even

"You'll be Arthur Weasley's son, eh?" Moody said. "Your father got me out of a very tight corner a few days ago. . . . Yes, re. . . . One year, and then back to my quiet retirement."

He gave a harsh laugh, and then clapped his gnarled hands together.

"So — straight into it. Curses. They come in many strengths and forms. Now, according to the Ministry of Magic, I'm s

supposed to show you what illegal Dark curses look like until you're in the sixth year. You're not supposed to be old of a higher opinion of your nerves, he reckons you can cope, and I say, the sooner you know what you're up against, the better. Anything you've never seen? A wizard who's about to put an illegal curse on you isn't going to tell you what he's about to do. You need to be prepared. You need to be alert and watchful. You need to put that away, Miss Brown, when I'm talking." Lavender jumped and blushed. She had been showing Parvati her completed horoscope under the desk. Apparently Moody had been looking at it from the back of his head.

"So . . . do any of you know which curses are most heavily punished by Wizarding law?"

Several hands rose tentatively into the air, including Ron's and Hermione's. Moody pointed at Ron, though his magic was not necessary.

"Er," said Ron tentatively, "my dad told me about one. . . . Is it called the Imperius Curse, or something?"

"Ah, yes," said Moody appreciatively. "Your father would know that one. Gave the Ministry a lot of trouble at one time."

Moody got heavily to his mismatched feet, opened his desk drawer, and took out a glass jar. Three large black spiders were next to him — Ron hated spiders.

Moody reached into the jar, caught one of the spiders, and held it in the palm of his hand so that they could all see it. The spider leapt from Moody's hand on a fine thread of silk and began to swing backward and forward as though on a string, breaking the thread and landing on the desk, where it began to cartwheel in circles. Moody jerked his wand, and the spider did a stakably a tap dance.

Everyone was laughing — everyone except Moody.

"Think it's funny, do you?" he growled. "You'd like it, would you, if I did it to you?"

The laughter died away almost instantly.

"Total control," said Moody quietly as the spider balled itself up and began to roll over and over. "I could make it jump over your throats . . ."

Ron gave an involuntary shudder.

"Years back, there were a lot of witches and wizards being controlled by the Imperius Curse," said Moody, and Harry looked a little less powerful. "Some job for the Ministry, trying to sort out who was being forced to act, and who was acting of their own free will."

"The Imperius Curse can be fought, and I'll be teaching you how, but it takes real strength of character, and not every student is up to it. ANTI-VIGILANCE!" he barked, and everyone jumped.

Moody picked up the somersaulting spider and threw it back into the jar.

"Anyone else know one? Another illegal curse?"

Hermione's hand flew into the air again and so, to Harry's slight surprise, did Neville's. The only class in which Neville was a top student. Neville looked surprised at his own daring.

"Yes?" said Moody, his magical eye rolling right over to fix on Neville.

"There's one — the Cruciatus Curse," said Neville in a small but distinct voice.

Moody was looking very intently at Neville, this time with both eyes.

"Your name's Longbottom?" he said, his magical eye swooping down to check the register again.

Neville nodded nervously, but Moody made no further inquiries. Turning back to the class at large, he reached into the jar. The spider remained motionless, apparently too scared to move.

"The Cruciatus Curse," said Moody. "Needs to be a bit bigger for you to get the idea," he said, pointing his wand at the spider. The spider swelled. It was now larger than a tarantula. Abandoning all pretense, Ron pushed his chair backward, as far as it would go. Moody raised his wand again, pointed it at the spider, and muttered, "Crucio!"

At once, the spider's legs bent in upon its body; it rolled over and began to twitch horribly, rocking from side to side. If it could have given voice, it would have been screaming. Moody did not remove his wand, and the spider started to shudder.

"Stop it!" Hermione said shrilly.

Harry looked around at her. She was looking, not at the spider, but at Neville, and Harry, following her gaze, saw that Neville's knuckles were white, his eyes wide and horrified.

Moody raised his wand. The spider's legs relaxed, but it continued to twitch.

"Reducio," Moody muttered, and the spider shrank back to its proper size. He put it back into the jar.

"Pain," said Moody softly. "You don't need thumbscrews or knives to torture someone if you can perform the Cruciatus Curse."

"Right . . . anyone know any others?"

Harry looked around. From the looks on everyone's faces, he guessed they were all wondering what was going to happen next. For the first time, she raised it into the air.

"Yes?" said Moody, looking at her.

"Avada Kedavra," Hermione whispered.

Several people looked uneasily around at her, including Ron.

"Ah," said Moody, another slight smile twisting his lopsided mouth. "Yes, the last and worst. Avada Kedavra . . . the Killing Curse."

He put his hand into the glass jar, and almost as though it knew what was coming, the third spider scuttled frantically across the desk, but he trapped it, and placed it upon the desktop. It started to scuttle frantically across the wooden surface.

Moody raised his wand, and Harry felt a sudden thrill of foreboding.

"Avada Kedavra!" Moody roared.

There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound, as though a vast, invisible something was soaring through the air. The spider was dead, unmarked, but unmistakably dead. Several of the students stifled cries; Ron had thrown himself backward and almost

Moody swept the dead spider off the desk onto the floor.

"Not nice," he said calmly. "Not pleasant. And there's no countercurse. There's no blocking it. Only one known person Harry felt his face redden as Moody's eyes (both of them) looked into his own. He could feel everyone else looking at him, fascinated by it, but not really seeing it at all. . . .

So that was how his parents had died . . . exactly like that spider. Had they been unblemished and unmarked too? Had they died a speeding death, before life was wiped from their bodies?

Harry had been picturing his parents' deaths over and over again for three years now, ever since he'd found out they had died that night: Wormtail had betrayed his parents' whereabouts to Voldemort, who had come to find them at their cottage. Sirius had tried to hold him off, while he shouted at his wife to take Harry and run . . . Voldemort had advanced on Lily Potter, who, even though she had begged him to kill her instead, refused to stop shielding her son . . . and so Voldemort had murdered her. Harry knew these details because he had heard his parents' voices when he had fought the dementors last year — for hours, trying to relive the worst memories of their lives, and drown, powerless, in their own despair. . . .

Moody was speaking again, from a great distance, it seemed to Harry. With a massive effort, he pulled himself back to listen. "Avada Kedavra's a curse that needs a powerful bit of magic behind it — you could all get your wands out now and point them at me. I'll nosebleed. But that doesn't matter. I'm not here to teach you how to do it.

"Now, if there's no countercurse, why am I showing you? Because you've got to know. You've got to appreciate what you're facing it. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he roared, and the whole class jumped again.

"Now . . . those three curses — Avada Kedavra, Imperius, and Cruciatus — are known as the Unforgivable Curses. They're the life sentence in Azkaban. That's what you're up against. That's what I've got to teach you to fight. You need preparing for constant, never-ceasing vigilance. Get out your quills . . . copy this down. . . ."

They spent the rest of the lesson taking notes on each of the Unforgivable Curses. No one spoke until the bell rang — when, all of a sudden, a torrent of talk burst forth. Most people were discussing the curses in awed voices — "Did you see it twitch?" — "I saw it!" They were talking about the lesson, Harry thought, as though it had been some sort of spectacular show, but he had been too busy to listen.

"Hurry up," she said tensely to Harry and Ron.

"Not the ruddy library again?" said Ron.

"No," said Hermione curtly, pointing up a side passage. "Neville."

Neville was standing alone, halfway up the passage, staring at the stone wall opposite him with the same horrified expression as he had when he had seen the Cruciatus Curse.

"Neville?" Hermione said gently.

Neville looked around.

"Oh hello," he said, his voice much higher than usual. "Interesting lesson, wasn't it? I wonder what's for dinner, I'm —"

"Neville, are you all right?" said Hermione.

"Oh yes, I'm fine," Neville gabbled in the same unnaturally high voice. "Very interesting dinner — I mean lesson — what's for dinner?" Ron gave Harry a startled look.

"Neville, what — ?"

But an odd clunking noise sounded behind them, and they turned to see Professor Moody limping toward them. All of a sudden, he was in a much lower and gentler growl than they had yet heard.

"It's all right, sonny," he said to Neville. "Why don't you come up to my office? Come on . . . we can have a cup of tea. I'll get it. Neville looked even more frightened at the prospect of tea with Moody. He neither moved nor spoke. Moody turned back to Harry and Ron.

"You all right, are you, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, almost defiantly.

Moody's blue eye quivered slightly in its socket as it surveyed Harry. Then he said, "You've got to know. It seems harsh, but you've got to. . . . Come on, Longbottom, I've got some books that might interest you."

Neville looked pleadingly at Harry, Ron, and Hermione, but they didn't say anything, so Neville had no choice but to follow Moody into his office.

"What was that about?" said Ron, watching Neville and Moody turn the corner.

"I don't know," said Hermione, looking pensive.

"Some lesson, though, eh?" said Ron to Harry as they set off for the Great Hall. "Fred and George were right, weren't they? Avada Kedavra, the way that spider just died, just snuffed it right —"

But Ron fell suddenly silent at the look on Harry's face and didn't speak again until they reached the Great Hall, where they found Sirius Black and Trelawney's predictions tonight, since they would take hours.

Hermione did not join in with Harry and Ron's conversation during dinner, but ate furiously fast, and then left for the library. Harry and Ron, who had been thinking of nothing else all through dinner, now raised the subject of the Unforgivable Curses.

"Wouldn't Moody and Dumbledore be in trouble with the Ministry if they knew we'd seen the curses?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, probably," said Ron. "But Dumbledore's always done things his way, hasn't he, and Moody's been getting in trouble with the Ministry — look at his dustbins. Balderdash."

The Fat Lady swung forward to reveal the entrance hole, and they climbed into the Gryffindor common room, which was empty except for the Fat Lady.

"Shall we get our Divination stuff, then?" said Harry.

"I s'pose," Ron groaned.

They went up to the dormitory to fetch their books and charts, to find Neville there alone, sitting on his bed, reading a book.

on, though still not entirely normal. His eyes were rather red.

"You all right, Neville?" Harry asked him.

"Oh yes," said Neville, "I'm fine, thanks. Just reading this book Professor Moody lent me. . . ."

He held up the book: *Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean*.

"Apparently, Professor Sprout told Professor Moody I'm really good at Herbology," Neville said. There was a faint note in his voice. "He thought I'd like this."

Telling Neville what Professor Sprout had said, Harry thought, had been a very tactful way of cheering Neville up, for the sort of thing Professor Lupin would have done.

Harry and Ron took their copies of *Unfogging the Future* back down to the common room, found a table, and set to work. They had made very little progress, though their table was littered with bits of parchment bearing sums and symbols, and the air was thick with fumes from Professor Trelawney's fire.

"I haven't got a clue what this lot's supposed to mean," he said, staring down at a long list of calculations.

"You know," said Ron, whose hair was on end because of all the times he had run his fingers through it in frustration.

"What — make it up?"

"Yeah," said Ron, sweeping the jumble of scrawled notes off the table, dipping his pen into some ink, and starting to write.

"Next Monday," he said as he scribbled, "I am likely to develop a cough, owing to the unlucky conjunction of Mars and the signs of misery, she'll lap it up."

"Right," said Harry, crumpling up his first attempt and lobbing it over the heads of a group of chattering first years in the corridor — burns."

"Yeah, you will be," said Ron darkly, "we're seeing the skrewts again on Monday. Okay, Tuesday, I'll . . . erm . . ."

"Lose a treasured possession," said Harry, who was flicking through *Unfogging the Future* for ideas.

"Good one," said Ron, copying it down. "Because of . . . erm . . . Mercury. Why don't you get stabbed in the back by someone?"

"Yeah . . . cool . . ." said Harry, scribbling it down, "because . . . Venus is in the twelfth house."

"And on Wednesday, I think I'll come off worst in a fight."

"Aaah, I was going to have a fight. Okay, I'll lose a bet."

"Yeah, you'll be betting I'll win my fight. . . ."

They continued to make up predictions (which grew steadily more tragic) for another hour, while the common room door opened and Hermione came in. She entered over to them, leapt lightly into an empty chair, and stared inscrutably at Harry, rather as Hermione might look at a piece of parchment. Staring around the room, trying to think of a kind of misfortune he hadn't yet used, Harry saw Fred and George sitting in the corner, poring over a single piece of parchment. It was most unusual to see Fred and George hidden away in a corner and not in the noisy center of attention. There was something secretive about the way they were working on the piece of parchment, as if they were trying to keep something back at the Burrow. He had thought then that it was another order form for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, but he surely have let Lee Jordan in on the joke. He wondered whether it had anything to do with entering the Triwizard Tournament. As Harry watched, George shook his head at Fred, scratched out something with his quill, and said, in a very quiet voice, "No — that sounds like we're accusing him. Got to be careful . . ."

Then George looked over and saw Harry watching him. Harry grinned and quickly returned to his predictions — he did not want the twins rolled up their parchment, said good night, and went off to bed.

Fred and George had been gone ten minutes or so when the portrait hole opened and Hermione climbed into the common room. The contents rattled as she walked in the other. Crookshanks arched his back, purring.

"Hello," she said, "I've just finished!"

"So have I!" said Ron triumphantly, throwing down his quill.

Hermione sat down, laid the things she was carrying in an empty armchair, and pulled Ron's predictions toward her.

"Not going to have a very good month, are you?" she said sardonically as Crookshanks curled up in her lap.

"Ah well, at least I'm forewarned," Ron yawned.

"You seem to be drowning twice," said Hermione.

"Oh am I?" said Ron, peering down at his predictions. "I'd better change one of them to getting trampled by a rampaging ogre."

"Don't you think it's a bit obvious you've made these up?" said Hermione.

"How dare you!" said Ron, in mock outrage. "We've been working like house-elves here!"

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"It's just an expression," said Ron hastily.

Harry laid down his quill too, having just finished predicting his own death by decapitation.

"What's in the box?" he asked, pointing at it.

"Funny you should ask," said Hermione, with a nasty look at Ron. She took off the lid and showed them the contents. Inside were about fifty badges, all of different colors, but all bearing the same letters: S.P.E.W.

"Spew?" said Harry, picking up a badge and looking at it. "What's this about?"

"Not spew," said Hermione impatiently. "It's S-P-E-W. Stands for the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare."

"Never heard of it," said Ron.

"Well, of course you haven't," said Hermione briskly, "I've only just started it."

"Yeah?" said Ron in mild surprise. "How many members have you got?"

"Well — if you two join — three," said Hermione.



"And you think we want to walk around wearing badges saying 'spew,' do you?" said Ron.

"S-P-E-W!" said Hermione hotly. "I was going to put Stop the Outrageous Abuse of Our Fellow Magical Creatures and So that's the heading of our manifesto."

She brandished the sheaf of parchment at them.

"I've been researching it thoroughly in the library. Elf enslavement goes back centuries. I can't believe no one's done

"Hermione — open your ears," said Ron loudly. "They. Like. It. They like being enslaved!"

"Our short-term aims," said Hermione, speaking even more loudly than Ron, and acting as though she hadn't heard a word. "Our long-term aims include changing the law about non-wand use, and trying to get an elf into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, which is shockingly underrepresented."

"And how do we do all this?" Harry asked.

"We start by recruiting members," said Hermione happily. "I thought two Sickles to join — that buys a badge — and then

I've got you a collecting tin upstairs — and Harry, you're secretary, so you might want to write down everything I'm saying."

There was a pause in which Hermione beamed at the pair of them, and Harry sat, torn between exasperation at Hermione and not by Ron, who in any case looked as though he was temporarily dumbstruck, but by a soft tap, tap on the windowpane. By the moonlight, a snowy owl perched on the windowsill.

"Hedwig!" he shouted, and he launched himself out of his chair and across the room to pull open the window.

Hedwig flew inside, soared across the room, and landed on the table on top of Harry's predictions.

"About time!" said Harry, hurrying after her.

"She's got an answer!" said Ron excitedly, pointing at the grubby piece of parchment tied to Hedwig's leg.

Harry hastily untied it and sat down to read, whereupon Hedwig fluttered onto his knee, hooting softly.

"What does it say?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

The letter was very short, and looked as though it had been scrawled in a great hurry. Harry read it aloud:

Harry —

I'm flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumors that have reached me, saying he's got Mad-Eye out of retirement, which means he's reading the signs, even if no one else is.

I'll be in touch soon. My best to Ron and Hermione. Keep your eyes open, Harry.

Harry looked up at Ron and Hermione, who stared back at him.

"He's flying north?" Hermione whispered. "He's coming back?"

"Dumbledore's reading what signs?" said Ron, looking perplexed. "Harry — what's up?"

For Harry had just hit himself in the forehead with his fist, jolting Hedwig out of his lap.

"I shouldn't've told him!" Harry said furiously.

"What are you on about?" said Ron in surprise.

"It's made him think he's got to come back!" said Harry, now slamming his fist on the table so that Hedwig landed on it. "He uses he thinks I'm in trouble! And there's nothing wrong with me! And I haven't got anything for you," Harry snapped at her. "Go up to the Owlery if you want food."

Hedwig gave him an extremely offended look and took off for the open window, cuffing him around the head with her wing.

"Harry," Hermione began, in a pacifying sort of voice.

"I'm going to bed," said Harry shortly. "See you in the morning."

Upstairs in the dormitory he pulled on his pajamas and got into his four-poster, but he didn't feel remotely tired.

If Sirius came back and got caught, it would be his, Harry's, fault. Why hadn't he kept his mouth shut? A few seconds' silence would have kept it to himself. . . .

He heard Ron come up into the dormitory a short while later, but did not speak to him. For a long time, Harry lay staring at the ceiling, silently, and, had he been less preoccupied, Harry would have realized that the absence of Neville's usual snores meant he was asleep.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### BEAUXBATONS AND DURMSTRANG

Early next morning, Harry woke with a plan fully formed in his mind, as though his sleeping brain had been working on it. He slipped out of the dormitory without waking Ron, and went back down to the deserted common room. Here he took a piece of parchment and wrote the following letter:

Dear Sirius,

I reckon I just imagined my scar hurting, I was half asleep when I wrote to you last time. There's no point coming back now. I'm feeling completely normal.

He then climbed out of the portrait hole, up through the silent castle (held up only briefly by Peeves, who tried to overtake him), finally arriving at the Owlery, which was situated at the top of West Tower.

The Owlery was a circular stone room, rather cold and drafty, because none of the windows had glass in them. The floor was covered with the faded skeletons of mice and voles. Hundreds upon hundreds of owls of every breed imaginable were nestled here on the floor, some asleep, though here and there a round amber eye glared at Harry. He spotted Hedwig nestled between a barn owl and a screech owl on the straw-strewn floor.

It took him a while to persuade her to wake up and then to look at him, as she kept shuffling around on her perch, still half-asleep. He owed her a great deal of gratitude the previous night. In the end, it was Harry suggesting she might be too tired, and that perhaps he would like to go to bed.

eg and allow him to tie the letter to it.

"Just find him, all right?" Harry said, stroking her back as he carried her on his arm to one of the holes in the wall. "Be careful. She nipped his finger, perhaps rather harder than she would ordinarily have done, but hooted softly in a reassuring way as she flew into the sunrise. Harry watched her fly out of sight with the familiar feeling of unease back in his stomach. He had been told that the more he thought about Sirius, the more he would increase the chances of her than increasing them.

"That was a lie, Harry," said Hermione sharply over breakfast, when he told her and Ron what he had done. "You didn't tell them."

"So what?" said Harry. "He's not going back to Azkaban because of me."

"Drop it," said Ron sharply to Hermione as she opened her mouth to argue some more, and for once, Hermione heeded him.

Harry did his best not to worry about Sirius over the next couple of weeks. True, he could not stop himself from looking at the portrait of Sirius, or, late at night before he went to sleep, prevent himself from seeing horrible visions of Sirius, cornered by dementors. He tried to keep his mind off his godfather. He wished he still had Quidditch to distract him; nothing worked so well on a troubled mind. His school lessons were becoming more difficult and demanding than ever before, particularly Moody's Defense Against the Dark Arts. To their surprise, Professor Moody had announced that he would be putting the Imperius Curse on each of them in the next few days to test its effects.

"But — but you said it's illegal, Professor," said Hermione uncertainly as Moody cleared away the desks with a sweep of his wand. "You said — to use it against another human was —"

"Dumbledore wants you taught what it feels like," said Moody, his magical eye swiveling onto Hermione and fixing her. "It's a fine way — when someone's putting it on you so they can control you completely — fine by me. You're excused. Off you go." He pointed one gnarled finger toward the door. Hermione went very pink and muttered something about not meaning to leave. The new Hermione would rather eat bubotuber pus than miss such an important lesson.

Moody began to beckon students forward in turn and put the Imperius Curse upon them. Harry watched as, one by one, they were taken. Dean Thomas hopped three times around the room, singing the national anthem. Lavender Brown imitated a squawking bird. She would certainly not have been capable of in his normal state. Not one of them seemed to be able to fight off the curse, except for Harry.

"Potter," Moody growled, "you next."

Harry moved forward into the middle of the classroom, into the space that Moody had cleared of desks. Moody raised his wand. It was the most wonderful feeling. Harry felt a floating sensation as every thought and worry in his head was wiped away. He stood there feeling immensely relaxed, only dimly aware of everyone watching him.

And then he heard Mad-Eye Moody's voice, echoing in some distant chamber of his empty brain: Jump onto the desk. Harry bent his knees obediently, preparing to spring.

Jump onto the desk. . . .

Why, though? Another voice had awoken in the back of his brain.

Stupid thing to do, really, said the voice.

Jump onto the desk. . . .

No, I don't think I will, thanks, said the other voice, a little more firmly . . . no, I don't really want to. . . .

Jump! NOW!

The next thing Harry felt was considerable pain. He had both jumped and tried to prevent himself from jumping — and he had over, and, by the feeling in his legs, fractured both his kneecaps.

"Now, that's more like it!" growled Moody's voice, and suddenly, Harry felt the empty, echoing feeling in his head disappear. The pain in his knees seemed to double.

"Look at that, you lot . . . Potter fought! He fought it, and he damn near beat it! We'll try that again, Potter, and the rest of you see it — very good, Potter, very good indeed! They'll have trouble controlling you!"

"The way he talks," Harry muttered as he hobbled out of the Defense Against the Dark Arts class an hour later (Moody had been so row, until Harry could throw off the curse entirely), "you'd think we were all going to be attacked any second."

"Yeah, I know," said Ron, who was skipping on every alternate step. He had had much more difficulty with the curse than Harry. "Talk about paranoid . . ." Ron glanced nervously over his shoulder to check that Moody was definitely out of the room. "He was definitely out of him at the Ministry. Did you hear him telling Seamus what he did to that witch who shouted 'Boo' behind him on Azkaban? He put the Imperius Curse with everything else we've got to do?"

All the fourth years had noticed a definite increase in the amount of work they were required to do this term. Professor McGonagall had a loud groan at the amount of Transfiguration homework she had assigned.

"You are now entering a most important phase of your magical education!" she told them, her eyes glinting dangerously. "The danger is drawing closer —"

"We don't take O.W.L.s till fifth year!" said Dean Thomas indignantly.

"Maybe not, Thomas, but believe me, you need all the preparation you can get! Miss Granger remains the only person who isn't a very pincushion. I might remind you that your pincushion, Thomas, still curls up in fright if anyone approaches it with a wand. Hermione, who had turned rather pink again, seemed to be trying not to look too pleased with herself.

Harry and Ron were deeply amused when Professor Trelawney told them that they had received top marks for their predictions, commending them for their unflinching acceptance of the horrors in store for them — but they were a month after next; both of them were running out of ideas for catastrophes.

Meanwhile Professor Binns, the ghost who taught History of Magic, had them writing weekly essays on the goblin rebellion. He had them to research antidotes. They took this one seriously, as he had hinted that he might be poisoning one of them before the end of the year.

d asked them to read three extra books in preparation for their lesson on Summoning Charms.

Even Hagrid was adding to their workload. The Blast-Ended Skrewts were growing at a remarkable pace given that no part of their "project," suggested that they come down to his hut on alternate evenings to observe the skrewts and m

"I will not," said Draco Malfoy flatly when Hagrid had proposed this with the air of Father Christmas pulling an extra-l

during lessons, thanks."

Hagrid's smile faded off his face.

"Yeh'll do wha' yer told," he growled, "or I'll be takin' a leaf outta Professor Moody's book. . . . I hear yeh made a good

The Gryffindors roared with laughter. Malfoy flushed with anger, but apparently the memory of Moody's punishment

n, and Hermione returned to the castle at the end of the lesson in high spirits; seeing Hagrid put down Malfoy was p

ry best to get Hagrid sacked the previous year.

When they arrived in the entrance hall, they found themselves unable to proceed owing to the large crowd of student

erected at the foot of the marble staircase. Ron, the tallest of the three, stood on tiptoe to see over the heads in front

TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT

THE DELEGATIONS FROM BEAUXBATONS AND DURMSTRANG WILL BE ARRIVING AT 6 O'CLOCK ON FRIDAY THE 30TH

"Brilliant!" said Harry. "It's Potions last thing on Friday! Snape won't have time to poison us all!"

STUDENTS WILL RETURN THEIR BAGS AND BOOKS TO THEIR DORMITORIES AND ASSEMBLE IN FRONT OF THE CASTLE

"Only a week away!" said Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff, emerging from the crowd, his eyes gleaming. "I wonder if Ced

"Cedric?" said Ron blankly as Ernie hurried off.

"Diggory," said Harry. "He must be entering the tournament."

"That idiot, Hogwarts champion?" said Ron as they pushed their way through the chattering crowd toward the stairca

"He's not an idiot. You just don't like him because he beat Gryffindor at Quidditch," said Hermione. "I've heard he's a

She spoke as though this settled the matter.

"You only like him because he's handsome," said Ron scathingly.

"Excuse me, I don't like people just because they're handsome!" said Hermione indignantly.

Ron gave a loud false cough, which sounded oddly like "Lockhart!"

The appearance of the sign in the entrance hall had a marked effect upon the inhabitants of the castle. During the fo

no matter where Harry went: the Triwizard Tournament. Rumors were flying from student to student like highly con

tournament would involve, how the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang differed from themselves.

Harry noticed too that the castle seemed to be undergoing an extra-thorough cleaning. Several grimy portraits had b

uddled in their frames muttering darkly and wincing as they felt their raw pink faces. The suits of armor were sudden

aretaker, was behaving so ferociously to any students who forgot to wipe their shoes that he terrified a pair of first-y

Other members of the staff seemed oddly tense too.

"Longbottom, kindly do not reveal that you can't even perform a simple Switching Spell in front of anyone from Durm

y difficult lesson, during which Neville had accidentally transplanted his own ears onto a cactus.

When they went down to breakfast on the morning of the thirtieth of October, they found that the Great Hall had be

each of them representing a Hogwarts House: red with a gold lion for Gryffindor, blue with a bronze eagle for Raven

silver serpent for Slytherin. Behind the teachers' table, the largest banner of all bore the Hogwarts coat of arms: lion,

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down beside Fred and George at the Gryffindor table. Once again, and most unusually

ices. Ron led the way over to them.

"It's a bummer, all right," George was saying gloomily to Fred. "But if he won't talk to us in person, we'll have to send

He can't avoid us forever."

"Who's avoiding you?" said Ron, sitting down next to them.

"Wish you would," said Fred, looking irritated at the interruption.

"What's a bummer?" Ron asked George.

"Having a nosy git like you for a brother," said George.

"You two got any ideas on the Triwizard Tournament yet?" Harry asked. "Thought any more about trying to enter?"

"I asked McGonagall how the champions are chosen but she wasn't telling," said George bitterly. "She just told me to

"Wonder what the tasks are going to be?" said Ron thoughtfully. "You know, I bet we could do them, Harry. We've do

"Not in front of a panel of judges, you haven't," said Fred. "McGonagall says the champions get awarded points accor

"Who are the judges?" Harry asked.

"Well, the Heads of the participating schools are always on the panel," said Hermione, and everyone looked around a

uring the Tournament of 1792, when a cockatrice the champions were supposed to be catching went on the rampage

She noticed them all looking at her and said, with her usual air of impatience that nobody else had read all the books

that book's not entirely reliable. A Revised History of Hogwarts would be a more accurate title. Or A Highly Biased an

Aspects of the School."

"What are you on about?" said Ron, though Harry thought he knew what was coming.

"House-elves!" said Hermione, her eyes flashing. "Not once, in over a thousand pages, does Hogwarts: A History men

s!"

Harry shook his head and applied himself to his scrambled eggs. His and Ron's lack of enthusiasm had done nothing

ouse-elves. True, both of them had paid two Sickles for a S.P.E.W. badge, but they had only done it to keep her quiet.

ed to have made Hermione more vociferous. She had been badgering Harry and Ron ever since, first to wear the ba o rattling around the Gryffindor common room every evening, cornering people and shaking the collecting tin under "You do realize that your sheets are changed, your fires lit, your classrooms cleaned, and your food cooked by a group ying fiercely.

Some people, like Neville, had paid up just to stop Hermione from glowering at them. A few seemed mildly interested role in campaigning. Many regarded the whole thing as a joke.

Ron now rolled his eyes at the ceiling, which was flooding them all in autumn sunlight, and Fred became extremely in adge). George, however, leaned in toward Hermione.

"Listen, have you ever been down in the kitchens, Hermione?"

"No, of course not," said Hermione curtly, "I hardly think students are supposed to —"

"Well, we have," said George, indicating Fred, "loads of times, to nick food. And we've met them, and they're happy. T

"That's because they're uneducated and brainwashed!" Hermione began hotly, but her next few words were drowned r rival of the post owls. Harry looked up at once, and saw Hedwig soaring toward him. Hermione stopped talking abru to Harry's shoulder, folded her wings, and held out her leg wearily.

Harry pulled off Sirius's reply and offered Hedwig his bacon rinds, which she ate gratefully. Then, checking that Fred he Triwizard Tournament, Harry read out Sirius's letter in a whisper to Ron and Hermione.

Nice try, Harry.

I'm back in the country and well hidden. I want you to keep me posted on everything that's going on at Hogwarts. Do watch out for yourself. Don't forget what I said about your scar.

"Why d'you have to keep changing owls?" Ron asked in a low voice.

"Hedwig'll attract too much attention," said Hermione at once. "She stands out. A snowy owl that keeps returning to v they?"

Harry rolled up the letter and slipped it inside his robes, wondering whether he felt more or less worried than before ught was something. He couldn't deny either that the idea that Sirius was much nearer was reassuring; at least he w

"Thanks, Hedwig," he said, stroking her. She hooted sleepily, dipped her beak briefly into his goblet of orange juice, t n the Owlery.

There was a pleasant feeling of anticipation in the air that day. Nobody was very attentive in lessons, being much mo uxbatons and Durmstrang; even Potions was more bearable than usual, as it was half an hour shorter. When the bel , deposited their bags and books as they had been instructed, pulled on their cloaks, and rushed back downstairs int The Heads of Houses were ordering their students into lines.

"Weasley, straighten your hat," Professor McGonagall snapped at Ron. "Miss Patil, take that ridiculous thing out of yo Parvati scowled and removed a large ornamental butterfly from the end of her plait.

"Follow me, please," said Professor McGonagall. "First years in front . . . no pushing. . . ."

They filed down the steps and lined up in front of the castle. It was a cold, clear evening; dusk was falling and a pale, dden Forest. Harry, standing between Ron and Hermione in the fourth row from the front, saw Dennis Creevey posit

"Nearly six," said Ron, checking his watch and then staring down the drive that led to the front gates. "How d'you rec

"I doubt it," said Hermione.

"How, then? Broomsticks?" Harry suggested, looking up at the starry sky.

"I don't think so . . . not from that far away. . . ."

"A Portkey?" Ron suggested. "Or they could Apparate — maybe you're allowed to do it under seventeen wherever the

"You can't Apparate inside the Hogwarts grounds, how often do I have to tell you?" said Hermione impatiently.

They scanned the darkening grounds excitedly, but nothing was moving; everything was still, silent, and quite as usu . . . Maybe the foreign students were preparing a dramatic entrance. . . . He remembered what Mr. Weasley had said me — we can't resist showing off when we get together. . . ."

And then Dumbledore called out from the back row where he stood with the other teachers —

"Aha! Unless I am very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!"

"Where?" said many students eagerly, all looking in different directions.

"There!" yelled a sixth year, pointing over the forest.

Something large, much larger than a broomstick — or, indeed, a hundred broomsticks — was hurtling across the de

"It's a dragon!" shrieked one of the first years, losing her head completely.

"Don't be stupid . . . it's a flying house!" said Dennis Creevey.

Dennis's guess was closer. . . . As the gigantic black shape skimmed over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest and th ntic, powder-blue, horse-drawn carriage, the size of a large house, soaring toward them, pulled through the air by a a hant.

The front three rows of students drew backward as the carriage hurtled ever lower, coming in to land at a tremendo ward onto a Slytherin fifth year's foot, the horses' hooves, larger than dinner plates, hit the ground. A second later, th the golden horses tossed their enormous heads and rolled large, fiery red eyes.

Harry just had time to see that the door of the carriage bore a coat of arms (two crossed, golden wands, each emitting A boy in pale blue robes jumped down from the carriage, bent forward, fumbled for a moment with something on th respectfully. Then Harry saw a shining, high-heeled black shoe emerging from the inside of the carriage — a shoe the

gest woman he had ever seen in his life. The size of the carriage, and of the horses, was immediately explained. A few Harry had only ever seen one person as large as this woman in his life, and that was Hagrid; he doubted whether the simply because he was used to Hagrid — this woman (now at the foot of the steps, and looking around at the waiting, into the light flooding from the entrance hall, she was revealed to have a handsome, olive-skinned face; large, black, awn back in a shining knob at the base of her neck. She was dressed from head to foot in black satin, and many mag Dumbledore started to clap; the students, following his lead, broke into applause too, many of them standing on tiptoe. Her face relaxed into a gracious smile and she walked forward toward Dumbledore, extending a glittering hand. Dumbledore said, "My dear Madame Maxime," he said. "Welcome to Hogwarts."

"Dumbly-dorr," said Madame Maxime in a deep voice. "I 'ope I find you well?"

"In excellent form, I thank you," said Dumbledore.

"My pupils," said Madame Maxime, waving one of her enormous hands carelessly behind her.

Harry, whose attention had been focused completely upon Madame Maxime, now noticed that about a dozen boys and the carriage and were now standing behind Madame Maxime. They were shivering, which was unsurprising, given the earing cloaks. A few had wrapped scarves and shawls around their heads. From what Harry could see of them (they up at Hogwarts with apprehensive looks on their faces.

"As Karkaroff arrived yet?" Madame Maxime asked.

"He should be here any moment," said Dumbledore. "Would you like to wait here and greet him or would you prefer?"

"Warm up, I think," said Madame Maxime. "But ze 'orses —"

"Our Care of Magical Creatures teacher will be delighted to take care of them," said Dumbledore, "the moment he has h some of his other — er — charges."

"Skrewts," Ron muttered to Harry, grinning.

"My steeds require — er — forceful 'andling," said Madame Maxime, looking as though she doubted whether any Car y are very strong. . . ."

"I assure you that Hagrid will be well up to the job," said Dumbledore, smiling.

"Very well," said Madame Maxime, bowing slightly. "Will you please inform zis 'Agrid zat ze 'orses drink only single-ma"

"It will be attended to," said Dumbledore, also bowing.

"Come," said Madame Maxime imperiously to her students, and the Hogwarts crowd parted to allow her and her stu

"How big d'you reckon Durmstrang's horses are going to be?" Seamus Finnigan said, leaning around Lavender and Pa

"Well, if they're any bigger than this lot, even Hagrid won't be able to handle them," said Harry. "That's if he hasn't be

"Maybe they've escaped," said Ron hopefully.

"Oh don't say that," said Hermione with a shudder. "Imagine that lot loose on the grounds. . . ."

They stood, shivering slightly now, waiting for the Durmstrang party to arrive. Most people were gazing hopefully up at dame Maxime's huge horses snorting and stamping. But then —

"Can you hear something?" said Ron suddenly.

Harry listened; a loud and oddly eerie noise was drifting toward them from out of the darkness: a muffled rumbling along a riverbed. . . .

"The lake!" yelled Lee Jordan, pointing down at it. "Look at the lake!"

From their position at the top of the lawns overlooking the grounds, they had a clear view of the smooth black surface at all. Some disturbance was taking place deep in the center; great bubbles were forming on the surface, waves were dle of the lake, a whirlpool appeared, as if a giant plug had just been pulled out of the lake's floor. . . .

What seemed to be a long, black pole began to rise slowly out of the heart of the whirlpool . . . and then Harry saw th

"It's a mast!" he said to Ron and Hermione.

Slowly, magnificently, the ship rose out of the water, gleaming in the moonlight. It had a strangely skeletal look about y lights shimmering at its portholes looked like ghostly eyes. Finally, with a great sloshing noise, the ship emerged en ward the bank. A few moments later, they heard the splash of an anchor being thrown down in the shallows, and the People were disembarking; they could see their silhouettes passing the lights in the ship's portholes. All of them, Har oyle . . . but then, as they drew nearer, walking up the lawns into the light streaming from the entrance hall, he saw t ing cloaks of some kind of shaggy, matted fur. But the man who was leading them up to the castle was wearing furs

"Dumbledore!" he called heartily as he walked up the slope. "How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?"

"Blooming, thank you, Professor Karkaroff," Dumbledore replied.

Karkaroff had a fruity, unctuous voice; when he stepped into the light pouring from the front doors of the castle the air was short, and his goatee (finishing in a small curl) did not entirely hide his rather weak chin. When he reached D

"Dear old Hogwarts," he said, looking up at the castle and smiling; his teeth were rather yellow, and Harry noticed th

d shrewd. "How good it is to be here, how good. . . . Viktor, come along, into the warmth . . . you don't mind, Dumble

Karkaroff beckoned forward one of his students. As the boy passed, Harry caught a glimpse of a prominent curved n n gave him, or the hiss in his ear, to recognize that profile.

"Harry — it's Krum!"

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### THE GOBLET OF FIRE

I don't believe it!" Ron said, in a stunned voice, as the Hogwarts students filed back up the steps behind the party from the entrance. "For heaven's sake, Ron, he's only a Quidditch player," said Hermione.

"Only a Quidditch player?" Ron said, looking at her as though he couldn't believe his ears. "Hermione — he's one of the best players in the world!"

As they recrossed the entrance hall with the rest of the Hogwarts students heading for the Great Hall, Harry saw Lee Jordan and Viktor Krum enter. He didn't look at the back of Krum's head. Several sixth-year girls were frantically searching their pockets as they walked —

"Oh I don't believe it, I haven't got a single quill on me —"

"D'you think he'd sign my hat in lipstick?"

"Really," Hermione said loftily as they passed the girls, now squabbling over the lipstick.

"I'm getting his autograph if I can," said Ron. "You haven't got a quill, have you, Harry?"

"Nope, they're upstairs in my bag," said Harry.

They walked over to the Gryffindor table and sat down. Ron took care to sit on the side facing the doorway, because he didn't want to see Krum. He didn't want to see Krum, apparently unsure about where they should sit. The students from Beauxbatons had chosen seats at the Ravenclaw table. The students from Durmstrang were sitting at the Slytherin table. The students from the other schools had expressions of surprise on their faces. Three of them were still clutching scarves and shawls around their heads.

"It's not that cold," said Hermione defensively. "Why didn't they bring cloaks?"

"Over here! Come and sit over here!" Ron hissed. "Over here! Hermione, budge up, make a space —"

"What?"

"Too late," said Ron bitterly.

Viktor Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students had settled themselves at the Slytherin table. Harry could see Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson. Malfoy bent forward to speak to Krum.

"Yeah, that's right, smarm up to him, Malfoy," said Ron scathingly. "I bet Krum can see right through him, though . . . I bet he's got a quill on him. d'you reckon they're going to sleep? We could offer him a space in our dormitory, Harry . . . I wouldn't mind giving him a space in our dormitory." Hermione snorted.

"They look a lot happier than the Beauxbatons lot," said Harry.

The Durmstrang students were pulling off their heavy furs and looking up at the starry black ceiling with expressions of surprise and gobs of goblets and examining them, apparently impressed.

Up at the staff table, Filch, the caretaker, was adding chairs. He was wearing his moldy old tailcoat in honor of the occasion. There were two on either side of Dumbledore's.

"But there are only two extra people," Harry said. "Why's Filch putting out four chairs, who else is coming?"

"Eh?" said Ron vaguely. He was still staring avidly at Krum.

When all the students had entered the Hall and settled down at their House tables, the staff entered, filing up to the head table. There were Dumbledore, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime. When their headmistress appeared, the pupils from Beauxbatons party appeared quite unembarrassed, however, and did not resume their seats until Madame Maxime had spoken. Then a silence fell over the Great Hall.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and — most particularly — guests," said Dumbledore, beaming around the room. "Welcome to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable."

One of the Beauxbatons girls still clutching a muffler around her head gave what was unmistakably a derisive laugh.

"No one's making you stay!" Hermione whispered, bristling at her.

"The tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast," said Dumbledore. "I now invite you all to eat, drink, and be merry." He sat down, and Harry saw Karkaroff lean forward at once and engage him in conversation.

The plates in front of them filled with food as usual. The house-elves in the kitchen seemed to have pulled out all the stops. There was more than Harry had ever seen, including several that were definitely foreign.

"What's that?" said Ron, pointing at a large dish of some sort of shellfish stew that stood beside a large steak-and-kidney pie.

"Bouillabaisse," said Hermione.

"Bless you," said Ron.

"It's French," said Hermione, "I had it on holiday summer before last. It's very nice."

"I'll take your word for it," said Ron, helping himself to black pudding.

The Great Hall seemed somehow much more crowded than usual, even though there were barely twenty additional people. The portraits stood out so clearly against the black of the Hogwarts robes. Now that they had removed their furs, the Durmstrang students were shivering. Hagrid sidled into the Hall through a door behind the staff table twenty minutes after the start of the feast. He slid in with a very heavily bandaged hand.

"Skrewts doing all right, Hagrid?" Harry called.

"Thrivin'," Hagrid called back happily.

"Yeah, I'll just bet they are," said Ron quietly. "Looks like they've finally found a food they like, doesn't it? Hagrid's finger food."

At that moment, a voice said, "Excuse me, are you wanting ze bouillabaisse?"

It was the girl from Beauxbatons who had laughed during Dumbledore's speech. She had finally removed her muffler. She had large, deep blue eyes, and very white, even teeth.

Ron went purple. He stared up at her, opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out except a faint gurgling noise.

"Yeah, have it," said Harry, pushing the dish toward the girl.

"You 'ave finished wiz it?"

"Yeah," Ron said breathlessly. "Yeah, it was excellent."

The girl picked up the dish and carried it carefully off to the Ravenclaw table. Ron was still goggling at the girl as though he sound seemed to jog Ron back to his senses.

"She's a veela!" he said hoarsely to Harry.

"Of course she isn't!" said Hermione tartly. "I don't see anyone else gaping at her like an idiot!"

But she wasn't entirely right about that. As the girl crossed the Hall, many boys' heads turned, and some of them seemed to be staring at her.

"I'm telling you, that's not a normal girl!" said Ron, leaning sideways so he could keep a clear view of her. "They don't."

"They make them okay at Hogwarts," said Harry without thinking. Cho happened to be sitting only a few places away.

"When you've both put your eyes back in," said Hermione briskly, "you'll be able to see who's just arrived."

She was pointing up at the staff table. The two remaining empty seats had just been filled. Ludo Bagman was now sitting at the end of the staff table, and his boss, was next to Madame Maxime.

"What are they doing here?" said Harry in surprise.

"They organized the Triwizard Tournament, didn't they?" said Hermione. "I suppose they wanted to be here to see it."

When the second course arrived they noticed a number of unfamiliar desserts too. Ron examined an odd sort of pastry.

It was light, so that it would be clearly visible from the Ravenclaw table. The girl who looked like a veela appeared to have eaten it.

Once the golden plates had been wiped clean, Dumbledore stood up again. A pleasant sort of tension seemed to fill the Hall.

Something was coming. Several seats down from them, Fred and George were leaning forward, staring at Dumbledore with interest.

"The moment has come," said Dumbledore, smiling around at the sea of upturned faces. "The Triwizard Tournament is about to begin."

"The what?" Harry muttered.

Ron shrugged.

"— just to clarify the procedure that we will be following this year. But first, let me introduce, for those who do not know, the International Magical Cooperation" — there was a smattering of polite applause — "and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Ministry of Magic."

There was a much louder round of applause for Bagman than for Crouch, perhaps because of his fame as a Beater, or perhaps because of his position.

With a jovial wave of his hand. Bartemius Crouch did not smile or wave when his name was announced. Remembering the incident with the troll, he seemed a little strange in wizard's robes.

His toothbrush mustache and severe parting looked very odd next to Dumbledore's long, flowing white hair.

"Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament. They will be joined by Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions' efforts."

At the mention of the word "champions," the attentiveness of the listening students seemed to sharpen. Perhaps Dumbledore was about to say something important.

"The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch."

Filch, who had been lurking unnoticed in a far corner of the Hall, now approached Dumbledore carrying a great wooden chest.

A great excitement rose from the watching students; Dennis Creevey actually stood on his chair to see it properly, but he was told to sit down.

"The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman. They are now on the table before him, "and they have made the necessary arrangements for each challenge. There will be three tasks, each of which will be completed in many different ways . . . their magical prowess — their daring — their powers of deduction — and, of course, their strength."

At this last word, the Hall was filled with a silence so absolute that nobody seemed to be breathing.

"As you know, three champions compete in the tournament," Dumbledore went on calmly, "one from each of the participating schools. The winner of the tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champion will be chosen by the judges."

Dumbledore now took out his wand and tapped three times upon the top of the casket. The lid creaked slowly open, revealing a golden cup.

It would have been entirely unremarkable had it not been full to the brim with dancing blue-white flames. Dumbledore closed the casket and placed the goblet carefully on top of it, where it would be clearly visible to everyone.

"Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment. The parchment will be placed in the goblet. You have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return to the school. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete."

"To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation," said Dumbledore, "I will be drawing an Age Line around the goblet. Only those of legal age will be able to cross this line."

"Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. It is a serious business, and you must be prepared to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding contract. Once you have become a champion, please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you draw your name."

"An Age Line!" Fred Weasley said, his eyes glinting, as they all made their way across the Hall to the doors into the entrance hall. "Shouldn't it? And once your name's in that goblet, you're laughing — it can't tell whether you're seventeen or not!"

"But I don't think anyone under seventeen will stand a chance," said Hermione, "we just haven't learned enough . . ."

"Speak for yourself," said George shortly. "You'll try and get in, won't you, Harry?"

Harry thought briefly of Dumbledore's insistence that nobody under seventeen should submit their name, but then he decided to ignore it.

He led his mind again. . . . He wondered how angry Dumbledore would be if someone younger than seventeen did find a way to get in.

"Where is he?" said Ron, who wasn't listening to a word of this conversation, but looking through the crowd to see where the veela was going.

ng people are sleeping, did he?"

But this query was answered almost instantly; they were level with the Slytherin table now, and Karkaroff had just begun to speak.

"Back to the ship, then," he was saying. "Viktor, how are you feeling? Did you eat enough? Should I send for some more?" Harry saw Krum shake his head as he pulled his furs back on.

"Professor, I would like some wine," said one of the other Durmstrang boys hopefully.

"I wasn't offering it to you, Poliakov," snapped Karkaroff, his warmly paternal air vanishing in an instant. "I notice you're a disgusting boy —"

Karkaroff turned and led his students toward the doors, reaching them at exactly the same moment as Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"Thank you," said Karkaroff carelessly, glancing at him.

And then Karkaroff froze. He turned his head back to Harry and stared at him as though he couldn't believe his eyes. He didn't even halt too. Karkaroff's eyes moved slowly up Harry's face and fixed upon his scar. The Durmstrang students were staring in incomprehension down on a few of their faces. The boy with food all down his front nudged the girl next to him and nodded.

"Yeah, that's Harry Potter," said a growling voice from behind them.

Professor Karkaroff spun around. Mad-Eye Moody was standing there, leaning heavily on his staff, his magical eye glaring.

The color drained from Karkaroff's face as Harry watched. A terrible look of mingled fury and fear came over him.

"You!" he said, staring at Moody as though unsure he was really seeing him.

"Me," said Moody grimly. "And unless you've got anything to say to Potter, Karkaroff, you might want to move. You're blocking the way."

It was true; half the students in the Hall were now waiting behind them, looking over one another's shoulders to see what was going on. Without another word, Professor Karkaroff swept his students away with him. Moody watched him until he was out of sight, then he came back upon his mutilated face.

As the next day was Saturday, most students would normally have breakfasted late. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were up early on weekends. When they went down into the entrance hall, they saw about twenty people milling around it, some of them looking at the floor in the center of the hall on the stool that normally bore the Sorting Hat. A thin golden line had been traced on the floor.

"Anyone put their name in yet?" Ron asked a third-year girl eagerly.

"All the Durmstrang lot," she replied. "But I haven't seen anyone from Hogwarts yet."

"Bet some of them put it in last night after we'd all gone to bed," said Harry. "I would've if it had been me . . . wouldn't you?"

"I wouldn't have if I'd been you," said Hermione.

Someone laughed behind Harry. Turning, he saw Fred, George, and Lee Jordan hurrying down the staircase, all three looking excited.

"Done it," Fred said in a triumphant whisper to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Just taken it."

"What?" said Ron.

"The Aging Potion, dung brains," said Fred.

"One drop each," said George, rubbing his hands together with glee. "We only need to be a few months older."

"We're going to split the thousand Galleons between the three of us if one of us wins," said Lee, grinning broadly.

"I'm not sure this is going to work, you know," said Hermione warningly. "I'm sure Dumbledore will have thought of this."

Fred, George, and Lee ignored her.

"Ready?" Fred said to the other two, quivering with excitement. "C'mon, then — I'll go first —"

Harry watched, fascinated, as Fred pulled a slip of parchment out of his pocket bearing the words Fred Weasley — Harry's name, re, rocking on his toes like a diver preparing for a fifty-foot drop. Then, with the eyes of every person in the entrance hall fixed on him, he stepped forward.

For a split second Harry thought it had worked — George certainly thought so, for he let out a yell of triumph and leapt forward, and both twins were hurled out of the golden circle as though they had been thrown by an invisible shot-putter. To add insult to injury, there was a loud popping noise, and both of them sprouted identical long white beards.

The entrance hall rang with laughter. Even Fred and George joined in, once they had gotten to their feet and taken a moment to look at their beards.

"I did warn you," said a deep, amused voice, and everyone turned to see Professor Dumbledore coming out of the Great Hall. "You both go up to Madam Pomfrey. She is already tending to Miss Fawcett, of Ravenclaw, and Mr. Summers, of Hufflepuff. Though I must say, neither of their beards is anything like as fine as yours."

Fred and George set off for the hospital wing, accompanied by Lee, who was howling with laughter, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

The decorations in the Great Hall had changed this morning. As it was Halloween, a cloud of live bats was fluttering and swooping from every corner. Harry led the way over to Dean and Seamus, who were discussing those Hogwarts students who had played Quidditch for Warrington.

"There's a rumor going around that Warrington got up early and put his name in," Dean told Harry. "That big bloke from Warrington, who had played Quidditch against Warrington, shook his head in disgust."

"We can't have a Slytherin champion!"

"And all the Hufflepuffs are talking about Diggory," said Seamus contemptuously. "But I wouldn't have thought he'd have put his name in."

"Listen!" said Hermione suddenly.

People were cheering out in the entrance hall. They all swiveled around in their seats and saw Angelina Johnson coming down the stairs. A black girl who played Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Angelina came over to them, sat down, and said, "Well, I'm glad someone from Gryffindor's entering," said Hermione. "I really hope you get it, Angelina!"

"Thanks, Hermione," said Angelina, smiling at her.



"Yeah, better you than Pretty-Boy Diggory," said Seamus, causing several Hufflepuffs passing their table to scowl heavily.

"What're we going to do today, then?" Ron asked Harry and Hermione when they had finished breakfast and were leaving the Great Hall.

"We haven't been down to visit Hagrid yet," said Harry.

"Okay," said Ron, "just as long as he doesn't ask us to donate a few fingers to the skrewts."

A look of great excitement suddenly dawned on Hermione's face.

"I've just realized — I haven't asked Hagrid to join S.P.E.W. yet!" she said brightly. "Wait for me, will you, while I nip up to my room."

"What is it with her?" said Ron, exasperated, as Hermione ran away up the marble staircase.

"Hey, Ron," said Harry suddenly. "It's your friend . . ."

The students from Beauxbatons were coming through the front doors from the grounds, among them, the veela-girls, all dressed in their finest, and watching eagerly.

Madame Maxime entered the hall behind her students and organized them into a line. One by one, the Beauxbatons students entered the blue-white flames. As each name entered the fire, it turned briefly red and emitted sparks.

"What d'you reckon'll happen to the ones who aren't chosen?" Ron muttered to Harry as the veela-girl dropped her parchment and quill.

"Dunno," said Harry. "Hang around, I suppose. . . . Madame Maxime's staying to judge, isn't she?"

When all the Beauxbatons students had submitted their names, Madame Maxime led them back out of the hall and into the courtyard.

"Where are they sleeping, then?" said Ron, moving toward the front doors and staring after them.

A loud rattling noise behind them announced Hermione's reappearance with the box of S.P.E.W. badges.

"Oh good, hurry up," said Ron, and he jumped down the stone steps, keeping his eyes on the back of the veela-girl, who was following him.

As they neared Hagrid's cabin on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, the mystery of the Beauxbatons' sleeping quarters had been parked two hundred yards from Hagrid's front door, and the students were climbing back inside it. The veela-girls were grazing in a makeshift paddock alongside it.

Harry knocked on Hagrid's door, and Fang's booming barks answered instantly.

"Bout time!" said Hagrid, when he'd flung open the door. "Thought you lot'd forgotten where I live!"

"We've been really busy, Hag —" Hermione started to say, but then she stopped dead, looking up at Hagrid, apparently for the first time.

Hagrid was wearing his best (and very horrible) hairy brown suit, plus a checked yellow-and-orange tie. This wasn't the first time she'd seen him in that suit, but she'd never noticed before that he was using large quantities of what appeared to be axle grease. It was now slicked down into two bunches — perhaps he thought that would make him look better. The look didn't really suit Hagrid at all. For a moment, Hermione goggled at him, then, obviously deciding not to comment, she turned back to the box.

"Out by the pumpkin patch," said Hagrid happily. "They're gettin' massive, mus' be nearly three foot long now. On'y two left."

"Oh no, really?" said Hermione, shooting a repressive look at Ron, who, staring at Hagrid's odd hairstyle, had just opened his mouth.

"Yeah," said Hagrid sadly. "'S' okay, though, I've got 'em in separate boxes now. Still got about twenty."

"Well, that's lucky," said Ron. Hagrid missed the sarcasm.

Hagrid's cabin comprised a single room, in one corner of which was a gigantic bed covered in a patchwork quilt. A single table and a stool were tucked beneath the quantity of cured hams and dead birds hanging from the ceiling. They sat down at the table while Hagrid went to the door to see if any of the Triwizard Tournament entrants had arrived.

Hagrid seemed quite as excited about it as they were.

"You wait," he said, grinning. "You jus' wait. Yer going ter see some stuff yeh've never seen before. Firs' task . . . ah, but I can't tell yeh that."

"Go on, Hagrid!" Harry, Ron, and Hermione urged him, but he just shook his head, grinning.

"I don' want ter spoil it fer yeh," said Hagrid. "But it's gonna be spectacular, I'll tell yeh that. Them champions're going to be real good. Yeh'll see the Triwizard Tournament played again!"

They ended up having lunch with Hagrid, though they didn't eat much — Hagrid had made what he said was a beef and onion soup, but it was so watery that Harry and Ron rather lost their appetites. However, they enjoyed themselves trying to make Hagrid tell them what the first task was, and wondering whether Fred and George were beardless yet.

A light rain had started to fall by midafternoon; it was very cozy sitting by the fire, listening to the gentle patter of the rain on the roof, and arguing with Hermione about house-elves — for he flatly refused to join S.P.E.W. when she showed him her badge.

"It'd be doin' 'em an unkindness, Hermione," he said gravely, threading a massive bone needle with thick yellow yarn. "I'd be makin' 'em unhappy ter take away their work, an' insultin' 'em if yeh tried ter pay 'em."

"But Harry set Dobby free, and he was over the moon about it!" said Hermione. "And we heard he's asking for wages now."

"Yeah, well, yeh get weirdos in every breed. I'm not sayin' there isn't the odd elf who'd take freedom, but yeh'll never see it."

Hermione looked very cross indeed and stuffed her box of badges back into her cloak pocket.

By half past five it was growing dark, and Ron, Harry, and Hermione decided it was time to get back up to the castle for the night. They were the only ones left of the school champions.

"I'll come with yeh," said Hagrid, putting away his darning. "Jus' give us a sec."

Hagrid got up, went across to the chest of drawers beside his bed, and began searching for something inside it. They waited.

"Eh?" said Hagrid, turning around with a large bottle in his hand. "Don' yeh like it?"

"Is that aftershave?" said Hermione in a slightly choked voice.

"Er — eau de cologne," Hagrid muttered. He was blushing. "Maybe it's a bit much," he said gruffly. "I'll go take it off, hah!"

He stumped out of the cabin, and they saw him washing himself vigorously in the water barrel outside the window.

"Eau de cologne?" said Hermione in amazement. "Hagrid?"

"And what's with the hair and the suit?" said Harry in an undertone.

"Look!" said Ron suddenly, pointing out of the window.

Hagrid had just straightened up and turned 'round. If he had been blushing before, it was nothing to what he was doing now. He didn't spot them, Harry, Ron, and Hermione peered through the window and saw that Madame Maxime and the Beauxbatons girls had just come off for the feast too. They couldn't hear what Hagrid was saying, but he was talking to Madame Maxime with a rapid, excited air — when he had been looking at the baby dragon, Norbert.

"He's going up to the castle with her!" said Hermione indignantly. "I thought he was waiting for us!"

Without so much as a backward glance at his cabin, Hagrid was trudging off up the grounds with Madame Maxime, talking to her with enormous strides.

"He fancies her!" said Ron incredulously. "Well, if they end up having children, they'll be setting a world record — bet you can't find a pair of them faster!" They let themselves out of the cabin and shut the door behind them. It was surprisingly dark outside. Drawing their robes tight, they hurried across the lawns.

"Ooh it's them, look!" Hermione whispered.

The Durmstrang party was walking up toward the castle from the lake. Viktor Krum was walking side by side with Karkaroff and trying to lead them. Ron watched Krum excitedly, but Krum did not look around as he reached the front doors a little ahead of them. When they entered the candlelit Great Hall it was almost full. The Goblet of Fire had been moved; it was now standing in the center of the hall and George — clean-shaven again — seemed to have taken their disappointment fairly well.

"Hope it's Angelina," said Fred as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down.

"So do I!" said Hermione breathlessly. "Well, we'll soon know!"

The Halloween feast seemed to take much longer than usual. Perhaps because it was their second feast in two days, or perhaps because, as he would have normally. Like everyone else in the Hall, judging by the constantly craning necks, the impatient expectation to see whether Dumbledore had finished eating yet, Harry simply wanted the plates to clear, and to hear who had been selected. At long last, the golden plates returned to their original spotless state; there was a sharp upswing in the level of noise. Dumbledore got to his feet. On either side of him, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime looked as tense and expectant as the students. Mr. Crouch, however, looked quite uninterested, almost bored.

"Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision," said Dumbledore. "I estimate that it requires one more minute. Please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber" — he indicated the door, giving their first instructions.

He took out his wand and gave a great sweeping wave with it; at once, all the candles except those inside the carved wooden chandeliers went out. The Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole Hall, the sparkling bright, bluey-white light of the flames waiting. . . . A few people kept checking their watches. . . .

"Any second," Lee Jordan whispered, two seats away from Harry.

The flames inside the goblet turned suddenly red again. Sparks began to fly from it. Next moment, a tongue of flame shot out of the top — the whole room gasped.

Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and held it at arm's length, so that he could read it by the light of the flames.

"The champion for Durmstrang," he read, in a strong, clear voice, "will be Viktor Krum."

"No surprises there!" yelled Ron as a storm of applause and cheering swept the Hall. Harry saw Viktor Krum rise from his seat, walk along the staff table, and disappeared through the door into the next chamber.

"Bravo, Viktor!" boomed Karkaroff, so loudly that everyone could hear him, even over all the applause. "Knew you had it!" The clapping and chatting died down. Now everyone's attention was focused again on the goblet, which, seconds later, was glowing with a new light, propelled by the flames.

"The champion for Beauxbatons," said Dumbledore, "is Fleur Delacour!"

"It's her, Ron!" Harry shouted as the girl who so resembled a veela got gracefully to her feet, shook back her sheet of blonde hair, and walked toward the staff table. The applause and cheering died down. The clapping and chatting died down. Now everyone's attention was focused again on the goblet, which, seconds later, was glowing with a new light, propelled by the flames.

"Oh look, they're all disappointed," Hermione said over the noise, nodding toward the remainder of the Beauxbatons girls. Two of the girls who had not been selected had dissolved into tears and were sobbing with their heads on their arms. When Fleur Delacour too had vanished into the side chamber, silence fell again, but this time it was a silence so stiff that it was almost painful. . . .

And the Goblet of Fire turned red once more; sparks showered out of it; the tongue of flame shot high into the air, and the hall was lit with a new light.

"The Hogwarts champion," he called, "is Cedric Diggory!"

"No!" said Ron loudly, but nobody heard him except Harry; the uproar from the next table was too great. Every single person in the hall, as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers' table. It was a long time before Dumbledore could make himself heard again.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore called happily as at last the tumult died down. "Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure that the champions from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering them on. But Dumbledore suddenly stopped speaking, and it was apparent to everybody what had distracted him.

The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were flying out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and the hall was lit with a new light. Automatically, it seemed, Dumbledore reached out a long hand and seized the parchment. He held it out and stared at it. Dumbledore stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room stared at Dumbledore. And then Dumbledore cleared his throat.

"Harry Potter."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### THE FOUR CHAMPIONS

Harry sat there, aware that every head in the Great Hall had turned to look at him. He was stunned. He felt numb. He was alone. There was no applause. A buzzing, as though of angry bees, was starting to fill the Hall; some students were standing up.

Up at the top table, Professor McGonagall had got to her feet and swept past Ludo Bagman and Professor Karkaroff, frowning slightly.

Harry turned to Ron and Hermione; beyond them, he saw the long Gryffindor table all watching him, openmouthed.

"I didn't put my name in," Harry said blankly. "You know I didn't."

Both of them stared just as blankly back.

At the top table, Professor Dumbledore had straightened up, nodding to Professor McGonagall.

"Harry Potter!" he called again. "Harry! Up here, if you please!"

"Go on," Hermione whispered, giving Harry a slight push.

Harry got to his feet, trod on the hem of his robes, and stumbled slightly. He set off up the gap between the Gryffindor table and the top table didn't seem to be getting any nearer at all, and he could feel hundreds and hundreds of eyes upon him. It was louder. After what seemed like an hour, he was right in front of Dumbledore, feeling the stares of all the teachers upon him.

"Well . . . through the door, Harry," said Dumbledore. He wasn't smiling.

Harry moved off along the teachers' table. Hagrid was seated right at the end. He did not wink at Harry, or wave, or gape. He was astonished and stared at Harry as he passed like everyone else. Harry went through the door out of the Great Hall and into the corridor. A handsome fire was roaring in the fireplace opposite him.

The faces in the portraits turned to look at him as he entered. He saw a wizened witch flit out of the frame of her picture, showing a walrus mustache. The wizened witch started whispering in his ear.

Viktor Krum, Cedric Diggory, and Fleur Delacour were grouped around the fire. They looked strangely impressive, still standing against the mantelpiece, slightly apart from the other two. Cedric was standing with his hands behind his back. Fleur had just walked in and threw back her sheet of long, silvery hair.

"What is it?" she said. "Do zey want us back in ze Hall?"

She thought he had come to deliver a message. Harry didn't know how to explain what had just happened. He just stood there. All of them were.

There was a sound of scurrying feet behind him, and Ludo Bagman entered the room. He took Harry by the arm and squeezed it. "Extraordinary!" he muttered, squeezing Harry's arm. "Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen . . . lady," he added, addressing Fleur, "produce — incredible though it may seem — the fourth Triwizard champion?"

Viktor Krum straightened up. His surly face darkened as he surveyed Harry. Cedric looked nonplussed. He looked from Harry to Ludo Bagman and then to Fleur Delacour, who, however, tossed her hair, smiling, and said, "Oh, vairy funny joke, Meester Krum."

"Joke?" Bagman repeated, bewildered. "No, no, not at all! Harry's name just came out of the Goblet of Fire!"

Krum's thick eyebrows contracted slightly. Cedric was still looking politely bewildered. Fleur frowned.

"But evidently zair 'as been a mistake," she said contemptuously to Bagman. "'E cannot compete. 'E is too young."

"Well . . . it is amazing," said Bagman, rubbing his smooth chin and smiling down at Harry. "But, as you know, the age limit is sixteen. And as his name's come out of the goblet . . . I mean, I don't think there can be any ducking out at this stage. . . . He must have to do the best he —"

The door behind them opened again, and a large group of people came in: Professor Dumbledore, followed closely by Professor McGonagall, and Professor Snape. Harry heard the buzzing of the hundreds of students on the other side of the wall, before Professor McGonagall spoke.

"Madame Maxime!" said Fleur at once, striding over to her headmistress. "Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete. Somewhere under Harry's numb disbelief he felt a ripple of anger. Little boy?

Madame Maxime had drawn herself up to her full, and considerable, height. The top of her handsome head brushed the ceiling.

"What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-dorr?" she said imperiously.

"I'd rather like to know that myself, Dumbledore," said Professor Karkaroff. He was wearing a steely smile, and his blue eyes were cold. "I don't remember anyone telling me the host school is allowed two champions — or have I not read the rules carefully enough?" He gave a short and nasty laugh.

"C'est impossible," said Madame Maxime, whose enormous hand with its many superb opals was resting upon Fleur's shoulder.

"We were under the impression that your Age Line would keep out younger contestants, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff. "Otherwise, we would, of course, have brought along a wider selection of candidates from our own schools."

"It's no one's fault but Potter's, Karkaroff," said Snape softly. His black eyes were alight with malice. "Don't go blaming the host school. It has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here —"

"Thank you, Severus," said Dumbledore firmly, and Snape went quiet, though his eyes still glinted malevolently through his hair. Professor Dumbledore was now looking down at Harry, who looked right back at him, trying to discern the expression on his face.

"Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry?" he asked calmly.

"No," said Harry. He was very aware of everybody watching him closely. Snape made a soft noise of impatient disbelief.

"Did you ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?" said Professor Dumbledore, ignoring Snape.

"No," said Harry vehemently.

"Ah, but of course 'e is lying!" cried Madame Maxime. Snape was now shaking his head, his lip curling.

"He could not have crossed the Age Line," said Professor McGonagall sharply. "I am sure we are all agreed on that —

"Dumbly-dorr must 'ave made a mistake wiz ze line," said Madame Maxime, shrugging.

"It is possible, of course," said Dumbledore politely.

"Dumbledore, you know perfectly well you did not make a mistake!" said Professor McGonagall angrily. "Really, what professor Dumbledore believes that he did not persuade an older student to do it for him, I'm sure that should be good for him. She shot a very angry look at Professor Snape.

"Mr. Crouch . . . Mr. Bagman," said Karkaroff, his voice unctuous once more, "you are our — er — objective judges. So Mr. Bagman wiped his round, boyish face with his handkerchief and looked at Mr. Crouch, who was standing outside the tent. The light was slightly eerie, the half darkness making him look much older, giving him an almost skull-like appearance. When he spoke, his voice was

"We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire must compete."

"Well, Barty knows the rule book back to front," said Bagman, beaming and turning back to Karkaroff and Madame Maxime.

"I insist upon resubmitting the names of the rest of my students," said Karkaroff. He had dropped his unctuous tone. "We will set up the Goblet of Fire once more, and we will continue adding names until each school has two champions. It's our duty."

"But Karkaroff, it doesn't work like that," said Bagman. "The Goblet of Fire's just gone out — it won't reignite until the next year — in which Durmstrang will most certainly not be competing!" exploded Karkaroff. "After all our meetings and negotiations, this is the result? It's a disaster! I have half a mind to leave now!"

"Empty threat, Karkaroff," growled a voice from near the door. "You can't leave your champion now. He's got to compete. It's the rules." Dumbledore said. Convenient, eh?"

Moody had just entered the room. He limped toward the fire, and with every right step he took, there was a loud clunk. "Convenient?" said Karkaroff. "I'm afraid I don't understand you, Moody."

Harry could tell he was trying to sound disdainful, as though what Moody was saying was barely worth his notice, but he didn't say so. "Don't you?" said Moody quietly. "It's very simple, Karkaroff. Someone put Potter's name in that goblet knowing he'd win. Evidently, someone 'oo wished to give 'Ogwarts two bites at ze apple!" said Madame Maxime.

"I quite agree, Madame Maxime," said Karkaroff, bowing to her. "I shall be lodging complaints with the Ministry of Magic. If anyone's got reason to complain, it's Potter," growled Moody, "but . . . funny thing . . . I don't hear him saying a word."

"Why should 'e complain?" burst out Fleur Delacour, stamping her foot. "'E 'as ze chance to compete, 'asn't 'e? We 'ave a chance to win for our schools! A thousand Galleons in prize money — zis is a chance many would die for!"

"Maybe someone's hoping Potter is going to die for it," said Moody, with the merest trace of a growl.

An extremely tense silence followed these words. Ludo Bagman, who was looking very anxious indeed, bounced nervously. "Nothing to say?"

"We all know Professor Moody considers the morning wasted if he hasn't discovered six plots to murder him before breakfast. It's a good thing that his students to fear assassination too. An odd quality in a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Dumbledore, but not surprising."

"Imagining things, am I?" growled Moody. "Seeing things, eh? It was a skilled witch or wizard who put the boy's name in the goblet."

"Ah, what evidence is zere of zat?" said Madame Maxime, throwing up her huge hands.

"Because they hoodwinked a very powerful magical object!" said Moody. "It would have needed an exceptionally strong wizard to make three schools compete in the tournament. . . . I'm guessing they submitted Potter's name under a fourth school, to make it look like a fourth school was competing."

"You seem to have given this a great deal of thought, Moody," said Karkaroff coldly, "and a very ingenious theory it is. But I don't think that one of your birthday presents contained a cunningly disguised basilisk egg, and smashed it to pieces before the tournament. . . . I don't take you entirely seriously. . . ."

"There are those who'll turn innocent occasions to their advantage," Moody retorted in a menacing voice. "It's my job to watch out for them. Remember. . . ."

"Alastor!" said Dumbledore warningly. Harry wondered for a moment whom he was speaking to, but then realized "Moody." He was still surveying Karkaroff with satisfaction — Karkaroff's face was burning.

"How this situation arose, we do not know," said Dumbledore, speaking to everyone gathered in the room. "It seems clear that Cedric and Harry have been chosen to compete in the tournament. This, therefore, they will do. . . ."

"Ah, but Dumbly-dorr —"

"My dear Madame Maxime, if you have an alternative, I would be delighted to hear it."

Dumbledore waited, but Madame Maxime did not speak, she merely glared. She wasn't the only one either. Snape looked on with a cold, steady gaze.

"Well, shall we crack on, then?" he said, rubbing his hands together and smiling around the room. "Got to give our champions a chance, don't we?"

Mr. Crouch seemed to come out of a deep reverie.

"Yes," he said, "instructions. Yes . . . the first task . . ."

He moved forward into the firelight. Close up, Harry thought he looked ill. There were dark shadows beneath his eyes. "The first task is designed to test your daring," he told Harry, Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor, "so we are not going to be telling you what to do. It's an important quality in a wizard . . . very important. . . ."

"The first task will take place on November the twenty-fourth, in front of the other students and the panel of judges. The champions are not permitted to ask for or accept help of any kind from their teachers to complete the tasks in the tournament."

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only with their wands. They will receive information about the second task when the first is over. Owing to the demands of the tournament, the champions are exempted from end-of-year tests."

Mr. Crouch turned to look at Dumbledore.

"I think that's all, is it, Albus?"

"I think so," said Dumbledore, who was looking at Mr. Crouch with mild concern. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay?"

"No, Dumbledore, I must get back to the Ministry," said Mr. Crouch. "It is a very busy, very difficult time at the moment. I'm a little overenthusiastic . . . a little overenthusiastic, if truth be told. . . ."

"You'll come and have a drink before you go, at least?" said Dumbledore.

"Come on, Barty, I'm staying!" said Bagman brightly. "It's all happening at Hogwarts now, you know, much more exciting than the Ministry."

"I think not, Ludo," said Crouch with a touch of his old impatience.

"Professor Karkaroff — Madame Maxime — a nightcap?" said Dumbledore.

But Madame Maxime had already put her arm around Fleur's shoulders and was leading her swiftly out of the room. Karkaroff beckoned to Krum, and they, too, exited, though in silence.

"Harry, Cedric, I suggest you go up to bed," said Dumbledore, smiling at both of them. "I am sure Gryffindor and Hufflepuff will be able to deprive them of this excellent excuse to make a great deal of mess and noise."

Harry glanced at Cedric, who nodded, and they left together.

The Great Hall was deserted now; the candles had burned low, giving the jagged smiles of the pumpkins an eerie, flickering light.

"So," said Cedric, with a slight smile. "We're playing against each other again!"

"I s'pose," said Harry. He really couldn't think of anything to say. The inside of his head seemed to be in complete disarray.

"So . . . tell me . . ." said Cedric as they reached the entrance hall, which was now lit only by torches in the absence of candles.

"I didn't," said Harry, staring up at him. "I didn't put it in. I was telling the truth."

"Ah . . . okay," said Cedric. Harry could tell Cedric didn't believe him. "Well . . . see you, then."

Instead of going up the marble staircase, Cedric headed for a door to its right. Harry stood listening to him going down the stairs, then the marble ones.

Was anyone except Ron and Hermione going to believe him, or would they all think he'd put himself in for the tournament? He'd had three years' more magical education than he had — when he was now facing tasks that not only sounded impossible but were. Yes, he'd thought about it . . . he'd fantasized about it . . . but it had been a joke, really, an idle sort of dream. . . .

But someone else had considered it . . . someone else had wanted him in the tournament, and had made sure he was in.

To see him make a fool of himself? Well, they were likely to get their wish. . . .

But to get him killed?

Was Moody just being his usual paranoid self? Couldn't someone have put Harry's name in the goblet as a trick, a prank?

Harry was able to answer that at once. Yes, someone wanted him dead, someone had wanted him dead ever since he'd been chosen. But how had they ensured that Harry's name got into the Goblet of Fire? Voldemort was supposed to be far away, in some distant corner of the world.

Yet in that dream he had had, just before he had awoken with his scar hurting, Voldemort had not been alone . . . he'd had help.

Harry got a shock to find himself facing the Fat Lady already. He had barely noticed where his feet were carrying him. The wizened witch who had flitted into her neighbor's painting when he had joined the champions downstairs.

He had walked through every picture lining seven staircases to reach here before him. Both she and the Fat Lady were looking down at him.

"Well, well, well," said the Fat Lady, "Violet's just told me everything. Who's just been chosen as school champion, the Gryffindor?"

"Balderdash," said Harry dully.

"It most certainly isn't!" said the pale witch indignantly.

"No, no, Vi, it's the password," said the Fat Lady soothingly, and she swung forward on her hinges to let Harry into the house.

The blast of noise that met Harry's ears when the portrait opened almost knocked him backward. Next thing he knew he was in the middle of a crowd of hands, and was facing the whole of Gryffindor House, all of whom were screaming, applauding, and whistling.

"You should've told us you'd entered!" bellowed Fred; he looked half annoyed, half deeply impressed.

"How did you do it without getting a beard? Brilliant!" roared George.

"I didn't," Harry said. "I don't know how —"

But Angelina had now swooped down upon him; "Oh if it couldn't be me, at least it's a Gryffindor —"

"You'll be able to pay back Diggory for that last Quidditch match, Harry!" shrieked Katie Bell, another of the Gryffindor champions.

"We've got food, Harry, come and have some —"

"I'm not hungry, I had enough at the feast —"

But nobody wanted to hear that he wasn't hungry; nobody wanted to hear that he hadn't put his name in the goblet; they were all in the mood to celebrate. . . . Lee Jordan had unearthed a Gryffindor banner from somewhere, and he insisted on displaying it.

As he tried to sidle over to the staircase up to the dormitories, the crowd around him closed ranks, forcing another boy to the front. . . . Everyone wanted to know how he had done it, how he had tricked Dumbledore's Age Line and managed to get his name in.

"I didn't," he said, over and over again, "I don't know how it happened."

But for all the notice anyone took, he might just as well not have answered at all.

"I'm tired!" he bellowed finally, after nearly half an hour. "No, seriously, George — I'm going to bed —"

He wanted more than anything to find Ron and Hermione, to find a bit of sanity, but neither of them seemed to be interested in attending the little Creevey brothers as they attempted to waylay him at the foot of the stairs, Harry managed to shake them off.

To his great relief, he found Ron was lying on his bed in the otherwise empty dormitory, still fully dressed. He looked at him for a moment, then said, "Where've you been?" Harry said.

"Oh hello," said Ron.

He was grinning, but it was a very odd, strained sort of grin. Harry suddenly became aware that he was still wearing the invisibility cloak. He hastened to take it off, but it was knotted very tightly. Ron lay on the bed without moving, watching Harry struggle to remove it.

"So," he said, when Harry had finally removed the banner and thrown it into a corner. "Congratulations."

"What d'you mean, congratulations?" said Harry, staring at Ron. There was definitely something wrong with the way he was looking at him.

"Well . . . no one else got across the Age Line," said Ron. "Not even Fred and George. What did you use — the Invisibility Cloak?"

"The Invisibility Cloak wouldn't have got me over that line," said Harry slowly.

"Oh right," said Ron. "I thought you might've told me if it was the Cloak . . . because it would've covered both of us, wouldn't it?"

"Listen," said Harry, "I didn't put my name in that goblet. Someone else must've done it."

Ron raised his eyebrows.

"What would they do that for?"

"I dunno," said Harry. He felt it would sound very melodramatic to say, "To kill me."

Ron's eyebrows rose so high that they were in danger of disappearing into his hair.

"It's okay, you know, you can tell me the truth," he said. "If you don't want everyone else to know, fine, but I don't know what you're hiding. If you're worried about what the teachers will say, for it, did you? That friend of the Fat Lady's, that Violet, she's already told us all Dumbledore's letting you enter. A thousand times over. You can't fail the end-of-year tests either. . . ."

"I didn't put my name in that goblet!" said Harry, starting to feel angry.

"Yeah, okay," said Ron, in exactly the same skeptical tone as Cedric. "Only you said this morning you'd have done it later. You know."

"You're doing a really good impression of it," Harry snapped.

"Yeah?" said Ron, and there was no trace of a grin, forced or otherwise, on his face now. "You want to get to bed, Harry. Go on. Get to bed. Or something."

He wrenched the hangings shut around his four-poster, leaving Harry standing there by the door, staring at the darkness. He knew Ron was sure would believe him.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### THE WEIGHING OF THE WANDS

When Harry woke up on Sunday morning, it took him a moment to remember why he felt so miserable and worried. He pushed back the curtains of his own four-poster, intending to talk to Ron, to force Ron to believe him — only to find that the room was empty. Harry dressed and went down the spiral staircase into the common room. The moment he appeared, the people who had been waiting for him, all of going down into the Great Hall and facing the rest of the Gryffindors, all treating him like some sort of hero, was now gone. He found himself cornered by the Creevey brothers, who were both beckoning frantically to him to join them. He walked resolutely away from them, and found himself face-to-face with Hermione.

"Hello," she said, holding up a stack of toast, which she was carrying in a napkin. "I brought you this. . . . Want to go for a walk?"

"Good idea," said Harry gratefully.

They went downstairs, crossed the entrance hall quickly without looking in at the Great Hall, and were soon striding through the corridors, reflected blackly in the water. It was a chilly morning, and they kept moving, munching their toast, as Harry told her about the night before. To his immense relief, Hermione accepted his story without question.

"Well, of course I knew you hadn't entered yourself," she said when he'd finished telling her about the scene in the corridor. "But the question is, who did put it in? Because Moody's right, Harry . . . I don't think any student could have done that, or get over Dumbledore's —"

"Have you seen Ron?" Harry interrupted.

Hermione hesitated.

"Erm . . . yes . . . he was at breakfast," she said.

"Does he still think I entered myself?"

"Well . . . no, I don't think so . . . not really," said Hermione awkwardly.

"What's that supposed to mean, 'not really?'"

"Oh Harry, isn't it obvious?" Hermione said despairingly. "He's jealous!"

"Jealous?" Harry said incredulously. "Jealous of what? He wants to make a prat of himself in front of the whole school?"

"Look," said Hermione patiently, "it's always you who gets all the attention, you know it is. I know it's not your fault, so don't worry about it."

"I know you don't ask for it . . . but — well — you know, Ron's got all those brothers to compete against at home, and he's always been shunted to one side whenever people see you, and he puts up with it, and he never mentions it, but I suppose this is his chance."

"Great," said Harry bitterly. "Really great. Tell him from me I'll swap any time he wants. Tell him from me he's welcome to it."

"I'm not telling him anything," Hermione said shortly. "Tell him yourself. It's the only way to sort this out."

"I'm not running around after him trying to make him grow up!" Harry said, so loudly that several owls in a nearby tree started to fly off, not wanting to get themselves once I've got my neck broken or —"

"That's not funny," said Hermione quietly. "That's not funny at all." She looked extremely anxious. "Harry, I've been thinking about the way, the moment we get back to the castle?"

"Yeah, give Ron a good kick up the —"

"Write to Sirius. You've got to tell him what's happened. He asked you to keep him posted on everything that's going on, and he'll make sure it doesn't happen. I brought some parchment and a quill out with me —"

"Come off it," said Harry, looking around to check that they couldn't be overheard, but the grounds were quite deserted. "He'll probably come bursting right into the castle if I tell him someone's entered me in the Triwizard Tournament —"

"He'd want you to tell him," said Hermione sternly. "He's going to find out anyway —"

"How?"

"Harry, this isn't going to be kept quiet," said Hermione, very seriously. "This tournament's famous, and you're famous. The whole school knows about you competing. . . . You're already in half the books about You-Know-Who, you know . . . and Sirius wants to know about you. . . ."

"Okay, okay, I'll write to him," said Harry, throwing his last piece of toast into the lake. They both stood and watched it sink out of the water and scooped it beneath the surface. Then they returned to the castle.

"Whose owl am I going to use?" Harry said as they climbed the stairs. "He told me not to use Hedwig again."

"Ask Ron if you can borrow —"

"I'm not asking Ron for anything," Harry said flatly.

"Well, borrow one of the school owls, then, anyone can use them," said Hermione.

They went up to the Owlery. Hermione gave Harry a piece of parchment, a quill, and a bottle of ink, then strolled around the owl pens, while Harry sat down against a wall and wrote his letter.

Dear Sirius,

You told me to keep you posted on what's happening at Hogwarts, so here goes — I don't know if you've heard, but the school has got picked as a fourth champion. I don't know who put my name in the Goblet of Fire, because I didn't. The other champions are Cedric Diggory, Fleur Delacour, and Viktor Krum. He paused at this point, thinking. He had an urge to say something about the large weight of anxiety that seemed to be pressing down on him, but he didn't know how to translate this into words, so he simply dipped his quill back into the ink bottle and wrote,

Hope you're okay, and Buckbeak —

"Finished," he told Hermione, getting to his feet and brushing straw off his robes. At this, Hedwig came fluttering down and perched on his shoulder.

"I can't use you," Harry told her, looking around for the school owls. "I've got to use one of these. . . ."

Hedwig gave a very loud hoot and took off so suddenly that her talons cut into his shoulder. She kept her back to Harry and flew off. When the barn owl had flown off, Harry reached out to stroke Hedwig, but she clicked her beak furiously and flew off.

"First Ron, then you," said Harry angrily. "This isn't my fault."

If Harry had thought that matters would improve once everyone got used to the idea of him being champion, the following day would have proved him wrong. The rest of the school once he was back at lessons — and it was clear that the rest of the school, just like the Gryffindors, unlike the Gryffindors, however, they did not seem impressed.

The Hufflepuffs, who were usually on excellent terms with the Gryffindors, had turned remarkably cold toward the winner. It was plain that the Hufflepuffs felt that Harry had stolen their champion's glory; a feeling exacerbated, perhaps, by the fact that Cedric was one of the few who had ever given them any, having beaten Gryffindor once at Quidditch. Ernie Macmillan, who was on very well, did not talk to him even though they were repotting Bouncing Bulbs at the same tray — though they did not talk to him either. Ron wasn't talking to Harry either. Hermione sat between Harry and Ron, but even normally, they avoided making eye contact with each other. Harry thought even Professor Sprout seemed distant. He would have been looking forward to seeing Hagrid under normal circumstances, but Care of Magical Creatures was a subject he had no face with them since becoming champion.

Predictably, Malfoy arrived at Hagrid's cabin with his familiar sneer firmly in place.

"Ah, look, boys, it's the champion," he said to Crabbe and Goyle the moment he got within earshot of Harry. "Got you a good one. . . . It's going to be around much longer. . . . Half the Triwizard champions have died . . . how long d'you reckon you're going to be around?" Crabbe and Goyle guffawed sycophantically, but Malfoy had to stop there, because Hagrid emerged from the back of the cabin on a very large Blast-Ended Skrewt. To the class's horror, Hagrid proceeded to explain that the reason the skrewts had been brought in was the solution would be for each student to fix a leash on a skrewt and take it for a short walk. The only good thing about the skrewts was that they were easy to control.

"Take this thing for a walk?" he repeated in disgust, staring into one of the boxes. "And where exactly are we supposed to take it? It's a bloody sucker?"

"Roun' the middle," said Hagrid, demonstrating. "Er — yeh might want ter put on yer dragon-hide gloves, jus' as an extra precaution. . . . It's a big one. . . ."

Hagrid's real intention, however, was to talk to Harry away from the rest of the class. He waited until everyone else had gone, then he said very seriously, "So — yer competin', Harry. In the tournament. School champion."

"One of the champions," Harry corrected him.

Hagrid's beetle-black eyes looked very anxious under his wild eyebrows.

"No idea who put yeh in fer it, Harry?"

"You believe I didn't do it, then?" said Harry, concealing with difficulty the rush of gratitude he felt at Hagrid's words.

"Course I do," Hagrid grunted. "Yeh say it wasn't you, an' I believe yeh — an' Dumbledore believes yeh, an' all."

The pair of them looked out over the lawn; the class was widely scattered now, and all in great difficulty. The skrewts, ger shell-less and colorless, they had developed a kind of thick, grayish, shiny armor. They looked like a cross between gnizable heads or eyes. They had become immensely strong and very hard to control.

"Ah, I don't know, Harry," Hagrid sighed suddenly, looking back down at him with a worried expression on his face. "Should I tell you?"

The next few days were some of Harry's worst at Hogwarts. The closest he had ever come to feeling like this had been when the school had suspected him of attacking his fellow students. But Ron had been on his side then. He thought he could have had Ron back as a friend, but he wasn't going to try and persuade Ron to talk to him if Ron didn't want to. New friends, new sides.

Then there was the fact that Cedric looked the part of a champion so much more than he did. Exceptionally handsome, say who was receiving more admiration these days, Cedric or Viktor Krum. Harry actually saw the same sixth-year girl sign their school bags one lunchtime.

Double Potions was always a horrible experience, but these days it was nothing short of torture. Being shut in a dungeon with a professor whom seemed determined to punish Harry as much as possible for daring to become school champion, was about as bad as it got. Through one Friday's worth, with Hermione sitting next to him intoning "ignore them, ignore them, ignore them" under his breath. When he and Hermione arrived at Snape's dungeon after lunch, they found the Slytherins waiting outside, each and every one of them. For one wild moment Harry thought they were S.P.E.W. badges — then he saw that they all bore the same menacing expression. The underground passage:

He pressed his badge into his chest, and the message upon it vanished, to be replaced by another one, which glowed. The Slytherins howled with laughter. Each of them pressed their badges too, until the message POTTER STINKS was spread across the room, and neck.

"Want one, Granger?" said Malfoy, holding out a badge to Hermione. "I've got loads. But don't touch my hand, now. I've got a lot of things to do today. Some of the anger Harry had been feeling for days and days seemed to burst through a dam in his chest. He had realised that he had been wrong about them, and around them scrambled out of the way, backing down the corridor.

"Go on, then, Potter," Malfoy said quietly, drawing out his own wand. "Moody's not here to look after you now — do it. For a split second, they looked into each other's eyes, then, at exactly the same time, both acted.

"Densaugeo!" screamed Malfoy.

Ron had hurried forward to see what was wrong with her; Harry turned and saw Ron dragging Hermione's hand away. Her fingers, already larger than average — were now growing at an alarming rate; she was looking more and more like a beaver as her hands became more chicken, she felt them and let out a terrified cry.

Snape had arrived. The Slytherins clamored to give their explanations; Snape pointed a long yellow finger at Malfoy and said, "Potter attacked me, sir —"

"— and he hit Goyle — look —"

Snape examined Goyle, whose face now resembled something that would have been at home in a book on poisonous



"Hospital wing, Goyle," Snape said calmly.

"Malfoy got Hermione!" Ron said. "Look!"

He forced Hermione to show Snape her teeth — she was doing her best to hide them with her hands, though this was not the case. Ron and the other Slytherin girls were doubled up with silent giggles, pointing at Hermione from behind Snape's back.

Snape looked coldly at Hermione, then said, "I see no difference."

Hermione let out a whimper; her eyes filled with tears, she turned on her heel and ran, ran all the way up the corridor.

It was lucky, perhaps, that both Harry and Ron started shouting at Snape at the same time; lucky their voices echoed in the corridor. It was impossible for him to hear exactly what they were calling him. He got the gist, however.

"Let's see," he said, in his silkiest voice. "Fifty points from Gryffindor and a detention each for Potter and Weasley. No more!"

Harry's ears were ringing. The injustice of it made him want to curse Snape into a thousand slimy pieces. He passed his bag down onto the table. Ron was shaking with anger too — for a moment, it felt as though everything was back to normal. But then, as if by magic, Seamus instead, leaving Harry alone at his table. On the other side of the dungeon, Malfoy turned his back on Snape and walked across the room.

Harry sat there staring at Snape as the lesson began, picturing horrific things happening to him. . . . If only he knew how much he was back like that spider, jerking and twitching. . . .

"Antidotes!" said Snape, looking around at them all, his cold black eyes glittering unpleasantly. "You should all have prepared your antidotes, and then, we will be selecting someone on whom to test one. . . ."

Snape's eyes met Harry's, and Harry knew what was coming. Snape was going to poison him. Harry imagined picking up his bag and throwing it down on Snape's greasy head —

And then a knock on the dungeon door burst in on Harry's thoughts.

It was Colin Creevey; he edged into the room, beaming at Harry, and walked up to Snape's desk at the front of the room.

"Yes?" said Snape curtly.

"Please, sir, I'm supposed to take Harry Potter upstairs."

Snape stared down his hooked nose at Colin, whose smile faded from his eager face.

"Potter has another hour of Potions to complete," said Snape coldly. "He will come upstairs when this class is finished. You may go." Colin went pink.

"Sir — sir, Mr. Bagman wants him," he said nervously. "All the champions have got to go, I think they want to take photos of him. Harry would have given anything he owned to have stopped Colin saying those last few words. He chanced half a glance at the door."

"Very well, very well," Snape snapped. "Potter, leave your things here, I want you back down here later to test your antidotes."

"Please, sir — he's got to take his things with him," squeaked Colin. "All the champions —"

"Very well!" said Snape. "Potter — take your bag and get out of my sight!"

Harry swung his bag over his shoulder, got up, and headed for the door. As he walked through the Slytherin desks, he heard Colin say:

"It's amazing, isn't it, Harry?" said Colin, starting to speak the moment Harry had closed the dungeon door behind him.

"Yeah, really amazing," said Harry heavily as they set off toward the steps into the entrance hall. "What do they want with me?"

"The Daily Prophet, I think!"

"Great," said Harry dully. "Exactly what I need. More publicity."

"Good luck!" said Colin when they had reached the right room. Harry knocked on the door and entered.

He was in a fairly small classroom; most of the desks had been pushed away to the back of the room, leaving a large open space in front of the blackboard and covered with a long length of velvet. Five chairs had been set behind the velvet. Harry was looking at a witch he had never seen before, who was wearing magenta robes.

Viktor Krum was standing moodily in a corner as usual and not talking to anybody. Cedric and Fleur were in conversation; Cedric was looking at her, but she kept throwing back her head so that her long silvery hair caught the light. A paunchy man, holding a large bottle, was looking at the corner of his eye.

Bagman suddenly spotted Harry, got up quickly, and bounded forward.

"Ah, here he is! Champion number four! In you come, Harry, in you come . . . nothing to worry about, it's just the wand ceremony —"

"Wand weighing?" Harry repeated nervously.

"We have to check that your wands are fully functional, no problems, you know, as they're your most important tools," said Bagman. "Dumbledore. And then there's going to be a little photo shoot. This is Rita Skeeter," he added, gesturing toward the woman. "She's the reporter for the Daily Prophet. . . ."

"Maybe not that small, Ludo," said Rita Skeeter, her eyes on Harry.

Her hair was set in elaborate and curiously rigid curls that contrasted oddly with her heavy-jawed face. She wore jewel-colored robes and a handbag ended in two-inch nails, painted crimson.

"I wonder if I could have a little word with Harry before we start?" she said to Bagman, but still gazing fixedly at Harry. "What about it, Ludo?"

"Certainly!" cried Bagman. "That is — if Harry has no objection?"

"Er —" said Harry.

"Lovely," said Rita Skeeter, and in a second, her scarlet-taloned fingers had Harry's upper arm in a surprisingly strong grip. She was standing near a doorway.

"We don't want to be in there with all that noise," she said. "Let's see . . . ah, yes, this is nice and cozy."

It was a broom cupboard. Harry stared at her.

"Come along, dear — that's right — lovely," said Rita Skeeter again, perching herself precariously upon an upturned broom, throwing them into darkness. "Let's see now . . ."

She unsnapped her crocodile-skin handbag and pulled out a handful of candles, which she lit with a wave of her wand. "Ooing."

"You won't mind, Harry, if I use a Quick-Quotes Quill? It leaves me free to talk to you normally. . . ."

"A what?" said Harry.

Rita Skeeter's smile widened. Harry counted three gold teeth. She reached again into her crocodile bag and drew out a green quill. She held it out between them on a crate of Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover. She put the tip of the green quill on the parchment, where it stood balanced on its point, quivering slightly.

"Testing . . . my name is Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter."

Harry looked down quickly at the quill. The moment Rita Skeeter had spoken, the green quill had started to scribble. "Attractive blonde Rita Skeeter, forty-three, whose savage quill has punctured many inflated reputations —

"Lovely," said Rita Skeeter, yet again, and she ripped the top piece of parchment off, crumpled it up, and stuffed it into her bag. "Harry . . . what made you decide to enter the Triwizard Tournament?"

"Er —" said Harry again, but he was distracted by the quill. Even though he wasn't speaking, it was dashing across the parchment. An ugly scar, souvenir of a tragic past, disfigures the otherwise charming face of Harry Potter, whose eyes —

"Ignore the quill, Harry," said Rita Skeeter firmly. Reluctantly, Harry looked up at her instead. "Now — why did you decide to enter?"

"I didn't," said Harry. "I don't know how my name got into the Goblet of Fire. I didn't put it in there."

Rita Skeeter raised one heavily penciled eyebrow.

"Come now, Harry, there's no need to be scared of getting into trouble. We all know you shouldn't really have entered the tournament."

"But I didn't enter," Harry repeated. "I don't know who —"

"How do you feel about the tasks ahead?" said Rita Skeeter. "Excited? Nervous?"

"I haven't really thought . . . yeah, nervous, I suppose," said Harry. His insides squirmed uncomfortably as he spoke.

"Champions have died in the past, haven't they?" said Rita Skeeter briskly. "Have you thought about that at all?"

"Well . . . they say it's going to be a lot safer this year," said Harry.

The quill whizzed across the parchment between them, back and forward as though it were skating.

"Of course, you've looked death in the face before, haven't you?" said Rita Skeeter, watching him closely. "How would you feel about that?"

"Er," said Harry, yet again.

"Do you think that the trauma in your past might have made you keen to prove yourself? To live up to your name? Did you enter the tournament because —"

"I didn't enter," said Harry, starting to feel irritated.

"Can you remember your parents at all?" said Rita Skeeter, talking over him.

"No," said Harry.

"How do you think they'd feel if they knew you were competing in the Triwizard Tournament? Proud? Worried? Angry? Harry was feeling really annoyed now. How on earth was he to know how his parents would feel if they were alive? He avoided her gaze and looked down at words the quill had just written:

Tears fill those startlingly green eyes as our conversation turns to the parents he can barely remember.

"I have NOT got tears in my eyes!" said Harry loudly.

Before Rita Skeeter could say a word, the door of the broom cupboard was pulled open. Harry looked around, blinking at both of them, squashed into the cupboard.

"Dumbledore!" cried Rita Skeeter, with every appearance of delight — but Harry noticed that her quill and the parchment and Rita's clawed fingers were hastily snapping shut the clasp of her crocodile-skin bag. "How are you?" she said, standing up. "I hope you saw my piece over the summer about the International Confederation of Wizards' Conference?"

"Enchantingly nasty," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "I particularly enjoyed your description of me as an obsolete wizard." Rita Skeeter didn't look remotely abashed.

"I was just making the point that some of your ideas are a little old-fashioned, Dumbledore, and that many wizards in the Ministry will be delighted to hear the reasoning behind the rudeness, Rita," said Dumbledore, with a courteous bow and a smile.

He Weighing of the Wands is about to start, and it cannot take place if one of our champions is hidden in a broom cupboard. Very glad to get away from Rita Skeeter, Harry hurried back into the room. The other champions were now sitting in a circle around the velvet-covered table, where four of the five judges were now sitting — Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, and Madam Pomfrey. Harry saw her slip the parchment out of her bag again, spread it on her knee, suck the end of the Quick-Quotes Quill.

"May I introduce Mr. Ollivander?" said Dumbledore, taking his place at the judges' table and talking to the champions. "He is in excellent condition before the tournament."

Harry looked around, and with a jolt of surprise saw an old wizard with large, pale eyes standing quietly by the window. He was the man from whom Harry had bought his own wand over three years ago in Diagon Alley.

"Mademoiselle Delacour, could we have you first, please?" said Mr. Ollivander, stepping into the empty space in the room. Fleur Delacour swept over to Mr. Ollivander and handed him her wand.

"Hmmm . . ." he said.

He twirled the wand between his long fingers like a baton and it emitted a number of pink and gold sparks. Then he

"Yes," he said quietly, "nine and a half inches . . . inflexible . . . rosewood . . . and containing . . . dear me . . ."

"An 'air from ze 'ead of a veela," said Fleur. "One of my grandmuzzer's."

So Fleur was part veela, thought Harry, making a mental note to tell Ron . . . then he remembered that Ron wasn't supposed to know.

"Yes," said Mr. Ollivander, "yes, I've never used veela hair myself, of course. I find it makes for rather temperamental wands . . ."

Mr. Ollivander ran his fingers along the wand, apparently checking for scratches or bumps; then he muttered, "Orchid wood."

"Very well, very well, it's in fine working order," said Mr. Ollivander, scooping up the flowers and handing them to Fleur. Fleur glided back to her seat, smiling at Cedric as he passed her.

"Ah, now, this is one of mine, isn't it?" said Mr. Ollivander, with much more enthusiasm, as Cedric handed over his wand. It was the tail of a particularly fine male unicorn . . . must have been seventeen hands; nearly gored me with his horn after I plucked it. Pleasantly springy. It's in fine condition. . . . You treat it regularly?"

"Polished it last night," said Cedric, grinning.

Harry looked down at his own wand. He could see finger marks all over it. He gathered a fistful of robe from his knees and shot out of the end of it. Fleur Delacour gave him a very patronizing look, and he desisted.

Mr. Ollivander sent a stream of silver smoke rings across the room from the tip of Cedric's wand, pronounced himself satisfied, and Viktor Krum got up and slouched, round-shouldered and duck-footed, toward Mr. Ollivander. He thrust out his wand.

"Hmm," said Mr. Ollivander, "this is a Gregorovitch creation, unless I'm much mistaken? A fine wandmaker, though the wand is a bit old. He lifted the wand and examined it minutely, turning it over and over before his eyes.

"Yes . . . hornbeam and dragon heartstring?" he shot at Krum, who nodded. "Rather thicker than one usually sees . . . The hornbeam wand let off a blast like a gun, and a number of small, twittering birds flew out of the end and through the air.

"Good," said Mr. Ollivander, handing Krum back his wand. "Which leaves . . . Mr. Potter."

Harry got to his feet and walked past Krum to Mr. Ollivander. He handed over his wand.

"Aaaah, yes," said Mr. Ollivander, his pale eyes suddenly gleaming. "Yes, yes, yes. How well I remember."

Harry could remember too. He could remember it as though it had happened yesterday. . . .

Four summers ago, on his eleventh birthday, he had entered Mr. Ollivander's shop with Hagrid to buy a wand. Mr. Ollivander had shown him dozens of wands to try. Harry had waved what felt like every wand in the shop, until at last he had found the one that suited him. It contained a single feather from the tail of a phoenix. Mr. Ollivander had been very surprised that Harry had been so choosy. It was not until Harry asked what was curious about the wand that Mr. Ollivander explained that the phoenix feather in Harry's wand had come from Fawcett's.

Harry had never shared this piece of information with anybody. He was very fond of his wand, and as far as he was concerned, it was his. It helped — rather as he couldn't help being related to Aunt Petunia. However, he really hoped that Mr. Ollivander was right. The Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill might just explode with excitement if he did.

Mr. Ollivander spent much longer examining Harry's wand than anyone else's. Eventually, however, he made a fount of it, and Harry was pleased to find that it was still in perfect condition.

"Thank you all," said Dumbledore, standing up at the judges' table. "You may go back to your lessons now — or perhaps to the end of the tournament —"

Feeling that at last something had gone right today, Harry got up to leave, but the man with the black camera jumped up.

"Photos, Dumbledore, photos!" cried Bagman excitedly. "All the judges and champions, what do you think, Rita?"

"Er — yes, let's do those first," said Rita Skeeter, whose eyes were upon Harry again. "And then perhaps some individual portraits of the champions."

The photographs took a long time. Madame Maxime cast everyone else into shadow wherever she stood, and the photographer eventually had to sit while everyone else stood around her. Karkaroff kept twirling his goatee around his finger to give it a flourish.

He had been used to this sort of thing, skulked, half-hidden, at the back of the group. The photographer seemed keen to put him forward and dragging Harry into greater prominence. Then she insisted on separate shots of all the champions. At last, though, she was satisfied.

Harry went down to dinner. Hermione wasn't there — he supposed she was still in the hospital wing having her teeth fixed. He went to the Gryffindor Tower, thinking of all the extra work on Summoning Charms that he had to do. Up in the dormitory, he came to a stop.

"You've had an owl," said Ron brusquely the moment he walked in. He was pointing at Harry's pillow. The school barn owl had been waiting for him.

"Oh — right," said Harry.

"And we've got to do our detentions tomorrow night, Snape's dungeon," said Ron.

He then walked straight out of the room, not looking at Harry. For a moment, Harry considered going after him — he thought it might be quite appealing — but the lure of Sirius's answer was too strong. Harry strode over to the barn owl, took the letter, and returned to his room.

I can't say everything I would like to in a letter, it's too risky in case the owl is intercepted — we need to talk face-to-face. When are you coming to the Gryffindor Tower at one o'clock in the morning on the 22nd of November?

I know better than anyone that you can look after yourself, and while you're around Dumbledore and Moody I don't think you'll be in any danger. I'm having a good try. Entering you in that tournament would have been very risky, especially right under Dumbledore's nose. Be on the watch, Harry. I still want to hear about anything unusual. Let me know about the 22nd of November as quickly as you can.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### THE HUNGARIAN HORNTAIL

The prospect of talking face-to-face with Sirius was all that sustained Harry over the next fortnight, the only bright spot in a dark time.

inding himself school champion had worn off slightly now, and the fear of what was facing him had started to sink in. It was as if t were crouching ahead of him like some horrific monster, barring his path. He had never suffered nerves like these; not even at a match, not even his last one against Slytherin, which had decided who would win the Quidditch Cup. Harry was finally realizing that his whole life had been leading up to, and would finish with, the first task. . . .

Admittedly, he didn't see how Sirius was going to make him feel any better about having to perform an unknown piece of magic, but the mere sight of a friendly face would be something at the moment. Harry wrote back to Sirius saying that he was fine, and he and Hermione spent a long time going over plans for forcing any stragglers out of the common room on the way to drop a bag of Dungbombs, but they hoped they wouldn't have to resort to that — Filch would skin them alive. In the meantime, life became even worse for Harry within the confines of the castle, for Rita Skeeter had published her article. It was not so much a report on the tournament as a highly colored life story of Harry. Much of the front page had been devoted to his first two, six, and seven) had been all about Harry, the names of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang champions (misspellings hadn't been mentioned at all.

The article had appeared ten days ago, and Harry still got a sick, burning feeling of shame in his stomach every time he thought of the lot of things that he couldn't remember ever saying in his life, let alone in that broom cupboard.

I suppose I get my strength from my parents. I know they'd be very proud of me if they could see me now. . . . Yes, so I can't let it hurt me. . . . I know nothing will hurt me during the tournament, because they're watching over me. . . .

But Rita Skeeter had gone even further than transforming his "er's" into long, sickly sentences: She had interviewed Colin Creevey, and Harry has at last found love at Hogwarts. His close friend, Colin Creevey, says that Harry is rarely seen out of the company of a girl who, like Harry, is one of the top students in the school.

From the moment the article had appeared, Harry had had to endure people — Slytherins, mainly — quoting it at him.

"Want a hanky, Potter, in case you start crying in Transfiguration?"

"Since when have you been one of the top students in the school, Potter? Or is this a school you and Longbottom have been to?"

"Hey — Harry!"

"Yeah, that's right!" Harry found himself shouting as he wheeled around in the corridor, having had just about enough of people telling him to just off to do a bit more. . . .

"No — it was just — you dropped your quill."

It was Cho. Harry felt the color rising in his face.

"Oh — right — sorry," he muttered, taking the quill back.

"Er . . . good luck on Tuesday," she said. "I really hope you do well."

Which left Harry feeling extremely stupid.

Hermione had come in for her fair share of unpleasantness too, but she hadn't yet started yelling at innocent bystanders or trying to handle the situation.

"Stunningly pretty? Her?" Pansy Parkinson had shrieked the first time she had come face-to-face with Hermione after the first task. "Is she a Weasley?"

"Ignore it," Hermione said in a dignified voice, holding her head in the air and stalking past the sniggering Slytherin girls. "It's not my business."

But Harry couldn't ignore it. Ron hadn't spoken to him at all since he had told him about Snape's detentions. Harry had heard that they were forced to pickle rats' brains in Snape's dungeon, but that had been the day Rita's article had appeared, which had been drawing all the attention.

Hermione was furious with the pair of them; she went from one to the other, trying to force them to talk to each other. She had admitted that Harry hadn't put his name in the Goblet of Fire and apologized for calling him a liar.

"I didn't start this," Harry said stubbornly. "It's his problem."

"You miss him!" Hermione said impatiently. "And I know he misses you —"

"Miss him?" said Harry. "I don't miss him. . . ."

But this was a downright lie. Harry liked Hermione very much, but she just wasn't the same as Ron. There was much more to her. Hermione was your best friend. Harry still hadn't mastered Summoning Charms, he seemed to have developed something that would help. They consequently spent a lot of time poring over books during their lunchtimes.

Viktor Krum was in the library an awful lot too, and Harry wondered what he was up to. Was he studying, or was he just there to be seen? He had even complained about Krum being there — not that he ever bothered them — but because groups of giggling girls often gathered around him, and the noise distracting.

"He's not even good-looking!" she muttered angrily, glaring at Krum's sharp profile. "They only like him because he's a bit of a Wonky-Faint thing —"

"Wronski Feint," said Harry, through gritted teeth. Quite apart from liking to get Quidditch terms correct, it caused him to feel better. He had heard Hermione talking about Wonky-Faints.

It is a strange thing, but when you are dreading something, and would give anything to slow down time, it has a disorienting effect. It seemed to slip by as though someone had fixed the clocks to work at double speed. Harry's feeling of barely controlled panic was almost gone when he read the comments about the Daily Prophet article.

On the Saturday before the first task, all students in the third year and above were permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade for a bit, and Harry didn't need much persuasion.

"What about Ron, though?" he said. "Don't you want to go with him?"

"Oh . . . well . . ." Hermione went slightly pink. "I thought we might meet up with him in the Three Broomsticks. . . ."

"No," said Harry flatly.

"Oh Harry, this is so stupid —"

"I'll come, but I'm not meeting Ron, and I'm wearing my Invisibility Cloak."

"Oh all right then . . ." Hermione snapped, "but I hate talking to you in that Cloak, I never know if I'm looking at you or not."

So Harry put on his Invisibility Cloak in the dormitory, went back downstairs, and together he and Hermione set off for the village.

Harry felt wonderfully free under the Cloak; he watched other students walking past them as they entered the village. No horrible remarks came his way for a change, and nobody was quoting that stupid article.

"People keep looking at me now," said Hermione grumpily as they came out of Honeydukes Sweetshop later, eating

"Don't move your lips so much then."

"Come on, please just take off your Cloak for a bit, no one's going to bother you here."

"Oh yeah?" said Harry. "Look behind you."

Rita Skeeter and her photographer friend had just emerged from the Three Broomsticks pub. Talking in low voices, they moved toward the wall of Honeydukes to stop Rita Skeeter from hitting him with her crocodile-skin handbag. When they were gone, Harry went to watch the first task.

As he said it, his stomach flooded with a wave of molten panic. He didn't mention this; he and Hermione hadn't discussed it, and he didn't want to think about it.

"She's gone," said Hermione, looking right through Harry toward the end of the street. "Why don't we go and have a look? You don't have to talk to Ron!" she added irritably, correctly interpreting his silence.

The Three Broomsticks was packed, mainly with Hogwarts students enjoying their free afternoon, but also with a variety of other people. As Hogsmeade was the only all-wizard village in Britain, it was a bit of a haven for creatures like hags, who were often seen there.

It was very hard to move through crowds in the Invisibility Cloak, in case you accidentally trod on someone, which tended to happen. Harry took a spare table in the corner while Hermione went to buy drinks. On his way through the pub, Harry spotted Ron, who was sitting at a table.

Give Ron a good hard poke in the back of the head, he finally reached the table and sat down at it.

Hermione joined him a moment later and slipped him a butterbeer under his Cloak.

"I look like such an idiot, sitting here on my own," she muttered. "Luckily I brought something to do."

And she pulled out a notebook in which she had been keeping a record of S.P.E.W. members. Harry saw his and Ron's names in it, and that they had sat making up those predictions together, and Hermione had turned up and appointed them secretaries.

"You know, maybe I should try and get some of the villagers involved in S.P.E.W.," Hermione said thoughtfully, looking at the notebook.

"Yeah, right," said Harry. He took a swig of butterbeer under his Cloak. "Hermione, when are you going to give up on this?"

"When house-elves have decent wages and working conditions!" she hissed back. "You know, I'm starting to think it's not just the house-elves' kitchens?"

"No idea, ask Fred and George," said Harry.

Hermione lapsed into thoughtful silence, while Harry drank his butterbeer, watching the people in the pub. All of the students were swapping Chocolate Frog cards at a nearby table, both of them sporting Support Cedric Diggory! badges on their robes. Even the Ravenclaw friends. She wasn't wearing a Cedric badge though. . . . This cheered up Harry very slightly. . . .

What wouldn't he have given to be one of these people, sitting around laughing and talking, with nothing to worry about? His name hadn't come out of the Goblet of Fire. He wouldn't be wearing the Invisibility Cloak, for one thing. Ron wouldn't be so busy imagining what deadly dangerous task the school champions would be facing on Tuesday. He'd have been really sitting on Cedric with everyone else, safe in a seat at the back of the stands. . . .

He wondered how the other champions were feeling. Every time he had seen Cedric lately, he had been surrounded by a crowd of people. He had seen her come from time to time in the corridors; she looked exactly as she always did, haughty and unruffled. And Krum just stood there, looking at Sirius, and the tight, tense knot in his chest seemed to ease slightly. He would be speaking to him in the common room, meeting at the common room fire — assuming nothing went wrong, as everything else had done lately. . . .

"Look, it's Hagrid!" said Hermione.

The back of Hagrid's enormous shaggy head — he had mercifully abandoned his bunches — emerged over the crowd. He was looking at Professor Moody. Hagrid had his usual look, but standing up carefully, he saw that Hagrid had been leaning low, talking to Professor Moody. Hagrid had his usual look, but standing up carefully, he saw that Hagrid had been leaning low, talking to Professor Moody. Hagrid had his usual look, but standing up carefully, he saw that Hagrid had been leaning low, talking to Professor Moody.

Madam Rosmerta, the pretty landlady, didn't seem to think much of this; she was looking askance at Moody. She thought it was an insult to her mulled mead, but Harry knew better. Moody had told them all during their last Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson that it was so easy for Dark wizards to poison an unattended cup.

As Harry watched, he saw Hagrid and Moody get up to leave. He waved, then remembered that Hagrid couldn't see him. He was standing. He tapped Hagrid in the small of the back (being unable to reach his shoulder), muttered something to Hagrid, and then turned toward Harry and Hermione's table.

"All right, Hermione?" said Hagrid loudly.

"Hello," said Hermione, smiling back.

Moody limped around the table and bent down; Harry thought he was reading the S.P.E.W. notebook, until he muttered something to Hagrid. Harry stared at him in amazement. The large chunk missing from Moody's nose was particularly obvious at a few inches.

"Can your eye — I mean, can you — ?"

"Yeah, it can see through Invisibility Cloaks," Moody said quietly. "And it's come in useful at times, I can tell you."

Hagrid was beaming down at Harry too. Harry knew Hagrid couldn't see him, but Moody had obviously told Hagrid that he could.

W. notebook as well, and said in a whisper so low that only Harry could hear it, "Harry, meet me tonight at midnight." Straightening up, Hagrid said loudly, "Nice ter see yeh, Hermione," winked, and departed. Moody followed him. "Why does Hagrid want me to meet him at midnight?" Harry said, very surprised. "Does he?" said Hermione, looking startled. "I wonder what he's up to? I don't know whether you should go, Harry. . . . ate for Sirius."

It was true that going down to Hagrid's at midnight would mean cutting his meeting with Sirius very fine indeed; Hermione wouldn't go — always assuming she would consent to take the note, of course — Harry, however, thought it better just to know what this might be; Hagrid had never asked Harry to visit him so late at night.

At half past eleven that evening, Harry, who had pretended to go up to bed early, pulled the Invisibility Cloak back over himself. Quite a few people were still in there. The Creevey brothers had managed to get hold of a stack of Support Cedric Diagon Alley! instead. So far, however, all they had managed to do was get the badges stuck on POTTER STINK! or so, keeping an eye on his watch. Then Hermione opened the Fat Lady for him from outside as they had planned to enter the castle.

The grounds were very dark. Harry walked down the lawn toward the lights shining in Hagrid's cabin. The inside of the castle was lit up. Madame Maxime talking inside it as he knocked on Hagrid's front door.

"You there, Harry?" Hagrid whispered, opening the door and looking around.

"Yeah," said Harry, slipping inside the cabin and pulling the Cloak down off his head. "What's up?"

"Got summat ter show yeh," said Hagrid.

There was an air of enormous excitement about Hagrid. He was wearing a flower that resembled an oversized article of axle grease, but he had certainly attempted to comb his hair — Harry could see the comb's broken teeth tangled in his hair.

"What're you showing me?" Harry said warily, wondering if the skrewts had laid eggs, or Hagrid had managed to buy a new pet.

"Come with me, keep quiet, an' keep yerself covered with that Cloak," said Hagrid. "We won't take Fang, he won't like it."

"Listen, Hagrid, I can't stay long. . . . I've got to be back up at the castle by one o'clock —"

But Hagrid wasn't listening; he was opening the cabin door and striding off into the night. Harry hurried to follow and the Beauxbatons carriage.

"Hagrid, what —?"

"Shhhh!" said Hagrid, and he knocked three times on the door bearing the crossed golden wands.

Madame Maxime opened it. She was wearing a silk shawl wrapped around her massive shoulders. She smiled when she saw Harry.

"Ah, 'Agrid . . . it is time?"

"Bong-sewer," said Hagrid, beaming at her, and holding out a hand to help her down the golden steps.

Madame Maxime closed the door behind her, Hagrid offered her his arm, and they set off around the edge of the park. The other guests were all bewildered, running to keep up with them. Had Hagrid wanted to show him Madame Maxime? He could see her from the carriage. But it seemed that Madame Maxime was in for the same treat as Harry, because after a while she said playfully, "What's this?"

"Yeh'll enjoy this," said Hagrid gruffly, "worth seein', trust me. On'y — don' go tellin' anyone I showed yeh, right? Yeh'r a wizard, eh?"

"Of course not," said Madame Maxime, fluttering her long black eyelashes.

And still they walked, Harry getting more and more irritated as he jogged along in their wake, checking his watch every few minutes. He might make him miss Sirius. If they didn't get there soon, he was going to turn around, go straight back to the castle.

axime. . . .

But then — when they had walked so far around the perimeter of the forest that the castle and the lake were out of sight — suddenly came a deafening, earsplitting roar. . . .

Hagrid led Madame Maxime around a clump of trees and came to a halt. Harry hurried up alongside them — for a second he was alone — and then his mouth fell open.

Dragons.

Four fully grown, enormous, vicious-looking dragons were rearing onto their hind legs inside an enclosure fenced with high stone walls. They were shooting into the dark sky from their open, fanged mouths, fifty feet above the ground on their outstretched necks. One was a smooth-scaled green one, which was writhing and stamping with all its might. Another was a smooth-scaled blue one, which was shooting mushroom-shaped fire clouds into the air; and a gigantic black one, more lizard-like than the others. At least thirty wizards, seven or eight to each dragon, were attempting to control them, pulling on the chains connected to their necks. Harry looked up, high above him, and saw the eyes of the black dragon, with vertical pupils like a cat's, bulging wide open. It was making a horrible noise, a yowling, screeching scream. . . .

"Keep back there, Hagrid!" yelled a wizard near the fence, straining on the chain he was holding. "They can shoot fire from their mouths!"

"Is'n' it beautiful?" said Hagrid softly.

"It's no good!" yelled another wizard. "Stunning Spells, on the count of three!"

Harry saw each of the dragon keepers pull out his wand.

"Stupefy!" they shouted in unison, and the Stunning Spells shot into the darkness like fiery rockets, bursting in showers of sparks. The dragon nearest to them teetered dangerously on its back legs; its jaws stretched wide in a silent howl. It fell — then, very slowly, it fell. Several tons of sinewy, scaly-black dragon hit the ground with a thud that Harry could hear. The dragon keepers lowered their wands and walked forward to their fallen charges, each of which was the size of a hippogriff. They were using iron pegs, which they forced deep into the ground with their wands.

"Wan' a closer look?" Hagrid asked Madame Maxime excitedly. The pair of them moved right up to the fence, and Harry turned, and Harry realized who it was: Charlie Weasley.

"All right, Hagrid?" he panted, coming over to talk. "They should be okay now — we put them out with a Sleeping Draught up in the dark and the quiet — but, like you saw, they weren't happy, not happy at all —"

"What breeds you got here, Charlie?" said Hagrid, gazing at the closest dragon, the black one, with something close to a rip of gleaming yellow beneath its wrinkled black eyelid.

"This is a Hungarian Horntail," said Charlie. "There's a Common Welsh Green over there, the smaller one — a Swedish Short-Snout red."

Charlie looked around; Madame Maxime was strolling away around the edge of the enclosure, gazing at the Stunned Dragon.

"I didn't know you were bringing her, Hagrid," Charlie said, frowning. "The champions aren't supposed to know what's going on."

"Jus' thought she'd like ter see 'em," shrugged Hagrid, still gazing, enraptured, at the dragons.

"Really romantic date, Hagrid," said Charlie, shaking his head.

"Four . . ." said Hagrid, "so it's one fer each o' the champions, is it? What've they gotta do — fight 'em?"

"Just get past them, I think," said Charlie. "We'll be on hand if it gets nasty, Extinguishing Spells at the ready. They want you to win this, I don't envy the one who gets the Horntail. Vicious thing. Its back end's as dangerous as its front, look."

Charlie pointed toward the Horntail's tail, and Harry saw long, bronze-colored spikes protruding along it every few inches. Five of Charlie's fellow keepers staggered up to the Horntail at that moment, carrying a clutch of huge granite-gray eggs to the Horntail's side. Hagrid let out a moan of longing.

"I've got them counted, Hagrid," said Charlie sternly. Then he said, "How's Harry?"

"Fine," said Hagrid. He was still gazing at the eggs.

"Just hope he's still fine after he's faced this lot," said Charlie grimly, looking out over the dragons' enclosure. "I didn't know she's already having kittens about him. . . ." Charlie imitated his mother's anxious voice. "'How could they let him enter the arena? He's not all safe, I thought there was going to be an age limit!' She was in floods after that Daily Prophet article about him. 'He's not safe!'"

Harry had had enough. Trusting to the fact that Hagrid wouldn't miss him, with the attractions of four dragons and Madame Maxime away, back to the castle.

He didn't know whether he was glad he'd seen what was coming or not. Perhaps this way was better. The first shock of the Tuesday, he would have passed out cold in front of the whole school . . . but maybe he would anyway. . . . He was going to be going more than a narrow strip of wood — against a fifty-foot-high, scaly, spike-ridden, fire-breathing dragon. And he had to get to the castle. Harry sped up, skirting the edge of the forest; he had just under fifteen minutes to get back to the fireside and talk to someone more than he did right now — when, without warning, he ran into something very solid.

Harry fell backward, his glasses askew, clutching the Cloak around him. A voice nearby said, "Ouch! Who's there?"

Harry hastily checked that the Cloak was covering him and lay very still, staring up at the dark outline of the wizard head in the portrait hole.

"Who's there?" said Karkaroff again, very suspiciously, looking around in the darkness. Harry remained still and silent. He had just hit some sort of animal; he was looking around at waist height, as though expecting to see a dog. Then he crept back to the place where the dragons were.

Very slowly and very carefully, Harry got to his feet and set off again as fast as he could without making too much noise. He had no doubt whatsoever what Karkaroff was up to. He had sneaked off his ship to try and find out what the first task was. He saw Madame Maxime heading off around the forest together — they were hardly difficult to spot at a distance . . . and now all Karkaroff and Madame Maxime, would know what was in store for the champions.

By the looks of it, the only champion who would be facing the unknown on Tuesday was Cedric.

Harry reached the castle, slipped in through the front doors, and began to climb the marble stairs; he was very out of breath. It took him five minutes to get up to the fire. . . .

"Balderdash!" he gasped at the Fat Lady, who was snoozing in her frame in front of the portrait hole.

"If you say so," she muttered sleepily, without opening her eyes, and the picture swung forward to admit him. Harry was surprised to find that it smelled quite normal. Hermione had not needed to set off any Dungbombs to ensure that he and Sirius were safe. Harry pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and threw himself into an armchair in front of the fire. The room was in semidarkness. On the table, the Support Cedric Diggory! badges the Creeveys had been trying to improve were glinting in the firelight. The Fat Lady, Mrs. Bagnon, and Mrs. Pince, and jumped.

Sirius's head was sitting in the fire. If Harry hadn't seen Mr. Diggory do exactly this back in the Weasleys' kitchen, it would have been a shocking sight. Seeing it, however, he was grinning into the first smile he had worn for days, he scrambled out of his chair, crouched down by the hearth, and said, "Sirius!" Sirius looked different from Harry's memory of him. When they had said good-bye, Sirius's face had been gaunt and his hair was short and clean now, Sirius's face was fuller, and he looked younger, much more like the only photograph Harry had of him.

"Never mind me, how are you?" said Sirius seriously.

"I'm —" For a second, Harry tried to say "fine" — but he couldn't do it. Before he could stop himself, he was talking about how he hadn't entered the tournament of his own free will, how Rita Skeeter had lied about him in the Daily Prophet, how he couldn't get Ron, Ron not believing him, Ron's jealousy . . .

". . . and now Hagrid's just shown me what's coming in the first task, and it's dragons, Sirius, and I'm a goner," he finished. Sirius looked at him, eyes full of concern, eyes that had not yet lost the look that Azkaban had given them — that dead, empty look — without interruption, but now he said, "Dragons we can deal with, Harry, but we'll get to that in a minute — I haven't

the fire, but they could be back at any time. There are things I need to warn you about."

"What?" said Harry, feeling his spirits slip a further few notches. . . . Surely there could be nothing worse than dragons.

"Karkaroff," said Sirius. "Harry, he was a Death Eater. You know what Death Eaters are, don't you?"

"Yes — he — what?"

"He was caught, he was in Azkaban with me, but he got released. I'd bet everything that's why Dumbledore wanted a Karkaroff. Put him into Azkaban in the first place."

"Karkaroff got released?" Harry said slowly — his brain seemed to be struggling to absorb yet another piece of shock.

"He did a deal with the Ministry of Magic," said Sirius bitterly. "He said he'd seen the error of his ways, and then he was in his place. . . . He's not very popular in there, I can tell you. And since he got out, from what I can tell, he's been teaching at that school of his. So watch out for the Durmstrang champion as well."

"Okay," said Harry slowly. "But . . . are you saying Karkaroff put my name in the goblet? Because if he did, he's a really good actor, me from competing."

"We know he's a good actor," said Sirius, "because he convinced the Ministry of Magic to set him free, didn't he? Now he's — you and the rest of the world," said Harry bitterly.

"— and reading between the lines of that Skeeter woman's article last month, Moody was attacked the night before last, arm," Sirius said hastily, seeing Harry about to speak, "but I don't think so, somehow. I think someone tried to stop him. It would be a lot more difficult with him around. And no one's going to look into it too closely; Mad-Eye's heard intruders at the Ministry, a real thing. Moody was the best Auror the Ministry ever had."

"So . . . what are you saying?" said Harry slowly. "Karkaroff's trying to kill me? But — why?"

Sirius hesitated.

"I've been hearing some very strange things," he said slowly. "The Death Eaters seem to be a bit more active than usual, don't they? Someone set off the Dark Mark . . . and then — did you hear about that Ministry of Magic witch who's gone missing?"

"Bertha Jorkins?" said Harry.

"Exactly . . . she disappeared in Albania, and that's definitely where Voldemort was rumored to be last . . . and she was never seen again, is she?"

"Yeah, but . . . it's not very likely she'd have walked straight into Voldemort, is it?" said Harry.

"Listen, I knew Bertha Jorkins," said Sirius grimly. "She was at Hogwarts when I was, a few years above your dad and I. It's not a good combination, Harry. I'd say she'd be very easy to lure into a trap."

"So . . . so Voldemort could have found out about the tournament?" said Harry. "Is that what you mean? You think Karkaroff?"

"I don't know," said Sirius slowly, "I just don't know . . . Karkaroff doesn't strike me as the type who'd go back to Voldemort to help him. But whoever put your name in that goblet did it for a reason, and I can't help thinking the tournament would be a good idea."

"Looks like a really good plan from where I'm standing," said Harry, grinning bleakly. "They'll just have to stand back and watch."

"Right — these dragons," said Sirius, speaking very quickly now. "There's a way, Harry. Don't be tempted to try a Stunspell. If you're knocked out by a single Stunner, you need about half a dozen wizards at a time to overcome a dragon —"

"Yeah, I know, I just saw," said Harry.

"But you can do it alone," said Sirius. "There is a way, and a simple spell's all you need. Just —"

But Harry held up a hand to silence him, his heart suddenly pounding as though it would burst. He could hear footsteps.

"Go!" he hissed at Sirius. "Go! There's someone coming!"

Harry scrambled to his feet, hiding the fire — if someone saw Sirius's face within the walls of Hogwarts, they would realize it, Harry, would be questioned about Sirius's whereabouts —

Harry heard a tiny pop! in the fire behind him and knew Sirius had gone. He watched the bottom of the spiral staircase disappear, and stopped Sirius from telling him how to get past a dragon?

It was Ron. Dressed in his maroon paisley pajamas, Ron stopped dead facing Harry across the room, and looked around.

"Who were you talking to?" he said.

"What's that got to do with you?" Harry snarled. "What are you doing down here at this time of night?"

"I just wondered where you —" Ron broke off, shrugging. "Nothing. I'm going back to bed."

"Just thought you'd come nosing around, did you?" Harry shouted. He knew that Ron had no idea what he'd walked in on. In that moment he hated everything about Ron, right down to the several inches of bare ankle showing beneath his pajamas.

"Sorry about that," said Ron, his face reddening with anger. "Should've realized you didn't want to be disturbed. I'll leave now."

Harry seized one of the POTTER REALLY STINKS badges off the table and chucked it, as hard as he could, across the room.

"There you go," Harry said. "Something for you to wear on Tuesday. You might even have a scar now, if you're lucky."

He strode across the room toward the stairs; he half expected Ron to stop him, he would even have liked Ron to throw something at him, and Harry, having stormed upstairs, lay awake in bed fuming for a long time afterward and didn't hear him come up.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### THE FIRST TASK

Harry got up on Sunday morning and dressed so inattentively that it was a while before he realized he was trying to put his clothes on the wrong parts of his body, he hurried off to find Hermione, locating her at the Gryffindor table.



ny. Feeling too queasy to eat, Harry waited until Hermione had swallowed her last spoonful of porridge, then dragged her to the lake. He walked around the lake, and about everything Sirius had said, while they took another long walk around the lake.

Alarmed as she was by Sirius's warnings about Karkaroff, Hermione still thought that the dragons were the more preferable option. "Let's just try and keep you alive until Tuesday evening," she said desperately, "and then we can worry about Karkaroff." They walked three times around the lake, trying all the way to think of a simple spell that would subdue a dragon. None came. Instead, here, Harry pulled down every book he could find on dragons, and both of them set to work searching through them.

"Talon-clipping by charms . . . treating scale-rot . . ." This is no good, this is for nutters like Hagrid who want to keep the dragons. "Dragons are extremely difficult to slay, owing to the ancient magic that imbues their thick hides, which none but the most powerful of wizards could do it. . . ."

"Let's try some simple spellbooks, then," said Harry, throwing aside *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*. He returned to the table with a pile of spellbooks, set them down, and began to flick through each in turn, Hermione following him. "Well, there are Switching Spells . . . but what's the point of Switching it? Unless you swapped its fangs for wine-gums. That's a double is, like that book said, not much is going to get through a dragon's hide. . . . I'd say Transfigure it, but something's wrong with Professor McGonagall . . . unless you're supposed to put the spell on yourself? Maybe to give yourself extra powers? But I've never seen it in class, I only know about them because I've been doing O.W.L. practice papers. . . ."

"Hermione," Harry said, through gritted teeth, "will you shut up for a bit, please? I'm trying to concentrate." But all that happened, when Hermione fell silent, was that Harry's brain filled with a sort of blank buzzing, which didn't help. He looked down the index of Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed. Instant scalping . . . but dragons had no hair . . . pepper breath . . . horn tongue . . . just what he needed, to give it an extra weapon . . .

"Oh no, he's back again, why can't he read on his stupid ship?" said Hermione irritably as Viktor Krum slouched in, came to a table in a distant corner with a pile of books. "Come on, Harry, we'll go back to the common room . . . his fan club'll be here waiting for him." And sure enough, as they left the library, a gang of girls tiptoed past them, one of them wearing a Bulgaria scarf tied around her head. Harry barely slept that night. When he awoke on Monday morning, he seriously considered for the first time ever just leaving the castle. At breakfast time, and thought about what leaving the castle would mean, he knew he couldn't do it. It was the only place he had ever been happy with his parents too, but he couldn't remember that.

Somehow, the knowledge that he would rather be here and facing a dragon than back on Privet Drive with Dudley was a relief. He went on with difficulty (his throat wasn't working too well), and as he and Hermione got up, he saw Cedric Diggory leaving the library. Cedric still didn't know about the dragons . . . the only champion who didn't, if Harry was right in thinking that Maximilian Black was the one. "Hermione, I'll see you in the greenhouses," Harry said, coming to his decision as he watched Cedric leaving the Hall.

"Harry, you'll be late, the bell's about to ring —"

"I'll catch you up, okay?"

By the time Harry reached the bottom of the marble staircase, Cedric was at the top. He was with a load of sixth-year students. They were among those who had been quoting Rita Skeeter's article at him every time he went near them. He followed them down the corridor. This gave Harry an idea. Pausing at a distance from them, he pulled out his wand, and took careful aim.

"Diffindo!"

Cedric's bag split. Parchment, quills, and books spilled out of it onto the floor. Several bottles of ink smashed.

"Don't bother," said Cedric in an exasperated voice as his friends bent down to help him. "Tell Flitwick I'm coming, go on." This was exactly what Harry had been hoping for. He slipped his wand back into his robes, waited until Cedric's friends had gone, and then he went to the corridor, which was now empty of everyone but himself and Cedric.

"Hi," said Cedric, picking up a copy of *A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration* that was now splattered with ink. "My bag's broken." "Cedric," said Harry, "the first task is dragons."

"What?" said Cedric, looking up.

"Dragons," said Harry, speaking quickly, in case Professor Flitwick came out to see where Cedric had got to. "They've been talking about dragons. Cedric stared at him. Harry saw some of the panic he'd been feeling since Saturday night flickering in Cedric's gray eyes.

"Are you sure?" Cedric said in a hushed voice.

"Dead sure," said Harry. "I've seen them."

"But how did you find out? We're not supposed to know. . . ."

"Never mind," said Harry quickly — he knew Hagrid would be in trouble if he told the truth. "But I'm not the only one who knows. Both Cedric and I saw the dragons too."

Cedric straightened up, his arms full of inky quills, parchment, and books, his ripped bag dangling off one shoulder. He looked at Harry.

"Why are you telling me?" he asked.

Harry looked at him in disbelief. He was sure Cedric wouldn't have asked that if he had seen the dragons himself. He was sure Cedric would have said, "Well, perhaps Malfoy or Snape . . ."

"It's just . . . fair, isn't it?" he said to Cedric. "We all know now . . . we're on an even footing, aren't we?"

Cedric was still looking at him in a slightly suspicious way when Harry heard a familiar clunking noise behind him. He turned.

"Come with me, Potter," he growled. "Diggory, off you go."

Harry stared apprehensively at Moody. Had he overheard them?

"Er — Professor, I'm supposed to be in Herbology —"

"Never mind that, Potter. In my office, please. . . ."

Harry followed him, wondering what was going to happen to him now. What if Moody wanted to know how he'd found out, or just turn Harry into a ferret? Well, it might be easier to get past a dragon if he were a ferret, Harry thought dully, fifty feet . . .

He followed Moody into his office. Moody closed the door behind them and turned to look at Harry, his magical eye staring.

"That was a very decent thing you just did, Potter," Moody said quietly.

Harry didn't know what to say; this wasn't the reaction he had expected at all.

"Sit down," said Moody, and Harry sat, looking around.

He had visited this office under two of its previous occupants. In Professor Lockhart's day, the walls had been plastered with photographs of himself. When Lupin had lived here, you were more likely to come across a specimen of some fascinating new Dark creature. The room was full of a number of exceptionally odd objects that Harry supposed Moody had used in the days when he had been a teacher. On his desk stood what looked like a large, cracked, glass spinning top; Harry recognized it at once as a Sneakoscope, one of Moody's. In the corner on a small table stood an object that looked something like an extra-squiggly, golden television set. It was hung opposite Harry on the wall, but it was not reflecting the room. Shadowy figures were moving around inside it, like my Dark Detectors, do you?" said Moody, who was watching Harry closely.

"What's that?" Harry asked, pointing at the squiggly golden aerial.

"Secrecy Sensor. Vibrates when it detects concealment and lies . . . no use here, of course, too much interference — from your homework. Been humming ever since I got here. I had to disable my Sneakoscope because it wouldn't stop whistling. Otherwise, it could be picking up more than kid stuff," he added in a growl.

"And what's the mirror for?"

"Oh that's my Foe-Glass. See them out there, skulking around? I'm not really in trouble until I see the whites of their eyes. He let out a short, harsh laugh, and pointed to the large trunk under the window. It had seven keyholes in a row. Harry looked at him sharply back to earth.

"So . . . found out about the dragons, have you?"

Harry hesitated. He'd been afraid of this — but he hadn't told Cedric, and he certainly wasn't going to tell Moody, that was certain.

"It's all right," said Moody, sitting down and stretching out his wooden leg with a groan. "Cheating's a traditional part of the game."

"I didn't cheat," said Harry sharply. "It was — a sort of accident that I found out."

Moody grinned. "I wasn't accusing you, laddie. I've been telling Dumbledore from the start, he can be as high-minded as he likes. They'll have told their champions everything they can. They want to win. They want to beat Dumbledore. They'd like to know how you did it. Moody gave another harsh laugh, and his magical eye swiveled around so fast it made Harry feel queasy to watch it.

"So . . . got any ideas how you're going to get past your dragon yet?" said Moody.

"No," said Harry.

"Well, I'm not going to tell you," said Moody gruffly. "I don't show favoritism, me. I'm just going to give you some good advice."

"I haven't got any," said Harry, before he could stop himself.

"Excuse me," growled Moody, "you've got strengths if I say you've got them. Think now. What are you best at?"

Harry tried to concentrate. What was he best at? Well, that was easy, really —

"Quidditch," he said dully, "and a fat lot of help —"

"That's right," said Moody, staring at him very hard, his magical eye barely moving at all. "You're a damn good flier from what I hear."

"Yeah, but . . ." Harry stared at him. "I'm not allowed a broom, I've only got my wand —"

"My second piece of general advice," said Moody loudly, interrupting him, "is to use a nice, simple spell that will enable you to get past the dragon. Harry looked at him blankly. What did he need?

"Come on, boy . . ." whispered Moody. "Put them together . . . it's not that difficult. . . ."

And it clicked. He was best at flying. He needed to pass the dragon in the air. For that, he needed his Firebolt. And for that, he needed to get past the dragon. "Hermione," Harry whispered, when he had sped into the greenhouse three minutes later, uttering a hurried apology to the professor who had caught him.

"What d'you think I've been trying to do, Harry?" she whispered back, her eyes round with anxiety over the top of the greenhouse. "Hermione, I need to learn how to do a Summoning Charm properly by tomorrow afternoon."

And so they practiced. They didn't have lunch, but headed for a free classroom, where Harry tried with all his might to get the books and quills to fly. He was having problems. The books and quills kept losing heart halfway across the room and dropping like stones to the floor. "Concentrate, Harry, concentrate. . . ."

"What d'you think I'm trying to do?" said Harry angrily. "A great big dragon keeps popping up in my head for some reason. He wanted to skip Divination to keep practicing, but Hermione refused point-blank to skive off Arithmancy, and there was a detention over an hour of Professor Trelawney, who spent half the lesson telling everyone that the position of Mars with relation to the planets is in great danger of sudden, violent deaths."

"Well, that's good," said Harry loudly, his temper getting the better of him, "just as long as it's not drawn-out. I don't want to be late for my lesson. Ron looked for a moment as though he was going to laugh; he certainly caught Harry's eye for the first time in days, but he didn't. He spent the rest of the lesson trying to attract small objects toward him under the table with his wand. He managed to get a few, but he was pretty sure that was his prowess at Summoning Charms — perhaps the fly was just stupid."

He forced down some dinner after Divination, then returned to the empty classroom with Hermione, using the Invisibility Spell to get past the professor who had caught him.

midnight. They would have stayed longer, but Peeves turned up and, pretending to think that Harry wanted things that Hermione left in a hurry before the noise attracted Filch, and went back to the Gryffindor common room, which was now empty. At two o'clock in the morning, Harry stood near the fireplace, surrounded by heaps of objects: books, quills, several unidentifiable revolvers. Only in the last hour had Harry really got the hang of the Summoning Charm.

"That's better, Harry, that's loads better," Hermione said, looking exhausted but very pleased.

"Well, now we know what to do next time I can't manage a spell," Harry said, throwing a rune dictionary back to Hermione. ". . ." He raised his wand once more. "Accio Dictionary!"

The heavy book soared out of Hermione's hand, flew across the room, and Harry caught it.

"Harry, I really think you've got it!" said Hermione delightedly.

"Just as long as it works tomorrow," Harry said. "The Firebolt's going to be much farther away than the stuff in here, it's on the grounds. . . ."

"That doesn't matter," said Hermione firmly. "Just as long as you're concentrating really, really hard on it, it'll come. He'll find it."

Harry had been focusing so hard on learning the Summoning Charm that evening that some of his blind panic had leaked through. The atmosphere in the school was one of great tension and excitement. Lessons were to stop at midday, giving all the students of course, they didn't yet know what they would find there.

Harry felt oddly separate from everyone around him, whether they were wishing him good luck or hissing "We'll have you so nervous so advanced that he wondered whether he mightn't just lose his head when they tried to lead him out to the grounds, having in a more peculiar fashion than ever, rushing past in great dollops, so that one moment he seemed to be sitting down and then getting up, and then (where had the morning gone? the last of the dragon-free hours?), Professor McGonagall was watching.

"Potter, the champions have to come down onto the grounds now. . . . You have to get ready for your first task."

"Okay," said Harry, standing up, his fork falling onto his plate with a clatter.

"Good luck, Harry," Hermione whispered. "You'll be fine!"

"Yeah," said Harry in a voice that was most unlike his own.

He left the Great Hall with Professor McGonagall. She didn't seem herself either; in fact, she looked nearly as anxious as he. Into the cold November afternoon, she put her hand on his shoulder.

"Now, don't panic," she said, "just keep a cool head. . . . We've got wizards standing by to control the situation if it gets out of hand, and nobody will think any the worse of you. . . . Are you all right?"

"Yes," Harry heard himself say. "Yes, I'm fine."

She was leading him toward the place where the dragons were, around the edge of the forest, but when they approached the tent, visible, Harry saw that a tent had been erected, its entrance facing them, screening the dragons from view.

"You're to go in here with the other champions," said Professor McGonagall, in a rather shaky sort of voice, "and wait until I call you in. . . . I'll be telling you the — the procedure. . . . Good luck."

"Thanks," said Harry, in a flat, distant voice. She left him at the entrance of the tent. Harry went inside.

Fleur Delacour was sitting in a corner on a low wooden stool. She didn't look nearly as composed as usual, but rather nervous. What Harry supposed was his way of showing nerves. Cedric was pacing up and down. When Harry entered, Cedric gave up, his face working rather hard, as though they had forgotten how to do it.

"Harry! Good-o!" said Bagman happily, looking around at him. "Come in, come in, make yourself at home!"

Bagman looked somehow like a slightly overblown cartoon figure, standing amid all the pale-faced champions. He waved his wand.

"Well, now we're all here — time to fill you in!" said Bagman brightly. "When the audience has assembled, I'm going to throw a ball of purple silk and shook it at them — "from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face. . . . I'll tell you something else too . . . ah, yes . . . your task is to collect the golden egg!"

Harry glanced around. Cedric had nodded once, to show that he understood Bagman's words, and then started pacing. Krum hadn't reacted at all. Perhaps they thought they might be sick if they opened their mouths; that was certainly possible.

And in no time at all, hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of feet could be heard passing the tent, their owners talking to each other as though they were a different species. And then — it seemed like about a second later to Harry — Bagman called out. "Ladies first," he said, offering it to Fleur Delacour.

She put a shaking hand inside the bag and drew out a tiny, perfect model of a dragon — a Welsh Green. It had the number one around its neck. It showed no sign of surprise, but rather a determined resignation, that he had been right: Madame Maxime had told him that it was the number one. The same held true for Krum. He pulled out the scarlet Chinese Fireball. It had a number three around its neck. He drew out the Hungarian Horntail, and the number four. It stretched its wings as he looked down at it, and bared its teeth.

"Well, there you are!" said Bagman. "You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which I'm going to have to leave you in a moment, because I'm commentating. Mr. Diggory, you're first, just go out into the arena. . . . could I have a quick word? Outside?"

"Er . . . yes," said Harry blankly, and he got up and went out of the tent with Bagman, who walked him a short distance before he returned with a worried expression on his face.

"Feeling all right, Harry? Anything I can get you?"

"What?" said Harry. "I — no, nothing."

"Got a plan?" said Bagman, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Because I don't mind sharing a few pointers, if you'd like. . . . I'll say it in a voice still further, "you're the underdog here, Harry. . . . Anything I can do to help . . ."

"No," said Harry so quickly he knew he had sounded rude, "no — I — I know what I'm going to do, thanks."

"Nobody would know, Harry," said Bagman, winking at him.

"No, I'm fine," said Harry, wondering why he kept telling people this, and wondering whether he had ever been less fit. A whistle had blown somewhere.

"Good lord, I've got to run!" said Bagman in alarm, and he hurried off.

Harry walked back to the tent and saw Cedric emerging from it, greener than ever. Harry tried to wish him luck as he passed, but he only made an arse grunt.

Harry went back inside to Fleur and Krum. Seconds later, they heard the roar of the crowd, which meant Cedric had been the better terpart of his model. . . .

It was worse than Harry could ever have imagined, sitting there and listening. The crowd screamed . . . yelled . . . gasped . . . as he was doing to get past the Swedish Short-Snout. Krum was still staring at the ground. Fleur had now taken to retreating, and her elementary made everything much, much worse. . . . Horrible pictures formed in Harry's mind as he heard: "Oooh, narrow! . . . "Clever move — pity it didn't work!"

And then, after about fifteen minutes, Harry heard the deafening roar that could mean only one thing: Cedric had gone. "Very good indeed!" Bagman was shouting. "And now the marks from the judges!"

But he didn't shout out the marks; Harry supposed the judges were holding them up and showing them to the crowd.

"One down, three to go!" Bagman yelled as the whistle blew again. "Miss Delacour, if you please!"

Fleur was trembling from head to foot; Harry felt more warmly toward her than he had done so far as she left the tent. Krum were left alone, at opposite sides of the tent, avoiding each other's gaze.

The same process started again. . . . "Oh I'm not sure that was wise!" they could hear Bagman shouting gleefully. "Oh yes, it was! . . . it then!"

Ten minutes later, Harry heard the crowd erupt into applause once more. . . . Fleur must have been successful too. A whistle. . . . then, for the third time, the whistle.

"And here comes Mr. Krum!" cried Bagman, and Krum slouched out, leaving Harry quite alone.

He felt much more aware of his body than usual; very aware of the way his heart was pumping fast, and his fingers tight. He tried to hide himself, seeing the walls of the tent, and hearing the crowd, as though from far away. . . .

"Very daring!" Bagman was yelling, and Harry heard the Chinese Fireball emit a horrible, roaring shriek, while the crowd roared — and — yes, he's got the egg!"

Applause shattered the wintry air like breaking glass; Krum had finished — it would be Harry's turn any moment.

He stood up, noticing dimly that his legs seemed to be made of marshmallow. He waited. And then he heard the whistle rising into a crescendo inside him. And now he was walking past the trees, through a gap in the enclosure fence.

He saw everything in front of him as though it was a very highly colored dream. There were hundreds and hundreds of faces since he'd last stood on this spot. And there was the Horntail, at the other end of the enclosure, crouched low over the ground. She was upon him, a monstrous, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, leaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground. Friendly or not, Harry didn't know or care. It was time to do what he had to do . . . to focus his mind, entirely and absolutely. He raised his wand.

"Accio Firebolt!" he shouted.

Harry waited, every fiber of him hoping, praying. . . . If it hadn't worked . . . if it wasn't coming . . . He seemed to be looking through a shimmering, transparent barrier, like a heat haze, which made the enclosure and the hundreds of faces around him swim.

And then he heard it, speeding through the air behind him; he turned and saw his Firebolt hurtling toward him around the corner. It was dead in midair beside him, waiting for him to mount. The crowd was making even more noise. . . . Bagman was shouting. . . . listening wasn't important. . . .

He swung his leg over the broom and kicked off from the ground. And a second later, something miraculous happened. As he soared upward, as the wind rushed through his hair, as the crowd's faces became mere flesh-colored pinpricks.

That he had left not only the ground behind, but also his fear. . . . He was back where he belonged. . . .

This was just another Quidditch match, that was all . . . just another Quidditch match, and that Horntail was just another obstacle. He looked down at the clutch of eggs and spotted the gold one, gleaming against its cement-colored fellows, residing in the nest.

If, "diversionary tactics . . . let's go. . . ."

He dived. The Horntail's head followed him; he knew what it was going to do and pulled out of the dive just in time; and he had he not swerved away . . . but Harry didn't care . . . that was no more than dodging a Bludger. . . .

"Great Scott, he can fly!" yelled Bagman as the crowd shrieked and gasped. "Are you watching this, Mr. Krum?"

Harry soared higher in a circle; the Horntail was still following his progress; its head revolving on its long neck — if he pushed it too long, or it would be breathing fire again —

Harry plummeted just as the Horntail opened its mouth, but this time he was less lucky — he missed the flames, but he was off to the left, one of the long spikes grazed his shoulder, ripping his robes —

He could feel it stinging, he could hear screaming and groans from the crowd, but the cut didn't seem to be deep. . . . It occurred to him. . . .

The Horntail didn't seem to want to take off, she was too protective of her eggs. Though she writhed and twisted, fur yes on Harry, she was afraid to move too far from them . . . but he had to persuade her to do it, or he'd never get ne

He began to fly, first this way, then the other, not near enough to make her breathe fire to stave him off, but still pos Her head swayed this way and that, watching him out of those vertical pupils, her fangs bared. . . .

He flew higher. The Horntail's head rose with him, her neck now stretched to its fullest extent, still swaying, like a snake Harry rose a few more feet, and she let out a roar of exasperation. He was like a fly to her, a fly she was longing to sw w. . . . She shot fire into the air, which he dodged. . . . Her jaws opened wide. . . .

"Come on," Harry hissed, swerving tantalizingly above her, "come on, come and get me . . . up you get now . . ."

And then she reared, spreading her great, black, leathery wings at last, as wide as those of a small airplane — and Harry had disappeared to, he was speeding toward the ground as fast as he could go, toward the eggs now unprotected b e had seized the golden egg —

And with a huge spurt of speed, he was off, he was soaring out over the stands, the heavy egg safely under his uninj e back up — for the first time, he became properly aware of the noise of the crowd, which was screaming and appla

"Look at that!" Bagman was yelling. "Will you look at that! Our youngest champion is quickest to get his egg! Well, this Harry saw the dragon keepers rushing forward to subdue the Horntail, and, over at the entrance to the enclosure, P im, all of them waving him toward them, their smiles evident even from this distance. He flew back over the stands, t y to land, his heart lighter than it had been in weeks. . . . He had got through the first task, he had survived. . . .

"That was excellent, Potter!" cried Professor McGonagall as he got off the Firebolt — which from her was extravagant ulder. "You'll need to see Madam Pomfrey before the judges give out your score. . . . Over there, she's had to mop up

"Yeh did it, Harry!" said Hagrid hoarsely. "Yeh did it! An' agains' the Horntail an' all, an' yeh know Charlie said that was

"Thanks, Hagrid," said Harry loudly, so that Hagrid wouldn't blunder on and reveal that he had shown Harry the drag Professor Moody looked very pleased too; his magical eye was dancing in its socket.

"Nice and easy does the trick, Potter," he growled.

"Right then, Potter, the first aid tent, please . . ." said Professor McGonagall.

Harry walked out of the enclosure, still panting, and saw Madam Pomfrey standing at the mouth of a second tent, lo

"Dragons!" she said, in a disgusted tone, pulling Harry inside. The tent was divided into cubicles; he could make out C e badly injured; he was sitting up, at least. Madam Pomfrey examined Harry's shoulder, talking furiously all the while to bring into this school next? You're very lucky . . . this is quite shallow . . . it'll need cleaning before I heal it up, thoug She cleaned the cut with a dab of some purple liquid that smoked and stung, but then poked his shoulder with her w

"Now, just sit quietly for a minute — sit! And then you can go and get your score."

She bustled out of the tent and he heard her go next door and say, "How does it feel now, Diggory?"

Harry didn't want to sit still: He was too full of adrenaline. He got to his feet, wanting to see what was going on outsid e had come darting inside — Hermione, followed closely by Ron.

"Harry, you were brilliant!" Hermione said squeakily. There were fingernail marks on her face where she had been cl But Harry was looking at Ron, who was very white and staring at Harry as though he were a ghost.

"Harry," he said, very seriously, "whoever put your name in that goblet — I — I reckon they're trying to do you in!"

It was as though the last few weeks had never happened — as though Harry were meeting Ron for the first time, righ

"Caught on, have you?" said Harry coldly. "Took you long enough."

Hermione stood nervously between them, looking from one to the other. Ron opened his mouth uncertainly. Harry l hear it.

"It's okay," he said, before Ron could get the words out. "Forget it."

"No," said Ron, "I shouldn't've —"

"Forget it," Harry said.

Ron grinned nervously at him, and Harry grinned back.

Hermione burst into tears.

"There's nothing to cry about!" Harry told her, bewildered.

"You two are so stupid!" she shouted, stamping her foot on the ground, tears splashing down her front. Then, before nd dashed away, now positively howling.

"Barking mad," said Ron, shaking his head. "Harry, c'mon, they'll be putting up your scores. . . ."

Picking up the golden egg and his Firebolt, feeling more elated than he would have believed possible an hour ago, H

"You were the best, you know, no competition. Cedric did this weird thing where he Transfigured a rock on the grou n go for the dog instead of him. Well, it was a pretty cool bit of Transfiguration, and it sort of worked, because he did

its mind halfway through and decided it would rather have him than the Labrador; he only just got away. And that F it into a trance — well, that kind of worked too, it went all sleepy, but then it snored, and this great jet of flame shot o

of water out of her wand. And Krum — you won't believe this, but he didn't even think of flying! He was probably the the eye. Only thing is, it went trampling around in agony and squashed half the real eggs — they took marks off for

Ron drew breath as he and Harry reached the edge of the enclosure. Now that the Horntail had been taken away, H end, in raised seats draped in gold.

"It's marks out of ten from each one," Ron said, and Harry, squinting up the field, saw the first judge — Madame Max

"Not bad!" said Ron as the crowd applauded. "I suppose she took marks off for your shoulder. . . ." Mr. Crouch came next. He shot a number nine into the air.

"Looking good!" Ron yelled, thumping Harry on the back.

Ludo Bagman — ten.

"Harry, don't complain!" Ron yelled excitedly.

"What?" Ron bellowed furiously. "Four? You lousy, biased scumbag, you gave Krum ten!"

"You're tied in first place, Harry! You and Krum!" said Charlie Weasley, hurrying to meet them as they set off back toward Mum an owl, I swore I'd tell her what happened — but that was unbelievable! Oh yeah — and they told me to tell you. Mum wants a word, back in the champions' tent."

"Good one, Harry."

"Well done, all of you!" said Ludo Bagman, bouncing into the tent and looking as pleased as though he personally had had a nice long break before the second task, which will take place at half past nine on the morning of February the twelfth. In the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you're all holding, you will see that they open . . . see the hinges that will tell you what the second task is, and enable you to prepare for it! All clear? Sure? Well, off you go, then!"

"Yeah, you can have a word," said Harry savagely. "Good-bye."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery that evening to find Pigwidgeon, so that Harry could send Sirius a letter. On the way, Harry filled Ron in on everything Sirius had told him about Karkaroff. Though shocked at first to hear the Owlery Ron was saying that they ought to have suspected it all along.

Pigwidgeon was so overexcited at the idea of a delivery he was flying around and around Harry's head, hooting incessantly while Harry attached the letter to his leg.

Harry knew that Ron was only saying this to make up for his behavior of the last few weeks, but he appreciated it all the same. He held her arms, and frowned at Ron.

He threw Pigwidgeon out of the window. Pigwidgeon plummeted twelve feet before managing to pull himself back up as usual — Harry hadn't been able to resist giving Sirius a blow-by-blow account of exactly how he had swerved, circled,

to the darkness, and then Ron said, "Well, we'd better get downstairs for your surprise party, Harry — Fred and George. Sure enough, when they entered the Gryffindor common room it exploded with cheers and yells again. There were no stars on the surface; Lee Jordan had let off some Filibuster's Fireworks, so that the air was thick with stars and sparks; and Dean had put up five new banners, most of which depicted Harry zooming around the Horntail's head on his Firebolt, though a couple of them showed Harry helping himself to food; he had almost forgotten what it was like to feel properly hungry, and sat down with Ron and Hermione back on his side, he'd gotten through the first task, and he wouldn't have to face the second one for three months. "Blimey, this is heavy," said Lee Jordan, picking up the golden egg, which Harry had left on a table, and weighing it in his hand.

ide it!"

"He's supposed to work out the clue on his own," Hermione said swiftly. "It's in the tournament rules. . . ."

"I was supposed to work out how to get past the dragon on my own too," Harry muttered, so only Hermione could hear.

"Yeah, go on, Harry, open it!" several people echoed.

Lee passed Harry the egg, and Harry dug his fingernails into the groove that ran all the way around it and prised it open. It was hollow and completely empty — but the moment Harry opened it, the most horrible noise, a loud and screeching sound, came out. It was the ghost orchestra at Nearly Headless Nick's deathday party, who had all been playing the musical saw.

"Shut it!" Fred bellowed, his hands over his ears.

"What was that?" said Seamus Finnigan, staring at the egg as Harry slammed it shut again. "Sounded like a banshee."

"It was someone being tortured!" said Neville, who had gone very white and spilled sausage rolls all over the floor. "You should have seen him!"

"Don't be a prat, Neville, that's illegal," said George. "They wouldn't use the Cruciatus Curse on the champions. I thought they were supposed to attack him while he's in the shower, Harry."

"Want a jam tart, Hermione?" said Fred.

Hermione looked doubtfully at the plate he was offering her. Fred grinned.

"It's all right," he said. "I haven't done anything to them. It's the custard creams you've got to watch —"

Neville, who had just bitten into a custard cream, choked and spat it out. Fred laughed.

"Just my little joke, Neville. . . ."

Hermione took a jam tart. Then she said, "Did you get all this from the kitchens, Fred?"

"Yep," said Fred, grinning at her. He put on a high-pitched squeak and imitated a house-elf. "Anything we can get you, missus, or is it just a little bit of a peckish?"

"How do you get in there?" Hermione said in an innocently casual sort of voice.

"Easy," said Fred, "concealed door behind a painting of a bowl of fruit. Just tickle the pear, and it giggles and —" He started to giggle.

"Nothing," said Hermione quickly.

"Going to try and lead the house-elves out on strike now, are you?" said George. "Going to give up all the leaflet stuff?"

Several people chortled. Hermione didn't answer.

"Don't you go upsetting them and telling them they've got to take clothes and salaries!" said Fred warningly. "You'll probably get a beating for it."

Just then, Neville caused a slight diversion by turning into a large canary.

"Oh — sorry, Neville!" Fred shouted over all the laughter. "I forgot — it was the custard creams we hexed —"

Within a minute, however, Neville had molted, and once his feathers had fallen off, he reappeared looking entirely normal.

"Canary Creams!" Fred shouted to the excitable crowd. "George and I invented them — seven Sickles each, a bargain!"

It was nearly one in the morning when Harry finally went up to the dormitory with Ron, Neville, Seamus, and Dean. He found a tiny model of the Hungarian Horntail on the table next to his bed, where it yawned, curled up, and closed its eyes. He was just about to go to sleep when the door opened, and Hagrid had a point . . . they were all right, really, dragons. . . .

The start of December brought wind and sleet to Hogwarts. Drafty though the castle always was in winter, Harry was used to it. He saw a ship on the lake, which was pitching in the high winds, its black sails billowing against the dark skies. He thought of the ship that had been wrecked on the coast of Norway. Hagrid, he noticed, was keeping Madame Maxime's horses well provided with their preferred drink of single-malt whisky. It was enough to make the entire Care of Magical Creatures class light-headed. This was unhelpful, as they were supposed to be learning about the habits of the various magical creatures. "I'm not sure whether they hibernate or not," Hagrid told the shivering class in the windy pumpkin patch next lesson.

"I jus' settle 'em down in these boxes. . . ."

There were now only ten skrewts left; apparently their desire to kill one another had not been exercised out of them. They had their armor; their powerful, scuttling legs; their fire-blasting ends; their stings and their suckers, combined to make them a very dangerous creature. The class looked dispiritedly at the enormous boxes Hagrid had brought out, all lined with pillows and fluffy blankets.

"We'll jus' lead 'em in here," Hagrid said, "an' put the lids on, and we'll see what happens."

But the skrewts, it transpired, did not hibernate, and did not appreciate being forced into pillow-lined boxes and nailed down. While the skrewts rampaged around the pumpkin patch, now strewn with the smoldering wreckage of the boxes. Mr. Hagrid's cabin through the back door and barricaded themselves in; Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were among the first to be caught.

They managed to restrain and tie up nine of the skrewts, though at the cost of numerous burns and cuts; finally, only one skrewt was left. "Don't frighten him, now!" Hagrid shouted as Ron and Harry used their wands to shoot jets of fiery sparks at the skrewt.

The skrewt was very angry, and it was very angry. "Jus' try an' slip the rope 'round his sting, so he won't hurt any o' the others!"

"Yeah, we wouldn't want that!" Ron shouted angrily as he and Harry backed into the wall of Hagrid's cabin, still holding their wands.

"Well, well, well . . . this does look like fun."

Rita Skeeter was leaning on Hagrid's garden fence, looking in at the mayhem. She was wearing a thick magenta cloak and a matching hat. She was looking at the skrewts as over her arm.

Hagrid launched himself forward on top of the skrewt that was cornering Harry and Ron and flattened it; a blast of fire from his wand.

"Who're you?" Hagrid asked Rita Skeeter as he slipped a loop of rope around the skrewt's sting and tightened it.

"Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter," Rita replied, beaming at him. Her gold teeth glinted.

"Thought Dumbledore said you weren't allowed inside the school anymore," said Hagrid, frowning slightly as he got on with his work.

Rita acted as though she hadn't heard what Hagrid had said.

"What are these fascinating creatures called?" she asked, beaming still more widely.

"Blast-Ended Skrewts," grunted Hagrid.

"Really?" said Rita, apparently full of lively interest. "I've never heard of them before . . . where do they come from?" Harry noticed a dull red flush rising up out of Hagrid's wild black beard, and his heart sank. Where had Hagrid got those lines, said quickly, "They're very interesting, aren't they? Aren't they, Harry?"

"What? Oh yeah . . . ouch . . . interesting," said Harry as she stepped on his foot.

"Ah, you're here, Harry!" said Rita Skeeter as she looked around. "So you like Care of Magical Creatures, do you? One

"Yes," said Harry stoutly. Hagrid beamed at him.

"Lovely," said Rita. "Really lovely. Been teaching long?" she added to Hagrid.

Harry noticed her eyes travel over Dean (who had a nasty cut across one cheek), Lavender (whose robes were badly stained by the cabin windows, where most of the class stood, their noses pressed against the glass waiting to see if the coast was

"This is only my second year," said Hagrid.

"Lovely . . . I don't suppose you'd like to give an interview, would you? Share some of your experience of magical creatures I'm sure you know. We could feature these — er — Blast-Ended Scoots."

"Blast-Ended Skrewts," Hagrid said eagerly. "Er — yeah, why not?"

Harry had a very bad feeling about this, but there was no way of communicating it to Hagrid without Rita Skeeter seeing. Rita Skeeter made arrangements to meet in the Three Broomsticks for a good long interview later that week. Then the bell

"Well, good-bye, Harry!" Rita Skeeter called merrily to him as he set off with Ron and Hermione. "Until Friday night, then

"She'll twist everything he says," Harry said under his breath.

"Just as long as he didn't import those skrewts illegally or anything," said Hermione desperately. They looked at one another

"Hagrid's been in loads of trouble before, and Dumbledore's never sacked him," said Ron consolingly. "Worst that can happen to him is that he did I say worst? I meant best."

Harry and Hermione laughed, and, feeling slightly more cheerful, went off to lunch.

Harry thoroughly enjoyed double Divination that afternoon; they were still doing star charts and predictions, but now it was very funny again. Professor Trelawney, who had been so pleased with the pair of them when they had been predicting the future, red through her explanation of the various ways in which Pluto could disrupt everyday life.

"I would think," she said, in a mystical whisper that did not conceal her obvious annoyance, "that some of us" — she said this in a loud voice — "would have had they seen what I have seen during my crystal gazing last night. As I sat here, absorbed in my needlework, the future showed itself before it, and I gazed into its crystalline depths . . . and what do you think I saw gazing back at me?"

"An ugly old bat in outsize specs?" Ron muttered under his breath.

Harry fought hard to keep his face straight.

"Death, my dears."

Parvati and Lavender both put their hands over their mouths, looking horrified.

"Yes," said Professor Trelawney, nodding impressively, "it comes, ever closer, it circles overhead like a vulture, ever looms closer. She stared pointedly at Harry, who yawned very widely and obviously.

"It'd be a bit more impressive if she hadn't done it about eighty times before," Harry said as they finally regained the corridor. "But if I'd dropped dead every time she's told me I'm going to, I'd be a medical miracle."

"You'd be a sort of extra-concentrated ghost," said Ron, chortling, as they passed the Bloody Baron going in the opposite direction. "I didn't get homework. I hope Hermione got loads off Professor Vector, I love not working when she is. . . ."

But Hermione wasn't at dinner, nor was she in the library when they went to look for her afterward. The only person they saw was a while, watching Krum, debating in whispers with Harry whether he should ask for an autograph — but then Ron remembered that he was debating exactly the same thing, and he lost his enthusiasm for the idea.

"Wonder where she's got to?" Ron said as he and Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Dunno . . . balderdash."

But the Fat Lady had barely begun to swing forward when the sound of racing feet behind them announced Hermione's return.

"Harry!" she panted, skidding to a halt beside him (the Fat Lady stared down at her, eyebrows raised). "Harry, you've been waiting — please —"

She seized Harry's arm and started to try to drag him back along the corridor.

"What's the matter?" Harry said.

"I'll show you when we get there — oh come on, quick —"

Harry looked around at Ron; he looked back at Harry, intrigued.

"Okay," Harry said, starting off back down the corridor with Hermione, Ron hurrying to keep up.

"Oh don't mind me!" the Fat Lady called irritably after them. "Don't apologize for bothering me! I'll just hang here, waiting for you."

"Yeah, thanks!" Ron shouted over his shoulder.

"Hermione, where are we going?" Harry asked, after she had led them down through six floors, and started down the seventh.

"You'll see, you'll see in a minute!" said Hermione excitedly.

She turned left at the bottom of the staircase and hurried toward the door through which Cedric Diggory had gone to his death. Harry had never been through here before. He and Ron followed Hermione down a flight of stone steps, but when the door opened and it led to Snape's dungeon, they found themselves in a broad stone corridor, brightly lit with torches, and decorated with tapestries.

"Oh hang on . . ." said Harry slowly, halfway down the corridor. "Wait a minute, Hermione. . . ."

"What?" She turned around to look at him, anticipation all over her face.



"And then Dobby had the idea, Harry Potter, sir! 'Why doesn't Dobby and Winky find work together?' Dobby says. 'Why? Why not?' Dobby thinks, and it comes to him, sir! Hogwarts! So Dobby and Winky came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir, and Profes

Dobby beamed very brightly, and happy tears welled in his eyes again.

"And Professor Dumbledore says he will pay Dobby, sir, if Dobby wants paying! And so Dobby is a free elf, sir, and Dobby is happy!"

"That's not very much!" Hermione shouted indignantly from the floor, over Winky's continued screaming and fist-beating.

"Professor Dumbledore offered Dobby ten Galleons a week, and weekends off," said Dobby, suddenly giving a little smile, "but Dobby beat him down, miss. . . . Dobby likes freedom, miss, but he isn't wanting too much, miss, he likes his freedom."

"And how much is Professor Dumbledore paying you, Winky?" Hermione asked kindly.

If she had thought this would cheer up Winky, she was wildly mistaken. Winky did stop crying, but when she sat up she had her face sopping wet and suddenly furious.

"Winky is a disgraced elf, but Winky is not yet getting paid!" she squeaked. "Winky is not sunk so low as that! Winky is not!"

"Ashamed?" said Hermione blankly. "But — Winky, come on! It's Mr. Crouch who should be ashamed, not you! You don't want to be ashamed!"

But at these words, Winky clapped her hands over the holes in her hat, flattening her ears so that she couldn't hear a word.

"You are not insulting Mr. Crouch! Mr. Crouch is a good wizard, miss! Mr. Crouch is right to sack bad Winky!"

"Winky is having trouble adjusting, Harry Potter," squeaked Dobby confidentially. "Winky forgets she is not bound to do what she is told."

"Can't house-elves speak their minds about their masters, then?" Harry asked.

"Oh no, sir, no," said Dobby, looking suddenly serious. "'Tis part of the house-elf's enslavement, sir. We keeps their secrets and we never speaks ill of them — though Professor Dumbledore told Dobby he does not insist upon this. Professor Dumbledore said so!"

Dobby looked suddenly nervous and beckoned Harry closer. Harry bent forward. Dobby whispered, "He said we is free, but Dobby gave a frightened sort of giggle."

"But Dobby is not wanting to, Harry Potter," he said, talking normally again, and shaking his head so that his ears flapped. "Dobby is proud to keep his secrets and our silence for him."

"But you can say what you like about the Malfoys now?" Harry asked him, grinning.

A slightly fearful look came into Dobby's immense eyes.

"Dobby — Dobby could," he said doubtfully. He squared his small shoulders. "Dobby could tell Harry Potter that his own master is a bad wizard!"

Dobby stood for a moment, quivering all over, horror-struck by his own daring — then he rushed over to the nearest table and hid his face.

Dobby! Bad Dobby!"

Harry seized Dobby by the back of his tie and pulled him away from the table.

"Thank you, Harry Potter, thank you," said Dobby breathlessly, rubbing his head.

"You just need a bit of practice," Harry said.

"Practice!" squealed Winky furiously. "You is ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dobby, talking that way about your master!"

"They isn't my masters anymore, Winky!" said Dobby defiantly. "Dobby doesn't care what they think anymore!"

"Oh you is a bad elf, Dobby!" moaned Winky, tears leaking down her face once more. "My poor Mr. Crouch, what is he doing looking after the Crouches all my life, and my mother is doing it before me, and my grandmother is doing it before her!"

"The shame, the shame!" She buried her face in her skirt again and bawled.

"Winky," said Hermione firmly, "I'm quite sure Mr. Crouch is getting along perfectly well without you. We've seen him, and he is happy!"

"You is seeing my master?" said Winky breathlessly, raising her tearstained face out of her skirt once more and goggling.

"Yes," said Hermione, "he and Mr. Bagman are judges in the Triwizard Tournament."

"Mr. Bagman comes too?" squeaked Winky, and to Harry's great surprise (and Ron's and Hermione's too, by the look of it) Dobby nodded.

"A very bad wizard! My master isn't liking him, oh no, not at all!"

"Bagman — bad?" said Harry.

"Oh yes," Winky said, nodding her head furiously. "My master is telling Winky some things! But Winky is not saying them!"

She dissolved yet again in tears; they could hear her sobbing into her skirt, "Poor master, poor master, no Winky to help!"

They couldn't get another sensible word out of Winky. They left her to her crying and finished their tea, while Dobby waited for his wages.

"Dobby is going to buy a sweater next, Harry Potter!" he said happily, pointing at his bare chest.

"Tell you what, Dobby," said Ron, who seemed to have taken a great liking to the elf, "I'll give you the one my mum knitted for me, a maroon, do you?"

Dobby was delighted.

"We might have to shrink it a bit to fit you," Ron told him, "but it'll go well with your tea cozy."

As they prepared to take their leave, many of the surrounding elves pressed in upon them, offering snacks to take back to their homes.

elves kept bowing and curtsying, but Harry and Ron loaded their pockets with cream cakes and pies.

"Thanks a lot!" Harry said to the elves, who had all clustered around the door to say good night. "See you, Dobby!"

"Harry Potter . . . can Dobby come and see you sometimes, sir?" Dobby asked tentatively.

"Course you can," said Harry, and Dobby beamed.

"You know what?" said Ron, once he, Hermione, and Harry had left the kitchens behind and were climbing the steps to the dormitory.

Pressed with Fred and George, nicking food from the kitchens — well, it's not exactly difficult, is it? They can't wait to give it to Dobby.

"I think this is the best thing that could have happened to those elves, you know," said Hermione, leading the way back to the dormitory.

The other elves will see how happy he is, being free, and slowly it'll dawn on them that they want that too!"

"Let's hope they don't look too closely at Winky," said Harry.

"Oh she'll cheer up," said Hermione, though she sounded a bit doubtful. "Once the shock's worn off, and she's got used to it."

t Crouch man."

"She seems to love him," said Ron thickly (he had just started on a cream cake).

"Doesn't think much of Bagman, though, does she?" said Harry. "Wonder what Crouch says at home about him?"

"Probably says he's not a very good Head of Department," said Hermione, "and let's face it . . . he's got a point, hasn't he?"

"I'd still rather work for him than old Crouch," said Ron. "At least Bagman's got a sense of humor."

"Don't let Percy hear you saying that," Hermione said, smiling slightly.

"Yeah, well, Percy wouldn't want to work for anyone with a sense of humor, would he?" said Ron, now starting on a chocolate cake. He was sitting in front of him wearing Dobby's tea cozy."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### THE UNEXPECTED TASK

Potter! Weasley! Will you pay attention?"

Professor McGonagall's irritated voice cracked like a whip through the Transfiguration class on Thursday, and Harry and Ron looked up. It was the end of the lesson; they had finished their work; the guinea fowl they had been changing into guinea pigs had been changed (Neville's still had feathers); they had copied down their homework from the blackboard ("Describe, with examples, the various uses of the charm for Changing Cross-Species Switches"). The bell was due to ring at any moment, and Harry and Ron, who had been having a good time, looked up, Ron holding a tin parrot and Harry, a rubber haddock.

"Now that Potter and Weasley have been kind enough to act their age," said Professor McGonagall, with an angry look, "I have something to say to you all. It is silent to the floor — Ron's parrot's beak had severed it moments before —

"The Yule Ball is approaching — a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and an opportunity for us to socialize with the other schools — although you may invite a younger student if you wish —"

Lavender Brown let out a shrill giggle. Parvati Patil nudged her hard in the ribs, her face working furiously as she too looked at Professor McGonagall ignored them, which Harry thought was distinctly unfair, as she had just told off him and Ron.

"Dress robes will be worn," Professor McGonagall continued, "and the ball will start at eight o'clock on Christmas Day. I expect you will all be there. Professor McGonagall stared deliberately around the class.

"The Yule Ball is of course a chance for us all to — er — let our hair down," she said, in a disapproving voice.

Lavender giggled harder than ever, with her hand pressed hard against her mouth to stifle the sound. Harry could see her hair in a tight bun, looked as though she had never let her hair down in any sense.

"But that does NOT mean," Professor McGonagall went on, "that we will be relaxing the standards of behavior we expect of a Gryffindor student embarrasses the school in any way."

The bell rang, and there was the usual scuffle of activity as everyone packed their bags and swung them onto their shoulders. Professor McGonagall called above the noise, "Potter — a word, if you please."

Assuming this had something to do with his headless rubber haddock, Harry proceeded gloomily to the teacher's desk and then said, "Potter, the champions and their partners —"

"What partners?" said Harry.

Professor McGonagall looked suspiciously at him, as though she thought he was trying to be funny.

"Your partners for the Yule Ball, Potter," she said coldly. "Your dance partners."

Harry's insides seemed to curl up and shrivel.

"Dance partners?" He felt himself going red. "I don't dance," he said quickly.

"Oh yes, you do," said Professor McGonagall irritably. "That's what I'm telling you. Traditionally, the champions and their partners are expected to dance at the Yule Ball. Harry had a sudden mental image of himself in a top hat and tails, accompanied by a girl in the sort of frilly dress Aunt Muriel wore at the Ministry ball."

"I'm not dancing," he said.

"It is traditional," said Professor McGonagall firmly. "You are a Hogwarts champion, and you will do what is expected of you. You are a partner, Potter."

"But — I don't —"

"You heard me, Potter," said Professor McGonagall in a very final sort of way.

A week ago, Harry would have said finding a partner for a dance would be a cinch compared to taking on a Hungarian Horntail. In the prospect of asking a girl to the ball, he thought he'd rather have another round with the dragon.

Harry had never known so many people to put their names down to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas; he always did, of course, but he had always been very much in the minority before now. This year, however, everyone in the fourth year was obsessed with the coming ball — or at least all the girls were, and it was amazing how many girls Hogwarts suddenly seemed to be full of. They were giggling and whispering in the corridors, girls shrieking with laughter as boys passed them, girls excitedly comparing notes. "Why do they have to move in packs?" Harry asked Ron as a dozen or so girls walked past them, sniggering and staring at them.

"Lasso one?" Ron suggested. "Got any idea who you're going to try?"

Harry didn't answer. He knew perfectly well whom he'd like to ask, but working up the nerve was something else. . . . She was a very good Quidditch player, and she was also very popular.

Ron seemed to know what was going on inside Harry's head.

"Listen, you're not going to have any trouble. You're a champion. You've just beaten a Hungarian Horntail. I bet they'll be glad to see you. In tribute to their recently repaired friendship, Ron had kept the bitterness in his voice to a bare minimum. Moreover,



"Who're you going with, then?" said Ron.

"Angelina," said Fred promptly, without a trace of embarrassment.

"What?" said Ron, taken aback. "You've already asked her?"

"Good point," said Fred. He turned his head and called across the common room, "Oi! Angelina!"

Angelina, who had been chatting with Alicia Spinnet near the fire, looked over at him.

"What?" she called back.

"Want to come to the ball with me?"

Angelina gave Fred an appraising sort of look.

"All right, then," she said, and she turned back to Alicia and carried on chatting with a bit of a grin on her face.

"There you go," said Fred to Harry and Ron, "piece of cake."

He got to his feet, yawning, and said, "We'd better use a school owl then, George, come on. . . ."

They left. Ron stopped feeling his eyebrows and looked across the smoldering wreck of his card castle at Harry.

"We should get a move on, you know . . . ask someone. He's right. We don't want to end up with a pair of trolls."

Hermione let out a sputter of indignation.

"A pair of . . . what, excuse me?"

"Well — you know," said Ron, shrugging. "I'd rather go alone than with — with Eloise Midgen, say."

"Her acne's loads better lately — and she's really nice!"

"Her nose is off-center," said Ron.

"Oh I see," Hermione said, bristling. "So basically, you're going to take the best-looking girl who'll have you, even if she's a troll?"

"Er — yeah, that sounds about right," said Ron.

"I'm going to bed," Hermione snapped, and she swept off toward the girls' staircase without another word.

The Hogwarts staff, demonstrating a continued desire to impress the visitors from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, set the decorations went up, Harry noticed that they were the most stunning he had yet seen inside the school. Everlasting candles; the usual twelve Christmas trees in the Great Hall were bedecked with everything from luminous holly berries to bewitched to sing carols whenever anyone passed them. It was quite something to hear "O Come, All Ye Faithful" sung by the elves. Filch the caretaker had to extract Peeves from inside the armor, where he had taken to hiding, filling in the gaps in the armor with a very rude.

And still, Harry hadn't asked Cho to the ball. He and Ron were getting very nervous now, though as Harry pointed out to Ron; Harry was supposed to be starting the dancing with the other champions.

"I suppose there's always Moaning Myrtle," he said gloomily, referring to the ghost who haunted the girls' toilets on the third floor.

"Harry — we've just got to grit our teeth and do it," said Ron on Friday morning, in a tone that suggested they were preparing for a fight. "Back to the common room tonight, we'll both have partners — agreed?"

"Er . . . okay," said Harry.

But every time he glimpsed Cho that day — during break, and then lunchtime, and once on the way to History of Magic — he wondered: e? Could he perhaps ambush her as she was going into a bathroom? But no — she even seemed to go there with an air of having been asked by somebody else.

He found it hard to concentrate on Snape's Potions test, and consequently forgot to add the key ingredient — a bezoar — to the potion; he was too busy screwing up his courage for what he was about to do. When the bell rang, he grabbed his bag, and said to Ron and Hermione, "I'll meet you at dinner," and he dashed off upstairs.

He'd just have to ask Cho for a private word, that was all. . . . He hurried off through the packed corridors looking for Cho, emerging from a Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson.

"Er — Cho? Could I have a word with you?"

Giggling should be made illegal, Harry thought furiously, as all the girls around Cho started doing it. She didn't, though, and neither did her classmates.

Harry turned to look at her and his stomach gave a weird lurch as though he had missed a step going downstairs.

"Er," he said.

He couldn't ask her. He couldn't. But he had to. Cho stood there looking puzzled, watching him.

The words came out before Harry had quite got his tongue around them.

"Wangoballwime?"

"Sorry?" said Cho.

"D'you — d'you want to go to the ball with me?" said Harry. Why did he have to go red now? Why?

"Oh!" said Cho, and she went red too. "Oh Harry, I'm really sorry," and she truly looked it. "I've already said I'll go with Ron."

"Oh," said Harry.

It was odd; a moment before his insides had been writhing like snakes, but suddenly he didn't seem to have any inside him.

"Oh okay," he said, "no problem."

"I'm really sorry," she said again.

"That's okay," said Harry.

They stood there looking at each other, and then Cho said, "Well —"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"Well, 'bye," said Cho, still very red. She walked away.

Harry called after her, before he could stop himself.

"Who're you going with?"

"Oh — Cedric," she said. "Cedric Diggory."

"Oh right," said Harry.

His insides had come back again. It felt as though they had been filled with lead in their absence.

Completely forgetting about dinner, he walked slowly back up to Gryffindor Tower, Cho's voice echoing in his ears warning to quite like Cedric — prepared to overlook the fact that he had once beaten him at Quidditch, and was handsome. He suddenly realized that Cedric was in fact a useless pretty boy who didn't have enough brains to fill an eggcup.

"Fairy lights," he said dully to the Fat Lady — the password had been changed the previous day.

"Yes, indeed, dear!" she trilled, straightening her new tinsel hair band as she swung forward to admit him.

Entering the common room, Harry looked around, and to his surprise he saw Ron sitting ashen-faced in a distant corner. He spoke in a low, soothing voice.

"What's up, Ron?" said Harry, joining them.

Ron looked up at Harry, a sort of blind horror in his face.

"Why did I do it?" he said wildly. "I don't know what made me do it!"

"What?" said Harry.

"He — er — just asked Fleur Delacour to go to the ball with him," said Ginny. She looked as though she was fighting back tears.

"You what?" said Harry.

"I don't know what made me do it!" Ron gasped again. "What was I playing at? There were people — all around — I've never seen her in the entrance hall — she was standing there talking to Diggory — and it sort of came over me — and I asked her!"

Ron moaned and put his face in his hands. He kept talking, though the words were barely distinguishable.

"She looked at me like I was a sea slug or something. Didn't even answer. And then — I dunno — I just sort of came to."

"She's part veela," said Harry. "You were right — her grandmother was one. It wasn't your fault, I bet you just walked off with a blast of it — but she was wasting her time. He's going with Cho Chang."

Ron looked up.

"I asked her to go with me just now," Harry said dully, "and she told me."

Ginny had suddenly stopped smiling.

"This is mad," said Ron. "We're the only ones left who haven't got anyone — well, except Neville. Hey — guess who he's going with?"

"What?" said Harry, completely distracted by this startling news.

"Yeah, I know!" said Ron, some of the color coming back into his face as he started to laugh. "He told me after Potions that he was going with her. She's a girl and stuff — but she told him she was already going with someone. Ha! As if! She just didn't want to go with Neville."

"Don't!" said Ginny, annoyed. "Don't laugh —"

Just then Hermione climbed in through the portrait hole.

"Why weren't you two at dinner?" she said, coming over to join them.

"Because — oh shut up laughing, you two — because they've both just been turned down by girls they asked to the ball. That shut Harry and Ron up."

"Thanks a bunch, Ginny," said Ron sourly.

"All the good-looking ones taken, Ron?" said Hermione loftily. "Eloise Midgen starting to look quite pretty now, is she? And so is Parvati."

But Ron was staring at Hermione as though suddenly seeing her in a whole new light.

"Hermione, Neville's right — you are a girl. . . ."

"Oh well spotted," she said acidly.

"Well — you can come with one of us!"

"No, I can't," snapped Hermione.

"Oh come on," he said impatiently, "we need partners, we're going to look really stupid if we haven't got any, everyone's got one!"

"I can't come with you," said Hermione, now blushing, "because I'm already going with someone."

"No, you're not!" said Ron. "You just said that to get rid of Neville!"

"Oh did I?" said Hermione, and her eyes flashed dangerously. "Just because it's taken you three years to notice, Ron, that doesn't mean she's not!"

Ron stared at her. Then he grinned again.

"Okay, okay, we know you're a girl," he said. "That do? Will you come now?"

"I've already told you!" Hermione said very angrily. "I'm going with someone else!"

And she stormed off toward the girls' dormitories again.

"She's lying," said Ron flatly, watching her go.

"She's not," said Ginny quietly.

"Who is it then?" said Ron sharply.

"I'm not telling you, it's her business," said Ginny.

"Right," said Ron, who looked extremely put out, "this is getting stupid. Ginny, you can go with Harry, and I'll just —"

"I can't," said Ginny, and she went scarlet too. "I'm going with — with Neville. He asked me when Hermione said no, and I said yes. Otherwise, I'm not in fourth year." She looked extremely miserable. "I think I'll go and have dinner," she said, and she got up and left. Ron goggled at Harry.

"What's got into them?" he demanded.

But Harry had just seen Parvati and Lavender come in through the portrait hole. The time had come for drastic action.

"Wait here," he said to Ron, and he stood up, walked straight up to Parvati, and said, "Parvati? Will you go to the ball with me?"

Parvati went into a fit of giggles. Harry waited for them to subside, his fingers crossed in the pocket of his robes.

"Yes, all right then," she said finally, blushing furiously.

"Thanks," said Harry, in relief. "Lavender — will you go with Ron?"

"She's going with Seamus," said Parvati, and the pair of them giggled harder than ever.

Harry sighed.

"Can't you think of anyone who'd go with Ron?" he said, lowering his voice so that Ron wouldn't hear.

"What about Hermione Granger?" said Parvati.

"She's going with someone else."

Parvati looked astonished.

"Ooooh — who?" she said keenly.

Harry shrugged. "No idea," he said. "So what about Ron?"

"Well . . ." said Parvati slowly, "I suppose my sister might . . . Padma, you know . . . in Ravenclaw. I'll ask her if you like."

"Yeah, that would be great," said Harry. "Let me know, will you?"

And he went back over to Ron, feeling that this ball was a lot more trouble than it was worth, and hoping very much

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### THE YULE BALL

Despite the very heavy load of homework that the fourth years had been given for the holidays, Harry was in no mood as enjoying himself as fully as possible along with everyone else. Gryffindor Tower was hardly less crowded now than in the past, and the common room's inhabitants were being so much rowdier than usual. Fred and George had had a great success with their Canary Cream Cakes, and the birds were resting into feather all over the place. Before long, however, all the Gryffindors had learned to treat food anybody else's. The Gryffindor common room concealed in the center, and George confided to Harry that he and Fred were now working on developing some new products. Harry was p from Fred and George in future. He still hadn't forgotten Dudley and the Ton-Tongue Toffee.

Snow was falling thickly upon the castle and its grounds now. The pale blue Beauxbatons carriage looked like a large white tent, while the Durmstrang ship's portholes were glazed with ice, the rigging white with frost. The house was full of the smells of rich, warming stews and savory puddings, and only Fleur Delacour seemed to be able to find anything to complain about.

"It is too 'eavy, all zis 'Ogwarts food," they heard her saying grumpily as they left the Great Hall behind her one evening. "I will not fit into my dress robes!"

"Oooh there's a tragedy," Hermione snapped as Fleur went out into the entrance hall. "She really thinks a lot of herself."

"Hermione — who are you going to the ball with?" said Ron.

He kept springing this question on her, hoping to startle her into a response by asking it when she least expected it. "You're joking, Weasley!" said Malfoy, behind them. "You're not telling me someone's asked that to the ball? Not the least bit!"

Harry and Ron both whipped around, but Hermione said loudly, waving to somebody over Malfoy's shoulder, "Hello, Malfoy!" Malfoy went pale and jumped backward, looking wildly around for Moody, but he was still up at the staff table, finishing his drink.

"Twitchy little ferret, aren't you, Malfoy?" said Hermione scathingly, and she, Harry, and Ron went up the marble staircase.

"Hermione," said Ron, looking sideways at her, suddenly frowning, "your teeth . . ."

"What about them?" she said.

"Well, they're different . . . I've just noticed. . . ."

"Of course they are — did you expect me to keep those fangs Malfoy gave me?"

"No, I mean, they're different to how they were before he put that hex on you. . . . They're all . . . straight and — and nice!"

Hermione suddenly smiled very mischievously, and Harry noticed it too: It was a very different smile from the one he had seen her wear before.

"Well . . . when I went up to Madam Pomfrey to get them shrunk, she held up a mirror and told me to stop her when I was ready. . . . let her carry on a bit." She smiled even more widely. "Mum and Dad won't be too pleased. I've been trying to persuade them to let me carry on with my braces. You know, they're dentists, they just don't think teeth and magic should — look! Pigwidgeon!"

Ron's tiny owl was twittering madly on the top of the icicle-laden banisters, a scroll of parchment tied to his leg. People were looking up at it. A third-year girl paused and said, "Oh look at the weeny owl! Isn't he cute?"

"Stupid little feathery git!" Ron hissed, hurrying up the stairs and snatching up Pigwidgeon. "You bring letters to the attention of the staff!" Pigwidgeon hooted happily, his head protruding over Ron's fist. The third-year girls all looked very shocked.

"Clear off!" Ron snapped at them, waving the fist holding Pigwidgeon, who hooted more happily than ever as he soared away. The third-year girls scuttled away looking scandalized. He pulled Sirius's reply off Pigwidgeon's leg, Harry pocketed it, and went on.

Everyone in the common room was much too busy in letting off more holiday steam to observe what anyone else was doing. Harry went to the window that was gradually filling up with snow, and Harry read out:

Dear Harry,

Congratulations on getting past the Horntail. Whoever put your name in that goblet shouldn't be feeling too happy right now. Your eyes are its weakest point — "That's what Krum did!" Hermione whispered — but your way was better, I'm impressed."

Don't get complacent, though, Harry. You've only done one task; whoever put you in for the tournament's got plenty more to come — particularly when the person we discussed is around — and concentrate on keeping yourself out of trouble. Keep in touch, I still want to hear about anything unusual.

"He sounds exactly like Moody," said Harry quietly, tucking the letter away again inside his robes. "Constant vigilance on the walls. . . ."

"But he's right, Harry," said Hermione, "you have still got two tasks to do. You really ought to have a look at that egg, Harry."

"Hermione, he's got ages!" snapped Ron. "Want a game of chess, Harry?"

"Yeah, okay," said Harry. Then, spotting the look on Hermione's face, he said, "Come on, how'm I supposed to concentrate on this lot?"

"Oh I suppose not," she sighed, and she sat down to watch their chess match, which culminated in an exciting checkmate by a very violent bishop.

Harry awoke very suddenly on Christmas Day. Wondering what had caused his abrupt return to consciousness, he opened his eyes, only to find himself staring back at him in the darkness, so close they were almost nose to nose.

"Dobby!" Harry yelled, scrambling away from the elf so fast he almost fell out of bed. "Don't do that!"

"Dobby is sorry, sir!" squeaked Dobby anxiously, jumping backward with his long fingers over his mouth. "Dobby is on duty, sir! Harry Potter did say Dobby could come and see him sometimes, sir!"

"It's okay," said Harry, still breathing rather faster than usual, while his heart rate returned to normal. "Just — just pretend I didn't see that. . . ."

Harry pulled back the curtains around his four-poster, took his glasses from his bedside table, and put them on. His eyes were peering through the gaps in their own hangings, heavy-eyed and tousle-haired.

"Someone attacking you, Harry?" Seamus asked sleepily.

"No, it's just Dobby," Harry muttered. "Go back to sleep."

"Nah . . . presents!" said Seamus, spotting the large pile at the foot of his bed. Ron, Dean, and Neville decided that no one was to be woken up for Christmas morning. Harry turned back to Dobby, who was now standing nervously next to Harry's bed, still looking worried. He had a loop on top of his tea cozy.

"Can Dobby give Harry Potter his present?" he squeaked tentatively.

"Course you can," said Harry. "Er . . . I've got something for you too."

It was a lie; he hadn't bought anything for Dobby at all, but he quickly opened his trunk and pulled out a particularly old, musty, mustard yellow, and had once belonged to Uncle Vernon. The reason they were extra-knobbly was that Harry had pulled out the Sneakoscope and handed the socks to Dobby, saying, "Sorry, I forgot to wrap them. . . ."

But Dobby was utterly delighted.

"Socks are Dobby's favorite, favorite clothes, sir!" he said, ripping off his odd ones and pulling on Uncle Vernon's. "I had been thinking of pulling them off for a long time, but I was afraid of offending you. Now, having pulled both socks up to their highest extent, so that they reached to the bottom of his shorts, "they have become one and the same!"

"Ah, no, Harry, how come you didn't spot that?" said Ron, grinning over from his own bed, which was now strewn with his own socks. "You can mix them up properly. And here's your sweater."

He threw Dobby a pair of violet socks he had just unwrapped, and the hand-knitted sweater Mrs. Weasley had sent.

"Sir is very kind!" he squeaked, his eyes brimming with tears again, bowing deeply to Ron. "Dobby knew sir must be a very kind man. Dobby did not know that he was also as generous of spirit, as noble, as selfless —"

"They're only socks," said Ron, who had gone slightly pink around the ears, though he looked rather pleased all the same. "Cool!" He jammed it onto his head, where it clashed horribly with his hair.

Dobby now handed Harry a small package, which turned out to be — socks.

"Dobby is making them himself, sir!" the elf said happily. "He is buying the wool out of his wages, sir!"

The left sock was bright red and had a pattern of broomsticks upon it; the right sock was green with a pattern of Snitch.

"They're . . . they're really . . . well, thanks, Dobby," said Harry, and he pulled them on, causing Dobby's eyes to leak with joy.

"Dobby must go now, sir, we are already making Christmas dinner in the kitchens!" said Dobby, and he hurried out of the room.

Harry's other presents were much more satisfactory than Dobby's odd socks — with the obvious exception of the Duffel Cloak, which he supposed they too were remembering the Ton-Tongue Toffee. Hermione had given Harry a book called Quidditch Through the Ages, a handy penknife with attachments to unlock any lock and undo any knot; and Hagrid, a vast box of sweets including all the favorites, including Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, and Fizzing Whizbees. There was also, of course, Mrs. Weasley's usual package, including a box of Bûche de Noël (which Harry supposed Charlie had told her all about the Horntail), and a large quantity of homemade mince pies.

Harry and Ron met up with Hermione in the common room, and they went down to breakfast together. They spent the morning opening their presents, then returned to the Great Hall for a magnificent lunch, which included at least a hundred turkeys and Christmas puddings.

They went out onto the grounds in the afternoon; the snow was untouched except for the deep channels made by the footprints of the Weasleys. Hermione chose to watch Harry and the Weasleys' snowball fight rather than join in, and at five o'clock said she was going to bed.

"What, you need three hours?" said Ron, looking at her incredulously and paying for his lapse in concentration when he had been so close to the goal. "Who're you going with?" he yelled after Hermione, but she just waved and disappeared up the stone steps.

There was no Christmas tea today, as the ball included a feast, so at seven o'clock, when it had become hard to aim properly, Harry and Ron went back to the common room. The Fat Lady was sitting in her frame with her friend Violet from downstairs, both of them



ottom of her picture.

"Lairy fights, that's the one!" she giggled when they gave the password, and she swung forward to let them inside. Harry, Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville changed into their dress robes up in their dormitory, all of them looking very the long mirror in the corner with an appalled look on his face. There was just no getting around the fact that his robe attempt to make them look more manly, he used a Severing Charm on the ruff and cuffs. It worked fairly well; at least the edges still looked depressingly frayed as the boys set off downstairs.

"I still can't work out how you two got the best-looking girls in the year," muttered Dean.

"Animal magnetism," said Ron gloomily, pulling stray threads out of his cuffs.

The common room looked strange, full of people wearing different colors instead of the usual mass of black. Parvati was pretty indeed, in robes of shocking pink, with her long dark plait braided with gold, and gold bracelets glimmering at her wrists.

"You — er — look nice," he said awkwardly.

"Thanks," she said. "Padma's going to meet you in the entrance hall," she added to Ron.

"Right," said Ron, looking around. "Where's Hermione?"

Parvati shrugged. "Shall we go down then, Harry?"

"Okay," said Harry, wishing he could just stay in the common room. Fred winked at Harry as he passed him on the way. The entrance hall was packed with students too, all milling around waiting for eight o'clock, when the doors to the Great Hall from different Houses were edging through the crowd trying to find one another. Parvati found her sister, Padma. "Hi," said Padma, who was looking just as pretty as Parvati in robes of bright turquoise. She didn't look too enthusiastic about the frayed neck and sleeves of his dress robes as she looked him up and down.

"Hi," said Ron, not looking at her, but staring around at the crowd. "Oh no . . ."

He bent his knees slightly to hide behind Harry, because Fleur Delacour was passing, looking stunning in robes of silver. In, Roger Davies. When they had disappeared, Ron stood straight again and stared over the heads of the crowd.

"Where is Hermione?" he said again.

A group of Slytherins came up the steps from their dungeon common room. Malfoy was in front; he was wearing dress robes that made him look like a vicar. Pansy Parkinson in very frilly robes of pale pink was clutching Malfoy's arm. Crabbe and Goyle, and neither of them, Harry was pleased to see, had managed to find a partner.

The oak front doors opened, and everyone turned to look as the Durmstrang students entered with Professor Karkaroff in blue robes Harry didn't know. Over their heads he saw that an area of lawn right in front of the castle had been transformed; hundreds of actual living fairies were sitting in the rosebushes that had been conjured there, and fluttering over the courtyard.

Then Professor McGonagall's voice called, "Champions over here, please!"

Parvati readjusted her bangles, beaming; she and Harry said "See you in a minute" to Ron and Padma and walked for McGonagall, who was wearing dress robes of red tartan and had arranged a rather ugly wreath of thistles around the back of her head. Everyone else went inside; they were to enter the Great Hall in procession when the rest of the students had sat down. The doors; Davies looked so stunned by his good fortune in having Fleur for a partner that he could hardly take his eyes off her from them so he wouldn't have to talk to them. His eyes fell instead on the girl next to Krum. His jaw dropped.

It was Hermione.

But she didn't look like Hermione at all. She had done something with her hair; it was no longer bushy but sleek and straight. She was wearing robes made of a floaty, periwinkle-blue material, and she was holding herself differently, somehow, she usually had slung over her back. She was also smiling — rather nervously, it was true — but the reduction in the size of her mouth wouldn't understand how he hadn't spotted it before.

"Hi, Harry!" she said. "Hi, Parvati!"

Parvati was gazing at Hermione in unflattering disbelief. She wasn't the only one either; when the doors to the Great Hall opened, showing Hermione looks of deepest loathing. Pansy Parkinson gaped at her as she walked by with Malfoy, and even he, who usually walked right past Hermione without looking at her.

Once everyone else was settled in the Hall, Professor McGonagall told the champions and their partners to get in line. The Great Hall applauded as they entered and started walking up toward a large round table at the top of the Hall, where the champions were to sit. The walls of the Hall had all been covered in sparkling silver frost, with hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crocheted into the walls; instead, there were about a hundred smaller, lantern-lit ones, each seating about a dozen people.

Harry concentrated on not tripping over his feet. Parvati seemed to be enjoying herself; she was beaming around at everyone. Hermione was a show dog she was putting through its paces. He caught sight of Ron and Padma as he neared the top table. Ron looked sulky.

Dumbledore smiled happily as the champions approached the top table, but Karkaroff wore an expression remarkable for tonight in robes of bright purple with large yellow stars, was clapping as enthusiastically as any of the students; and Sirius Black, in a flowing gown of lavender silk, was applauding them politely. But Mr. Crouch, Harry suddenly realized, was not smiling.

When the champions and their partners reached the table, Percy drew out the empty chair beside him, staring point-blank at Harry as wearing brand-new, navy-blue dress robes and an expression of such smugness that Harry thought it ought to be said. "I've been promoted," Percy said before Harry could even ask, and from his tone, he might have been announcing his

personal assistant, and I'm here representing him."

"Why didn't he come?" Harry asked. He wasn't looking forward to being lectured on cauldron bottoms all through dinner. "I'm afraid to say Mr. Crouch isn't well, not well at all. Hasn't been right since the World Cup. Hardly surprising — overliant, of course, the mind remains as great as it ever was. But the World Cup was a fiasco for the whole Ministry, and the behavior of that house-elf of his, Blinky, or whatever she was called. Naturally, he dismissed her immediately afterwards, and I think he's found a definite drop in his home comforts since she left. And then we had the tournament to arrange, a keeter woman buzzing around — no, poor man, he's having a well-earned, quiet Christmas. I'm just glad he knew he was wanted. Harry wanted very much to ask whether Mr. Crouch had stopped calling Percy "Weatherby" yet, but resisted the temptation. There was no food as yet on the glittering golden plates, but small menus were lying in front of each of them. Harry glanced at his. Dumbledore, however, looked carefully down at his own menu, then said very clearly to his plate, "Pork chops!" And pork chops appeared. Getting the idea, the rest of the table placed their orders with their plates too. Harry glanced at the complicated method of dining — surely it meant plenty of extra work for the house-elves? — but for once, Hermione, Viktor Krum and hardly seemed to notice what she was eating.

It now occurred to Harry that he had never actually heard Krum speak before, but he was certainly talking now, and in a pleasant voice. "Vell, ve have a castle also, not as big as this, nor as comfortable, I am thinking," he was telling Hermione. "Ve have just a few rooms. But ve have grounds larger even than these — though in vinter, ve have very little daylight, so ve are not enjoying the outdoors and the mountains —"

"Now, now, Viktor!" said Karkaroff with a laugh that didn't reach his cold eyes, "don't go giving away anything else, no matter how small!"

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling. "Igor, all this secrecy . . . one would almost think you didn't want visitors."

"Well, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff, displaying his yellowing teeth to their fullest extent, "we are all protective of our secrets. The halls of learning that have been entrusted to us? Are we not right to be proud that we alone know our school's secrets?" "Oh I would never dream of assuming I know all Hogwarts' secrets, Igor," said Dumbledore amicably. "Only this morning I came to the room and found myself in a beautifully proportioned room I have never seen before, containing a really rather magnificent tapestry. I looked at it very closely, I discovered that the room had vanished. But I must keep an eye out for it. Possibly it is only accessible at the full moon — or when the seeker has an exceptionally full bladder."

Harry snorted into his plate of goulash. Percy frowned, but Harry could have sworn Dumbledore had given him a very meaningful look. Meanwhile Fleur Delacour was criticizing the Hogwarts decorations to Roger Davies.

"Zis is nothing," she said dismissively, looking around at the sparkling walls of the Great Hall. "At ze Palace of Beauxbatons, we have a Christmas tree that doesn't melt, of course . . . zey are like huge statues of diamond, glittering around ze place. And ze fire-breathing dragon serenades us as we eat. We 'ave none of zis ugly armor in ze 'alls, and eef a poltergeist ever entaired into Beauxbatons, it would be thrown out of the table impatiently."

Roger Davies was watching her talk with a very dazed look on his face, and he kept missing his mouth with his fork. He was trying to take in a word she was saying.

"Absolutely right," he said quickly, slapping his own hand down on the table in imitation of Fleur. "Like that. Yeah."

Harry looked around the Hall. Hagrid was sitting at one of the other staff tables; he was back in his horrible hairy brown robe, with a small wave, and looking around, saw Madame Maxime return it, her opals glittering in the candlelight.

Hermione was now teaching Krum to say her name properly; he kept calling her "Herm-own."

"Her-my-oh-nee," she said slowly and clearly.

"Herm-own-ninny."

"Close enough," she said, catching Harry's eye and grinning.

When all the food had been consumed, Dumbledore stood up and asked the students to do the same. Then, with a wave of his wand, the floor cleared, and then he conjured a raised platform into existence along the right wall. A set of drums, several guitars, and a few other instruments appeared. The Weird Sisters now trooped up onto the stage to wildly enthusiastic applause; they were all extremely hairy and dressed in black. They picked up their instruments, and Harry, who had been so interested in watching them that he had almost forgotten to eat, realized that his own plate and her tables had gone out, and that the other champions and their partners were standing up.

"Come on!" Parvati hissed. "We're supposed to dance!"

Harry tripped over his dress robes as he stood up. The Weird Sisters struck up a slow, mournful tune; Harry walked over to the edge of the dance floor (he could see Seamus and Dean waving at him and sniggering), and next moment, Parvati had seized his hand and pulled him into hers.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been, Harry thought, revolving slowly on the spot (Parvati was steering). He kept his eyes on many of them too had come onto the dance floor, so that the champions were no longer the center of attention. He was dancing more frequently as Neville trod on her feet — and Dumbledore was waltzing with Madame Maxime. He was so dwarfed by her that he moved very gracefully for a woman so large. Mad-Eye Moody was doing an extremely ungainly two-step with Professor Sprout.

"Nice socks, Potter," Moody growled as he passed, his magical eye staring through Harry's robes.

"Oh — yeah, Dobby the house-elf knitted them for me," said Harry, grinning.

"He is so creepy!" Parvati whispered as Moody clunked away. "I don't think that eye should be allowed!"

Harry heard the final, quavering note from the bagpipe with relief. The Weird Sisters stopped playing, applause filled the hall.

"Let's sit down, shall we?"

"Oh — but — this is a really good one!" Parvati said as the Weird Sisters struck up a new song, which was much faster than the last.

"No, I don't like it," Harry lied, and he led her away from the dance floor, past Fred and Angelina, who were dancing so close they were almost out of sight. Ron glared after them.

"How's it going?" Harry asked Ron, sitting down and opening a bottle of butterbeer.

Ron didn't answer. He was glaring at Hermione and Krum, who were dancing nearby. Padma was sitting with her arm around him, and she threw a disgruntled look at Ron, who was completely ignoring her. Parvati sat down on Harry's other side, and she started dancing with a boy from Beauxbatons.

"You don't mind, do you, Harry?" Parvati said.

"What?" said Harry, who was now watching Cho and Cedric.

"Oh never mind," snapped Parvati, and she went off with the boy from Beauxbatons. When the song ended, she did a little curtsy. Hermione came over and sat down in Parvati's empty chair. She was a bit pink in the face from dancing.

"Hi," said Harry. Ron didn't say anything.

"It's hot, isn't it?" said Hermione, fanning herself with her hand. "Viktor's just gone to get some drinks."

Ron gave her a withering look. "Viktor?" he said. "Hasn't he asked you to call him Vicky yet?"

Hermione looked at him in surprise. "What's up with you?" she said.

"If you don't know," said Ron scathingly, "I'm not going to tell you."

Hermione stared at him, then at Harry, who shrugged.

"Ron, what — ?"

"He's from Durmstrang!" spat Ron. "He's competing against Harry! Against Hogwarts! You — you're —" Ron was obviously embarrassed. "Fraternalizing with the enemy, that's what you're doing!"

Hermione's mouth fell open.

"Don't be so stupid!" she said after a moment. "The enemy! Honestly — who was the one who was all excited when they found out about a model of him up in their dormitory?"

Ron chose to ignore this. "I s'pose he asked you to come with him while you were both in the library?"

"Yes, he did," said Hermione, the pink patches on her cheeks glowing more brightly. "So what?"

"What happened — trying to get him to join spew, were you?"

"No, I wasn't! If you really want to know, he — he said he'd been coming up to the library every day to try and talk to me about his egg." Hermione said this very quickly, and blushed so deeply that she was the same color as Parvati's robes.

"Yeah, well — that's his story," said Ron nastily.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Obvious, isn't it? He's Karkaroff's student, isn't he? He knows who you hang around with. . . . He's just trying to get close to you enough to jinx him —"

Hermione looked as though Ron had slapped her. When she spoke, her voice quivered.

"For your information, he hasn't asked me one single thing about Harry, not one —"

Ron changed tack at the speed of light.

"Then he's hoping you'll help him find out what his egg means! I suppose you've been putting your heads together during the tournament?"

"I'd never help him work out that egg!" said Hermione, looking outraged. "Never. How could you say something like that to me, Harry?"

"You've got a funny way of showing it," sneered Ron.

"This whole tournament's supposed to be about getting to know foreign wizards and making friends with them!" said Hermione.

"No it isn't!" shouted Ron. "It's about winning!"

People were starting to stare at them.

"Ron," said Harry quietly, "I haven't got a problem with Hermione coming with Krum —"

But Ron ignored Harry too.

"Why don't you go and find Vicky, he'll be wondering where you are," said Ron.

"Don't call him Vicky!"

Hermione jumped to her feet and stormed off across the dance floor, disappearing into the crowd. Ron watched her go.

"Are you going to ask me to dance at all?" Padma asked him.

"No," said Ron, still glaring after Hermione.

"Fine," snapped Padma, and she got up and went to join Parvati and the Beauxbatons boy, who conjured up one of those chairs and brought him there by a Summoning Charm.

"Vare is Herm-own-ninny?" said a voice.

Krum had just arrived at their table clutching two butterbeers.

"No idea," said Ron mulishly, looking up at him. "Lost her, have you?"

Krum was looking surly again.

"Vell, if you see her, tell her I haff drinks," he said, and he slouched off.

"Made friends with Viktor Krum, have you, Ron?"

Percy had hustled over, rubbing his hands together and looking extremely pompous. "Excellent! That's the whole point of the tournament. To make friends with foreign wizards. To Harry's displeasure, Percy now took Padma's vacated seat. The top table was now empty; Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, Madame Maxime and Hagrid were cutting a wide path around the dance floor as they waltzed through the students. Everybody applauded once more, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman kiss Professor McGonagall's hand and make his way back to the judges' table.

"What do they think they're doing, annoying senior Ministry members?" Percy hissed, watching Fred and George suspiciously. Ludo Bagman shook off Fred and George fairly quickly, however, and, spotting Harry, waved and came over to them.

"I hope my brothers weren't bothering you, Mr. Bagman?" said Percy at once.

"What? Oh not at all, not at all!" said Bagman. "No, they were just telling me a bit more about those fake wands of the Ministry. They promised to put them in touch with a couple of contacts of mine at Zonko's Joke Shop. . . ."

Percy didn't look happy about this at all, and Harry was prepared to bet he would be rushing to tell Mrs. Weasley about it. The twins had grown even more ambitious lately, if they were hoping to sell to the public. Bagman opened his mouth to ask Percy a question.

"How do you feel the tournament's going, Mr. Bagman? Our department's quite satisfied — the hitch with the Goblet of Fire, but it seems to have gone very smoothly since, don't you think?"

"Oh yes," Bagman said cheerfully, "it's all been enormous fun. How's old Barty doing? Shame he couldn't come."

"Oh I'm sure Mr. Crouch will be up and about in no time," said Percy importantly, "but in the meantime, I'm more than ready to go to balls" — he laughed airily — "oh no, I've had to deal with all sorts of things that have cropped up in his absence — you know, the new carpets into the country? And then we've been trying to persuade the Transylvanians to sign the International Bar Association in the new year —"

"Let's go for a walk," Ron muttered to Harry, "get away from Percy. . . ."

Pretending they wanted more drinks, Harry and Ron left the table, edged around the dance floor, and slipped out into the garden. The fairy lights in the rose garden winked and twinkled as they went down the front steps, where they found themselves in a courtyard. Statues. Harry could hear splashing water, which sounded like a fountain. Here and there, people were sitting on carved benches. Through the rosebushes, but they had gone only a short way when they heard an unpleasantly familiar voice.

". . . don't see what there is to fuss about, Igor."

"Severus, you cannot pretend this isn't happening!" Karkaroff's voice sounded anxious and hushed, as though keen not to be overheard. "I am becoming seriously concerned, I can't deny it —"

"Then flee," said Snape's voice curtly. "Flee — I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts."

Snape and Karkaroff came around the corner. Snape had his wand out and was blasting rosebushes apart, his expression grim. Dark shapes emerged from them.

"Ten points from Ravenclaw, Fawcett!" Snape snarled as a girl ran past him. "And ten points from Hufflepuff too, Stebbins!" he added, catching sight of Harry and Ron on the path ahead. Karkaroff, Harry saw, looked slightly discomposed, and he began winding it around his finger.

"We're walking," Ron told Snape shortly. "Not against the law, is it?"

"Keep walking, then!" Snape snarled, and he brushed past them, his long black cloak billowing out behind him. Karkaroff followed.

"What's got Karkaroff all worried?" Ron muttered.

"And since when have he and Snape been on first-name terms?" said Harry slowly.

They had reached a large stone reindeer now, over which they could see the sparkling jets of a tall fountain. The shadows were long, watching the water in the moonlight. And then Harry heard Hagrid speak.

"Momen' I saw yeh, I knew," he was saying, in an oddly husky voice.

Harry and Ron froze. This didn't sound like the sort of scene they ought to walk in on, somehow. . . . Harry looked around. He was standing half-concealed in a rosebush nearby. He tapped Ron on the shoulder and jerked his head toward them, motioning for them to follow. (Fleur and Davies looked very busy to Harry), but Ron, eyes widening in horror at the sight of Fleur, shook his head and refused to follow.

reindeer.

"What did you know, 'Agrid?" said Madame Maxime, a purr in her low voice.

Harry definitely didn't want to listen to this; he knew Hagrid would hate to be overheard in a situation like this (he knew Hagrid would put his fingers in his ears and hummed loudly, but that wasn't really an option. Instead he tried to interest himself in the beetle just wasn't interesting enough to block out Hagrid's next words.

"I jus' knew . . . knew you were like me. . . . Was it yer mother or yer father?"

"I — I don't know what you mean, 'Agrid. . . ."

"It was my mother," said Hagrid quietly. "She was one o' the las' ones in Britain. 'Course, I can' remember her too well. I was a baby. . . . y the maternal sort. Well . . . it's not in their natures, is it? Dunno what happened to her . . . might be dead fer all I know. . . ."

Madame Maxime didn't say anything. And Harry, in spite of himself, took his eyes off the beetle and looked over the courtyard. He saw Hagrid talk about his childhood before.

"Me dad was broken-hearted when she wen'. Tiny little bloke, my dad was. By the time I was six I could lift him up and carry him. . . ."

him laugh. . . ." Hagrid's deep voice broke. Madame Maxime was listening, motionless, apparently staring at the silver beetle.

fter I started school. Sorta had ter make me own way after that. Dumbledore was a real help, mind. Very kind ter me. . . ."

Hagrid pulled out a large spotted silk handkerchief and blew his nose heavily.

"So . . . anyway . . . enough about me. What about you? Which side you got it on?"

But Madame Maxime had suddenly got to her feet.

"It is chilly," she said — but whatever the weather was doing, it was nowhere near as cold as her voice. "I think I will go to bed."

"Eh?" said Hagrid blankly. "No, don' go! I've — I've never met another one before!"

"Anuzzer what, precisely?" said Madame Maxime, her tone icy.

Harry could have told Hagrid it was best not to answer; he stood there in the shadows gritting his teeth, hoping again that Madame Maxime would go to bed.

"Another half-giant, o' course!" said Hagrid.

"Ow dare you!" shrieked Madame Maxime. Her voice exploded through the peaceful night air like a foghorn; behind her never had been more insulted in my life! 'Alf-giant? Moi? I 'ave — I 'ave big bones!"

She stormed away; great multicolored swarms of fairies rose into the air as she passed, angrily pushing aside bushes so much too dark to make out his expression. Then, after about a minute, he stood up and strode away, not back to the Gryffindor cabin.

"C'mon," Harry said, very quietly to Ron. "Let's go. . . ."

But Ron didn't move.

"What's up?" said Harry, looking at him.

Ron looked around at Harry, his expression very serious indeed.

"Did you know?" he whispered. "About Hagrid being half-giant?"

"No," Harry said, shrugging. "So what?"

He knew immediately, from the look Ron was giving him, that he was once again revealing his ignorance of the Wizarding world. The things that wizards took for granted that were revelations to Harry, but these surprises had become fewer with each successive year. He said "So what?" upon finding out that one of their friends had a giantess for a mother.

"I'll explain inside," said Ron quietly, "c'mon. . . ."

Fleur and Roger Davies had disappeared, probably into a more private clump of bushes. Harry and Ron returned to the Gryffindor common room with a whole crowd of Beauxbatons boys, and Hermione was once more dancing with Krum. Harry and Ron sat down.

"So?" Harry prompted Ron. "What's the problem with giants?"

"Well, they're . . . they're . . ." Ron struggled for words. ". . . not very nice," he finished lamely.

"Who cares?" Harry said. "There's nothing wrong with Hagrid!"

"I know there isn't, but . . . blimey, no wonder he keeps it quiet," Ron said, shaking his head. "I always thought he'd got something. Didn't like to mention it. . . ."

"But what's it matter if his mother was a giantess?" said Harry.

"Well . . . no one who knows him will care, 'cos they'll know he's not dangerous," said Ron slowly. "But . . . Harry, they're different natures, they're like trolls . . . they just like killing, everyone knows that. There aren't any left in Britain now, though."

"What happened to them?"

"Well, they were dying out anyway, and then loads got themselves killed by Aurors. There're supposed to be giants all over the world."

"I don't know who Maxime thinks she's kidding," Harry said, watching Madame Maxime sitting alone at the judges' table. "Big bones . . . the only thing that's got bigger bones than her is a dinosaur."

Harry and Ron spent the rest of the ball discussing giants in their corner, neither of them having any inclination to dance. He had a strong desire to kick something.

When the Weird Sisters finished playing at midnight, everyone gave them a last, loud round of applause and started talking about the wish that the ball could have gone on longer, but Harry was perfectly happy to be going to bed; as far as he was concerned, it was over.

Out in the entrance hall, Harry and Ron saw Hermione saying good night to Krum before he went back to the Durmstrang common room. She went up the marble staircase without speaking. Harry and Ron followed her, but halfway up the staircase Harry heard someone calling.

"Hey — Harry!"

It was Cedric Diggory. Harry could see Cho waiting for him in the entrance hall below.

"Yeah?" said Harry coldly as Cedric ran up the stairs toward him.

Cedric looked as though he didn't want to say whatever it was in front of Ron, who shrugged, looking bad-tempered.

"Listen . . ." Cedric lowered his voice as Ron disappeared. "I owe you one for telling me about the dragons. You know that."

"Yeah," said Harry.

"Well . . . take a bath, okay?"

"What?"

"Take a bath, and — er — take the egg with you, and — er — just mull things over in the hot water. It'll help you think about it." Harry stared at him.

"Tell you what," Cedric said, "use the prefects' bathroom. Fourth door to the left of that statue of Boris the Bewildered. Just say you want to say good night —"

He grinned at Harry again and hurried back down the stairs to Cho.

Harry walked back to Gryffindor Tower alone. That had been extremely strange advice. Why would a bath help him think about it? Was he trying to make Harry look like a fool, so Cho would like him even more by comparison?

The Fat Lady and her friend Vi were snoozing in the picture over the portrait hole. Harry had to yell "Fairy lights!" before she opened. He climbed into the common room and found Ron and Hermione having a blazing row. Standing ten feet apart.

"Well, if you don't like it, you know what the solution is, don't you?" yelled Hermione; her hair was coming down out of her eyes.

"Oh yeah?" Ron yelled back. "What's that?"

"Next time there's a ball, ask me before someone else does, and not as a last resort!"

Ron mouthed soundlessly like a goldfish out of water as Hermione turned on her heel and stormed up the girls' staircase.

"Well," he sputtered, looking thunderstruck, "well — that just proves — completely missed the point —"

Harry didn't say anything. He liked being back on speaking terms with Ron too much to speak his mind right now — he was a lot more than Ron had.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### RITA SKEETER'S SCOOP

Everybody got up late on Boxing Day. The Gryffindor common room was much quieter than it had been lately, mainly because Hermione was asleep; she confessed to Harry that she had used liberal amounts of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion on it for the ball, "but it's worth it," she said, scratching a purring Crookshanks behind the ears.

Ron and Hermione seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement not to discuss their argument. They were being busy, but there was no time in telling Hermione about the conversation they had overheard between Madame Maxime and Hagrid, but it was as shocking as Ron did.

"Well, I thought he must be," she said, shrugging. "I knew he couldn't be pure giant because they're about twenty feet tall, and all be horrible. . . . It's the same sort of prejudice that people have toward werewolves. . . . It's just bigotry, isn't it?"

Ron looked as though he would have liked to reply scathingly, but perhaps he didn't want another row, because he could see that Hermione wasn't looking.

It was time now to think of the homework they had neglected during the first week of the holidays. Everybody seemed to be busy, except Harry, that is, who was starting (once again) to feel slightly nervous.

The trouble was that February the twenty-fourth looked a lot closer from this side of Christmas, and he still hadn't done his homework. He therefore started taking the egg out of his trunk every time he went up to the dormitory, opening it, and listening to the sound it made. He was trained to think what the sound reminded him of, apart from thirty musical saws, but he had never heard anything like it before. He came again to see if the sound had changed, but it hadn't. He tried asking the egg questions, shouting over all the wailing, but the egg wouldn't help, though he hadn't really expected that to help.

Harry had not forgotten the hint that Cedric had given him, but his less-than-friendly feelings toward Cedric just now made it difficult to follow it. In any case, it seemed to him that if Cedric had really wanted to give Harry a hand, he would have been a lot more helpful. He had done the first task — and Cedric's idea of a fair exchange had been to tell Harry to take a bath. Well, he didn't need that. He had his own corridors hand in hand with Cho, anyway. And so the first day of the new term arrived, and Harry set off to lessons, still with the lurking worry of the egg heavy in his stomach, as though he were carrying that around with him too.

Snow was still thick upon the grounds, and the greenhouse windows were covered in condensation so thick that they were almost invisible. It was no Care of Magical Creatures much in this weather, though as Ron said, the skrewts would probably warm them up nicely. But Hagrid's cabin would catch fire.

When they arrived at Hagrid's cabin, however, they found an elderly witch with closely cropped gray hair and a very pointed nose. "Hurry up, now, the bell rang five minutes ago," she barked at them as they struggled toward her through the snow.

"Who're you?" said Ron, staring at her. "Where's Hagrid?"

"My name is Professor Grubbly-Plank," she said briskly. "I am your temporary Care of Magical Creatures teacher."

"Where's Hagrid?" Harry repeated loudly.

"He is indisposed," said Professor Grubbly-Plank shortly.

Soft and unpleasant laughter reached Harry's ears. He turned; Draco Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins were joining them. They were all surprised to see Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"This way, please," said Professor Grubbly-Plank, and she strode off around the paddock where the Beauxbatons horses were kept. They all looked back over their shoulders at Hagrid's cabin. All the curtains were closed. Was Hagrid in there, alone and ill?

"What's wrong with Hagrid?" Harry said, hurrying to catch up with Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"Never you mind," she said as though she thought he was being nosy.

"I do mind, though," said Harry hotly. "What's up with him?"

Professor Grubbly-Plank acted as though she couldn't hear him. She led them past the paddock where the huge Beauxbatons tree on the edge of the forest, where a large and beautiful unicorn was tethered.

Many of the girls "ooooohed!" at the sight of the unicorn.

"Oh it's so beautiful!" whispered Lavender Brown. "How did she get it? They're supposed to be really hard to catch!"

The unicorn was so brightly white it made the snow all around look gray. It was pawing the ground nervously with its front hooves.

"Boys keep back!" barked Professor Grubbly-Plank, throwing out an arm and catching Harry hard in the chest. "They're delicate creatures. Handle them with care, come on, easy does it. . . ."

She and the girls walked slowly forward toward the unicorn, leaving the boys standing near the paddock fence, watching. Harry turned to Ron.

"What d'you reckon's wrong with him? You don't think a skrewt — ?"

"Oh he hasn't been attacked, Potter, if that's what you're thinking," said Malfoy softly. "No, he's just too ashamed to show his face."

"What d'you mean?" said Harry sharply.

Malfoy put his hand inside the pocket of his robes and pulled out a folded page of newspaper.

"There you go," he said. "Hate to break it to you, Potter. . . ."

He smirked as Harry snatched the page, unfolded it, and read it, with Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville looking over his shoulder. The paper was extremely shifty.

### DUMBLEDORE'S GIANT MISTAKE

Albus Dumbledore, eccentric headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has never been afraid to make a mistake. In September of this year, he hired Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, the notoriously jinx-happy ex-Auror, to teach

ised eyebrows at the Ministry of Magic, given Moody's well-known habit of attacking anybody who makes a sudden move. He was kind and kindly when set beside the part-human Dumbledore employs to teach Care of Magical Creatures. Rubeus Hagrid, who admits to being expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, has enjoyed the position of gamekeeper for the last year, however, Hagrid used his mysterious influence over the headmaster to secure the additional post of Care of Magical Creatures teacher. He had a list of potential candidates.

An alarmingly large and ferocious-looking man, Hagrid has been using his newfound authority to terrify the students. When Dumbledore turns a blind eye, Hagrid has maimed several pupils during a series of lessons that many admit to being "very frightening." "I was attacked by a hippogriff, and my friend Vincent Crabbe got a bad bite off a flobberworm," says Draco Malfoy, and he refused to say anything.

Hagrid has no intention of ceasing his campaign of intimidation, however. In conversation with a Daily Prophet reporter, he said, "I was just having some fun," he says, before hastily changing the subject.

As if this were not enough, the Daily Prophet has now unearthed evidence that Hagrid is not — as he has always pretended — a simple giant. His mother, we can exclusively reveal, is none other than the giantess Fridwulfa, whose whereabouts are currently unknown. Bloodthirsty and brutal, the giants brought themselves to the point of extinction by warring amongst themselves during the reign of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and were responsible for some of the worst mass Muggle killings of his reign of terror. While many of the giants who served He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were killed by Aurors working against the Dark Side, some of the giant communities still existing in foreign mountain ranges. If his antics during Care of Magical Creatures lessons have not been enough, Hagrid's brutal nature.

In a bizarre twist, Hagrid is reputed to have developed a close friendship with the boy who brought around You-Know-Who. He has turned the rest of You-Know-Who's supporters, into hiding. Perhaps Harry Potter is unaware of the unpleasant truth about Hagrid. He knows that Harry Potter, along with his fellow students, is warned about the dangers of associating with part-giants. Harry finished reading and looked up at Ron, whose mouth was hanging open.

"How did she find out?" he whispered.

But that wasn't what was bothering Harry.

"What d'you mean, 'we all hate Hagrid?'" Harry spat at Malfoy. "What's this rubbish about him" — he pointed at Crabbe and Goyle. "Teeth!"

Crabbe was sniggering, apparently very pleased with himself.

"Well, I think this should put an end to the oaf's teaching career," said Malfoy, his eyes glinting. "Half-giant . . . and the e-Gro when he was young. . . . None of the mummies and daddies are going to like this at all. . . . They'll be worried h—"

"You —"

"Are you paying attention over there?"

Professor Grubbly-Plank's voice carried over to the boys; the girls were all clustered around the unicorn now, stroking it. Hagrid was in his hands as he turned to stare unseeingly at the unicorn, whose many magical properties Professor Grubbly-Plank was explaining.

"I hope she stays, that woman!" said Parvati Patil when the lesson had ended and they were all heading back to the common room. "Proper creatures like unicorns, not monsters. . . ."

"What about Hagrid?" Harry said angrily as they went up the steps.

"What about him?" said Parvati in a hard voice. "He can still be gamekeeper, can't he?"

Parvati had been very cool toward Harry since the ball. He supposed that he ought to have paid her a bit more attention. He was certainly telling anybody who would listen that she had made arrangements to meet the boy from Beauxbatons in Hogsmeade.

"That was a really good lesson," said Hermione as they entered the Great Hall. "I didn't know half the things Professor Hagrid knew."

"Look at this!" Harry snarled, and he shoved the Daily Prophet article under Hermione's nose.

Hermione's mouth fell open as she read. Her reaction was exactly the same as Ron's.

"How did that horrible Skeeter woman find out? You don't think Hagrid told her?"

"No," said Harry, leading the way over to the Gryffindor table and throwing himself into a chair, furious. "He never even told me. Loads of horrible stuff about me, she went ferreting around to get him back."

"Maybe she heard him telling Madame Maxime at the ball," said Hermione quietly.

"We'd have seen her in the garden!" said Ron. "Anyway, she's not supposed to come into school anymore, Hagrid said."

"Maybe she's got an Invisibility Cloak," said Harry, ladling chicken casserole onto his plate and splashing it everywhere. "She's listening to people."

"Like you and Ron did, you mean," said Hermione.

"We weren't trying to hear him!" said Ron indignantly. "We didn't have any choice! The stupid prat, talking about his g—"

"We've got to go and see him," said Harry. "This evening, after Divination. Tell him we want him back . . . you do want him back, don't you?"

"I — well, I'm not going to pretend it didn't make a nice change, having a proper Care of Magical Creatures lesson for once. But I've decided hastily, quailing under Harry's furious stare."

So that evening after dinner, the three of them left the castle once more and went down through the frozen grounds to Hagrid's hut.

"Hagrid, it's us!" Harry shouted, pounding on the door. "Open up!"

Hagrid didn't answer. They could hear Fang scratching at the door, whining, but it didn't open. They hammered on it a few times, but there was no response.

"What's he avoiding us for?" Hermione said when they had finally given up and were walking back to the school. "He doesn't seem to care. They didn't see a sign of him all week. He didn't appear at the staff table at meals, and he wasn't on the grounds, and Professor Grubbly-Plank continued to take the Care of Magical Creatures classes. Malfoy was gloating. 'Missing your half-breed pal?' he kept whispering to Harry whenever there was a teacher around, so that he was safe. There was a Hogsmeade visit halfway through January. Hermione was very surprised that Harry was going to go. 'I just thought you'd want to take advantage of the common room being quiet,' she said. 'Really get to work on that egg.' 'Oh I — I reckon I've got a pretty good idea what it's about now,' Harry lied.

"Have you really?" said Hermione, looking impressed. "Well done!"

Harry's insides gave a guilty squirm, but he ignored them. He still had five weeks to work out that egg clue, after all, and he might run into Hagrid, and get a chance to persuade him to come back.

He, Ron, and Hermione left the castle together on Saturday and set off through the cold, wet grounds toward the garage. Viktor Krum emerged onto the deck, dressed in nothing but swimming trunks. He was very skinny indeed, but appeared to be in good health. He stretched out his arms, and dived, right into the lake.

"He's mad!" said Harry, staring at Krum's dark head as it bobbed out into the middle of the lake. "It must be freezing."

"It's a lot colder where he comes from," said Hermione. "I suppose it feels quite warm to him."

"Yeah, but there's still the giant squid," said Ron. He didn't sound anxious — if anything, he sounded hopeful. Hermione looked at him.

"He's really nice, you know," she said. "He's not at all like you'd think, coming from Durmstrang. He likes it much better here. Ron said nothing. He hadn't mentioned Viktor Krum since the ball, but Harry had found a miniature arm under his bed. It was a small model figure wearing Bulgarian Quidditch robes.

Harry kept his eyes skinned for a sign of Hagrid all the way down the slushy High Street, and suggested a visit to the pub. There was no sign of him in any of the shops.

The pub was as crowded as ever, but one quick look around at all the tables told Harry that Hagrid wasn't there. He ordered three butterbeers from Madam Rosmerta, and thought gloomily that he might just as well have stayed behind and listened to the goblins.

"Doesn't he ever go into the office?" Hermione whispered suddenly. "Look!"

She pointed into the mirror behind the bar, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman reflected there, sitting in a shadowy corner, talking to the goblins, all of whom had their arms crossed and were looking rather menacing.

It was indeed odd, Harry thought, that Bagman was here at the Three Broomsticks on a weekend when there was no sign of him in the mirror. He was looking strained again, quite as strained as he had that night in the forest before the Dark Mark appeared. He saw Harry, and stood up.

"In a moment, in a moment!" Harry heard him say brusquely to the goblins, and Bagman hurried through the pub to the bar.

"Harry!" he said. "How are you? Been hoping to run into you! Everything going all right?"

"Fine, thanks," said Harry.

"Wonder if I could have a quick, private word, Harry?" said Bagman eagerly. "You couldn't give us a moment, you two?"

"Er — okay," said Ron, and he and Hermione went off to find a table.

Bagman led Harry along the bar to the end furthest from Madam Rosmerta.

"Well, I just thought I'd congratulate you again on your splendid performance against that Horntail, Harry," said Bagman.

"Thanks," said Harry, but he knew this couldn't be all that Bagman wanted to say, because he could have congratulated him in any other way. He had a particular rush to spill the beans, though. Harry saw him glance into the mirror over the bar at the goblins, who were still watching him with their big, staring eyes.

"Absolute nightmare," said Bagman to Harry in an undertone, noticing Harry watching the goblins too. "Their English is terrible. They don't speak at the Quidditch World Cup . . . but at least they used sign language another human could recognize. This lot keep going on about it. Degook. Bladvak. It means 'pickaxe.' I don't like to use it in case they think I'm threatening them."

He gave a short, booming laugh.

"What do they want?" Harry said, noticing how the goblins were still watching Bagman very closely.

"Er — well . . ." said Bagman, looking suddenly nervous. "They . . . er . . . they're looking for Barty Crouch."

"Why are they looking for him here?" said Harry. "He's at the Ministry in London, isn't he?"

"Er . . . as a matter of fact, I've no idea where he is," said Bagman. "He's sort of . . . stopped coming to work. Been absent a lot. The Ministry says he's ill. Apparently he's just been sending instructions in by owl. But would you mind not mentioning that to anyone where she can, and I'm willing to bet she'd work up Barty's illness into something sinister. Probably say he's gone missing. It's a bit of a delicate matter."

"Have you heard anything about Bertha Jorkins?" Harry asked.

"No," said Bagman, looking strained again. "I've got people looking, of course . . ." (About time, thought Harry) "and it's a bit of a delicate matter. She met her second cousin there. And then she left the cousin's house to go south and see an aunt . . . and she said she was going to see an aunt. She doesn't seem the type to elope, for instance . . . but still. . . . What are we doing, talking about this?"

"Er . . . not bad," Harry said untruthfully.

Bagman seemed to know he wasn't being honest.

"Listen, Harry," he said (still in a very low voice), "I feel very bad about all this . . . you were thrown into this tournament. It's a bit of a delicate matter. Your voice was so quiet now, Harry had to lean closer to listen) "if I can help at all . . . a prod in the right direction . . . I've got a few ideas."



hat dragon! . . . well, just say the word."

Harry stared up into Bagman's round, rosy face and his wide, baby-blue eyes.

"We're supposed to work out the clues alone, aren't we?" he said, careful to keep his voice casual and not sound as though he was talking about the rules of the game of S.P.U.G. and Sports of breaking the rules.

"Well . . . well, yes," said Bagman impatiently, "but — come on, Harry — we all want a Hogwarts victory, don't we?"

"Have you offered Cedric help?" Harry said.

The smallest of frowns creased Bagman's smooth face. "No, I haven't," he said. "I — well, like I say, I've taken a liking to you."

"Well, thanks," said Harry, "but I think I'm nearly there with the egg . . . couple more days should crack it."

He wasn't entirely sure why he was refusing Bagman's help, except that Bagman was almost a stranger to him, and a stranger was not a person you would normally be asking advice from Ron, Hermione, or Sirius.

Bagman looked almost affronted, but couldn't say much more as Fred and George turned up at that point.

"Hello, Mr. Bagman," said Fred brightly. "Can we buy you a drink?"

"Er . . . no," said Bagman, with a last disappointed glance at Harry, "no, thank you, boys . . ."

Fred and George looked quite as disappointed as Bagman, who was surveying Harry as though he had let him down.

"Well, I must dash," he said. "Nice seeing you all. Good luck, Harry."

He hurried out of the pub. The goblins all slid off their chairs and exited after him. Harry went to rejoin Ron and Hermione.

"What did he want?" Ron said, the moment Harry had sat down.

"He offered to help me with the golden egg," said Harry.

"He shouldn't be doing that!" said Hermione, looking very shocked. "He's one of the judges! And anyway, you've already won!"

"Er . . . nearly," said Harry.

"Well, I don't think Dumbledore would like it if he knew Bagman was trying to persuade you to cheat!" said Hermione. "It's not fair to Cedric as much!"

"He's not, I asked," said Harry.

"Who cares if Diggory's getting help?" said Ron. Harry privately agreed.

"Those goblins didn't look very friendly," said Hermione, sipping her butterbeer. "What were they doing here?"

"Looking for Crouch, according to Bagman," said Harry. "He's still ill. Hasn't been into work."

"Maybe Percy's poisoning him," said Ron. "Probably thinks if Crouch snuffs it he'll be made Head of the Department of Magical Creatures." Hermione gave Ron a don't-joke-about-things-like-that look, and said, "Funny, goblins looking for Mr. Crouch. . . . The control of Magical Creatures."

"Crouch can speak loads of different languages, though," said Harry. "Maybe they need an interpreter."

"Worrying about poor 'ickle goblins, now, are you?" Ron asked Hermione. "Thinking of starting up S.P.U.G. or something?"

"Ha, ha, ha," said Hermione sarcastically. "Goblins don't need protection. Haven't you been listening to what Professor McGonagall says?"

"No," said Harry and Ron together.

"Well, they're quite capable of dealing with wizards," said Hermione, taking another sip of butterbeer. "They're very clever for themselves."

"Uh-oh," said Ron, staring at the door.

Rita Skeeter had just entered. She was wearing banana-yellow robes today; her long nails were painted shocking pink. She was holding a camera and a stack of drinks, and she and the photographer made their way through the crowds to a table nearby, Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Rita Skeeter was very satisfied about something.

" . . . didn't seem very keen to talk to us, did he, Bozo? Now, why would that be, do you think? And what's he doing with the egg? . . . what nonsense . . . he was always a bad liar. Reckon something's up? Think we should do a bit of digging? 'Disgraceful' . . . py start to a sentence, Bozo — we just need to find a story to fit it —"

"Trying to ruin someone else's life?" said Harry loudly.

A few people looked around. Rita Skeeter's eyes widened behind her jeweled spectacles as she saw who had spoken.

"Harry!" she said, beaming. "How lovely! Why don't you come and join — ?"

"I wouldn't come near you with a ten-foot broomstick," said Harry furiously. "What did you do that to Hagrid for, eh?"

Rita Skeeter raised her heavily penciled eyebrows.

"Our readers have a right to the truth, Harry. I am merely doing my —"

"Who cares if he's half-giant?" Harry shouted. "There's nothing wrong with him!"

The whole pub had gone very quiet. Madam Rosmerta was staring over from behind the bar, apparently oblivious to what was going on. Rita Skeeter's smile flickered very slightly, but she hitched it back almost at once; she snapped open her crocodile-skin book and said, "Now, Harry, about giving me an interview about the Hagrid you know, Harry? The man behind the muscles? Your unlikely friends? . . . ?"

Hermione stood up very abruptly, her butterbeer clutched in her hand as though it were a grenade.

"You horrible woman," she said, through gritted teeth, "you don't care, do you, anything for a story, and anyone will do!"

"Sit down, you silly little girl, and don't talk about things you don't understand," said Rita Skeeter coldly, her eyes hard. "Bagman that would make your hair curl . . . not that it needs it —" she added, eyeing Hermione's bushy hair.

"Let's go," said Hermione, "c'mon, Harry — Ron . . ."

They left; many people were staring at them as they went. Harry glanced back as they reached the door. Rita Skeeter was still sitting at the table, looking over a piece of parchment on the table.

"She'll be after you next, Hermione," said Ron in a low and worried voice as they walked quickly back up the street. "Let her try!" said Hermione defiantly; she was shaking with rage. "I'll show her! Silly little girl, am I? Oh, I'll get her back!" "You don't want to go upsetting Rita Skeeter," said Ron nervously. "I'm serious, Hermione, she'll dig up something on you!" "My parents don't read the Daily Prophet. She can't scare me into hiding!" said Hermione, now striding along so fast that last time Harry had seen Hermione in a rage like this, she had hit Draco Malfoy around the face. "And Hagrid isn't hiding anything! He's just being upset him! Come on!"

Breaking into a run, she led them all the way back up the road, through the gates flanked by winged boars, and up the stairs to the castle. The curtains were still drawn, and they could hear Fang barking as they approached.

"Hagrid!" Hermione shouted, pounding on his front door. "Hagrid, that's enough! We know you're in there! Nobody can stop a woman from doing this to you! Hagrid, get out here, you're just being —"

The door opened. Hermione said, "About time!" and then stopped, very suddenly, because she had found herself facing Hagrid. "Good afternoon," he said pleasantly, smiling down at them.

"We — er — we wanted to see Hagrid," said Hermione in a rather small voice.

"Yes, I surmised as much," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Why don't you come in?"

"Oh . . . um . . . okay," said Hermione.

She, Ron, and Harry went into the cabin; Fang launched himself upon Harry the moment he entered, barking madly. Hagrid was sitting at his table, where there were two large mugs of tea. He looked a real mess. His face was blotchy, his hair was concerned; far from trying to make it behave, it now looked like a wig of tangled wire.

"Hi, Hagrid," said Harry.

Hagrid looked up.

"Lo," he said in a very hoarse voice.

"More tea, I think," said Dumbledore, closing the door behind Harry, Ron, and Hermione, drawing out his wand, and a plate of cakes. Dumbledore magicked the tray onto the table, and everybody sat down. There was a slight pause, and then Hagrid was shouting, "Hagrid?"

Hermione went slightly pink, but Dumbledore smiled at her and continued, "Hermione, Harry, and Ron still seem to want to know you. Own the door."

"Of course we still want to know you!" Harry said, staring at Hagrid. "You don't think anything that Skeeter cow — said?"

"I have gone temporarily deaf and haven't any idea what you said, Harry," said Dumbledore, twiddling his thumbs.

"Er — right," said Harry sheepishly. "I just meant — Hagrid, how could you think we'd care what that — woman — wrote?"

Two fat tears leaked out of Hagrid's beetle-black eyes and fell slowly into his tangled beard.

"Living proof of what I've been telling you, Hagrid," said Dumbledore, still looking carefully up at the ceiling. "I have shown you from their own days here, telling me in no uncertain terms that if I sacked you, they would have something to say about it."

"Not all of 'em," said Hagrid hoarsely. "Not all of 'em want me to stay."

"Really, Hagrid, if you are holding out for universal popularity, I'm afraid you will be in this cabin for a very long time," said Dumbledore, looking at his spectacles. "Not a week has passed since I became headmaster of this school when I haven't had at least one owl come to me myself in my study and refuse to talk to anybody?"

"Yeh — yeh're not half-giant!" said Hagrid croakily.

"Hagrid, look what I've got for relatives!" Harry said furiously. "Look at the Dursleys!"

"An excellent point," said Professor Dumbledore. "My own brother, Aberforth, was prosecuted for practicing inappropriate magic. He hid? No, he did not! He held his head high and went about his business as usual! Of course, I'm not entirely sure."

"Come back and teach, Hagrid," said Hermione quietly, "please come back, we really miss you."

Hagrid gulped. More tears leaked out down his cheeks and into his tangled beard.

Dumbledore stood up. "I refuse to accept your resignation, Hagrid, and I expect you back at work on Monday," he said. "No excuses. Good afternoon to you all."

Dumbledore left the cabin, pausing only to scratch Fang's ears. When the door had shut behind him, Hagrid began to sob. At last, Hagrid looked up, his eyes very red indeed, and said, "Great man, Dumbledore . . . great man . . ."

"Yeah, he is," said Ron. "Can I have one of these cakes, Hagrid?"

"Help yerself," said Hagrid, wiping his eyes on the back of his hand. "Ar, he's right, o' course — yeh're all right . . . I bin bin behavin' . . ." More tears leaked out, but he wiped them away more forcefully, and said, "Never shown you a picture of me?"

Hagrid got up, went over to his dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out a picture of a short wizard with Hagrid's croak. Hagrid was a good seven or eight feet tall, judging by the apple tree beside him, but his face was beardless, young, and smiling.

"Tha' was taken jus' after I got inter Hogwarts," Hagrid croaked. "Dad was dead chuffed . . . thought I might not be a wizard. Was great shakes at magic, really . . . but at least he never saw me expelled. Died, see, in me second year. . . ."

"Dumbledore was the one who stuck up for me after Dad went. Got me the gamekeeper job . . . trusts people, he does. He'll accept anyone at Hogwarts, s'long as they've got the talent. Knows people can turn out okay even if they're not. But some don't understand that. There's some who'd always hold it against yeh . . . there's some who'd even pretend to be angry with me. I am, an' I'm not ashamed. 'Never be ashamed,' my ol' dad used ter say, 'there's some who'll hold it against you, but that's no business of yours. I'm not botherin' with her no more, I promise yeh that. Big bones . . . I'll give her big bones.'"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another nervously; Harry would rather have taken fifty Blast-Ended Skrewts than listen to Hagrid, but Hagrid was still talking, apparently unaware that he had said anything odd.

"Yeh know wha', Harry?" he said, looking up from the photograph of his father, his eyes very bright, "when I firs' met yeh, I was feelin' like yeh wouldn't fit in at Hogwarts, remember? Not sure yeh were really up to it . . . an' now look at yeh, Harry. He looked at Harry for a moment and then said, very seriously, "Yeh know what I'd love, Harry? I'd love yeh ter win, I eblood ter do it. Yeh don't have ter be ashamed of what yeh are. It'd show 'em Dumbledore's the one who's got it right with that egg, Harry?"

"Great," said Harry. "Really great."

Hagrid's miserable face broke into a wide, watery smile.

"Tha's my boy . . . you show 'em, Harry, you show 'em. Beat 'em all."

Lying to Hagrid wasn't quite like lying to anyone else. Harry went back to the castle later that afternoon with Ron and Hermione on Hagrid's whiskery face as he had imagined Harry winning the tournament. The incomprehensible egg weighed more than he had got into bed, he had made up his mind — it was time to shelve his pride and see if Cedric's hint was worth a

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### THE EGG AND THE EYE

As Harry had no idea how long a bath he would need to work out the secret of the golden egg, he decided to do it at the prefects' bathroom, reluctant though he was to accept more favors from Cedric, he also decided to use the prefects' bathroom; far fewer people could be disturbed.

Harry planned his excursion carefully, because he had been caught out of bed and out-of-bounds by Filch the caretaker so many times that he had to repeat the experience. The Invisibility Cloak would, of course, be essential, and as an added precaution, Harry thought of the most useful aid to rule-breaking Harry owned. The map showed the whole of Hogwarts, including its many shortcuts, and the people inside the castle as minuscule, labeled dots, moving around the corridors, so that Harry would be forewarned of any danger. On Thursday night, Harry sneaked up to bed, put on the Cloak, crept back downstairs, and, just as he had done on the first night, he found the trait hole to open. This time it was Ron who waited outside to give the Fat Lady the password ("banana fritters"). "Good night," he said, and he went past him.

It was awkward moving under the Cloak tonight, because Harry had the heavy egg under one arm and the map held under the other. The castle was empty and silent, and by checking the map at strategic intervals, Harry was able to ensure that he wouldn't run into anyone. When he reached the Bewilderred, a lost-looking wizard with his gloves on the wrong hands, he located the right door, leaned close to the keyhole, and told him.

The door creaked open. Harry slipped inside, bolted the door behind him, and pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, looking around. His immediate reaction was that it would be worth becoming a prefect just to be able to use this bathroom. It was so large and so made of white marble, including what looked like an empty, rectangular swimming pool sunk into the middle of the floor. There were four fountains, each with a differently colored jewel set into its handle. There was also a diving board. Long white linen curtains hung in a corner, and there was a single golden-framed painting on the wall. It featured a blonde mermaid who was fast asleep and snoring.

Harry moved forward, looking around, his footsteps echoing off the walls. Magnificent though the bathroom was — it was here he couldn't quite suppress the feeling that Cedric might have been having him on. How on earth was this so? He took out one of the fluffy towels, the Cloak, the map, and the egg at the side of the swimming-pool-sized bath, then knelt down to look at the water. He could tell at once that they carried different sorts of bubble bath mixed with the water, though it wasn't bubble bath. There were blue bubbles the size of footballs; another poured ice-white foam so thick that Harry thought it would have supported him. There were also red and purple clouds hovering over the surface of the water. Harry amused himself for a while turning the taps on and off, watching the surface of the water in large arcs. Then, when the deep pool was full of hot water, foam, and bubbles, which took a long time to e taps, pulled off his pajamas, slippers, and dressing gown, and slid into the water.

It was so deep that his feet barely touched the bottom, and he actually did a couple of lengths before swimming back to the edge. He was able though it was to swim in hot and foamy water with clouds of different-colored steam wafting all around him, not to get g.

Harry stretched out his arms, lifted the egg in his wet hands, and opened it. The wailing, screeching sound filled the bathroom. It sounded just as incomprehensible as ever, if not more so with all the echoes. He snapped it shut again, worried that it might have been Cedric's plan — and then, making him jump so badly that he dropped the egg, which clattered away across the floor. "I'd try putting it in the water, if I were you."

Harry had swallowed a considerable amount of bubbles in shock. He stood up, sputtering, and saw the ghost of a veiled woman. It was Moaning Myrtle, who was usually to be heard sobbing in the S-bend of a toilet three floors below.

"Myrtle!" Harry said in outrage, "I'm — I'm not wearing anything!"

The foam was so dense that this hardly mattered, but he had a nasty feeling that Myrtle had been spying on him from the S-bend.

"I closed my eyes when you got in," she said, blinking at him through her thick spectacles. "You haven't been to see me before?"

"Yeah . . . well . . ." said Harry, bending his knees slightly, just to make absolutely sure Myrtle couldn't see anything but his feet. "I am I? It's a girls' one."

"You didn't used to care," said Myrtle miserably. "You used to be in there all the time."

This was true, though only because Harry, Ron, and Hermione had found Myrtle's out-of-order toilets a convenient place to hide. He had turned him and Ron into living replicas of Crabbe and Goyle for an hour, so that they could sneak into the Slytherin common room. "I got told off for going in there," said Harry, which was half-true; Percy had once caught him coming out of Myrtle's bathroom.

"Oh . . . I see . . ." said Myrtle, picking at a spot on her chin in a morose sort of way. "Well . . . anyway . . . I'd try the egg."

"Have you been spying on him too?" said Harry indignantly. "What d'you do, sneak up here in the evenings to watch?"

"Sometimes," said Myrtle, rather slyly, "but I've never come out to speak to anyone before."

"I'm honored," said Harry darkly. "You keep your eyes shut!"

He made sure Myrtle had her glasses well covered before hoisting himself out of the bath, wrapping the towel firmly in the water, Myrtle peered through her fingers and said, "Go on, then . . . open it under the water!"

Harry lowered the egg beneath the foamy surface and opened it . . . and this time, it did not wail. A gurgling song wa through the water.

"You need to put your head under too," said Myrtle, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying bossing him around. "Go on."

Harry took a great breath and slid under the surface — and now, sitting on the marble bottom of the bubble-filled bath, he held an egg in his hands:

"Come seek us where our voices sound,  
We cannot sing above the ground,  
And while you're searching, ponder this:  
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,  
An hour long you'll have to look,  
And to recover what we took,  
But past an hour — the prospect's black,  
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back."

Harry let himself float back upward and broke the bubbly surface, shaking his hair out of his eyes.

"Hear it?" said Myrtle.

"Yeah . . . 'Come seek us where our voices sound . . .' and if I need persuading . . . hang on, I need to listen again. . . ."

He sank back beneath the water. It took three more underwater renditions of the egg's song before Harry had it memorized. He sat and watched him.

"I've got to go and look for people who can't use their voices above the ground. . . ." he said slowly. "Er . . . who could?"

"Slow, aren't you?"

He had never seen Moaning Myrtle so cheerful, apart from the day when a dose of Polyjuice Potion had given Hermione a new identity, thinking . . . if the voices could only be heard underwater, then it made sense for them to belong to underwater creatures.

"Well, that's what Diggory thought," she said. "He lay there talking to himself for ages about it. Ages and ages . . . near the bottom of the lake."

"Underwater . . ." Harry said slowly. "Myrtle . . . what lives in the lake, apart from the giant squid?"

"Oh all sorts," she said. "I sometimes go down there . . . sometimes don't have any choice, if someone flushes my toilet."

Trying not to think about Moaning Myrtle zooming down a pipe to the lake with the contents of a toilet, Harry said, "What's the picture on the wall?"

Harry's eyes had fallen on the picture of the snoozing mermaid on the wall.

"Myrtle, there aren't merpeople in there, are there?"

"Oooh, very good," she said, her thick glasses twinkling, "it took Diggory much longer than that! And that was with her. She had an expression of great dislike on her glum face — "giggling and showing off and flashing her fins. . . ."

"That's it, isn't it?" said Harry excitedly. "The second task's to go and find the merpeople in the lake and . . . and . . ."

But he suddenly realized what he was saying, and he felt the excitement drain out of him as though someone had just told him he had never had much practice. Dudley had had lessons in his youth, but Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, no doubt hoping he would be a professional couple of lengths of this bath were all very well, but that lake was very large, and very deep . . . and merpeople would be very hard to find.

"Myrtle," Harry said slowly, "how am I supposed to breathe?"

At this, Myrtle's eyes filled with sudden tears again.

"Tactless!" she muttered, groping in her robes for a handkerchief.

"What's tactless?" said Harry, bewildered.

"Talking about breathing in front of me!" she said shrilly, and her voice echoed loudly around the bathroom. "When I was in the lake, I was used to breathing. I was used to it. She buried her face in her handkerchief and sniffed loudly. Harry remembered how touchy Myrtle had always been about it.

"Sorry," he said impatiently. "I didn't mean — I just forgot . . ."

"Oh yes, very easy to forget Myrtle's dead," said Myrtle, gulping, looking at him out of swollen eyes. "Nobody missed me. Nobody — I know, I was sitting there waiting for them. Olive Hornby came into the bathroom — 'Are you in here again, Harry? I've been looking for you —' And then she saw my body . . . oooh, she didn't forget it until her dying day, I made sure of that . . . for her brother's wedding —"

But Harry wasn't listening; he was thinking about the merpeople's song again. "We've taken what you'll sorely miss." It was a song, something he had to get back. What were they going to take?

"— and then, of course, she went to the Ministry of Magic to stop me stalking her, so I had to come back here and live in the lake."

"Good," said Harry vaguely. "Well, I'm a lot further on than I was. . . . Shut your eyes again, will you? I'm getting out."

He retrieved the egg from the bottom of the bath, climbed out, dried himself, and pulled on his pajamas and dressing gown.

"Will you come and visit me in my bathroom again sometime?" Moaning Myrtle asked mournfully as Harry picked up the egg.

"Er . . . I'll try," Harry said, though privately thinking the only way he'd be visiting Myrtle's bathroom again was if every day he came to see her. . . . thanks for your help."

"Bye, 'bye," she said gloomily, and as Harry put on the Invisibility Cloak he saw her zoom back up the tap. Out in the dark corridor, Harry examined the Marauder's Map to check that the coast was still clear. Yes, the dots belonging to the office . . . nothing else seemed to be moving apart from Peeves, though he was bouncing around the trophy room on the top of the Gryffindor Tower when something else on the map caught his eye . . . something distinctly odd. Peeves was not the only thing that was moving. A single dot was flitting around a room in the bottom left-hand corner of the map . . . it was Bartemius Crouch.

Harry stared at the dot. Mr. Crouch was supposed to be too ill to go to work or to come to the Yule Ball — so what was he doing? Harry watched closely as the dot moved around and around the room, pausing here and there. . . . Harry hesitated, thinking . . . and then his curiosity got the better of him. He turned and set off in the opposite direction. Mr. Crouch was up to.

Harry walked down the stairs as quietly as possible, though the faces in some of the portraits still turned curiously at him. He kept ept along the corridor below, pushed aside a tapestry about halfway along, and proceeded down a narrower staircase. He looked down at the map, wondering . . . It just didn't seem in character, somehow, for correct, law-abiding Mr. Crouch to be doing this.

And then, halfway down the staircase, not thinking about what he was doing, not concentrating on anything but the next step, he tripped over the rough the trick step Neville always forgot to jump. He gave an ungainly wobble, and the golden egg, still damp from the rain, slipped from his hand and catch it, but too late; the egg fell down the long staircase with a bang as loud as a bass drum on every step — the Marauder's Map fluttered out of his hand and slid down six stairs, where, sunk in the step to above his knee, he couldn't reach it. The golden egg fell through the tapestry at the bottom of the staircase, burst open, and began wailing loudly in the corridor. Harry tried to wipe the Marauder's Map, to wipe it blank, but it was too far away to reach —

Pulling the Cloak back over himself, Harry straightened up, listening hard with his eyes screwed up with fear . . . and, suddenly, he heard a voice.

"PEEVES!"

It was the unmistakable hunting cry of Filch the caretaker. Harry could hear his rapid, shuffling footsteps coming near. "What's this racket? Wake up the whole castle, will you? I'll have you, Peeves, I'll have you, you'll . . . and what is this?" Filch's footsteps halted; there was a clink of metal on metal and the wailing stopped — Filch had picked up the egg and was standing in the magical step, listening. Any moment now, Filch was going to pull aside the tapestry, expecting to see Peeves. But he didn't. Instead, he would spot the Marauder's Map . . . and Invisibility Cloak or not, the map would show "Harry Potter" standing in the step.

"Egg?" Filch said quietly at the foot of the stairs. "My sweet!" — Mrs. Norris was obviously with him — "This is a Triwizard clue, Harry. It's the Marauder's Map, to wipe it blank, but it was too far away to reach —"

Harry felt sick; his heart was hammering very fast —

"PEEVES!" Filch roared gleefully. "You've been stealing!"

He ripped back the tapestry below, and Harry saw his horrible, pouchy face and bulging, pale eyes staring up the dark staircase. "Hiding, are you?" he said softly. "I'm coming to get you, Peeves. . . . You've gone and stolen a Triwizard clue, Peeves. You're a filthy, pilfering poltergeist. . . ."

Filch started to climb the stairs, his scrawny, dust-colored cat at his heels. Mrs. Norris's lamp-like eyes, so very like her master's, began to wonder whether the Invisibility Cloak worked on cats. . . . Sick with apprehension, he watched Harry disappear — he tried desperately to pull his trapped leg free, but it merely sank a few more inches — any second now, Filch was going to hear the wailing.

"Filch? What's going on?"

Filch stopped a few steps below Harry and turned. At the foot of the stairs stood the only person who could make Harry disappear. He looked livid.

"It's Peeves, Professor," Filch whispered malevolently. "He threw this egg down the stairs."

Snape climbed up the stairs quickly and stopped beside Filch. Harry gritted his teeth, convinced his loudly thumping footsteps would give him away. "Peeves?" said Snape softly, staring at the egg in Filch's hands. "But Peeves couldn't get into my office. . . ."

"This egg was in your office, Professor?"

"Of course not," Snape snapped. "I heard banging and wailing —"

"Yes, Professor, that was the egg —"

"— I was coming to investigate —"

"— Peeves threw it, Professor —"

"— and when I passed my office, I saw that the torches were lit and a cupboard door was ajar! Somebody has been sneaking around here —"

"But Peeves couldn't —"

"I know he couldn't, Filch!" Snape snapped again. "I seal my office with a spell none but a wizard could break!" Snape turned to the corridor below. "I want you to come and help me search for the intruder, Filch."

"I — yes, Professor — but —"

Filch looked yearningly up the stairs, right through Harry, who could see that he was very reluctant to forgo the chance of a reward. He went on with Snape . . . go . . . Mrs. Norris was peering around Filch's legs. . . . Harry had the distinct impression that she could see through the tapestry and the perfumed foam?

"The thing is, Professor," said Filch plaintively, "the headmaster will have to listen to me this time. Peeves has been sneaking around here and out of the castle once and for all —"

"Filch, I don't give a damn about that wretched poltergeist; it's my office that's —"

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

Snape stopped talking very abruptly. He and Filch both looked down at the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Mad-Eye Moody's foot sticking out from under the tapestry.

dy was wearing his old traveling cloak over his nightshirt and leaning on his staff as usual.

"Pajama party, is it?" he growled up the stairs.

"Professor Snape and I heard noises, Professor," said Filch at once. "Peeves the Poltergeist, throwing things around a broken into his off —"

"Shut up!" Snape hissed to Filch.

Moody took a step closer to the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Moody's magical eye travel over Snape, and then, unmis Harry's heart gave a horrible jolt. Moody could see through Invisibility Cloaks . . . he alone could see the full strangen the egg, and he, Harry, trapped in the stairs behind them. Moody's lopsided gash of a mouth opened in surprise. For s. Then Moody closed his mouth and turned his blue eye upon Snape again.

"Did I hear that correctly, Snape?" he asked slowly. "Someone broke into your office?"

"It is unimportant," said Snape coldly.

"On the contrary," growled Moody, "it is very important. Who'd want to break into your office?"

"A student, I daresay," said Snape. Harry could see a vein flickering horribly on Snape's greasy temple. "It has happen e store cupboard . . . students attempting illicit mixtures, no doubt. . . ."

"Reckon they were after potion ingredients, eh?" said Moody. "Not hiding anything else in your office, are you?"

Harry saw the edge of Snape's sallow face turn a nasty brick color, the vein in his temple pulsing more rapidly.

"You know I'm hiding nothing, Moody," he said in a soft and dangerous voice, "as you've searched my office pretty th Moody's face twisted into a smile. "Auror's privilege, Snape. Dumbledore told me to keep an eye —"

"Dumbledore happens to trust me," said Snape through clenched teeth. "I refuse to believe that he gave you orders t

"Course Dumbledore trusts you," growled Moody. "He's a trusting man, isn't he? Believes in second chances. But me er come off, d'you know what I mean?"

Snape suddenly did something very strange. He seized his left forearm convulsively with his right hand, as though so Moody laughed. "Get back to bed, Snape."

"You don't have the authority to send me anywhere!" Snape hissed, letting go of his arm as though angry with himse !"

"Prowl away," said Moody, but his voice was full of menace. "I look forward to meeting you in a dark corridor some ti

With a stab of horror, Harry saw Moody point at the Marauder's Map, still lying on the staircase six steps below him.

on to the winds; he raised his arms under the Cloak and waved furiously at Moody to attract his attention, mouthing

Snape had reached out for it, a horrible expression of dawning comprehension on his face —

"Accio Parchment!"

The map flew up into the air, slipped through Snape's outstretched fingers, and soared down the stairs into Moody's

"My mistake," Moody said calmly. "It's mine — must've dropped it earlier —"

But Snape's black eyes were darting from the egg in Filch's arms to the map in Moody's hand, and Harry could tell he

"Potter," he said quietly.

"What's that?" said Moody calmly, folding up the map and pocketing it.

"Potter!" Snape snarled, and he actually turned his head and stared right at the place where Harry was, as though he parchment belongs to Potter. I have seen it before, I recognize it! Potter is here! Potter, in his Invisibility Cloak!"

Snape stretched out his hands like a blind man and began to move up the stairs; Harry could have sworn his over-lar rry leaned backward, trying to avoid Snape's fingertips, but any moment now —

"There's nothing there, Snape!" barked Moody, "but I'll be happy to tell the headmaster how quickly your mind jumpe

"Meaning what?" Snape turned again to look at Moody, his hands still outstretched, inches from Harry's chest.

"Meaning that Dumbledore's very interested to know who's got it in for that boy!" said Moody, limping nearer still to ed. . . ." The torchlight flickered across his mangled face, so that the scars, and the chunk missing from his nose, look

Snape was looking down at Moody, and Harry couldn't see the expression on his face. For a moment, nobody moved

"I merely thought," said Snape, in a voice of forced calm, "that if Potter was wandering around after hours again . . . it For — for his own safety."

"Ah, I see," said Moody softly. "Got Potter's best interests at heart, have you?"

There was a pause. Snape and Moody were still staring at each other. Mrs. Norris gave a loud meow, still peering ar mell.

"I think I will go back to bed," Snape said curtly.

"Best idea you've had all night," said Moody. "Now, Filch, if you'll just give me that egg —"

"No!" said Filch, clutching the egg as though it were his firstborn son. "Professor Moody, this is evidence of Peeves' tr

"It's the property of the champion he stole it from," said Moody. "Hand it over, now."

Snape swept downstairs and passed Moody without another word. Filch made a chirruping noise to Mrs. Norris, who lowing her master. Still breathing very fast, Harry heard Snape walking away down the corridor; Filch handed Moody

Never mind, my sweet . . . we'll see Dumbledore in the morning . . . tell him what Peeves was up to. . . ."

A door slammed. Harry was left staring down at Moody, who placed his staff on the bottommost stair and started to

"Close shave, Potter," he muttered.

"Yeah . . . I — er . . . thanks," said Harry weakly.

"What is this thing?" said Moody, drawing the Marauder's Map out of his pocket and unfolding it.

"Map of Hogwarts," said Harry, hoping Moody was going to pull him out of the staircase soon; his leg was really hurting.  
 "Merlin's beard," Moody whispered, staring at the map, his magical eye going haywire. "This . . . this is some map, Potter."  
 "Yeah, it's . . . quite useful," Harry said. His eyes were starting to water from the pain. "Er — Professor Moody, d'you think it's safe?"  
 "What? Oh! Yes . . . yes, of course . . ."

Moody took hold of Harry's arms and pulled; Harry's leg came free of the trick step, and he climbed onto the one above. "Potter . . ." he said slowly, "you didn't happen, by any chance, to see who broke into Snape's office, did you? On this . . . ?" "Er . . . yeah, I did . . ." Harry admitted. "It was Mr. Crouch."

Moody's magical eye whizzed over the entire surface of the map. He looked suddenly alarmed.

"Crouch?" he said. "You're — you're sure, Potter?"

"Positive," said Harry.

"Well, he's not here anymore," said Moody, his eye still whizzing over the map. "Crouch . . . that's very — very interest

He said nothing for almost a minute, still staring at the map. Harry could tell that this news meant something to Moody, but he dared ask. Moody scared him slightly . . . yet Moody had just helped him avoid an awful lot of trouble. . . .

"Er . . . Professor Moody . . . why d'you reckon Mr. Crouch wanted to look around Snape's office?"

Moody's magical eye left the map and fixed, quivering, upon Harry. It was a penetrating glare, and Harry had the impression that he was being judged, or not, or how much to tell him.

"Put it this way, Potter," Moody muttered finally, "they say old Mad-Eye's obsessed with catching Dark wizards . . . but He continued to stare at the map. Harry was burning to know more.

"Professor Moody?" he said again. "D'you think . . . could this have anything to do with . . . maybe Mr. Crouch thinks t

"Like what?" said Moody sharply.

Harry wondered how much he dare say. He didn't want Moody to guess that he had a source of information outside "I don't know," Harry muttered, "odd stuff's been happening lately, hasn't it? It's been in the Daily Prophet . . . the Daily Prophet . . ."

Both of Moody's mismatched eyes widened.

"You're a sharp boy, Potter," he said. His magical eye roved back to the Marauder's Map. "Crouch could be thinking a e been some funny rumors flying around lately — helped along by Rita Skeeter, of course. It's making a lot of people if there's one thing I hate," he muttered, more to himself than to Harry, and his magical eye was fixed on the left-har  
"

Harry stared at him. Could Moody possibly mean what Harry thought he meant?

"And now I want to ask you a question, Potter," said Moody in a more businesslike tone.

Harry's heart sank; he had thought this was coming. Moody was going to ask where he had got this map, which was to his hands incriminated not only him, but his own father, Fred and George Weasley, and Professor Lupin, their last out of Harry, who braced himself —

"Can I borrow this?"

"Oh!" said Harry.

He was very fond of his map, but on the other hand, he was extremely relieved that Moody wasn't asking where he'd  
"Yeah, okay."

"Good boy," growled Moody. "I can make good use of this . . . this might be exactly what I've been looking for. . . . Right!" They climbed to the top of the stairs together, Moody still examining the map as though it was a treasure the like of which had never been seen before. In the doorway of Moody's office, where he stopped and looked up at Harry.

"You ever thought of a career as an Auror, Potter?"

"No," said Harry, taken aback.

"You want to consider it," said Moody, nodding and looking at Harry thoughtfully. "Yes, indeed . . . and incidentally . . . tonight?"

"Er — no," said Harry, grinning. "I've been working out the clue."

Moody winked at him, his magical eye going haywire again.

"Nothing like a nighttime stroll to give you ideas, Potter. . . . See you in the morning. . . ."

He went back into his office, staring down at the Marauder's Map again, and closed the door behind him.

Harry walked slowly back to Gryffindor Tower, lost in thought about Snape, and Crouch, and what it all meant. . . . What was he going to do about the situation at Hogwarts when he wanted to? What did he think Snape was concealing in his office?

And Moody thought he, Harry, ought to be an Auror! Interesting idea . . . but somehow, Harry thought, as he got quiet now safely back in his trunk, he thought he'd like to check how scarred the rest of them were before he chose it as a

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## THE SECOND TASK

You said you'd already worked out that egg clue!" said Hermione indignantly.

"Keep your voice down!" said Harry crossly. "I just need to — sort of fine-tune it, all right?"

He, Ron, and Hermione were sitting at the very back of the Charms class with a table to themselves. They were supposed to be practicing the Banishing Charm. Owing to the potential for nasty accidents when objects kept flying across the room, Professor McGonagall had decided to let them practice the theory, the theory being that these wouldn't hurt anyone if they went off target. It was a good theory, but it wasn't working.

"Just forget the egg for a minute, all right?" Harry hissed as Professor Flitwick went whizzing resignedly past them, late for class. "I'll take care of it," said Snape and Moody. . . ."

"Snape said Moody's searched his office as well?" Ron whispered, his eyes alight with interest as he Banished a cushion and Parvati's hat off). "What . . . d'you reckon Moody's here to keep an eye on Snape as well as Karkaroff?"

"What?" said Ron, his eyes widening, his next cushion spinning high into the air, ricocheting off the chandelier, and d thinks Snape put your name in the Goblet of Fire!"

saved his life once, but the odd thing was, Snape definitely loathed him, just as he'd loathed Harry's father when they were young. Harry, and had certainly never missed an opportunity to give him punishments, or even to suggest that he should be

"—evil," said Ron promptly. "Come on, Hermione, why are all these Dark wizard catchers searching his office, then?"

"Why has Mr. Crouch been pretending to be ill?" said Hermione, ignoring Ron. "It's a bit funny, isn't it, that he can't m

"You just want to think Snape's up to something," said Hermione, sending her cushion zooming neatly into the box. "I just want to know what Snape did with his first chance, if he's on his second one," said Harry grimly, and his cushion

nd Moody and Snape's conversation. Then Harry turned his attention in earnest to the most urgent problem facing him in February.

isqualified for breaking the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy — it was too much to hope that no Muggles would see it. “Of course, the ideal solution would be for you to Transfigure yourself into a submarine or something,” Hermione said.

"I don't think he'd let you choose what you wanted to be turned into, though," said Hermione seriously. "No, I think y

So Harry, thinking that he would soon have had enough of the library to last him a lifetime, buried himself once mor

Harry to spend an hour underwater and live to tell the tale.  
Familiar flutterings of panic were starting to disturb Harry now, and he was finding it difficult to concentrate in class

Just as it had before he faced the Horntail, time was slipping away as though somebody had bewitched the clocks to ourth (there was still time) . . . there were five days to go (he was bound to find something soon) . . . three days to go

Send date of next Hogsmeade weekend by return owl.  
Harry turned the parchment over and looked at the back, hoping to see something else, but it was blank.

erwater? He had been so intent on telling Sirius all about Snape and Moody he had completely forgotten to mention  
 "What's he want to know about the next Hogsmeade weekend for?" said Ron.

For Grubbly-Plank could, Harry didn't know, but Hagrid had been continuing her lessons on unicorns ever since he'd put unicorns as he did about monsters, though it was clear that he found their lack of poisonous fangs disappointing.

"Easier ter spot than the adults," Hagrid told the class. "They turn silver when they're abou' two years old, an' they grow I grown, 'round about seven. They're a bit more trustin' when they're babies . . . don' mind boys so much. . . . C'mon, yeh

ew o' these sugar lumps. . . .



"You okay, Harry?" Hagrid muttered, moving aside slightly, while most of the others swarmed around the baby unicorn.

"Yeah," said Harry.

"Jus' nervous, eh?" said Hagrid.

"Bit," said Harry.

"Harry," said Hagrid, clapping a massive hand on his shoulder, so that Harry's knees buckled under its weight, "I'd've now yeh can do anythin' yeh set yer mind ter. I'm not worried at all. Yeh're goin' ter be fine. Got yer clue worked out, Harry nodded, but even as he did so, an insane urge to confess that he didn't have any idea how to survive at the bottom — perhaps he had to go into the lake sometimes, to deal with the creatures in it? He looked after everything else on the parchment.

"Yeh're goin' ter win," Hagrid growled, patting Harry's shoulder again, so that Harry actually felt himself sink a couple of inches.

"Yeh're goin' ter win, Harry."

Harry just couldn't bring himself to wipe the happy, confident smile off Hagrid's face. Pretending he was interested in the parchment, he moved forward to pat them with the others.

By the evening before the second task, Harry felt as though he were trapped in a nightmare. He was fully aware that he'd have a real job mastering it overnight. How could he have let this happen? Why hadn't he got to work on the egg's instructions if a teacher had once mentioned how to breathe underwater?

He sat with Hermione and Ron in the library as the sun set outside, tearing feverishly through page after page of spells on the desk in front of each of them. Harry's heart gave a huge leap every time he saw the word "water" on a page, but most of the time he found a pound of shredded mandrake leaves, and a newt . . .

"I don't reckon it can be done," said Ron's voice flatly from the other side of the table. "There's nothing. Nothing. Closest to Charm, but that was nowhere near powerful enough to drain the lake."

"There must be something," Hermione muttered, moving a candle closer to her. Her eyes were so tired she was poring over the parchment with her nose about an inch from the page. "They'd never have set a task that was undoable."

"They have," said Ron. "Harry, just go down to the lake tomorrow, right, stick your head in, yell at the merpeople to give you the clue. Best you can do, mate."

"There's a way of doing it!" Hermione said crossly. "There just has to be!"

She seemed to be taking the library's lack of useful information on the subject as a personal insult; it had never failed her before.

"I know what I should have done," said Harry, resting, facedown, on Saucy Tricks for Tricky Sorts. "I should've learned that Animagus was a wizard who could transform into an animal."

"Yeah, you could've turned into a goldfish any time you wanted!" said Ron.

"Or a frog," yawned Harry. He was exhausted.

"It takes years to become an Animagus, and then you have to register yourself and everything," said Hermione vaguely, looking at her Solutions. "Professor McGonagall told us, remember . . . you've got to register yourself with the Improper Use of Magic Office so you can't abuse it. . . ."

"Hermione, I was joking," said Harry wearily. "I know I haven't got a chance of turning into a frog by tomorrow morning."

"Oh this is no use," Hermione said, snapping shut Weird Wizarding Dilemmas. "Who on earth wants to make their nose disappear?"

"I wouldn't mind," said Fred Weasley's voice. "Be a talking point, wouldn't it?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up. Fred and George had just emerged from behind some bookshelves.

"What're you two doing here?" Ron asked.

"Looking for you," said George. "McGonagall wants you, Ron. And you, Hermione."

"Why?" said Hermione, looking surprised.

"Dunno . . . she was looking a bit grim, though," said Fred.

"We're supposed to take you down to her office," said George.

Ron and Hermione stared at Harry, who felt his stomach drop. Was Professor McGonagall about to tell Ron and Hermione that he ought to be working out how to do the task alone?

"We'll meet you back in the common room," Hermione told Harry as she got up to go with Ron — both of them looking a bit uneasy.

"Right," said Harry uneasily.

By eight o'clock, Madam Pince had extinguished all the lamps and came to chivy Harry out of the library. Staggering out into the Gryffindor common room, pulled a table into a corner, and continued to search. There was nothing in Madam Pince's book of spells or in the book of charms . . . not one mention of underwater exploits in An Anthology of Eighteenth-Century Charms, or in Dreadful Deeds that Do with Them Now You've Wised Up.

Crookshanks crawled into Harry's lap and curled up, purring deeply. The common room emptied slowly around Harry, but not voices like Hagrid's, all of them apparently convinced that he was about to pull off another stunning performance. When he couldn't answer them, he just nodded, feeling as though there were a golf ball stuck in his throat. By ten to midnight, he was alone with his remaining books, and Ron and Hermione had not come back.

It's over, he told himself. You can't do it. You'll just have to go down to the lake in the morning and tell the judges. . . .

He imagined himself explaining that he couldn't do the task. He pictured Bagman's look of round-eyed surprise, Karkadoff's look of disbelief, Delacour saying "I knew it . . . 'e is too young, 'e is only a little boy." He saw Malfoy flashing his POTTER STINKS badge and a smug, relieving face. . . .

Forgetting that Crookshanks was on his lap, Harry stood up very suddenly; Crookshanks hissed angrily as he landed on his bottlebrush tail in the air, but Harry was already hurrying up the spiral staircase to his dormitory. . . . He would grab

tay there all night if he had to. . . .

"Lumos," Harry whispered fifteen minutes later as he opened the library door.

Wand-tip alight, he crept along the bookshelves, pulling down more books — books of hexes and charms, books on magical inventions, on anything at all that might include one passing reference to underwater survival. He carried the low beam of his wand, occasionally checking his watch. . . .

One in the morning . . . two in the morning . . . the only way he could keep going was to tell himself, over and over again.

The mermaid in the painting in the prefects' bathroom was laughing. Harry was bobbing like a cork in bubbly water.

"Come and get it!" she giggled maliciously. "Come on, jump!"

"I can't," Harry panted, snatching at the Firebolt, and struggling not to sink. "Give it to me!"

But she just poked him painfully in the side with the end of the broomstick, laughing at him.

"That hurts — get off — ouch —"

"Harry Potter must wake up, sir!"

"Stop poking me —"

"Dobby must poke Harry Potter, sir, he must wake up!"

Harry opened his eyes. He was still in the library; the Invisibility Cloak had slipped off his head as he'd slept, and the Wand, There's a Way. He sat up, straightening his glasses, blinking in the bright daylight.

"Harry Potter needs to hurry!" squeaked Dobby. "The second task starts in ten minutes, and Harry Potter —"

"Ten minutes?" Harry croaked. "Ten — ten minutes?"

He looked down at his watch. Dobby was right. It was twenty past nine. A large, dead weight seemed to fall through him.

"Hurry, Harry Potter!" squeaked Dobby, plucking at Harry's sleeve. "You are supposed to be down by the lake with the

"It's too late, Dobby," Harry said hopelessly. "I'm not doing the task, I don't know how —"

"Harry Potter will do the task!" squeaked the elf. "Dobby knew Harry had not found the right book, so Dobby did it for

"What?" said Harry. "But you don't know what the second task is —"

"Dobby knows, sir! Harry Potter has to go into the lake and find his Wheezy —"

"Find my what?"

"— and take his Wheezy back from the merpeople!"

"What's a Wheezy?"

"Your Wheezy, sir, your Wheezy — Wheezy who is giving Dobby his sweater!"

Dobby plucked at the shrunken maroon sweater he was now wearing over his shorts.

"What?" Harry gasped. "They've got . . . they've got Ron?"

"The thing Harry Potter will miss most, sir!" squeaked Dobby. "'But past an hour —'"

"— 'the prospect's black,'" Harry recited, staring, horror-struck, at the elf. "'Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.' Dobby

"You has to eat this, sir!" squeaked the elf, and he put his hand in the pocket of his shorts and drew out a ball of what looked like seaweed. "You go into the lake, sir — gillyweed!"

"What's it do?" said Harry, staring at the gillyweed.

"It will make Harry Potter breathe underwater, sir!"

"Dobby," said Harry frantically, "listen — are you sure about this?"

He couldn't quite forget that the last time Dobby had tried to "help" him, he had ended up with no bones in his right

"Dobby is quite sure, sir!" said the elf earnestly. "Dobby hears things, sir, he is a house-elf, he goes all over the castle

Professor McGonagall and Professor Moody in the staffroom, talking about the next task. . . . Dobby cannot let Harry

Harry's doubts vanished. Jumping to his feet he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, stuffed it into his bag, grabbed the gillyweed, and ran to the library with Dobby at his heels.

"Dobby is supposed to be in the kitchens, sir!" Dobby squealed as they burst into the corridor. "Dobby will be missed

"See you later, Dobby!" Harry shouted, and he sprinted along the corridor and down the stairs, three at a time.

The entrance hall contained a few last-minute stragglers, all leaving the Great Hall after breakfast and heading through

As Harry flashed past, sending Colin and Dennis Creevey flying as he leapt down the stone steps and out onto the bridge

As he pounded down the lawn he saw that the seats that had encircled the dragons' enclosure in November were now

the bursting point and reflected in the lake below. The excited babble of the crowd echoed strangely across the water

the judges, who were sitting at another gold-draped table at the water's edge. Cedric, Fleur, and Krum were beside the

"I'm . . . here . . ." Harry panted, skidding to a halt in the mud and accidentally splattering Fleur's robes.

"Where have you been?" said a bossy, disapproving voice. "The task's about to start!"

Harry looked around. Percy Weasley was sitting at the judges' table — Mr. Crouch had failed to turn up again.

"Now, now, Percy!" said Ludo Bagman, who was looking intensely relieved to see Harry. "Let him catch his breath!"

Dumbledore smiled at Harry, but Karkaroff and Madame Maxime didn't look at all pleased to see him. . . . It was obvious that

Harry bent over, hands on his knees, gasping for breath; he had a stitch in his side that felt as though he had a knife in it. Ludo Bagman was now moving among the champions, spacing them along the bank at intervals of ten feet. Harry was out of breath and was holding his wand ready.

"All right, Harry?" Bagman whispered as he moved Harry a few feet farther away from Krum. "Know what you're going to

"Yeah," Harry panted, massaging his ribs.

Bagman gave Harry's shoulder a quick squeeze and returned to the judges' table; he pointed his wand at his throat and med out across the dark water toward the stands.

"Well, all our champions are ready for the second task, which will start on my whistle. They have precisely an hour to then. One . . . two . . . three!"

The whistle echoed shrilly in the cold, still air; the stands erupted with cheers and applause; without looking to see w s and socks, pulled the handful of gillyweed out of his pocket, stuffed it into his mouth, and waded out into the lake. It was so cold he felt the skin on his legs searing as though this were fire, not icy water. His sodden robes weighed hi es, and his rapidly numbing feet were slipping over silt and flat, slimy stones. He was chewing the gillyweed as hard a ike octopus tentacles. Waist-deep in the freezing water he stopped, swallowed, and waited for something to happen. He could hear laughter in the crowd and knew he must look stupid, walking into the lake without showing any sign o goose pimples; half immersed in the icy water, a cruel breeze lifting his hair, Harry started to shiver violently. He avo , and there were catcalls and jeering from the Slytherins. . . .

Then, quite suddenly, Harry felt as though an invisible pillow had been pressed over his mouth and nose. He tried to d he suddenly felt a piercing pain on either side of his neck —

Harry clapped his hands around his throat and felt two large slits just below his ears, flapping in the cold air. . . . He h that made sense — he flung himself forward into the water.

The first gulp of icy lake water felt like the breath of life. His head had stopped spinning; he took another great gulp o g oxygen back to his brain. He stretched out his hands in front of him and stared at them. They looked green and gh nd and looked at his bare feet — they had become elongated and the toes were webbed too: It looked as though he The water didn't feel icy anymore either . . . on the contrary, he felt pleasantly cool and very light. . . . Harry struck ou ike feet propelled him through the water, and noticing how clearly he could see, and how he no longer seemed to ne longer see the bottom. He flipped over and dived into its depths.

Silence pressed upon his ears as he soared over a strange, dark, foggy landscape. He could only see ten feet around om suddenly out of the oncoming darkness: forests of rippling, tangled black weed, wide plains of mud littered with e middle of the lake, his eyes wide, staring through the eerily gray-lit water around him to the shadows beyond, whe Small fish flickered past him like silver darts. Once or twice he thought he saw something larger moving ahead of him arge, blackened log, or a dense clump of weed. There was no sign of any of the other champions, merpeople, Ron — Light green weed stretched ahead of him as far as he could see, two feet deep, like a meadow of very overgrown gra shapes through the gloom . . . and then, without warning, something grabbed hold of his ankle.

Harry twisted his body around and saw a grindylow, a small, horned water demon, poking out of the weed, its long f — Harry stuck his webbed hand quickly inside his robes and fumbled for his wand. By the time he had grasped it, tw f Harry's robes, and were attempting to drag him down.

"Relashio!" Harry shouted, except that no sound came out. . . . A large bubble issued from his mouth, and his wand, i t seemed to be a jet of boiling water, for where it struck them, angry red patches appeared on their green skin. Harry as he could, occasionally sending more jets of hot water over his shoulder at random; every now and then he felt on hard; finally, he felt his foot connect with a horned skull, and looking back, saw the dazed grindylow floating away, cr nk back into the weed.

Harry slowed down a little, slipped his wand back inside his robes, and looked around, listening again. He turned full inst his eardrums. He knew he must be even deeper in the lake now, but nothing was moving but the rippling weed.

"How are you getting on?"

Harry thought he was having a heart attack. He whipped around and saw Moaning Myrtle floating hazily in front of h

"Myrtle!" Harry tried to shout — but once again, nothing came out of his mouth but a very large bubble. Moaning My

"You want to try over there!" she said, pointing. "I won't come with you. . . . I don't like them much, they always chase

Harry gave her the thumbs-up to show his thanks and set off once more, careful to swim a bit higher over the weed

He swam on for what felt like at least twenty minutes. He was passing over vast expanses of black mud now, which s ard a snatch of haunting mersong.

"An hour long you'll have to look, And to recover what we took . . ."

Harry swam faster and soon saw a large rock emerge out of the muddy water ahead. It had paintings of merpeople o t squid. Harry swam on past the rock, following the mersong.

". . . your time's half gone, so tarry not Lest what you seek stays here to rot. . . ."

A cluster of crude stone dwellings stained with algae loomed suddenly out of the gloom on all sides. Here and there emblance at all to the painting of the mermaid in the prefects' bathroom. . . .

The merpeople had grayish skin and long, wild, dark green hair. Their eyes were yellow, as were their broken teeth, a red at Harry as he swam past; one or two of them emerged from their caves to watch him better, their powerful, silv Harry sped on, staring around, and soon the dwellings became more numerous; there were gardens of weed around ne door. Merpeople were emerging on all sides now, watching him eagerly, pointing at his webbed hands and gills, t r and a very strange sight met his eyes.

A whole crowd of merpeople was floating in front of the houses that lined what looked like a mer-version of a village the champions toward them, and behind them rose a crude sort of statue; a gigantic merperson hewn from a bould Ron was tied between Hermione and Cho Chang. There was also a girl who looked no older than eight, whose clouds

ster. All four of them appeared to be in a very deep sleep. Their heads were lolling onto their shoulders, and fine streams of bubbles escaped from their nostrils. Harry sped toward the hostages, half expecting the merpeople to lower their spears and charge at him, but they did not. They were hick, slimy, and very strong. For a fleeting second he thought of the knife Sirius had bought him for Christmas — locked it in his pocket to him whatsoever.

He looked around. Many of the merpeople surrounding them were carrying spears. He swam swiftly toward a seven-foot merman and tried to mime a request to borrow the spear. The merman laughed and shook his head.

"We do not help," he said in a harsh, croaky voice.

"Come ON!" Harry said fiercely (but only bubbles issued from his mouth), and he tried to pull the spear away from the merman's hand and laughing.

Harry swirled around, staring about. Something sharp . . . anything . . .

There were rocks littering the lake bottom. He dived and snatched up a particularly jagged one and returned to the surface. After a few minutes' hard work, they broke apart. Ron floated, unconscious, a few inches above the lake bottom, drifting a little.

Harry looked around. There was no sign of any of the other champions. What were they playing at? Why didn't they let him go? He began to hack at her bindings too —

At once, several pairs of strong gray hands seized him. Half a dozen mermen were pulling him away from Hermione. "You take your own hostage," one of them said to him. "Leave the others . . ."

"No way!" said Harry furiously — but only two large bubbles came out.

"Your task is to retrieve your own friend . . . leave the others . . ."

"She's my friend too!" Harry yelled, gesturing toward Hermione, an enormous silver bubble emerging soundlessly from her mouth. Cho's head was on Hermione's shoulder; the small silver-haired girl was ghostly green and pale. Harry struggled to free her. He pulled her back. Harry looked wildly around. Where were the other champions? Would he have time to take Ron to the surface to find them again? He looked down at his watch to see how much time was left — it had stopped working.

But then the merpeople around him started pointing excitedly over his head. Harry looked up and saw Cedric swimming toward him. He made his features look oddly wide and stretched.

"Got lost!" he mouthed, looking panic-stricken. "Fleur and Krum're coming now!"

Feeling enormously relieved, Harry watched Cedric pull a knife out of his pocket and cut Cho free. He pulled her up with him. Harry looked around, waiting. Where were Fleur and Krum? Time was getting short, and according to the song, the hostages were to be freed.

The merpeople started screeching animatedly. Those holding Harry loosened their grip, staring behind them. Harry turned to see them: a human body in swimming trunks with the head of a shark. . . . It was Krum. He appeared to have transfigured himself.

The shark-man swam straight to Hermione and began snapping and biting at her ropes; the trouble was that Krum's mouth was bigger than a dolphin, and Harry was quite sure that if Krum wasn't careful, he was going to rip Hermione in half. Darting forward, he snatched the red stone. Krum seized it and began to cut Hermione free. Within seconds, he had done it; he grabbed Hermione around the waist and pulled her toward the surface.

Now what? Harry thought desperately. If he could be sure that Fleur was coming. . . . But still no sign. There was nothing left. He snatched up the stone, which Krum had dropped, but the mermen now closed in around Ron and the little girl, still unconscious.

"Get out of the way!"

Only bubbles flew out of his mouth, but he had the distinct impression that the mermen had understood him, because they backed off. Harry pointed his wand, and they looked scared. There might be a lot more of them than there were of him, but Harry could not let them do as the giant squid did.

"You've got until three!" Harry shouted; a great stream of bubbles burst from him, but he held up three fingers to make sure they counted. "two . . ." (he put down a second one) —

They scattered. Harry darted forward and began to hack at the ropes binding the small girl to the statue, and at last he freed her. He cut the neck of Ron's robes, and kicked off from the bottom.

It was very slow work. He could no longer use his webbed hands to propel himself forward; he worked his flippers furiously, but they were dragging him back down. . . . He fixed his eyes skyward, though he knew he must still be very deep, the water above him was dark. Merpeople were rising with him. He could see them swirling around him with ease, watching him struggle through the water. How much time was up? Did they perhaps eat humans? Harry's legs were seizing up with the effort to keep swimming; his shoulders ached. . . .

He was drawing breath with extreme difficulty. He could feel pain on the sides of his neck again . . . he was becoming dizzy. The darkness was definitely thinning now . . . he could see daylight above him. . . .

He kicked hard with his flippers and discovered that they were nothing more than feet . . . water was flooding through his ears. But he knew light and air were only ten feet above him . . . he had to get there . . . he had to . . .

Harry kicked his legs so hard and fast it felt as though his muscles were screaming in protest; his very brain felt waterlogged. He was going, he could not stop —

And then he felt his head break the surface of the lake; wonderful, cold, clear air was making his wet face sting; he gasped. He was up before, and, panting, pulled Ron and the little girl up with him. All around him, wild, green-haired heads were emerging from the water.

The crowd in the stands was making a great deal of noise; shouting and screaming, they all seemed to be on their feet. The little girl might be dead, but they were wrong . . . both of them had opened their eyes; the girl looked scared and confused.

Harry's eyes were bright light, turned to Harry, and said, "Wet, this, isn't it?" Then he spotted Fleur's sister. "What did you bring her for?"

"Fleur didn't turn up, I couldn't leave her," Harry panted.

"Harry, you prat," said Ron, "you didn't take that song thing seriously, did you? Dumbledore wouldn't have let any of us —"

"The song said —"

"It was only to make sure you got back inside the time limit!" said Ron. "I hope you didn't waste time down there acting stupid!"

Harry felt both stupid and annoyed. It was all very well for Ron; he'd been asleep, he hadn't felt how eerie it was down there. He was not at all

oked more than capable of murder.

"C'mon," Harry said shortly, "help me with her, I don't think she can swim very well."

They pulled Fleur's sister through the water, back toward the bank where the judges stood watching, twenty merpeople singing their

screechy songs.

Harry could see Madam Pomfrey fussing over Hermione, Krum, Cedric, and Cho, all of whom were wrapped in thick towels. Ron was on the bank as they swam nearer, but Percy, who looked very white and somehow much younger than usual, came swimming up to help Fleur Delacour, who was quite hysterical, fighting tooth and nail to return to the water.

"Gabrielle! Gabrielle! Is she alive? Is she 'urt?"

"She's fine!" Harry tried to tell her, but he was so exhausted he could hardly talk, let alone shout.

Percy seized Ron and was dragging him back to the bank ("Gerroff, Percy, I'm all right!"); Dumbledore and Bagman were on the bank and was hugging her sister.

"It was ze grindylows . . . zey attacked me . . . oh Gabrielle, I thought . . . I thought . . ."

"Come here, you," said Madam Pomfrey. She seized Harry and pulled him over to Hermione and the others, wrapped him in a blanket, and forced a measure of very hot potion down his throat. Steam gushed out of his ears.

"Harry, well done!" Hermione cried. "You did it, you found out how all by yourself!"

"Well —" said Harry. He would have told her about Dobby, but he had just noticed Karkaroff watching him. He was the only one showing signs of pleasure and relief that Harry, Ron, and Fleur's sister had got back safely. "Yeah, that's right," said Harry, raising his hand.

"You haff a water beetle in your hair, Herm-own-ninny," said Krum. Harry had the impression that Krum was drawing attention to himself, just rescued her from the lake, but Hermione brushed away the beetle impatiently and said, "You're well outside the water."

"No . . . I found you okay. . . ."

Harry's feeling of stupidity was growing. Now he was out of the water, it seemed perfectly clear that Dumbledore's side had won, just because their champion hadn't turned up. Why hadn't he just grabbed Ron and gone? He would have been first, and he would have else; they hadn't taken the mersong seriously. . . .

Dumbledore was crouching at the water's edge, deep in conversation with what seemed to be the chief merperson, who was making all sorts of screechy noises that the merpeople made when they were above water; clearly, Dumbledore could speak to them. He said, "A conference before we give the marks, I think."

The judges went into a huddle. Madam Pomfrey had gone to rescue Ron from Percy's clutches; she led him over to the Hufflepuffs. Ron went to fetch Fleur and her sister. Fleur had many cuts on her face and arms and her robes were torn, but she didn't seem to mind. "Look after Gabrielle," she told her, and then she turned to Harry. "You saved 'er," she said breathlessly. "Even though you were a bit late."

"Yeah," said Harry, who was now heartily wishing he'd left all three girls tied to the statue.

Fleur bent down, kissed Harry twice on each cheek (he felt his face burn and wouldn't have been surprised if steam came out of his ears) — you 'elped —"

"Yeah," said Ron, looking extremely hopeful, "yeah, a bit —"

Fleur swooped down on him too and kissed him. Hermione looked simply furious, but just then, Ludo Bagman's magic was at work, causing the crowd in the stands to go very quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision. Merchieftainess Murcus has told us exactly what happened and we have decided out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows. . . ."

"Fleur Delacour, though she demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm, was attacked by grindylows as she was rescuing her twenty-five points."

Applause from the stands.

"I deserved zero," said Fleur throatily, shaking her magnificent head.

"Cedric Diggory, who also used the Bubble-Head Charm, was first to return with his hostage, though he returned one minute late. He saved the Hufflepuffs in the crowd; Harry saw Cho give Cedric a glowing look. "We therefore award him forty-seven points."

Harry's heart sank. If Cedric had been outside the time limit, he most certainly had been.

"Viktor Krum used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was second to return with his hostage. Karkaroff clapped particularly hard, looking very superior."

"Harry Potter used gillyweed to great effect," Bagman continued. "He returned last, and well outside the time limit of one hour. He was the first to reach the hostages, and that the delay in his return was due to his determination to return all hostages safely. Ron and Hermione both gave Harry half-exasperated, half-commiserating looks."

"Most of the judges," and here, Bagman gave Karkaroff a very nasty look, "feel that this shows moral fiber and merits a high score. . . ."

Harry's stomach leapt — he was now tying for first place with Cedric. Ron and Hermione, caught by surprise, stared at him. . . .

f the crowd.

"There you go, Harry!" Ron shouted over the noise. "You weren't being thick after all — you were showing moral fiber and merit!"

Fleur was clapping very hard too, but Krum didn't look happy at all. He attempted to engage Hermione in conversation.

"The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June," continued Bagman. "The champions will be announced tomorrow. Thank you all for your support of the champions."

It was over, Harry thought dazedly, as Madam Pomfrey began herding the champions and hostages back to the castle. He didn't have to worry about anything now until June the twenty-fourth. . . .

Next time he was in Hogsmeade, Harry decided as he walked back up the stone steps into the castle, he was going to win.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### PADFOOT RETURNS

One of the best things about the aftermath of the second task was that everybody was very keen to hear details of what had happened. Harry was going to share Harry's limelight for once. Harry noticed that Ron's version of events changed subtly with every retelling. And Hermione's story, anyway — Dumbledore had put all the hostages into a bewitched sleep in Professor McGonagall's classroom, and they were all awake when they were back above the water. One week later, however, Ron was telling a thrilling tale of kidnapping in which he had to beat him into submission before tying him up.

"But I had my wand hidden up my sleeve," he assured Padma Patil, who seemed to be a lot keener on Ron now that he was back, than he had been every time they passed in the corridors. "I could've taken those mer-idiots any time I wanted."

"What were you going to do, snore at them?" said Hermione waspishly. People had been teasing her so much about her tetchy mood.

Ron's ears went red, and thereafter, he reverted to the bewitched sleep version of events.

As they entered March the weather became drier, but cruel winds skinned their hands and faces every time they went outside. The owls kept being blown off course. The brown owl that Harry had sent to Sirius with the dates of the Hogsmeade weekend was still ticking up the wrong way; Harry had no sooner torn off Sirius's reply than it took flight, clearly afraid it was going to be late. Sirius's letter was almost as short as the previous one.

Be at stile at end of road out of Hogsmeade (past Dervish and Banges) at two o'clock on Saturday afternoon. Bring a letter to Sirius. "He hasn't come back to Hogsmeade?" said Ron incredulously.

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" said Hermione.

"I can't believe him," said Harry tensely, "if he's caught . . ."

"Made it so far, though, hasn't he?" said Ron. "And it's not like the place is swarming with dementors anymore."

Harry folded up the letter, thinking. If he was honest with himself, he really wanted to see Sirius again. He therefore decided to go — feeling considerably more cheerful than he usually did when descending the steps to the dungeons.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in a huddle outside the classroom door with Pansy Parkinson's gang of Slytherins, all of whom were giggling and sniggering heartily. Pansy's pug-like face peered excitedly around Goyle's broad back as Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached. "There they are, there they are!" she giggled, and the knot of Slytherins broke apart. Harry saw that Pansy had a magazine in her hand. It showed a curly-haired witch who was smiling toothily and pointing at a large sponge cake with her wand.

"You might find something to interest you in there, Granger!" Pansy said loudly, and she threw the magazine at Hermione. The door opened, and Snape beckoned them all inside.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron headed for a table at the back of the dungeon as usual. Once Snape had turned his back on them, Hermione hastily rifled through the magazine under the desk. At last, in the center pages, Hermione found what she was looking for: a photograph of Harry headed a short piece entitled:

Harry Potter's Secret Heartache

A boy like no other, perhaps — yet a boy suffering all the usual pangs of adolescence, writes Rita Skeeter. Deprived of his only love, Harry Potter thought he had found solace in his steady girlfriend at Hogwarts, Muggle-born Hermione Granger. Little did he know that a cruel personal blow in a life already littered with personal loss.

Miss Granger, a plain but ambitious girl, seems to have a taste for famous wizards that Harry alone cannot satisfy. Since the death of the last World Quidditch Cup, Miss Granger has been toying with both boys' affections. Krum, who is open to visit him in Bulgaria over the summer holidays, and insists that he has "never felt this way about any other girl."

However, it might not be Miss Granger's doubtful natural charms that have captured these unfortunate boys' interest. "She's really ugly," says Pansy Parkinson, a pretty and vivacious fourth-year student, "but she'd be well up to making a fortune out of it."

Love Potions are, of course, banned at Hogwarts, and no doubt Albus Dumbledore will want to investigate these claims. Next time, he bestows his heart on a worthier candidate.

"I told you!" Ron hissed at Hermione as she stared down at the article. "I told you not to annoy Rita Skeeter! She's mad!" Hermione stopped looking astonished and snorted with laughter. "Scarlet woman?" she repeated, shaking with suppressed giggles.

"It's what my mum calls them," Ron muttered, his ears going red.

"If that's the best Rita can do, she's losing her touch," said Hermione, still giggling, as she threw Witch Weekly onto the table. She looked over at the Slytherins, who were all watching her and Harry closely across the room to see if they had been caught. A wave, and she, Harry, and Ron started unpacking the ingredients they would need for their Wit-Sharpening Potion.

"There's something funny, though," said Hermione ten minutes later, holding her pestle suspended over a bowl of scumwort.

"Known what?" said Ron quickly. "You haven't been mixing up Love Potions, have you?"

"Don't be stupid," Hermione snapped, starting to pound up her beetles again. "No, it's just . . . how did she know Viktor Krum?" Hermione blushed scarlet as she said this and determinedly avoided Ron's eyes.

"What?" said Ron, dropping his pestle with a loud clunk.

"He asked me right after he'd pulled me out of the lake," Hermione muttered. "After he'd got rid of his shark's head. I told him I'd be away from the judges so they wouldn't hear, and he said, if I wasn't doing anything over the summer, would I like to be a judge?"

"And what did you say?" said Ron, who had picked up his pestle and was grinding it on the desk, a good six inches from the edge.

"And what did you say?" said Ron, who had picked up his pestle and was grinding it on the desk, a good six inches from

"And he did say he'd never felt the same way about anyone else," Hermione went on, going so red now that Harry could have heard him? She wasn't there . . . or was she? Maybe she has got an Invisibility Cloak; maybe she sneaked onto

"And what did you say?" Ron repeated, pounding his pestle down so hard that it dented the desk.

"Well, I was too busy seeing whether you and Harry were okay to —"

"Fascinating though your social life undoubtedly is, Miss Granger," said an icy voice right behind them, and all three of them jumped. "Ten points from Gryffindor."

Snape had glided over to their desk while they were talking. The whole class was now looking around at them; Malfoy and Harry.

"Ah . . . reading magazines under the table as well?" Snape added, snatching up the copy of *Witch Weekly*. "A further black eyes glittered as they fell on Rita Skeeter's article. "Potter has to keep up with his press cuttings. . . ."

The dungeon rang with the Slytherins' laughter, and an unpleasant smile curled Snape's thin mouth. To Harry's fury,

"Harry Potter's Secret Heartache' . . . dear, dear, Potter, what's ailing you now? 'A boy like no other, perhaps . . .'"

Harry could feel his face burning. Snape was pausing at the end of every sentence to allow the Slytherins a hearty laugh. Hermione was blushing scarlet now.

“... Harry Potter’s well-wishers must hope that, next time, he bestows his heart upon a worthier candidate.’ How ve  
ued gales of laughter from the Slytherins. “Well, I think I had better separate the three of you, so you can keep your

Weasley, you stay here. Miss Granger, over there, beside Miss Parkinson. Potter — that table in front of my desk. Mo

Furious, Harry threw his ingredients and his bag into his cauldron and dragged it up to the front of the dungeon to the

Harry unload his cauldron. Determined not to look at Snape, Harry resumed the mashing of his scarab beetles, imag

"All this press attention seems to have inflated your already overlarge head, Potter," said Snape quietly, once the res

Harry didn't answer. He knew Snape was trying to provoke him; he had done this before. No doubt he was hoping for

nd of the class.

"You might be laboring under the delusion that the entire Wizarding world is impressed with you," Snape went on, so (his scarab beetles, even though he had already reduced them to a very fine powder), "but I don't care how many times

ing but a nasty little boy who considers rules to be beneath him."

Harry tipped the powdered beetles into his cauldron and started cutting up his ginger roots. His hands were shaking and he couldn't hear what Snape was saying to him.

"So I give you fair warning, Potter," Snape continued in a softer and more dangerous voice, "pint-sized celebrity or no

"I haven't been anywhere near your office!" said Harry angrily, forgetting his feigned deafness.

"Don't lie to me," Snape hissed, his fathomless black eyes boring into Harry's. "Boomslang skin. Gillyweed. Both come

Harry stared back at Snape, determined not to blink or to look guilty. In truth, he hadn't stolen either of these things

their second year — they had needed it for the Polyjuice Potion — and while Snape had suspected Harry at the time, he was a gillyweed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry lied coldly.

"You were out of bed on the night my office was broken into!" Snape hissed. "I know it, Potter! Now, Mad-Eye Moody

viator! One more nighttime stroll into my office, Potter, and you will pay!"

"Right," said Harry coolly, turning back to his ginger roots. "I'll bear that in mind if I ever get the urge to go in there."

Snape's eyes flashed. He plunged a hand into the inside of his black robes. For one wild moment, Harry thought Sn

Snape had drawn out a small crystal bottle of a completely clear potion. Harry stared at it.

"Do you know what this is, Potter?" Snape said, his eyes glittering dangerously again.

"No," said Harry, with complete honesty this time.

"It is Veritaserum — a Truth Potion so powerful that three drops would have you spilling your innermost secrets for t

f this potion is controlled by very strict Ministry guidelines. But unless you watch your step, you might just find that n

ht over your evening pumpkin juice. And then, Potter . . . then we'll find out whether you've been in my office or not.'

Harry said nothing. He turned back to his ginger roots once more, picked up his knife, and started slicing them again.

d he put it past Snape to slip him some. He repressed a shudder at the thought of what might come spilling out of his

t of people in trouble — Hermione and Dobby for a start — there were all the other things he was concealing . . . like

sides squirmed at the thought — how he felt about Cho. . . . He tipped his ginger roots into the cauldron too, and wo

tart drinking only from a private hip flask.

There was a knock on the dungeon door.

"Enter," said Snape in his usual voice.

The class looked around as the door opened. Professor Karkaroff came in. Everyone watched him as he walked up to the front of the classroom, looking agitated.

"We need to talk," said Karkaroff abruptly when he had reached Snape. He seemed so determined that nobody should as though he were a rather poor ventriloquist. Harry kept his eyes on his ginger roots, listening hard.

"I'll talk to you after my lesson, Karkaroff," Snape muttered, but Karkaroff interrupted him.

"I want to talk now, while you can't slip off, Severus. You've been avoiding me."

"After the lesson," Snape snapped.

Under the pretext of holding up a measuring cup to see if he'd poured out enough armadillo bile, Harry sneaked a sip, and Snape looked angry.

Karkaroff hovered behind Snape's desk for the rest of the double period. He seemed intent on preventing Snape from saying, Harry deliberately knocked over his bottle of armadillo bile with two minutes to go to the bell, which gave the rest of the class moved noisily toward the door.

"What's so urgent?" he heard Snape hiss at Karkaroff.

"This," said Karkaroff, and Harry, peering around the edge of his cauldron, saw Karkaroff pull up the left-hand sleeve.

"Well?" said Karkaroff, still making every effort not to move his lips. "Do you see? It's never been this clear, never since."

"Put it away!" snarled Snape, his black eyes sweeping the classroom.

"But you must have noticed —" Karkaroff began in an agitated voice.

"We can talk later, Karkaroff!" spat Snape. "Potter! What are you doing?"

"Clearing up my armadillo bile, Professor," said Harry innocently, straightening up and showing Snape the sodden rag. Karkaroff turned on his heel and strode out of the dungeon. He looked both worried and angry. Not wanting to remain, he dumped the ingredients back into his bag and left at top speed to tell Ron and Hermione what he had just witnessed.

They left the castle at noon the next day to find a weak silver sun shining down upon the grounds. The weather was perfect. In Hogsmeade, all three of them had taken off their cloaks and thrown them over their shoulders. The food Sirius had taken — chicken legs, a loaf of bread, and a flask of pumpkin juice from the lunch table.

They went into Gladrags Wizardwear to buy a present for Dobby, where they had fun selecting the most lurid socks topped with silver stars, and another that screamed loudly when they became too smelly. Then, at half past one, they made their way to the edge of the village.

Harry had never been in this direction before. The winding lane was leading them out into the wild countryside around the castle; they were walking toward the foot of the mountain in whose shadow Hogsmeade lay. Then they turned a corner. On the topmost bar, was a very large, shaggy black dog, which was carrying some newspapers in its mouth and looking at them.

"Hello, Sirius," said Harry when they had reached him.

The black dog sniffed Harry's bag eagerly, wagged its tail once, then turned and began to trot away from them across the mountain. Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed over the stile and followed.

Sirius led them to the very foot of the mountain, where the ground was covered with boulders and rocks. It was easy to see why he was out of breath. They followed Sirius higher, up onto the mountain itself. For nearly half an hour they climbed a steep, rocky path, sweating in the sun, the shoulder straps of Harry's bag cutting into his shoulders.

Then, at last, Sirius slipped out of sight, and when they reached the place where he had vanished, they saw a narrow path leading into a cool, dimly lit cave. Tethered at the end of it, one end of his rope around a large rock, was Buckbeak the hippogriff. His large eye flashed at the sight of them. All three of them bowed low to him, and after regarding them imperiously for a moment, he turned to rush forward and stroke his feathery neck. Harry, however, was looking at the black dog, which had just turned into Sirius. Sirius was wearing ragged gray robes; the same ones he had been wearing when he had left Azkaban. His black hair was untidy and matted once more. He looked very thin.

"Chicken!" he said hoarsely after removing the old Daily Prophets from his mouth and throwing them down onto the cave floor. Harry pulled open his bag and handed over the bundle of chicken legs and bread.

"Thanks," said Sirius, opening it, grabbing a drumstick, sitting down on the cave floor, and tearing off a large chunk with his teeth. "Too much food from Hogsmeade; I'd draw attention to myself."

He grinned up at Harry, but Harry returned the grin only reluctantly.

"What're you doing here, Sirius?" he said.

"Fulfilling my duty as godfather," said Sirius, gnawing on the chicken bone in a very doglike way. "Don't worry about it. He was still grinning, but seeing the anxiety in Harry's face, said more seriously, "I want to be on the spot. Your last letter said you were stealing the paper every time someone throws one out, and by the looks of things, I'm not the only one who does. I've been stealing the paper every time someone throws one out, and by the looks of things, I'm not the only one who does. He nodded at the yellowing Daily Prophets on the cave floor, and Ron picked them up and unfolded them. Harry, however, was still looking at Sirius.

"What if they catch you? What if you're seen?"

"You three and Dumbledore are the only ones around here who know I'm an Animagus," said Sirius, shrugging, and then he turned to Ron. Ron nudged Harry and passed him the Daily Prophets. There were two: The first bore the headline Mystery Illness of Minister of Magic Now Personally Involved.

Harry scanned the story about Crouch. Phrases jumped out at him: hasn't been seen in public since November . . . his health is declining . . . Ministry refuses to confirm rumors of critical illness. . . .

"They're making it sound like he's dying," said Harry slowly. "But he can't be that ill if he managed to get up here. . . ."

"My brother's Crouch's personal assistant," Ron informed Sirius. "He says Crouch is suffering from overwork."

"Mind you, he did look ill, last time I saw him up close," said Harry slowly, still reading the story. "The night my name was put forward for the position of Headmaster."

"Getting his comeuppance for sacking Winky, isn't he?" said Hermione, an edge to her voice. She was stroking Buckbeak's neck. "He hadn't done it now — bet he feels the difference now she's not there to look after him."

"Hermione's obsessed with house-elves," Ron muttered to Sirius, casting Hermione a dark look. Sirius, however, looked at Harry.

"Crouch sacked his house-elf?"



"Yeah, at the Quidditch World Cup," said Harry, and he launched into the story of the Dark Mark's appearance, and W  
rouch's fury. When Harry had finished, Sirius was on his feet again and had started pacing up and down the cave.

"Let me get this straight," he said after a while, brandishing a fresh chicken leg. "You first saw the elf in the Top Box. S  
"Right," said Harry, Ron, and Hermione together.

"But Crouch didn't turn up for the match?"

"No," said Harry. "I think he said he'd been too busy."

Sirius paced all around the cave in silence. Then he said, "Harry, did you check your pockets for your wand after you'  
"Erm . . ." Harry thought hard. "No," he said finally. "I didn't need to use it before we got in the forest. And then I put m  
mnioculars." He stared at Sirius. "Are you saying whoever conjured the Mark stole my wand in the Top Box?"

"It's possible," said Sirius.

"Winky didn't steal that wand!" Hermione insisted.

"The elf wasn't the only one in that box," said Sirius, his brow furrowed as he continued to pace. "Who else was sitting  
"Loads of people," said Harry. "Some Bulgarian ministers . . . Cornelius Fudge . . . the Malfoys . . ."

"The Malfoys!" said Ron suddenly, so loudly that his voice echoed all around the cave, and Buckbeak tossed his head  
"Anyone else?" said Sirius.

"No one," said Harry.

"Yes, there was, there was Ludo Bagman," Hermione reminded him.

"Oh yeah . . ."

"I don't know anything about Bagman except that he used to be Beater for the Wimbourne Wasps," said Sirius, still p  
"He's okay," said Harry. "He keeps offering to help me with the Triwizard Tournament."

"Does he, now?" said Sirius, frowning more deeply. "I wonder why he'd do that?"

"Says he's taken a liking to me," said Harry.

"Hmm," said Sirius, looking thoughtful.

"We saw him in the forest just before the Dark Mark appeared," Hermione told Sirius. "Remember?" she said to Harry  
"Yeah, but he didn't stay in the forest, did he?" said Ron. "The moment we told him about the riot, he went off to the  
"How d'you know?" Hermione shot back. "How d'you know where he Disapparated to?"

"Come off it," said Ron incredulously. "Are you saying you reckon Ludo Bagman conjured the Dark Mark?"

"It's more likely he did it than Winky," said Hermione stubbornly.

"Told you," said Ron, looking meaningfully at Sirius, "told you she's obsessed with house —"

But Sirius held up a hand to silence Ron.

"When the Dark Mark had been conjured, and the elf had been discovered holding Harry's wand, what did Crouch do  
"Went to look in the bushes," said Harry, "but there wasn't anyone else there."

"Of course," Sirius muttered, pacing up and down, "of course, he'd want to pin it on anyone but his own elf . . . and th  
"Yes," said Hermione in a heated voice, "he sacked her, just because she hadn't stayed in her tent and let herself get  
"Hermione, will you give it a rest with the elf!" said Ron.

Sirius shook his head and said, "She's got the measure of Crouch better than you have, Ron. If you want to know wha  
ot his equals."

He ran a hand over his unshaven face, evidently thinking hard.

"All these absences of Barty Crouch's . . . he goes to the trouble of making sure his house-elf saves him a seat at the  
He works very hard to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament, and then stops coming to that too. . . . It's not like Crouc  
this, I'll eat Buckbeak."

"D'you know Crouch, then?" said Harry.

Sirius's face darkened. He suddenly looked as menacing as he had the night when Harry first met him, the night whe  
"Oh I know Crouch all right," he said quietly. "He was the one who gave the order for me to be sent to Azkaban — wit  
"What?" said Ron and Hermione together.

"You're kidding!" said Harry.

"No, I'm not," said Sirius, taking another great bite of chicken. "Crouch used to be Head of the Department of Magica  
Harry, Ron, and Hermione shook their heads.

"He was tipped for the next Minister of Magic," said Sirius. "He's a great wizard, Barty Crouch, powerfully magical — a  
ding the look on Harry's face. "No, Barty Crouch was always very outspoken against the Dark Side. But then a lot of p  
derstand . . . you're too young. . . ."

"That's what my dad said at the World Cup," said Ron, with a trace of irritation in his voice. "Try us, why don't you?"

A grin flashed across Sirius's thin face.

"All right, I'll try you. . . ." He walked once up the cave, back again, and then said, "Imagine that Voldemort's powerful  
who's working for him and who isn't; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being a  
ly, and your friends. Every week, news comes of more deaths, more disappearances, more torturing . . . the Ministry  
g to keep everything hidden from the Muggles, but meanwhile, Muggles are dying too. Terror everywhere . . . panic .  
"Well, times like that bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. Crouch's principles might've been go  
the Ministry, and he started ordering very harsh measures against Voldemort's supporters. The Aurors were given n  
wasn't the only one who was handed straight to the dementors without trial. Crouch fought violence with violence, a

I would say he became as ruthless and cruel as many on the Dark Side. He had his supporters, mind you — plenty of them — were a lot of witches and wizards clamoring for him to take over as Minister of Magic. When Voldemort disappeared. . . . But then something rather unfortunate happened. . . .” Sirius smiled grimly. “Crouch’s own son was caught with a grudge. Apparently they were trying to find Voldemort and return him to power.”

“Crouch’s son was caught?” gasped Hermione.

“Yep,” said Sirius, throwing his chicken bone to Buckbeak, flinging himself back down on the ground beside the loaf of bread. “I’d imagine. Should have spent a bit more time at home with his family, shouldn’t he? Ought to have left the office when he was tired. He began to wolf down large pieces of bread.

“Was his son a Death Eater?” said Harry.

“No idea,” said Sirius, still stuffing down bread. “I was in Azkaban myself when he was brought in. This is mostly stuff I heard in the company of people I’d bet my life were Death Eaters — but he might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Did Crouch try and get his son off?” Hermione whispered.

Sirius let out a laugh that was much more like a bark.

“Crouch let his son off? I thought you had the measure of him, Hermione! Anything that threatened to tarnish his reputation as Minister of Magic. You saw him dismiss a devoted house-elf because she associated him with the Dark Mark again — didn’t he? It was just far enough to give his son a trial, and by all accounts, it wasn’t much more than an excuse for Crouch to shut his son out of Azkaban.”

“He gave his own son to the dementors?” asked Harry quietly.

“That’s right,” said Sirius, and he didn’t look remotely amused now. “I saw the dementors bringing him in, watched them take him in nineteen. They took him into a cell near mine. He was screaming for his mother by nightfall. He went quiet after a while. . . .”

For a moment, the deadened look in Sirius’s eyes became more pronounced than ever, as though shutters had closed.

“So he’s still in Azkaban?” Harry said.

“No,” said Sirius dully. “No, he’s not in there anymore. He died about a year after they brought him in.”

“He died?”

“He wasn’t the only one,” said Sirius bitterly. “Most go mad in there, and plenty stop eating in the end. They lose the will to live because the dementors could sense it, they got excited. That boy looked pretty sickly when he arrived. Crouch being his father, he’d had a hard visit. That was the last time I saw Barty Crouch, half carrying his wife past my cell. She died herself, apparently, and Crouch never came for his son’s body. The dementors buried him outside the fortress; I watched them do it.”

Sirius threw aside the bread he had just lifted to his mouth and instead picked up the flask of pumpkin juice and drank.

“So old Crouch lost it all, just when he thought he had it made,” he continued, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “. . . next, his son dead, his wife dead, the family name dishonored, and, so I’ve heard since I escaped, a big drop in popularity. . . .” Sirius became more sympathetic toward the son and started asking how a nice young lad from a good family had gone so badly as to end up in Azkaban. Cornelius Fudge got the top job, and Crouch was shunted sideways into the Department of International Magical Cooperation. There was a long silence. Harry was thinking of the way Crouch’s eyes had bulged as he’d looked down at his disobedient son. Then, must have been why Crouch had overreacted to Winky being found beneath the Dark Mark. It had brought back memories of the Ministry.

“Moody says Crouch is obsessed with catching Dark wizards,” Harry told Sirius.

“Yeah, I’ve heard it’s become a bit of a mania with him,” said Sirius, nodding. “If you ask me, he still thinks he can bring down Voldemort.”

“And he sneaked up here to search Snape’s office!” said Ron triumphantly, looking at Hermione.

“Yes, and that doesn’t make sense at all,” said Sirius.

“Yeah, it does!” said Ron excitedly, but Sirius shook his head.

“Listen, if Crouch wants to investigate Snape, why hasn’t he been coming to judge the tournament? It would be an ideal opportunity for him.”

“So you think Snape could be up to something, then?” asked Harry, but Hermione broke in.

“Look, I don’t care what you say, Dumbledore trusts Snape —”

“Oh give it a rest, Hermione,” said Ron impatiently. “I know Dumbledore’s brilliant and everything, but that doesn’t mean he’s infallible.”

“Why did Snape save Harry’s life in the first year, then? Why didn’t he just let him die?”

“I dunno — maybe he thought Dumbledore would kick him out —”

“What d’you think, Sirius?” Harry said loudly, and Ron and Hermione stopped bickering to listen.

“I think they’ve both got a point,” said Sirius, looking thoughtfully at Ron and Hermione. “Ever since I found out Snape was a Death Eater, he’s always been fascinated by the Dark Arts, he was famous for it at school. Slimy, oily, greasy-haired kid, he was, but he knew more curses when he arrived at school than half the kids in seventh year, and he was part of a gang of Slytherins. Sirius held up his fingers and began ticking off names.

“Rosier and Wilkes — they were both killed by Aurors the year before Voldemort fell. The Lestranges — they’re a marauder family, but he wormed his way out of trouble by saying he’d been acting under the Imperius Curse — he’s still at large. But as far as I know, he’s not that that means much. Plenty of them were never caught. And Snape’s certainly clever and cunning enough to keep his secrets.”

“Snape knows Karkaroff pretty well, but he wants to keep that quiet,” said Ron.

“Yeah, you should’ve seen Snape’s face when Karkaroff turned up in Potions yesterday!” said Harry quickly. “Karkaroff

karoff looked really worried. He showed Snape something on his arm, but I couldn't see what it was."

"He showed Snape something on his arm?" said Sirius, looking frankly bewildered. He ran his fingers distractedly through his hair. "But if Karkaroff's genuinely worried, and he's going to Snape for answers . . ."

Sirius stared at the cave wall, then made a grimace of frustration.

"There's still the fact that Dumbledore trusts Snape, and I know Dumbledore trusts where a lot of other people would never go. He'd ever worked for Voldemort."

"Why are Moody and Crouch so keen to get into Snape's office then?" said Ron stubbornly.

"Well," said Sirius slowly, "I wouldn't put it past Mad-Eye to have searched every single teacher's office when he got to Hogwarts. Moody. I'm not sure he trusts anyone at all, and after the things he's seen, it's not surprising. I'll say this for Moody, though. He brought people in alive where possible. He was tough, but he never descended to the level of the Death Eaters. Crouch, on the other hand, he is, why did he make the effort to drag himself up to Snape's office? And if he's not . . . what's he up to? What was he doing in the Top Box? What's he been doing while he should have been judging the tournament?"

Sirius lapsed into silence, still staring at the cave wall. Buckbeak was ferreting around on the rocky floor, looking for food. Sirius looked at Ron.

"You say your brother's Crouch's personal assistant? Any chance you could ask him if he's seen Crouch lately?"

"I can try," said Ron doubtfully. "Better not make it sound like I reckon Crouch is up to anything dodgy, though. Percy would be angry."

"And you might try and find out whether they've got any leads on Bertha Jorkins while you're at it," said Sirius, gesturing towards the cave wall.

"Bagman told me they hadn't," said Harry.

"Yes, he's quoted in the article in there," said Sirius, nodding at the paper. "Blustering on about how bad Bertha's memory was. Bertha I knew wasn't forgetful at all — quite the reverse. She was a bit dim, but she had an excellent memory for gossip. She was determined to keep her mouth shut. I can see her being a bit of a liability at the Ministry of Magic . . . maybe that's why Bagman was so keen to get rid of her. Sirius heaved an enormous sigh and rubbed his shadowed eyes.

"What's the time?"

Harry checked his watch, then remembered it hadn't been working since it had spent over an hour in the lake.

"It's half past three," said Hermione.

"You'd better get back to school," Sirius said, getting to his feet. "Now listen . . ." He looked particularly hard at Harry. "I want to hear about anything odd. But you're not to go leaving Hogwarts vulnerable to attack you."

"No one's tried to attack me so far, except a dragon and a couple of grindylows," Harry said, but Sirius scowled at him.

"I don't care . . . I'll breathe freely again when this tournament's over, and that's not until June. And don't forget, if you're not careful, you could be the next one to attack you."

He handed Harry the empty napkin and flask and went to pat Buckbeak good-bye. "I'll walk to the edge of the village and back. He transformed into the great black dog before they left the cave, and they walked back down the mountainside with Sirius. He allowed each of them to pat him on the head, before turning and setting off at a run around the outskirts of the village and up toward Hogwarts.

"Wonder if Percy knows all that stuff about Crouch?" Ron said as they walked up the drive to the castle. "But maybe he doesn't know any more. Yeah, Percy loves rules. He'd just say Crouch was refusing to break them for his own son."

"Percy would never throw any of his family to the dementors," said Hermione severely.

"I don't know," said Ron. "If he thought we were standing in the way of his career . . . Percy's really ambitious, you know."

They walked up the stone steps into the entrance hall, where the delicious smells of dinner wafted toward them from the kitchens.

"Poor old Snuffles," said Ron, breathing deeply. "He must really like you, Harry. . . . Imagine having to live off rats."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### THE MADNESS OF MR. CROUCH

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery after breakfast on Sunday to send a letter to Percy, asking, as Sirius had suggested, for Hedwig, because it had been so long since she'd had a job. When they had watched her fly out of sight through the clouds, they pulled out their new socks.

The house-elves gave them a very cheery welcome, bowing and curtsying and bustling around making tea again. Dobby was there. "Harry Potter is too good to Dobby!" he squeaked, wiping large tears out of his enormous eyes.

"You saved my life with that gillyweed, Dobby, you really did," said Harry.

"No chance of more of those eclairs, is there?" said Ron, who was looking around at the beaming and bowing house-elves.

"You've just had breakfast!" said Hermione irritably, but a great silver platter of eclairs was already zooming toward them.

"We should get some stuff to send up to Snuffles," Harry muttered.

"Good idea," said Ron. "Give Pig something to do. You couldn't give us a bit of extra food, could you?" he said to the house-elves to get some more.

"Dobby, where's Winky?" said Hermione, who was looking around.

"Winky is over there by the fire, miss," said Dobby quietly, his ears drooping slightly.

"Oh dear," said Hermione as she spotted Winky.

Harry looked over at the fireplace too. Winky was sitting on the same stool as last time, but she had allowed herself to be pulled into the e from the smoke-blackened brick behind her. Her clothes were ragged and unwashed. She was clutching a bottle of

But to her bewilderment, the gray owl landed in front of her plate, closely followed by four barn owls, a brown owl, a

"How many subscriptions did you take out?" said Harry, seizing Hermione's goblet before it was knocked over by the deliver their own letter first.

"What on earth — ?" Hermione said, taking the letter from the gray owl, opening it, and starting to read. "Oh really!"

"What's up?" said Ron.

"It's — oh how ridiculous —"

She thrust the letter at Harry, who saw that it was not handwritten, but composed from pasted letters that seemed to You are a WickEd giRL. HarRy PotTER desErves BeTteR. GO back wherE you cAME from mUGgle.

"They're all like it!" said Hermione desperately, opening one letter after another. "Harry Potter can do much better than g spawn. . . . ' Ouch!"

She had opened the last envelope, and yellowish-green liquid smelling strongly of petrol gushed over her hands, which "Undiluted bubotuber pus!" said Ron, picking up the envelope gingerly and sniffing it.

"Ow!" said Hermione, tears starting in her eyes as she tried to rub the pus off her hands with a napkin, but her fingers as though she were wearing a pair of thick, knobbly gloves.

"You'd better get up to the hospital wing," said Harry as the owls around Hermione took flight. "We'll tell Professor Sp

"I warned her!" said Ron as Hermione hurried out of the Great Hall, cradling her hands. "I warned her not to annoy R

rs Hermione had left behind: "I read in Witch Weekly about how you are playing Harry Potter false and that boy has t as soon as I can find a big enough envelope." Blimey, she'd better watch out for herself."

Hermione didn't turn up for Herbology. As Harry and Ron left the greenhouse for their Care of Magical Creatures cla of the castle. Pansy Parkinson was whispering and giggling behind them with her gang of Slytherin girls. Catching sig girlfriend? Why was she so upset at breakfast?"

Harry ignored her; he didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing how much trouble the Witch Weekly article Hagrid, who had told them last lesson that they had finished with unicorns, was waiting for them outside his cabin w at the sight of the crates — surely not another skrewt hatching? — but when he got near enough to see inside, he fo ng snouts. Their front paws were curiously flat, like spades, and they were blinking up at the class, looking politely pu

"These're nifflers," said Hagrid, when the class had gathered around. "Yeh find 'em down mines mostly. They like spa

One of the nifflers had suddenly leapt up and attempted to bite Pansy Parkinson's watch off her wrist. She shrieked

"Useful little treasure detectors," said Hagrid happily. "Thought we'd have some fun with 'em today. See over there?"

watched him digging from the Owlery window. "I've buried some gold coins. I've got a prize fer whoever picks the nif ose a niffler, an' get ready ter set 'em loose."

Harry took off his watch, which he was only wearing out of habit, as it didn't work anymore, and stuffed it into his po rry's ear and sniffed enthusiastically. It was really quite cuddly.

"Hang on," said Hagrid, looking down into the crate, "there's a spare niffler here . . . who's missin'? Where's Hermione

"She had to go to the hospital wing," said Ron.

"We'll explain later," Harry muttered; Pansy Parkinson was listening.

It was easily the most fun they had ever had in Care of Magical Creatures. The nifflers dived in and out of the patch o udent who had released it and spitting gold into their hands. Ron's was particularly efficient; it had soon filled his lap

"Can you buy these as pets, Hagrid?" he asked excitedly as his niffler dived back into the soil, splattering his robes.

"Yer mum wouldn' be happy, Ron," said Hagrid, grinning. "They wreck houses, nifflers. I reckon they've nearly got the

nifflers continued to dive. "I on'y buried a hundred coins. Oh there y'are, Hermione!"

Hermione was walking toward them across the lawn. Her hands were very heavily bandaged and she looked miserabl

"Well, let's check how yeh've done!" said Hagrid. "Count yer coins! An' there's no point tryin' ter steal any, Goyle," he a d. Vanishes after a few hours."

Goyle emptied his pockets, looking extremely sulky. It turned out that Ron's niffler had been most successful, so Hag e. The bell rang across the grounds for lunch; the rest of the class set off back to the castle, but Harry, Ron, and Herm heir boxes. Harry noticed Madame Maxime watching them out of her carriage window.

"What yeh done ter your hands, Hermione?" said Hagrid, looking concerned.

Hermione told him about the hate mail she had received that morning, and the envelope full of bubotuber pus.

"Aaah, don' worry," said Hagrid gently, looking down at her. "I got some o' those letters an' all, after Rita Skeeter wrot n.' 'Yer mother killed innocent people an' if you had any decency you'd jump in a lake."

"No!" said Hermione, looking shocked.

"Yeah," said Hagrid, heaving the niffler crates over by his cabin wall. "They're jus' nutters, Hermione. Don' open 'em if

"You missed a really good lesson," Harry told Hermione as they headed back toward the castle. "They're good, niffler

Ron, however, was frowning at the chocolate Hagrid had given him. He looked thoroughly put out about something.

"What's the matter?" said Harry. "Wrong flavor?"

"No," said Ron shortly. "Why didn't you tell me about the gold?"

"What gold?" said Harry.

"The gold I gave you at the Quidditch World Cup," said Ron. "The leprechaun gold I gave you for my Omnioculars. In t

Harry had to think for a moment before he realized what Ron was talking about.

"Oh . . ." he said, the memory coming back to him at last. "I dunno . . . I never noticed it had gone. I was more worried

They climbed the steps into the entrance hall and went into the Great Hall for lunch.

"Must be nice," Ron said abruptly, when they had sat down and started serving themselves roast beef and Yorkshire Pudding. "Galleons goes missing."

"Listen, I had other stuff on my mind that night!" said Harry impatiently. "We all did, remember?"

"I didn't know leprechaun gold vanishes," Ron muttered. "I thought I was paying you back. You shouldn't've given me a chance to say sorry."

"Forget it, all right?" said Harry.

Ron speared a roast potato on the end of his fork, glaring at it. Then he said, "I hate being poor."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Neither of them really knew what to say.

"It's rubbish," said Ron, still glaring down at his potato. "I don't blame Fred and George for trying to make some extra money. They're not wrong."

"Well, we know what to get you next Christmas," said Hermione brightly. Then, when Ron continued to look gloomy, she added, "I'll get her back for this if it's the last thing I do!"

Hate mail continued to arrive for Hermione over the following week, and although she followed Hagrid's advice and didn't go to the Gryffindor table and shrieked insults at her for the whole Hall to hear. Even those people who didn't like her were a bit sorry for her. Hermione was getting sick of telling people that she wasn't his girlfriend.

"It'll die down, though," he told Hermione, "if we just ignore it. . . . People got bored with that stuff she wrote about me. I want to know how she's listening into private conversations when she's supposed to be banned from the grounds!"

Hermione hung back in their next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson to ask Professor Moody something. The rest of the class was having a very boring lesson. The rest of the class was having a very boring lesson. The rest of the class was having a very boring lesson.

"Well, Rita's definitely not using an Invisibility Cloak!" Hermione panted five minutes later, catching up with Harry and Ron. "Moody says he didn't see her anywhere near the judges' table at the trial."

"Hermione, is there any point in telling you to drop this?" said Ron.

"No!" said Hermione stubbornly. "I want to know how she heard me talking to Viktor! And how she found out about Hagrid's secret!"

"Maybe she had you bugged," said Harry.

"Bugged?" said Ron blankly. "What . . . put fleas on her or something?"

Harry started explaining about hidden microphones and recording equipment. Ron was fascinated, but Hermione was bored.

"Aren't you two ever going to read *Hogwarts: A History*?"

"What's the point?" said Ron. "You know it by heart, we can just ask you."

"All those substitutes for magic Muggles use — electricity, computers, and radar, and all those things — they all go hooey!" said Hermione. "If Rita's using magic to eavesdrop, she must be. . . . If I could just find out what it is . . . ooh, if it's illegal, I'll have her . . ."

"Haven't we got enough to worry about?" Ron asked her. "Do we have to start a vendetta against Rita Skeeter as well?"

"I'm not asking you to help!" Hermione snapped. "I'll do it on my own!"

She marched back up the marble staircase without a backward glance. Harry was quite sure she was going to the library.

"What's the betting she comes back with a box of I Hate Rita Skeeter badges?" said Ron.

Hermione, however, did not ask Harry and Ron to help her pursue vengeance against Rita Skeeter, for which they were not going to. The days before the Easter holidays. Harry frankly marveled at the fact that Hermione could research magical methods so thoroughly. She was working flat-out just to get through all their homework, though he made a point of sending regular food packages to her. Harry had not forgotten what it felt like to be continually hungry. He enclosed notes to Sirius, telling him that nothing was wrong. He was waiting for an answer from Percy.

Hedwig didn't return until the end of the Easter holidays. Percy's letter was enclosed in a package of Easter eggs that were full of dragon eggs and full of homemade toffee. Hermione's, however, was smaller than a chicken egg. Her face fell when she opened it.

"Your mum doesn't read *Witch Weekly*, by any chance, does she, Ron?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah," said Ron, whose mouth was full of toffee. "Gets it for the recipes."

Hermione looked sadly at her tiny egg.

"Don't you want to see what Percy's written?" Harry asked her hastily.

Percy's letter was short and irritated.

As I am constantly telling the Daily Prophet, Mr. Crouch is taking a well-deserved break. He is sending in regular owls to deliver my messages. I can be trusted to know my own superior's handwriting. I have quite enough to do at the moment without trying to do anything else. It's something important. Happy Easter.

The start of the summer term would normally have meant that Harry was training hard for the last Quidditch match of the season. He was training hard for the last Quidditch match of the season. He was training hard for the last Quidditch match of the season.

On the Triwizard Tournament for which he needed to prepare, but he still didn't know what he would have to do. Finally, he decided to try Transfiguration.

"You are to go down to the Quidditch field tonight at nine o'clock, Potter," she told him. "Mr. Bagman will be there to see you. So at half past eight that night, Harry left Ron and Hermione in Gryffindor Tower and went downstairs. As he crossed the courtyard, he saw a large crowd of people gathered in the courtyard. He saw a large crowd of people gathered in the courtyard. He saw a large crowd of people gathered in the courtyard.

"What d'you reckon it's going to be?" he asked Harry as they went together down the stone steps, out into the cloudy night.

"That wouldn't be too bad," said Harry, thinking that he would simply ask Hagrid for a niffler to do the job for him.

They walked down the dark lawn to the Quidditch stadium, turned through a gap in the stands, and walked out onto the pitch.

"What've they done to it?" Cedric said indignantly, stopping dead.

The Quidditch field was no longer smooth and flat. It looked as though somebody had been building long, low walls. "They're hedges!" said Harry, bending to examine the nearest one.

"Hello there!" called a cheery voice.

Ludo Bagman was standing in the middle of the field with Krum and Fleur. Harry and Cedric made their way toward her. Her attitude toward him had changed completely since he had saved her sister from the lake.

"Well, what d'you think?" said Bagman happily as Harry and Cedric climbed over the last hedge. "Growing nicely, aren't they? Don't worry," he added, grinning, spotting the less-than-happy expressions on Harry's and Cedric's faces, "you'll have to grow them now, I imagine you can guess what we're making here?"

No one spoke for a moment. Then —

"Maze," grunted Krum.

"That's right!" said Bagman. "A maze. The third task's really very straightforward. The Triwizard Cup will be placed in the center. Whoever reaches it first will receive full marks."

"We seemly 'ave to get through the maze?" said Fleur.

"There will be obstacles," said Bagman happily, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Hagrid is providing a number of creatures to guard the maze. . . all that sort of thing, you know. Now, the champions who are leading on points will get a head start into the maze. . . . then Miss Delacour. But you'll all be in with a fighting chance, depending how well you get past the obstacles. She's a bit of a wizard, Harry, who knew only too well the kind of creatures that Hagrid was likely to provide for an event like this, thought it was a bit like the other champions."

"Very well . . . if you haven't got any questions, we'll go back up to the castle, shall we, it's a bit chilly. . . ."

Bagman hurried alongside Harry as they began to wend their way out of the growing maze. Harry had the feeling that he was being led, and Krum tapped Harry on the shoulder.

"Could I haff a vord?"

"Yeah, all right," said Harry, slightly surprised.

"Vill you valk vith me?"

"Okay," said Harry curiously.

Bagman looked slightly perturbed.

"I'll wait for you, Harry, shall I?"

"No, it's okay, Mr. Bagman," said Harry, suppressing a smile, "I think I can find the castle on my own, thanks."

Harry and Krum left the stadium together, but Krum did not set a course for the Durmstrang ship. Instead, he walked toward the castle. "What're we going this way for?" said Harry as they passed Hagrid's cabin and the illuminated Beauxbatons carriage.

"Don't vont to be overheard," said Krum shortly.

When at last they had reached a quiet stretch of ground a short way from the Beauxbatons horses' paddock, Krum stopped. "I vant to know," he said, glowering, "vot there is between you and Hermey-own-ninny."

Harry, who from Krum's secretive manner had expected something much more serious than this, stared up at Krum. "Nothing," he said. But Krum glowered at him, and Harry, somehow struck anew by how tall Krum was, elaborated. "Just that Skeeter woman making things up."

"Hermey-own-ninny talks about you very often," said Krum, looking suspiciously at Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry, "because we're friends."

He couldn't quite believe he was having this conversation with Viktor Krum, the famous International Quidditch player. Krum was an equal — a real rival —

"You haff never . . . you haff not . . ."

"No," said Harry very firmly.

Krum looked slightly happier. He stared at Harry for a few seconds, then said, "You fly very vell. I vos votching at the Quidditch World Cup. You were the best. . . ."

"Thanks," said Harry, grinning broadly and suddenly feeling much taller himself. "I saw you at the Quidditch World Cup. You were the best. . . ."

But something moved behind Krum in the trees, and Harry, who had some experience of the sort of thing that lurked in the shadows, stopped. "Vot is it?"

Harry shook his head, staring at the place where he'd seen movement. He slipped his hand inside his robes, reaching for his wand. Suddenly a man staggered out from behind a tall oak. For a moment, Harry didn't recognize him . . . then he realized who it was. He looked as though he had been traveling for days. The knees of his robes were ripped and bloody, his face scratched and his beard and stache were both in need of a wash and a trim. His strange appearance, however, was nothing to the way he was behaving. He was looking at someone that he alone could see. He reminded Harry vividly of an old tramp he had seen once when out shopping in Diagon Alley; Aunt Petunia had seized Dudley's hand and pulled him across the road to avoid him; Uncle Vernon had then threatened to turn him out of the house. "Vosn't he a judge?" said Krum, staring at Mr. Crouch. "Isn't he vith your Ministry?"

Harry nodded, hesitated for a moment, then walked slowly toward Mr. Crouch, who did not look at him, but continued to stare at the ground. " . . . and when you've done that, Weatherby, send an owl to Dumbledore confirming the number of Durmstrang students. . . . and there will be twelve. . . ."

"Mr. Crouch?" said Harry cautiously.

" . . . and then send another owl to Madame Maxime, because she might want to up the number of students she's bringing."

, will you? Will you? Will . . ."

Mr. Crouch's eyes were bulging. He stood staring at the tree, muttering soundlessly at it. Then he staggered sideways.

"Mr. Crouch?" Harry said loudly. "Are you all right?"

Crouch's eyes were rolling in his head. Harry looked around at Krum, who had followed him into the trees, and was I

"Vot is wrong with him?"

"No idea," Harry muttered. "Listen, you'd better go and get someone —"

"Dumbledore!" gasped Mr. Crouch. He reached out and seized a handful of Harry's robes, dragging him closer, though umbledore. . . ."

"Okay," said Harry, "if you get up, Mr. Crouch, we can go up to the —"

"I've done . . . stupid . . . thing . . ." Mr. Crouch breathed. He looked utterly mad. His eyes were rolling and bulging, and his word he spoke seemed to cost him a terrible effort. "Must . . . tell . . . Dumbledore . . ."

"Get up, Mr. Crouch," said Harry loudly and clearly. "Get up, I'll take you to Dumbledore!"

Mr. Crouch's eyes rolled forward onto Harry.

"Who . . . you?" he whispered.

"I'm a student at the school," said Harry, looking around at Krum for some help, but Krum was hanging back, looking

"You're not . . . his?" whispered Crouch, his mouth sagging.

"No," said Harry, without the faintest idea what Crouch was talking about.

"Dumbledore's?"

"That's right," said Harry.

Crouch was pulling him closer; Harry tried to loosen Crouch's grip on his robes, but it was too powerful.

"Warn . . . Dumbledore . . ."

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let go of me," said Harry. "Just let go, Mr. Crouch, and I'll get him. . . ."

"Thank you, Weatherby, and when you have done that, I would like a cup of tea. My wife and son will be arriving shortly."

Crouch was now talking fluently to a tree again, and seemed completely unaware that Harry was there, which surprised

"Yes, my son has recently gained twelve O.W.L.s, most satisfactory, yes, thank you, yes, very proud indeed. Now, if you will, I think I will have time to draft a response. . . ."

"You stay here with him!" Harry said to Krum. "I'll get Dumbledore, I'll be quicker, I know where his office is —"

"He is mad," said Krum doubtfully, staring down at Crouch, who was still gabbling to the tree, apparently convinced it

"Just stay with him," said Harry, starting to get up, but his movement seemed to trigger another abrupt change in Mr. Crouch, who fell back to the ground.

"Don't . . . leave . . . me!" he whispered, his eyes bulging again. "I . . . escaped . . . must warn . . . must tell . . . see Dumbledore . . . tha . . . dead . . . all my fault . . . my son . . . my fault . . . tell Dumbledore . . . Harry Potter . . . the Dark Lord . . . stronger . . ."

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let me go, Mr. Crouch!" said Harry. He looked furiously around at Krum. "Help me, will you?"

Looking extremely apprehensive, Krum moved forward and squatted down next to Mr. Crouch.

"Just keep him here," said Harry, pulling himself free of Mr. Crouch. "I'll be back with Dumbledore."

"Hurry, won't you?" Krum called after him as Harry sprinted away from the forest and up through the dark grounds. The stone steps tore up the stone steps, through the oak front doors, and off up the marble staircase, toward the second floor.

Five minutes later he was hurtling toward a stone gargoyle standing halfway along an empty corridor.

"Lemon — lemon drop!" he panted at it.

This was the password to the hidden staircase to Dumbledore's office — or at least, it had been two years ago. The gargoyle did not spring to life and jump aside, but stood frozen, glaring at Harry malevolently.

"Move!" Harry shouted at it. "C'mon!"

But nothing at Hogwarts had ever moved just because he shouted at it; he knew it was no good. He looked up and down the corridor, started running as fast as he could toward the staircase —

"POTTER!"

Harry skidded to a halt and looked around. Snape had just emerged from the hidden staircase behind the stone gargoyle and was looking back toward him.

"What are you doing here, Potter?"

"I need to see Professor Dumbledore!" said Harry, running back up the corridor and skidding to a standstill in front of the stone wall. . . . he's in the forest . . . he's asking —"

"What is this rubbish?" said Snape, his black eyes glittering. "What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Crouch!" Harry shouted. "From the Ministry! He's ill or something — he's in the forest, he wants to see Dumbledore!"

"The headmaster is busy, Potter," said Snape, his thin mouth curling into an unpleasant smile.

"I've got to tell Dumbledore!" Harry yelled.

"Didn't you hear me, Potter?"

Harry could tell Snape was thoroughly enjoying himself, denying Harry the thing he wanted when he was so panicky.

"Look," said Harry angrily, "Crouch isn't right — he's — he's out of his mind — he says he wants to warn —"

The stone wall behind Snape slid open. Dumbledore was standing there, wearing long green robes and a mildly curious expression, and Snape.

"Professor!" Harry said, sidestepping Snape before Snape could speak, "Mr. Crouch is here — he's down in the forest —"



Harry expected Dumbledore to ask questions, but to his relief, Dumbledore did nothing of the sort.

"Lead the way," he said promptly, and he swept off along the corridor behind Harry, leaving Snape standing next to t

"What did Mr. Crouch say, Harry?" said Dumbledore as they walked swiftly down the marble staircase.

"Said he wants to warn you . . . said he's done something terrible . . . he mentioned his son . . . and Bertha Jorkins . . . ing stronger. . . ."

"Indeed," said Dumbledore, and he quickened his pace as they hurried out into the pitch-darkness.

"He's not acting normally," Harry said, hurrying along beside Dumbledore. "He doesn't seem to know where he is. He anges, and says he needs to see you. . . . I left him with Viktor Krum."

"You did?" said Dumbledore sharply, and he began to take longer strides still, so that Harry was running to keep up.

"No," said Harry. "Krum and I were talking, Mr. Bagman had just finished telling us about the third task, we stayed be

"Where are they?" said Dumbledore as the Beauxbatons carriage emerged from the darkness.

"Over here," said Harry, moving in front of Dumbledore, leading the way through the trees. He couldn't hear Crouch's ch past the Beauxbatons carriage . . . somewhere around here. . . .

"Viktor?" Harry shouted.

No one answered.

"They were here," Harry said to Dumbledore. "They were definitely somewhere around here. . . ."

"Lumos," Dumbledore said, lighting his wand and holding it up.

Its narrow beam traveled from black trunk to black trunk, illuminating the ground. And then it fell upon a pair of feet Harry and Dumbledore hurried forward. Krum was sprawled on the forest floor. He seemed to be unconscious. Then y lifted one of his eyelids.

"Stunned," he said softly. His half-moon glasses glittered in the wandlight as he peered around at the surrounding tr

"Should I go and get someone?" said Harry. "Madam Pomfrey?"

"No," said Dumbledore swiftly. "Stay here."

He raised his wand into the air and pointed it in the direction of Hagrid's cabin. Harry saw something silvery dart out. Then Dumbledore bent over Krum again, pointed his wand at him, and muttered, "Rennervate."

Krum opened his eyes. He looked dazed. When he saw Dumbledore, he tried to sit up, but Dumbledore put a hand o

"He attacked me!" Krum muttered, putting a hand up to his head. "The old madman attacked me! I vos looking around

"Lie still for a moment," Dumbledore said.

The sound of thunderous footfalls reached them, and Hagrid came panting into sight with Fang at his heels. He was

"Professor Dumbledore!" he said, his eyes widening. "Harry — what the — ?"

"Hagrid, I need you to fetch Professor Karkaroff," said Dumbledore. "His student has been attacked. When you've do

"No need, Dumbledore," said a wheezy growl. "I'm here."

Moody was limping toward them, leaning on his staff, his wand lit.

"Damn leg," he said furiously. "Would've been here quicker . . . what's happened? Snape said something about Crouc

"Crouch?" said Hagrid blankly.

"Karkaroff, please, Hagrid!" said Dumbledore sharply.

"Oh yeah . . . right y'are, Professor . . ." said Hagrid, and he turned and disappeared into the dark trees, Fang trotting

"I don't know where Barty Crouch is," Dumbledore told Moody, "but it is essential that we find him."

"I'm onto it," growled Moody, and he raised his wand and limped off into the forest.

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke again until they heard the unmistakable sounds of Hagrid and Fang returning. lver furs, and he looked pale and agitated.

"What is this?" he cried when he saw Krum on the ground and Dumbledore and Harry beside him. "What's going on?"

"I vos attacked!" said Krum, sitting up now and rubbing his head. "Mr. Crouch or votever his name —"

"Crouch attacked you? Crouch attacked you? The Triwizard judge?"

"Igor," Dumbledore began, but Karkaroff had drawn himself up, clutching his furs around him, looking livid.

"Treachery!" he bellowed, pointing at Dumbledore. "It is a plot! You and your Ministry of Magic have lured me here u n! First you sneak Potter into the tournament, though he is underage! Now one of your Ministry friends attempts to p on in this whole affair, and you, Dumbledore, you, with your talk of closer international Wizarding links, of rebuilding k of you!"

Karkaroff spat onto the ground at Dumbledore's feet. In one swift movement, Hagrid seized the front of Karkaroff's f ee.

"Apologize!" Hagrid snarled as Karkaroff gasped for breath, Hagrid's massive fist at his throat, his feet dangling in mi

"Hagrid, no!" Dumbledore shouted, his eyes flashing.

Hagrid removed the hand pinning Karkaroff to the tree, and Karkaroff slid all the way down the trunk and slumped in his head.

"Kindly escort Harry back up to the castle, Hagrid," said Dumbledore sharply.

Breathing heavily, Hagrid gave Karkaroff a glowering look.

"Maybe I'd better stay here, Headmaster. . . ."

"You will take Harry back to school, Hagrid," Dumbledore repeated firmly. "Take him right up to Gryffindor Tower. An — any owls you might want to send — they can wait until morning, do you understand me?"

"Er — yes," said Harry, staring at him. How had Dumbledore known that, at that very moment, he had been thinking ppened?

"I'll leave Fang with yeh, Headmaster," Hagrid said, staring menacingly at Karkaroff, who was still sprawled at the foot of the stone mon, Harry."

They marched in silence past the Beauxbatons carriage and up toward the castle.

"How dare he," Hagrid growled as they strode past the lake. "How dare he accuse Dumbledore. Like Dumbledore'd do the firs' place. Worried! I dunno when I seen Dumbledore more worried than he's bin lately. An' you!" Hagrid suddenly were yeh doin', wanderin' off with ruddy Krum? He's from Durmstrang, Harry! Coulda jinxed yeh right there, couldn't off on yer own —"

"Krum's all right!" said Harry as they climbed the steps into the entrance hall. "He wasn't trying to jinx me, he just wanted to. I'll be havin' a few words with her, an' all," said Hagrid grimly, stomping up the stairs. "The less you lot 'ave ter do with t any of 'em."

"You were getting on all right with Madame Maxime," Harry said, annoyed.

"Don' you talk ter me abou' her!" said Hagrid, and he looked quite frightening for a moment. "I've got her number now. I'll tell her what's comin' in the third task. Ha! You can' trust any of 'em!"

Hagrid was in such a bad mood, Harry was quite glad to say good-bye to him in front of the Fat Lady. He clambered to the corner where Ron and Hermione were sitting, to tell them what had happened.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### THE DREAM

It comes down to this," said Hermione, rubbing her forehead. "Either Mr. Crouch attacked Viktor, or somebody else attacked him."

"It must've been Crouch," said Ron at once. "That's why he was gone when Harry and Dumbledore got there. He'd disappeared."

"I don't think so," said Harry, shaking his head. "He seemed really weak — I don't reckon he was up to Disapparating."

"You can't Disapparate on the Hogwarts grounds, haven't I told you enough times?" said Hermione.

"Okay . . . how's this for a theory," said Ron excitedly. "Krum attacked Crouch — no, wait for it — and then Stunned him."

"And Mr. Crouch evaporated, did he?" said Hermione coldly.

"Oh yeah . . ."

It was daybreak. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had crept out of their dormitories very early and hurried up to the Owlery to hang out at the misty grounds. All three of them were puffy-eyed and pale because they had been talking late into the night.

"Just go through it again, Harry," said Hermione. "What did Mr. Crouch actually say?"

"I've told you, he wasn't making much sense," said Harry. "He said he wanted to warn Dumbledore about something, but he sounded as dead. He kept saying stuff was his fault. . . . He mentioned his son."

"Well, that was his fault," said Hermione testily.

"He was out of his mind," said Harry. "Half the time he seemed to think his wife and son were still alive, and he kept talking about them."

"And . . . remind me what he said about You-Know-Who?" said Ron tentatively.

"I've told you," Harry repeated dully. "He said he's getting stronger."

There was a pause. Then Ron said in a falsely confident voice, "But he was out of his mind, like you said, so half of it was nonsense."

"He was sanest when he was trying to talk about Voldemort," said Harry, and Ron winced at the sound of the name. "He was as when he seemed to know where he was, and know what he wanted to do. He just kept saying he had to see Dumbledore."

Harry turned away from the window and stared up into the rafters. The many perches were half-empty; every now and then a owl was coming from its night's hunting with a mouse in its beak.

"If Snape hadn't held me up," Harry said bitterly, "we might've got there in time. The headmaster is busy, Potter . . . what chance of getting out of the way?"

"Maybe he didn't want you to get there!" said Ron quickly. "Maybe — hang on — how fast d'you reckon he could've got to Dumbledore there?"

"Not unless he can turn himself into a bat or something," said Harry.

"Wouldn't put it past him," Ron muttered.

"We need to see Professor Moody," said Hermione. "We need to find out whether he found Mr. Crouch."

"If he had the Marauder's Map on him, it would've been easy," said Harry.

"Unless Crouch was already outside the grounds," said Ron, "because it only shows up to the boundaries, doesn't it?"

"Shh!" said Hermione suddenly.

Somebody was climbing the steps up to the Owlery. Harry could hear two voices arguing, coming closer and closer.

"— that's blackmail, that is, we could get into a lot of trouble for that —"

"— we've tried being polite; it's time to play dirty, like him. He wouldn't like the Ministry of Magic knowing what he did."

"I'm telling you, if you put that in writing, it's blackmail!"

"Yeah, and you won't be complaining if we get a nice fat payoff, will you?"

The Owlery door banged open. Fred and George came over the threshold, then froze at the sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"What're you doing here?" Ron and Fred said at the same time.

"Sending a letter," said Harry and George in unison.

"What, at this time?" said Hermione and Fred.

Fred grinned.

"Fine — we won't ask you what you're doing, if you don't ask us," he said.

He was holding a sealed envelope in his hands. Harry glanced at it, but Fred, whether accidentally or on purpose, shielded it.

"Well, don't let us hold you up," Fred said, making a mock bow and pointing at the door.

Ron didn't move. "Who're you blackmailing?" he said.

The grin vanished from Fred's face. Harry saw George half glance at Fred, before smiling at Ron.

"Don't be stupid, I was only joking," he said easily.

"Didn't sound like that," said Ron.

Fred and George looked at each other. Then Fred said abruptly, "I've told you before, Ron, keep your nose out if you don't want it."

"It's my business if you're blackmailing someone," said Ron. "George's right, you could end up in serious trouble for this."

"Told you, I was joking," said George. He walked over to Fred, pulled the letter out of his hands, and began attaching it to a piece of parchment. "You're a bit like our dear older brother, you are, Ron. Carry on like this and you'll be made a prefect."

"No, I won't!" said Ron hotly.

George carried the barn owl over to the window and it took off. George turned around and grinned at Ron.

"Well, stop telling people what to do then. See you later."

He and Fred left the Owlery. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another.

"You don't think they know something about all this, do you?" Hermione whispered. "About Crouch and everything?"

"No," said Harry. "If it was something that serious, they'd tell someone. They'd tell Dumbledore."

Ron, however, was looking uncomfortable.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked him.

"Well . . ." said Ron slowly, "I dunno if they would. They're . . . they're obsessed with making money lately, I noticed it with the Weasleys."

"We weren't talking." Harry finished the sentence for him. "Yeah, but blackmail . . ."

"It's this joke shop idea they've got," said Ron. "I thought they were only saying it to annoy Mum, but they really mean it."

Hogwarts, they keep going on about how it's time to think about their future, and Dad can't help them, and they need money. Hermione was looking uncomfortable now.

"Yes, but . . . they wouldn't do anything against the law to get gold."

"Wouldn't they?" said Ron, looking skeptical. "I dunno . . . they don't exactly mind breaking rules, do they?"

"Yes, but this is the law," said Hermione, looking scared. "This isn't some silly school rule. . . . They'll get a lot more than a detention for this. . . ."

"Are you mad?" said Ron. "Tell Percy? He'd probably do a Crouch and turn them in." He stared at the window through which the owl had disappeared. "I don't want to get some breakfast."

"D'you think it's too early to go and see Professor Moody?" Hermione said as they went down the spiral staircase.

"Yes," said Harry. "He'd probably blast us through the door if we wake him at the crack of dawn; he'll think we're trying to pull a fast one on him."

The History of Magic had rarely gone so slowly. Harry kept checking Ron's watch, having finally discarded his own, but Ron kept checking his. All three of them were so tired they could happily have put their heads down on the desks and slept; even Hermione, with her head on her hand, gazing at Professor Binns with her eyes out of focus.

When the bell finally rang, they hurried out into the corridors toward the Dark Arts classroom and found Professor Moody. His normal eye was drooping, giving his face an even more lopsided appearance than usual.

"Professor Moody?" Harry called as they made their way toward him through the crowd.

"Hello, Potter," growled Moody. His magical eye followed a couple of passing first years, who sped up, looking nervous. He turned the corner before he spoke again.

"Come in here."

He stood back to let them into his empty classroom, limped in after them, and closed the door.

"Did you find him?" Harry asked without preamble. "Mr. Crouch?"

"No," said Moody. He moved over to his desk, sat down, stretched out his wooden leg with a slight groan, and pulled out a book.

"Did you use the map?" Harry said.

"Of course," said Moody, taking a swig from his flask. "Took a leaf out of your book, Potter. Summoned it from my office."

"So he did Disapparate?" said Ron.

"You can't Disapparate on the grounds, Ron!" said Hermione. "There are other ways he could have disappeared, aren't there?" Moody's magical eye quivered as it rested on Hermione. "You're another one who might think about a career as an Auror, aren't you?" Hermione flushed pink with pleasure.

"Well, he wasn't invisible," said Harry. "The map shows invisible people. He must've left the grounds, then."

"But under his own steam?" said Hermione eagerly, "or because someone made him?"

"Yeah, someone could've — could've pulled him onto a broom and flown off with him, couldn't they?" said Ron quickly. "That's the makings of an Auror."

"We can't rule out kidnap," growled Moody.

"So," said Ron, "d'you reckon he's somewhere in Hogsmeade?"

"Could be anywhere," said Moody, shaking his head. "Only thing we know for sure is that he's not here."

He yawned widely, so that his scars stretched, and his lopsided mouth revealed a number of missing teeth. Then he turned to Harry and Hermione. "You're the only two who might be able to find him. The Ministry'll be looking for him now, Dumbledore's notified the

"What?" said Harry. "Oh yeah . . ."

He hadn't given the maze a single thought since he'd left it with Krum the previous night.

"Should be right up your street, this one," said Moody, looking up at Harry and scratching his scarred and stubbly chin. "I've been through this stuff like this plenty of times. Broke your way through a series of obstacles guarding the Sorcerer's Stone in your first year."

"We helped," Ron said quickly. "Me and Hermione helped."

Moody grinned.

"Well, help him practice for this one, and I'll be very surprised if he doesn't win," said Moody. "In the meantime . . . come on. I'll draw a long draw from his hip flask, and his magical eye swiveled onto the window. The topmost sail of the Durmstrang ship was visible."

"You two," counseled Moody, his normal eye on Ron and Hermione, "you stick close to Potter, all right? I'm keeping a close eye on you both."

Sirius sent their owl back the very next morning. It fluttered down beside Harry at the same moment that a tawny owl came in its beak. She took the newspaper, scanned the first few pages, said, "Ha! She hasn't got wind of Crouch!" then joined the others in discussing the mysterious events of the night before last.

Harry — what do you think you are playing at, walking off into the forest with Viktor Krum? I want you to swear, by the way, that you didn't do it at night. There is somebody highly dangerous at Hogwarts. It is clear to me that they wanted to stop Crouch from seeing you. You could have been killed.

Your name didn't get into the Goblet of Fire by accident. If someone's trying to attack you, they're on their last chance. You've got to be on your guard after hours, and arm yourself for the third task. Practice Stunning and Disarming. A few hexes wouldn't go amiss either. You've got to look after yourself. I'm waiting for your letter giving me your word you won't stray out-of-bounds again.

"Who's he, to lecture me about being out-of-bounds?" said Harry in mild indignation as he folded up Sirius's letter and tucked it into his pocket.

"He's worried about you!" said Hermione sharply. "Just like Moody and Hagrid! So listen to them!"

"No one's tried to attack me all year," said Harry. "No one's done anything to me at all —"

"Except put your name in the Goblet of Fire," said Hermione. "And they must've done that for a reason, Harry. Snuffle up to it. They're going to get you."

"Look," said Harry impatiently, "let's say Sirius is right, and someone Stunned Krum to kidnap Crouch. Well, they would have had to get past me. I was out of the way until they acted, didn't they? So it doesn't look like I'm their target, does it?"

"They couldn't have made it look like an accident if they'd murdered you in the forest!" said Hermione. "But if you die, they'll be in a bit of a hurry to get you out of there."

"They didn't care about attacking Krum, did they?" said Harry. "Why didn't they just polish me off at the same time? That would have been easier."

"Harry, I don't understand it either," said Hermione desperately. "I just know there are a lot of odd things going on, and you've got to get in training for the third task, straight away. And you make sure you write back to Sirius and promise to do it. The Hogwarts grounds never looked more inviting than when Harry had to stay indoors. For the next few days he spent his time looking up hexes, or else in empty classrooms, which they sneaked into to practice. Harry was concentrating on the task, but what practicing it involved certain sacrifices on Ron's and Hermione's part."

"Can't we kidnap Mrs. Norris?" Ron suggested on Monday lunchtime as he lay flat on his back in the middle of their classroom. "It's the fourth time in a row. Let's Stun her for a bit. Or you could use Dobby, Harry, I bet he'd do anything to help you. He's got to be in the room, rubbing his backside — "but I'm aching all over. . . ."

"Well, you keep missing the cushions, don't you!" said Hermione impatiently, rearranging the pile of cushions they had used for the task. "Just try and fall backward!"

"Once you're Stunned, you can't aim too well, Hermione!" said Ron angrily. "Why don't you take a turn?"

"Well, I think Harry's got it now, anyway," said Hermione hastily. "And we don't have to worry about Disarming, because we can start on some of these hexes this evening."

She looked down the list they had made in the library.

"I like the look of this one," she said, "this Impediment Curse. Should slow down anything that's trying to attack you, like a troll. The bell rang. They hastily shoved the cushions back into Flitwick's cupboard and slipped out of the classroom."

"See you at dinner!" said Hermione, and she set off for Arithmancy, while Harry and Ron headed toward North Tower. They looked out the corridor from the high windows. The sky outside was so brightly blue it looked as though it had been enameled.

"It's going to be boiling in Trelawney's room, she never puts out that fire," said Ron as they started up the staircase to the third floor. He was quite right. The dimly lit room was swelteringly hot. The fumes from the perfumed fire were heavier than even the open windows. While Professor Trelawney was looking the other way, disentangling her shawl from a lamp, he opened the window. A soft breeze played across his face. It was extremely comfortable.

"My dears," said Professor Trelawney, sitting down in her winged armchair in front of the class and peering around at them. "I've shed our work on planetary divination. Today, however, will be an excellent opportunity to examine the effects of Magic on the human mind. You will all look this way, I will dim the lights. . . ."

She waved her wand and the lamps went out. The fire was the only source of light now. Professor Trelawney bent down to a small system, contained within a glass dome. It was a beautiful thing; each of the moons glimmered in place around the rim of the dome. At the glass. Harry watched lazily as Professor Trelawney began to point out the fascinating angle Mars was making with the sun. A breeze from the window played across his face. He could hear an insect humming gently somewhere behind the curtain. He was riding on the back of an eagle owl, soaring through the clear blue sky toward an old, ivy-covered house set high on a hill.

easantly in Harry's face, until they reached a dark and broken window in the upper story of the house and entered. M  
ery end . . . through the door they went, into a dark room whose windows were boarded up. . . .  
Harry had left the owl's back . . . he was watching, now, as it fluttered across the room, into a chair with its back to hi  
e chair . . . both of them were stirring. . . .  
One was a huge snake . . . the other was a man . . . a short, balding man, a man with watery eyes and a pointed nose  
"You are in luck, Wormtail," said a cold, high-pitched voice from the depths of the chair in which the owl had landed.  
everything. He is dead."  
"My Lord!" gasped the man on the floor. "My Lord, I am . . . I am so pleased . . . and so sorry. . . ."  
"Nagini," said the cold voice, "you are out of luck. I will not be feeding Wormtail to you, after all . . . but never mind, n  
The snake hissed. Harry could see its tongue fluttering.  
"Now, Wormtail," said the cold voice, "perhaps one more little reminder why I will not tolerate another blunder from  
"My Lord . . . no . . . I beg you . . ."  
The tip of a wand emerged from around the back of the chair. It was pointing at Wormtail.  
"Crucio!" said the cold voice.  
Wormtail screamed, screamed as though every nerve in his body were on fire, the screaming filled Harry's ears as th  
Voldemort would hear him, would know he was there. . . .  
"Harry! Harry!"  
Harry opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of Professor Trelawney's room with his hands over his face. His scar  
n had been real. The whole class was standing around him, and Ron was kneeling next to him, looking terrified.  
"You all right?" he said.  
"Of course he isn't!" said Professor Trelawney, looking thoroughly excited. Her great eyes loomed over Harry, gazing  
did you see?"  
"Nothing," Harry lied. He sat up. He could feel himself shaking. He couldn't stop himself from looking around, into th  
. . .  
"You were clutching your scar!" said Professor Trelawney. "You were rolling on the floor, clutching your scar! Come n  
Harry looked up at her.  
"I need to go to the hospital wing, I think," he said. "Bad headache."  
"My dear, you were undoubtedly stimulated by the extraordinary clairvoyant vibrations of my room!" said Professor  
urther than you have ever —"  
"I don't want to see anything except a headache cure," said Harry.  
He stood up. The class backed away. They all looked unnerved.  
"See you later," Harry muttered to Ron, and he picked up his bag and headed for the trapdoor, ignoring Professor Tr  
ough she had just been denied a real treat.  
When Harry reached the bottom of her stepladder, however, he did not set off for the hospital wing. He had no inter  
his scar hurt him again, and Harry was going to follow his advice: He was going straight to Dumbledore's office. He m  
e dream . . . it had been as vivid as the one that had awoken him on Privet Drive. . . . He ran over the details in his mi  
d heard Voldemort accusing Wormtail of making a blunder . . . but the owl had brought good news, the blunder had  
be fed to the snake . . . he, Harry, was going to be fed to it instead. . . .  
Harry had walked right past the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore's office without noticing. He bl  
steps, stopping in front of it. Then he remembered that he didn't know the password.  
"Lemon drop?" he tried tentatively.  
The gargoyle did not move.  
"Okay," said Harry, staring at it, "Pear Drop. Er — Licorice Wand. Fizzing Whizbee. Drooble's Best Blowing Gum. Bertie  
oes he? . . . oh just open, can't you?" he said angrily. "I really need to see him, it's urgent!"  
The gargoyle remained immovable.  
Harry kicked it, achieving nothing but an excruciating pain in his big toe.  
"Chocolate Frog!" he yelled angrily, standing on one leg. "Sugar Quill! Cockroach Cluster!"  
The gargoyle sprang to life and jumped aside. Harry blinked.  
"Cockroach Cluster?" he said, amazed. "I was only joking. . . ."  
He hurried through the gap in the walls and stepped onto the foot of a spiral stone staircase, which moved slowly up  
oak door with a brass door knocker.  
He could hear voices from inside the office. He stepped off the moving staircase and hesitated, listening.  
"Dumbledore, I'm afraid I don't see the connection, don't see it at all!" It was the voice of the Minister of Magic, Corne  
g herself lost. I agree we would have expected to have found her by now, but all the same, we've no evidence of foul  
nked with Barty Crouch's!"  
"And what do you think's happened to Barty Crouch, Minister?" said Moody's growling voice.  
"I see two possibilities, Alastor," said Fudge. "Either Crouch has finally cracked — more than likely, I'm sure you'll agre  
ndering off somewhere —"  
"He wandered extremely quickly, if that is the case, Cornelius," said Dumbledore calmly.  
"Or else — well . . ." Fudge sounded embarrassed. "Well, I'll reserve judgment until after I've seen the place where he

age? Dumbledore, you know what that woman is?"

"I consider her to be a very able headmistress — and an excellent dancer," said Dumbledore quietly.

"Dumbledore, come!" said Fudge angrily. "Don't you think you might be prejudiced in her favor because of Hagrid? That harmless, with that monster fixation he's got —"

"I no more suspect Madame Maxime than Hagrid," said Dumbledore, just as calmly. "I think it possible that it is you who

"Can we wrap up this discussion?" growled Moody.

"Yes, yes, let's go down to the grounds, then," said Fudge impatiently.

"No, it's not that," said Moody, "it's just that Potter wants a word with you, Dumbledore. He's just outside the door."

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### THE PENSIEVE

The door of the office opened.

"Hello, Potter," said Moody. "Come in, then."

Harry walked inside. He had been inside Dumbledore's office once before; it was a very beautiful, circular room, lined with portraits of the great wizards of the wizarding world, all of whom were fast asleep, their chests rising and falling gently.

Cornelius Fudge was standing beside Dumbledore's desk, wearing his usual pinstriped cloak and holding his lime-green wand.

"Harry!" said Fudge jovially, moving forward. "How are you?"

"Fine," Harry lied.

"We were just talking about the night when Mr. Crouch turned up on the grounds," said Fudge. "It was you who found him."

"Yes," said Harry. Then, feeling it was pointless to pretend that he hadn't overheard what they had been saying, he asked, "Did you see a job hiding, wouldn't she?"

Dumbledore smiled at Harry behind Fudge's back, his eyes twinkling.

"Yes, well," said Fudge, looking embarrassed, "we're about to go for a short walk on the grounds, Harry, if you'll excuse me."

"I wanted to talk to you, Professor," Harry said quickly, looking at Dumbledore, who gave him a swift, searching look.

"Wait here for me, Harry," he said. "Our examination of the grounds will not take long."

They trooped out in silence past him and closed the door. After a minute or so, Harry heard the clunks of Moody's wand.

"Hello, Fawkes," he said.

Fawkes, Professor Dumbledore's phoenix, was standing on his golden perch beside the door. The size of a swan, with a crest of red and gold, he blinked benignly at Harry.

Harry sat down in a chair in front of Dumbledore's desk. For several minutes, he sat and watched the old headmaster's portrait, which he had just heard, and running his fingers over his scar. It had stopped hurting now.

He felt much calmer, somehow, now that he was in Dumbledore's office, knowing he would shortly be telling him about the incident with the cursed book. The Sorting Hat was standing on a shelf. A glass case next to it held a magnificent silver sword with large, ornate carvings. It was the sword that Harry himself had pulled out of the Sorting Hat in his second year. The sword had once belonged to Godric Gryffindor, founder of Hogwarts. It was the sword that had come to his aid when he had thought all hope was lost, when he noticed a patch of silvery light, dancing and shimmering on the wall. He had seen the light and saw a sliver of silver-white shining brightly from within a black cabinet behind him, whose door had not been closed. He had walked up, walked across the office, and pulled open the cabinet door.

A shallow stone basin lay there, with odd carvings around the edge: runes and symbols that Harry did not recognize. Inside the basin was a substance like nothing Harry had ever seen before. He could not tell whether the substance was liquid or gas. It was a bright, shimmering silver, and it became ruffled like water beneath wind, and then, like clouds, separated and swirled smoothly. It looked like light caught in his mind.

He wanted to touch it, to find out what it felt like, but nearly four years' experience of the magical world told him that touching it was a very stupid thing to do. He therefore pulled his wand out of the inside of his robes, cast a nervous look around the room, and pointed it at the basin.

The surface of the silvery stuff inside the basin began to swirl very fast.

Harry bent closer, his head right inside the cabinet. The silvery substance had become transparent; it looked like glass. He looked down into the basin — and saw instead an enormous room below the surface of the mysterious substance, a room into which he had fallen. The room was dimly lit; he thought it might even be underground, for there were no windows, merely torches in brackets on the walls. He was holding his face so that his nose was a mere inch away from the glassy substance, Harry saw that rows and rows of witch-like figures were sitting on benches rising in levels. An empty chair stood in the very center of the room. There was something about the chair that made it seem as though its occupants were usually tied to it.

Where was this place? It surely wasn't Hogwarts; he had never seen a room like that here in the castle. Moreover, there were no teachers or students, and Harry knew there were not nearly that many teachers at Hogwarts. They seemed, he thought, to be all of the same age, and all of their faces seemed to be pointing in one direction, and none of them were talking to one another.

The basin being circular, and the room he was observing square, Harry could not make out what was going on in the room. He was alone . . .

The tip of his nose touched the strange substance into which he was staring.

Dumbledore's office gave an almighty lurch — Harry was thrown forward and pitched headfirst into the substance in the basin. But his head did not hit the stone bottom. He was falling through something icy-cold and black; it was like being sucked into a black hole. And suddenly, Harry found himself sitting on a bench at the end of the room inside the basin, a bench raised high above the

to see the circular window through which he had just been staring, but there was nothing there but dark, solid stone. Breathing hard and fast, Harry looked around him. Not one of the witches and wizards in the room (and there were a lot of them) seemed to have noticed that a fourteen-year-old boy had just dropped from the ceiling into their midst. Harry turned to find a surprise that reverberated around the silent room.

He was sitting right next to Albus Dumbledore.

"Professor!" Harry said in a kind of strangled whisper. "I'm sorry — I didn't mean to — I was just looking at that basin." But Dumbledore didn't move or speak. He ignored Harry completely. Like every other wizard on the benches, he was looking at Harry. Harry gazed, nonplussed, at Dumbledore, then around at the silently watchful crowd, then back at Dumbledore. And he remembered. Once before, Harry had found himself somewhere that nobody could see or hear him. That time, he had fallen through the floor . . . and unless he was very much mistaken, something of the sort had happened again. . . .

Harry raised his right hand, hesitated, and then waved it energetically in front of Dumbledore's face. Dumbledore didn't move, but, in Harry's opinion, settled the matter. Dumbledore wouldn't ignore him like that. He was inside a memory, and this was the same memory as the one he had seen a few days ago . . . the Dumbledore sitting next to him now was silver-haired, just like the present-day Dumbledore. But what was different? Harry looked around more carefully. The room, as he had suspected when observing it from above, was almost certainly empty except as a bleak and forbidding air about the place; there were no pictures on the walls, no decorations at all; just these seats and benches all positioned so that they had a clear view of that chair with the chains on its arms.

Before Harry could reach any conclusions about the place in which they were, he heard footsteps. The door in the corner opened, and one man, flanked by two dementors.

Harry's insides went cold. The dementors — tall, hooded creatures whose faces were concealed — were gliding slowly toward the man's arms with their dead and rotten-looking hands. The man between them looked as though he was about to be taken, but he remembered their power only too well. The watching crowd recoiled slightly and the door swung shut behind them.

Harry looked down at the man now sitting in the chair and saw that it was Karkaroff.

Unlike Dumbledore, Karkaroff looked much younger; his hair and goatee were black. He was not dressed in sleek formal robes, but the chains on the arms of the chair glowed suddenly gold and snaked their way up Karkaroff's arms, binding him to the chair. "Igor Karkaroff," said a curt voice to Harry's left. Harry looked around and saw Mr. Crouch standing up in the middle of the crowd. Much less lined, he looked fit and alert. "You have been brought from Azkaban to present evidence to the Ministry of Magic. Please give us the information for us."

Karkaroff straightened himself as best he could, tightly bound to the chair.

"I have, sir," he said, and although his voice was very scared, Harry could still hear the familiar unctuous note in it. "I would like to know that the Ministry is trying to — to round up the last of the Dark Lord's supporters. I am eager to assist in any way I can. There was a murmur around the benches. Some of the wizards and witches were surveying Karkaroff with interest, and from Dumbledore's other side, a familiar, growling voice saying, "Filth."

Harry leaned forward so that he could see past Dumbledore. Mad-Eye Moody was sitting there — except that there was only one of his magical eye, but two normal ones. Both were looking down upon Karkaroff, and both were narrowed in intense disapproval. "Crouch is going to let him out," Moody breathed quietly to Dumbledore. "He's done a deal with him. Took me six months to get enough new names. Let's hear his information, I say, and throw him straight back to the dementors."

Dumbledore made a small noise of dissent through his long, crooked nose.

"Ah, I was forgetting . . . you don't like the dementors, do you, Albus?" said Moody with a sardonic smile.

"No," said Dumbledore calmly, "I'm afraid I don't. I have long felt the Ministry is wrong to ally itself with such creatures."

"But for filth like this . . ." Moody said softly.

"You say you have names for us, Karkaroff," said Mr. Crouch. "Let us hear them, please."

"You must understand," said Karkaroff hurriedly, "that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named operated always in the greatest secrecy, and I regret now, very deeply, that I ever counted myself among them —"

"Get on with it," sneered Moody.

"— we never knew the names of every one of our fellows — He alone knew exactly who we all were —"

"Which was a wise move, wasn't it, as it prevented someone like you, Karkaroff, from turning all of them in," muttered Moody.

"Yet you say you have some names for us?" said Mr. Crouch.

"I — I do," said Karkaroff breathlessly. "And these were important supporters, mark you. People I saw with my own eyes who have fully and totally renounced him, and am filled with a remorse so deep I can barely —"

"These names are?" said Mr. Crouch sharply.

Karkaroff drew a deep breath.

"There was Antonin Dolohov," he said. "I — I saw him torture countless Muggles and — and non-supporters of the Dark Lord —"

"And helped him do it," murmured Moody.

"We have already apprehended Dolohov," said Crouch. "He was caught shortly after yourself."

"Indeed?" said Karkaroff, his eyes widening. "I — I am delighted to hear it!"

But he didn't look it. Harry could tell that this news had come as a real blow to him. One of his names was worthless.

"Any others?" said Crouch coldly.

"Why, yes . . . there was Rosier," said Karkaroff hurriedly. "Evan Rosier."

"Rosier is dead," said Crouch. "He was caught shortly after you were too. He preferred to fight rather than come quietly."

"Took a bit of me with him, though," whispered Moody to Harry's right. Harry looked around at him once more, and said, "No — no more than Rosier deserved!" said Karkaroff, a real note of panic in his voice now. Harry could see that he was using it to the Ministry. Karkaroff's eyes darted toward the door in the corner, behind which the dementors undoubtedly were waiting.

"Any more?" said Crouch.

"Yes!" said Karkaroff. "There was Travers — he helped murder the McKinnons! Mulciber — he specialized in the Imperio Curse, who was a spy, and passed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named useful information from inside the Ministry itself!"

Harry could tell that, this time, Karkaroff had struck gold. The watching crowd was all murmuring together.

"Rookwood?" said Mr. Crouch, nodding to a witch sitting in front of him, who began scribbling upon her piece of parchment.

"The very same," said Karkaroff eagerly. "I believe he used a network of well-placed wizards, both inside the Ministry and outside."

"But Travers and Mulciber we have," said Mr. Crouch. "Very well, Karkaroff, if that is all, you will be returned to Azkaban."

"Not yet!" cried Karkaroff, looking quite desperate. "Wait, I have more!"

Harry could see him sweating in the torchlight, his white skin contrasting strongly with the black of his hair and beard.

"Snape!" he shouted. "Severus Snape!"

"Snape has been cleared by this council," said Crouch disdainfully. "He has been vouched for by Albus Dumbledore."

"No!" shouted Karkaroff, straining at the chains that bound him to the chair. "I assure you! Severus Snape is a Death Eater!"

Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. "I have given evidence already on this matter," he said calmly. "Severus Snape was indeed a Death Eater. However, he has been cleared for us, at great personal risk. He is now no more a Death Eater than I am."

Harry turned to look at Mad-Eye Moody. He was wearing a look of deep skepticism behind Dumbledore's back.

"Very well, Karkaroff," Crouch said coldly, "you have been of assistance. I shall review your case. You will return to Azkaban." Mr. Crouch's voice faded. Harry looked around; the dungeon was dissolving as though it were made of smoke; everything was in deep darkness. . . .

And then, the dungeon returned. Harry was sitting in a different seat, still on the highest bench, but now to the left of the entrance, axed, even cheerful. The witches and wizards all around the walls were talking to one another, almost as though they were waiting for him. He lay up the rows of benches opposite. She had short blonde hair, was wearing magenta robes, and was sucking the end of a wand. Harry looked around; Dumbledore was sitting beside him again, wearing different robes. Mr. Crouch looked more like a different memory, a different day . . . a different trial.

The door in the corner opened, and Ludo Bagman walked into the room.

This was not, however, a Ludo Bagman gone to seed, but a Ludo Bagman who was clearly at the height of his Quidditch career, and muscular. Bagman looked nervous as he sat down in the chained chair, but it did not bind him there as it had before. He looked around at the watching crowd, waved at a couple of them, and managed a small smile.

"Ludo Bagman, you have been brought here in front of the Council of Magical Law to answer charges relating to the evidence against you, and are about to reach our verdict. Do you have anything to add to your testimony before we begin?"

Harry couldn't believe his ears. Ludo Bagman, a Death Eater?

"Only," said Bagman, smiling awkwardly, "well — I know I've been a bit of an idiot —"

One or two wizards and witches in the surrounding seats smiled indulgently. Mr. Crouch did not appear to share the amusement. He looked on with the utmost severity and dislike.

"You never spoke a truer word, boy," someone muttered dryly to Dumbledore behind Harry. He looked around and saw that the man who'd have said some of those Bludgers had permanently affected his brain. . . .

"Ludovic Bagman, you were caught passing information to Lord Voldemort's supporters," said Mr. Crouch. "For this, I am sentencing you to Azkaban for life. But there was an angry outcry from the surrounding benches. Several of the witches and wizards around the walls started shouting.

"But I've told you, I had no idea!" Bagman called earnestly over the crowd's babble, his round blue eyes widening. "No one crossed my mind he was in with You-Know-Who! I thought I was collecting information for our side! And Rookwood kept telling me my Quidditch days are over, you know . . . I mean, I can't keep getting hit by Bludgers for the rest of my life, can I?"

There were titters from the crowd.

"It will be put to the vote," said Mr. Crouch coldly. He turned to the right-hand side of the dungeon. "The jury will please to rise."

Harry looked toward the right-hand side of the dungeon. Not one person raised their hand. Many of the witches and wizards, however, stood up.

"Yes?" barked Crouch.

"We'd just like to congratulate Mr. Bagman on his splendid performance for England in the Quidditch match against France last night," said Mr. Crouch. Mr. Crouch looked furious. The dungeon was ringing with applause now. Bagman got to his feet and bowed, beaming.

"Despicable," Mr. Crouch spat at Dumbledore, sitting down as Bagman walked out of the dungeon. "Rookwood gets his chance to be a Death Eater for the Ministry. . . ."

And the dungeon dissolved again. When it had returned, Harry looked around. He and Dumbledore were still sitting in the same seats. There was total silence, broken only by the dry sobs of a frail, wispy-looking witch in the seat next to Mr. Crouch. She was holding her hands. Harry looked up at Crouch and saw that he looked gaunter and grayer than ever before. A nerve was twitching in his forehead.

"Bring them in," he said, and his voice echoed through the silent dungeon. The door in the corner opened yet again. Six dementors entered this time, flanking a group of four people. Harry saw that they were all looking at each other and whispered to one another.



The dementors placed each of the four people in the four chairs with chained arms that now stood on the dungeon floor. The inner and more nervous-looking man, whose eyes were darting around the crowd; a woman with thick, shining dark hair, though it were a throne; and a boy in his late teens, who looked nothing short of petrified. He was shivering, his straw-colored hair . . . The wispy little witch beside Crouch began to rock backward and forward in her seat, whimpering into her handkerchief. Crouch stood up. He looked down upon the four in front of him, and there was pure hatred in his face.

"You have been brought here before the Council of Magical Law," he said clearly, "so that we may pass judgment on you." "Father," said the boy with the straw-colored hair. "Father . . . please . . ."

"— that we have rarely heard the like of it within this court," said Crouch, speaking more loudly, drowning out his son. "You stand accused of capturing an Auror — Frank Longbottom — and subjecting him to the Cruciatus Curse, believing him to be the He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named —"

"Father, I didn't!" shrieked the boy in chains below. "I didn't, I swear it, Father, don't send me back to the dementors —"

"You are further accused," bellowed Mr. Crouch, "of using the Cruciatus Curse on Frank Longbottom's wife, when he was the He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to power, and to resume the lives of violence you presumably led while he was strong. I now ask the jury —"

"Mother!" screamed the boy below, and the wispy little witch beside Crouch began to sob, rocking backward and forward in her seat.

"I now ask the jury," shouted Mr. Crouch, "to raise their hands if they believe, as I do, that these crimes deserve a life sentence." In unison, the witches and wizards along the right-hand side of the dungeon raised their hands. The crowd around the dais gave a venge triumph. The boy began to scream.

"No! Mother, no! I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't know! Don't send me there, don't let him!"

The dementors were gliding back into the room. The boys' three companions rose quietly from their seats; the woman, who was the Lord will rise again, Crouch! Throw us into Azkaban; we will wait! He will rise again and will come for us, he will revenge us, faithful! We alone tried to find him!"

But the boy was trying to fight off the dementors, even though Harry could see their cold, draining power starting to take hold as the woman swept out of the dungeon, and the boy continued to struggle.

"I'm your son!" he screamed up at Crouch. "I'm your son!"

"You are no son of mine!" he screamed up at Crouch. "I'm your son!"

"You are no son of mine!" bellowed Mr. Crouch, his eyes bulging suddenly. "I have no son!"

The wispy witch beside him gave a great gasp and slumped in her seat. She had fainted. Crouch appeared not to have noticed.

"Take them away!" Crouch roared at the dementors, spit flying from his mouth. "Take them away, and may they rot to the bone!"

"Father! Father, I wasn't involved! No! No! Father, please!"

"I think, Harry, it is time to return to my office," said a quiet voice in Harry's ear.

Harry started. He looked around. Then he looked on his other side.

There was an Albus Dumbledore sitting on his right, watching Crouch's son being dragged away by the dementors —

"Come," said the Dumbledore on his left, and he put his hand under Harry's elbow. Harry felt himself rising into the air, and then he felt as though he had done a slow-motion somersault, suddenly landing flat on his feet, in what appeared to be a stone basin was shimmering in the cabinet in front of him, and Albus Dumbledore was standing beside him.

"Professor," Harry gasped, "I know I shouldn't've — I didn't mean — the cabinet door was sort of open and —"

"I quite understand," said Dumbledore. He lifted the basin, carried it over to his desk, placed it upon the polished top of the desk, and sat down opposite him.

Harry did so, staring at the stone basin. The contents had returned to their original, silvery-white state, swirling and shimmering. "What is it?" Harry asked shakily.

"This? It is called a Pensieve," said Dumbledore. "I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply forget things. I put them in this basin, and I can look at them whenever I like." "Er," said Harry, who couldn't truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

"At these times," said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, "I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from the mind at one's leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form."

"You mean . . . that stuff's your thoughts?" Harry said, staring at the swirling white substance in the basin.

"Certainly," said Dumbledore. "Let me show you."

Dumbledore drew his wand out of the inside of his robes and placed the tip into his own silvery hair, near his temple. He drew it out, and then Harry saw that it was in fact a glistening strand of the same strange silvery-white substance that filled the basin. And Harry, astonished, saw his own face swimming around the surface of the bowl. Dumbledore placed his long hand on the basin, and the face of the pector would pan for fragments of gold . . . and Harry saw his own face change smoothly into Snape's, who opened his eyes.

"It's coming back . . . Karkaroff's too . . . stronger and clearer than ever . . ."

"A connection I could have made without assistance," Dumbledore sighed, "but never mind." He peered over the top of the basin, which was continuing to swirl around the bowl. "I was using the Pensieve when Mr. Fudge arrived for our meeting at the Ministry. The cabinet door properly. Naturally, it would have attracted your attention."

"I'm sorry," Harry mumbled.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Curiosity is not a sin," he said. "But we should exercise caution with our curiosity . . . yes, yes." Frowning slightly, he prodded the thoughts within the basin with the tip of his wand. Instantly, a figure rose out of it, and she came slowly, with her feet still in the basin. She took no notice whatsoever of Harry or Professor Dumbledore. When she came from the depths of the stone basin. "He put a hex on me, Professor Dumbledore, and I was only teasing him, it was last Thursday. . . ."

"But why, Bertha," said Dumbledore sadly, looking up at the now silently revolving girl, "why did you have to follow him?"

"Bertha?" Harry whispered, looking up at her. "Is that — was that Bertha Jorkins?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, prodding the thoughts in the basin again; Bertha sank back into them, and they became silvery and cool."

The silvery light from the Pensieve illuminated Dumbledore's face, and it struck Harry suddenly how very old he was, but somehow he never really thought of Dumbledore as an old man.

"So, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "Before you got lost in my thoughts, you wanted to tell me something."

"Yes," said Harry. "Professor — I was in Divination just now, and — er — I fell asleep."

He hesitated here, wondering if a reprimand was coming, but Dumbledore merely said, "Quite understandable. Continue."

"Well, I had a dream," said Harry. "A dream about Lord Voldemort. He was torturing Wormtail . . . you know who Wormtail is?"

"I do know," said Dumbledore promptly. "Please continue."

"Voldemort got a letter from an owl. He said something like, Wormtail's blunder had been repaired. He said someone was a snake beside his chair. He said — he said he'd be feeding me to it, instead. Then he did the Cruciatus Curse on me, and it hurt so badly."

Dumbledore merely looked at him.

"Er — that's all," said Harry.

"I see," said Dumbledore quietly. "I see. Now, has your scar hurt at any other time this year, excepting the time it woke you?"

"No, I — how did you know it woke me up over the summer?" said Harry, astonished.

"You are not Sirius's only correspondent," said Dumbledore. "I have also been in contact with him ever since he left Hogwarts, and he has said that Hogwarts is as the safest place for him to stay."

Dumbledore got up and began walking up and down behind his desk. Every now and then, he placed his wand-tip to the basin of the Pensieve. The thoughts inside began to swirl so fast that Harry couldn't make out anything clearly: It was merely a light blue mist.

"Professor?" he said quietly, after a couple of minutes.

Dumbledore stopped pacing and looked at Harry.

"My apologies," he said quietly. He sat back down at his desk.

"D'you — d'you know why my scar's hurting me?"

Dumbledore looked very intently at Harry for a moment, and then said, "I have a theory, no more than that. . . . It is not a coincidence that it hurts you, and when he is feeling a particularly strong surge of hatred."

"But . . . why?"

"Because you and he are connected by the curse that failed," said Dumbledore. "That is no ordinary scar."

"So you think . . . that dream . . . did it really happen?"

"It is possible," said Dumbledore. "I would say — probable. Harry — did you see Voldemort?"

"No," said Harry. "Just the back of his chair. But — there wouldn't have been anything to see, would there? I mean, he was holding the wand?" Harry said slowly.

"How indeed?" muttered Dumbledore. "How indeed . . ."

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke for a while. Dumbledore was gazing across the room, and, every now and then, he would look back at the thought to the seething mass within the Pensieve.

"Professor," Harry said at last, "do you think he's getting stronger?"

"Voldemort?" said Dumbledore, looking at Harry over the Pensieve. It was the characteristic, piercing look Dumbledore gave when he was trying to see through something, though Dumbledore were seeing right through him in a way that even Moody's magical eye could not. "Once again, Harry, I am not sure. But I think he is. He is getting stronger, and he is getting older, and wearier, than ever."

"The years of Voldemort's ascent to power," he said, "were marked with disappearances. Bertha Jorkins has vanished, and it is believed to be last. Mr. Crouch too has disappeared . . . within these very grounds. And there was a third disappearance, one which I have not mentioned, for it concerns a Muggle. His name was Frank Bryce, he lived in the village where Voldemort's father grew up, and he was a Muggle newspaperman, unlike most of my Ministry friends."

Dumbledore looked very seriously at Harry.

"These disappearances seem to me to be linked. The Ministry disagrees — as you may have heard, while waiting outside the Ministry. Harry nodded. Silence fell between them again, Dumbledore extracting thoughts every now and then. Harry felt as though he were being pulled into a deep well."

"Professor?" he said again.

"Yes, Harry?" said Dumbledore.

"Er . . . could I ask you about . . . that court thing I was in . . . in the Pensieve?"

"You could," said Dumbledore heavily. "I attended it many times, but some trials come back to me more clearly than others."

"You know — you know the trial you found me in? The one with Crouch's son? Well . . . were they talking about Neville Longbottom?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a very sharp look. "Has Neville never told you why he has been brought up by his grandmother?"

Harry shook his head, wondering, as he did so, how he could have failed to ask Neville this, in almost four years of knowing him.

"Yes, they were talking about Neville's parents," said Dumbledore. "His father, Frank, was an Auror just like Professor Dumbledore. He was killed by Voldemort's whereabouts after he lost his powers, as you heard."

"So they're dead?" said Harry quietly.

"No," said Dumbledore, his voice full of a bitterness Harry had never heard there before. "They are insane. They are living in a state of madness. I believe Neville visits them, with his grandmother, during the holidays. They do not recognize him."

Harry sat there, horror-struck. He had never known . . . never, in four years, bothered to find out . . .

"The Longbottoms were very popular," said Dumbledore. "The attacks on them came after Voldemort's fall from power, a wave of fury such as I have never known. The Ministry was under great pressure to catch those who had done it. Unfortunately, none too reliable."

"Then Mr. Crouch's son might not have been involved?" said Harry slowly.

Dumbledore shook his head.

"As to that, I have no idea."

Harry sat in silence once more, watching the contents of the Pensieve swirl. There were two more questions he was

...

"Er," he said, "Mr. Bagman . . ."

". . . has never been accused of any Dark activity since," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Right," said Harry hastily, staring at the contents of the Pensieve again, which were swirling more slowly now that Du

But the Pensieve seemed to be asking his question for him. Snape's face was swimming on the surface again. Dumb

"No more has Professor Snape," he said.

Harry looked into Dumbledore's light blue eyes, and the thing he really wanted to know spilled out of his mouth before

"What made you think he'd really stopped supporting Voldemort, Professor?"

Dumbledore held Harry's gaze for a few seconds, and then said, "That, Harry, is a matter between Professor Snape and

Harry knew that the interview was over; Dumbledore did not look angry, yet there was a finality in his tone that told

"Harry," he said as Harry reached the door. "Please do not speak about Neville's parents to anybody else. He has the

"Yes, Professor," said Harry, turning to go.

"And —"

Harry looked back. Dumbledore was standing over the Pensieve, his face lit from beneath by its silvery spots of light,

then said, "Good luck with the third task."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

### THE THIRD TASK

Dumbledore reckons You-Know-Who's getting stronger again as well?" Ron whispered.

Everything Harry had seen in the Pensieve, nearly everything Dumbledore had told and shown him afterward, he had

hom Harry had sent an owl the moment he had left Dumbledore's office. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat up late in the

his mind was reeling, until he understood what Dumbledore had meant about a head becoming so full of thoughts that

Ron stared into the common room fire. Harry thought he saw Ron shiver slightly, even though the evening was warm

"And he trusts Snape?" Ron said. "He really trusts Snape, even though he knows he was a Death Eater?"

"Yes," said Harry.

Hermione had not spoken for ten minutes. She was sitting with her forehead in her hands, staring at her knees. Harry

ieve.

"Rita Skeeter," she muttered finally.

"How can you be worrying about her now?" said Ron, in utter disbelief.

"I'm not worrying about her," Hermione said to her knees. "I'm just thinking . . . remember what she said to me in the

make your hair curl.' This is what she meant, isn't it? She reported his trial, she knew he'd passed information to the

bad wizard.' Mr. Crouch would have been furious he got off, he would have talked about it at home."

"Yeah, but Bagman didn't pass information on purpose, did he?"

Hermione shrugged.

"And Fudge reckons Madame Maxime attacked Crouch?" Ron said, turning back to Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry, "but he's only saying that because Crouch disappeared near the Beauxbatons carriage."

"We never thought of her, did we?" said Ron slowly. "Mind you, she's definitely got giant blood, and she doesn't want

"Of course she doesn't," said Hermione sharply, looking up. "Look what happened to Hagrid when Rita found out about

because she's part giant. Who needs that sort of prejudice? I'd probably say I had big bones if I knew that's what I'd g

Hermione looked at her watch. "We haven't done any practicing!" she said, looking shocked. "We were going to do th

ome on, Harry, you need to get some sleep."

Harry and Ron went slowly upstairs to their dormitory. As Harry pulled on his pajamas, he looked over at Neville's be

one about Neville's parents. As Harry took off his glasses and climbed into his four-poster, he imagined how it must t

e often got sympathy from strangers for being an orphan, but as he listened to Neville's snores, he thought that Nev

elt a rush of anger and hate toward the people who had tortured Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. . . . He remembered the

ed from the court by the dementors. . . . He understood how they had felt. . . . Then he remembered the milk-white f

d a year later. . . .

It was Voldemort, Harry thought, staring up at the canopy of his bed in the darkness, it all came back to Voldemort. .

ruined all these lives. . . .

Ron and Hermione were supposed to be studying for their exams, which would finish on the day of the third task, bu

e.

"Don't worry about it," Hermione said shortly when Harry pointed this out to them and said he didn't mind practicing

Against the Dark Arts. We'd never have found out about all these hexes in class."

"Good training for when we're all Aurors," said Ron excitedly, attempting the Impediment Curse on a wasp that had been bothering him. The mood in the castle as they entered June became excited and tense again. Everyone was looking forward to the third task. Harry was practicing hexes at every available moment. He felt more confident about this task than either of the others. It was his right: Harry had managed to find his way past monstrous creatures and enchanted barriers before now, and this time he was going ahead.

Tired of walking in on Harry, Hermione, and Ron all over the school, Professor McGonagall had given them permission to practice. Harry had soon mastered the Impediment Curse, a spell to slow down and obstruct attackers; the Reductor Curse, which would make anything disappear; and the Invisibility Spell, a useful discovery of Hermione's that would make his wand point due north, therefore enabling him to check his orientation. He was still having trouble with the Shield Charm, though. This was supposed to cast a temporary, invisible wall around him. He tried it with a well-placed Jelly-Legs Jinx, and Harry wobbled around the room for ten minutes afterward before she had to stop him. "You're still doing really well, though," Hermione said encouragingly, looking down her list and crossing off those spells he had mastered. "The Shield Charm is in handy."

"Come and look at this," said Ron, who was standing by the window. He was staring down onto the grounds. "What's that?" Harry and Hermione went to see. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in the shadow of a tree below. Crabbe and Goyle were holding his hand up to his mouth and speaking into it.

"He looks like he's using a walkie-talkie," said Harry curiously.

"He can't be," said Hermione, "I've told you, those sorts of things don't work around Hogwarts. Come on, Harry," she said, leading him to the middle of the room, "let's try that Shield Charm again."

Sirius was sending daily owls now. Like Hermione, he seemed to want to concentrate on getting Harry through the last task. He included Harry in every letter that whatever might be going on outside the walls of Hogwarts was not Harry's responsibility. If Voldemort is really getting stronger again, he wrote, my priority is to ensure your safety. He cannot hope to lay hands on him until the same, take no risks: Concentrate on getting through that maze safely, and then we can turn our attention to other matters. Harry's nerves mounted as June the twenty-fourth drew closer, but they were not as bad as those he had felt before. He had done everything in his power to prepare for the task. For another, this was the final hurdle, and how he would overcome it, which would be an enormous relief.

Breakfast was a very noisy affair at the Gryffindor table on the morning of the third task. The post owls appeared, bringing letters of parchment, folded over and bearing a muddy paw print on its front, but Harry appreciated it all the same. A screech from the Slytherin table. It was the Daily Prophet as usual. She unfolded the paper, glanced at the front page, and spat out a mouthful of pumpkin juice all over the table. "What?" said Harry and Ron together, staring at her.

"Nothing," said Hermione quickly, trying to shove the paper out of sight, but Ron grabbed it. He stared at the headline.

"What?" said Harry. "Rita Skeeter again?"

"No," said Ron, and just like Hermione, he attempted to push the paper out of sight.

"It's about me, isn't it?" said Harry.

"No," said Ron, in an entirely unconvincing tone.

But before Harry could demand to see the paper, Draco Malfoy shouted across the Great Hall from the Slytherin table.

"Hey, Potter! Potter! How's your head? You feeling all right? Sure you're not going to go berserk on us?"

Malfoy was holding a copy of the Daily Prophet too. Slytherins up and down the table were sniggering, twisting in their seats.

"Let me see it," Harry said to Ron. "Give it here."

Very reluctantly, Ron handed over the newspaper. Harry turned it over and found himself staring at his own picture, a small, grainy, black and white photograph of HARRY POTTER.

"DISTURBED AND DANGEROUS"

The boy who defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is unstable and possibly dangerous, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Harry Potter's strange behavior, which casts doubts upon his suitability to compete in a demanding competition like the Triwizard Tournament, the Daily Prophet can exclusively reveal, regularly collapses at school, and is often heard to complain of pain in his head (after u-know-who attempted to kill him). On Monday last, midway through a Divination lesson, your Daily Prophet reporter found him as hurting too badly to continue studying.

It is possible, say top experts at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, that Potter's brain was affected by the scar. His insistence that the scar is still hurting is an expression of his deep-seated confusion.

"He might even be pretending," said one specialist. "This could be a plea for attention."

The Daily Prophet, however, has unearthed worrying facts about Harry Potter that Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts, has kept hidden. "Potter can speak Parseltongue," reveals Draco Malfoy, a Hogwarts fourth year. "There were a lot of attacks on students in the Slytherin common room after they saw him lose his temper at a dueling club and set a snake on another boy. It was all hushed up, but everyone knows he'd do anything for a bit of power."

Parseltongue, the ability to converse with snakes, has long been considered a Dark Art. Indeed, the most famous Parselmaster, Lord Voldemort, member of the Dark Force Defense League, who wished to remain unnamed, stated that he would regard any wizard who could converse with snakes as highly suspicious of anybody who could converse with snakes, as serpents are often used in the worst kind of magic. Similarly, "anyone who seeks out the company of such vicious creatures as werewolves and giants would appear to have a dark mind." Albus Dumbledore should surely consider whether a boy such as this should be allowed to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. It is desperation to win the tournament, the third task of which takes place this evening.

"Gone off me a bit, hasn't she?" said Harry lightly, folding up the paper.

Over at the Slytherin table, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were laughing at him, tapping their heads with their fingers, pokes.

"How did she know your scar hurt in Divination?" Ron said. "There's no way she was there, there's no way she could've."

"The window was open," said Harry. "I opened it to breathe."

"You were at the top of North Tower!" Hermione said. "Your voice couldn't have carried all the way down to the ground."

"Well, you're the one who's supposed to be researching magical methods of bugging!" said Harry. "You tell me how she did it."

"I've been trying!" said Hermione. "But I . . . but . . ."

An odd, dreamy expression suddenly came over Hermione's face. She slowly raised a hand and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Are you all right?" said Ron, frowning at her.

"Yes," said Hermione breathlessly. She ran her fingers through her hair again, and then held her hand up to her mouth.

Ron stared at each other.

"I've had an idea," Hermione said, gazing into space. "I think I know . . . because then no one would be able to see . . . the window ledge . . . but she's not allowed . . . she's definitely not allowed . . . I think we've got her! Just give me two seconds."

With that, Hermione seized her school bag and dashed out of the Great Hall.

"Oi!" Ron called after her. "We've got our History of Magic exam in ten minutes! Blimey," he said, turning back to Harry.

It was the start of an exam. What're you going to do in Binns's class — read again?"

Exempt from the end-of-term tests as a Triwizard champion, Harry had been sitting in the back of every exam class since his first year.

"S'pose so," Harry said to Ron; but just then, Professor McGonagall came walking alongside the Gryffindor table toward them.

"Potter, the champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast," she said.

"But the task's not till tonight!" said Harry, accidentally spilling scrambled eggs down his front, afraid he had mistaken her.

"I'm aware of that, Potter," she said. "The champions' families are invited to watch the final task, you know. This is simply the start of the evening."

She moved away. Harry gaped after her.

"She doesn't expect the Dursleys to turn up, does she?" he asked Ron blankly.

"Dunno," said Ron. "Harry, I'd better hurry, I'm going to be late for Binns. See you later."

Harry finished his breakfast in the emptying Great Hall. He saw Fleur Delacour get up from the Ravenclaw table and touched off to join them shortly afterward. Harry stayed where he was. He really didn't want to go into the chamber. It was his life, anyway. But just as he was getting up, thinking that he might as well go up to the library and do a spot more homework, he tucked his head out.

"Harry, come on, they're waiting for you!"

Utterly perplexed, Harry got up. The Dursleys couldn't possibly be here, could they? He walked across the Hall and opened the door. Cedric and his parents were just inside the door. Viktor Krum was over in a corner, conversing with his dark-haired mother. Cedric's hooked nose. On the other side of the room, Fleur was jabbering away in French to her mother. Fleur's little sister, Victoire, who waved back, grinning. Then he saw Mrs. Weasley and Bill standing in front of the fireplace, beaming at him.

"Surprise!" Mrs. Weasley said excitedly as he smiled broadly and walked over to them. "Thought we'd come and watch you."

"You all right?" said Bill, grinning at Harry and shaking his hand. "Charlie wanted to come, but he couldn't get time off work."

Fleur Delacour, Harry noticed, was eyeing Bill with great interest over her mother's shoulder. Harry could tell she had a crush on him.

"This is really nice of you," Harry muttered to Mrs. Weasley. "I thought for a moment — the Dursleys —"

"Hmm," said Mrs. Weasley, pursing her lips. She had always refrained from criticizing the Dursleys in front of Harry, but now she was different.

"It's great being back here," said Bill, looking around the chamber (Violet, the Fat Lady's friend, winked at him from her picture of the mad knight still around? Sir Cadogan?"

"Oh yeah," said Harry, who had met Sir Cadogan the previous year.

"And the Fat Lady?" said Bill.

"She was here in my time," said Mrs. Weasley. "She gave me such a telling off one night when I got back to the dormitory."

"What were you doing out of your dormitory at four in the morning?" said Bill, surveying his mother with amazement.

Mrs. Weasley grinned, her eyes twinkling.

"Your father and I had been for a nighttime stroll," she said. "He got caught by Apollyon Pringle — he was the caretaker at the time."

"Fancy giving us a tour, Harry?" said Bill.

"Yeah, okay," said Harry, and they made their way back toward the door into the Great Hall. As they passed Amos Diggory, he nodded.

"There you are, are you?" he said, looking Harry up and down. "Bet you're not feeling quite as full of yourself now Cedric's back."

"What?" said Harry.

"Ignore him," said Cedric in a low voice to Harry, frowning after his father. "He's been angry ever since Rita Skeeter's article about you made out you were the only Hogwarts champion."

"Didn't bother to correct her, though, did he?" said Amos Diggory, loudly enough for Harry to hear as he started to walk away.

"I'll show him, Ced. Beaten him once before, haven't you?"

"Rita Skeeter goes out of her way to cause trouble, Amos!" Mrs. Weasley said angrily. "I would have thought you'd know better."

Mr. Diggory looked as though he was going to say something angry, but his wife laid a hand on his arm, and he merely shrugged.

Harry had a very enjoyable morning walking over the sunny grounds with Bill and Mrs. Weasley, showing them the Big Tree, the Whomping Willow, which had been planted after she had left school, and reminisced at length about the greenhouse.

"How's Percy?" Harry asked as they walked around the greenhouses.

"Not good," said Bill.

"He's very upset," said Mrs. Weasley, lowering her voice and glancing around. "The Ministry wants to keep Mr. Crouch about the instructions Mr. Crouch has been sending in. They seem to think there's a chance they weren't genuinely letting him fill in for Mr. Crouch as the fifth judge tonight. Cornelius Fudge is going to be doing it."

They returned to the castle for lunch.

"Mum — Bill!" said Ron, looking stunned, as he joined the Gryffindor table. "What're you doing here?"

"Come to watch Harry in the last task!" said Mrs. Weasley brightly. "I must say, it makes a lovely change, not having to

"Oh . . . okay," said Ron. "Couldn't remember all the goblin rebels' names, so I invented a few. It's all right," he said, he looked stern, "they're all called stuff like Bodrod the Bearded and Urg the Unclean; it wasn't hard."

Fred, George, and Ginny came to sit next to them too, and Harry was having such a good time he felt almost as though the evening's task, and not until Hermione turned up, halfway through lunch, did he remember that she had had a brain

"Are you going to tell us — ?"

Hermione shook her head warningly and glanced at Mrs. Weasley.

"Hello, Hermione," said Mrs. Weasley, much more stiffly than usual.

"Hello," said Hermione, her smile faltering at the cold expression on Mrs. Weasley's face.

Harry looked between them, then said, "Mrs. Weasley, you didn't believe that rubbish Rita Skeeter wrote in Witch Weekly."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Weasley. "No — of course I didn't!"

But she became considerably warmer toward Hermione after that.

Harry, Bill, and Mrs. Weasley whiled away the afternoon with a long walk around the castle, and then returned to the feast. Bagman had joined the staff table now. Bagman looked quite cheerful, but Cornelius Fudge, who was sitting next to Madam Pomfrey, was frowning at her plate, and Harry thought her eyes looked red. Hagrid kept glancing along the table at her.

There were more courses than usual, but Harry, who was starting to feel really nervous now, didn't eat much. As the feast drew to a close, Dumbledore rose to his feet at the staff table, and silence fell.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes' time, I will be asking you to make your way down to the Quidditch field for the Triwizard Tournament. The champions please follow Mr. Bagman down to the stadium now."

Harry got up. The Gryffindors all along the table were applauding him; the Weasleys and Hermione all wished him good luck, and Viktor.

"Feeling all right, Harry?" Bagman asked as they went down the stone steps onto the grounds. "Confident?"

"I'm okay," said Harry. It was sort of true; he was nervous, but he kept running over all the hexes and spells he had been taught, and that he could remember them all made him feel better.

They walked onto the Quidditch field, which was now completely unrecognizable. A twenty-foot-high hedge ran all the way around the field: the entrance to the vast maze. The passage beyond it looked dark and creepy.

Five minutes later, the stands had begun to fill; the air was full of excited voices and the rumbling of feet as the hunched champions gathered. The clear blue now, and the first stars were starting to appear. Hagrid, Professor Moody, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Trelawney were standing with the champions. They were wearing large, red, luminous stars on their hats, all except Hagrid, who had his on his forehead.

"We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze," said Professor McGonagall to the champions. "If you get into the maze, and one of us will come and get you, do you understand?"

The champions nodded.

"Off you go, then!" said Bagman brightly to the four patrollers.

"Good luck, Harry," Hagrid whispered, and the four of them walked away in different directions, to station themselves. Hagrid's booming, "Sonus," and his magically magnified voice echoed into the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points each — Mr. Cedric Diggory and Mr. Harry Potter, both of Hogwarts School!" The cheers and applause sent them flying.

"In second place, with eighty points — Mr. Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute!" More applause. "And in third place — Mr. Cedric Diggory, with seventy points!" Harry could just make out Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermione applauding Fleur politely, halfway up the stands. He

"So . . . on my whistle, Harry and Cedric!" said Bagman. "Three — two — one —"

He gave a short blast on his whistle, and Harry and Cedric hurried forward into the maze.

The towering hedges cast black shadows across the path, and, whether because they were so tall and thick or because the darkness silenced the moment they entered the maze. Harry felt almost as though he were underwater again. He pulled out his wand.

After about fifty yards, they reached a fork. They looked at each other.

"See you," Harry said, and he took the left one, while Cedric took the right.

Harry heard Bagman's whistle for the second time. Krum had entered the maze. Harry sped up. His chosen path seemed to lead him high over his head, trying to see as far ahead as possible. Still, there was nothing in sight.

Bagman's whistle blew in the distance for the third time. All of the champions were now inside.

Harry kept looking behind him. The old feeling that he was being watched was upon him. The maze was growing darker. He reached a second fork.

"Point Me," he whispered to his wand, holding it flat in his palm.

The wand spun around once and pointed toward his right, into solid hedge. That way was north, and he knew that his first and only way to do was to take the left fork and go right again as soon as possible.

The path ahead was empty too, and when Harry reached a right turn and took it, he again found his way unblocked. Surely he should have met something by now? It felt as though the maze were luring him into a false sense of security, ready to attack, but its beam fell only upon Cedric, who had just hurried out of a path on the right-hand side. Cedric hissed. "Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts!" he hissed. "They're enormous — I only just got away!"

He shook his head and dived out of sight, along another path. Keen to put plenty of distance between himself and the maze, he saw . . . a dementor gliding toward him. Twelve feet tall, its face hidden by its hood, its rotting, scabbed hands outstretched. Harry could hear its rattling breath; he felt clammy coldness stealing over him, but knew what he had to do. . . .

He summoned the happiest thought he could, concentrated with all his might on the thought of getting out of the maze, and, "Expecto Patronum!"

A silver stag erupted from the end of Harry's wand and galloped toward the dementor, which fell back and tripped over its own mble.

"Hang on!" he shouted, advancing in the wake of his silver Patronus. "You're a boggart! Riddikulus!"

There was a loud crack, and the shape-shifter exploded in a wisp of smoke. The silver stag faded from sight. Harry wobbled but he moved on, quickly and quietly as possible, listening hard, his wand held high once more.

Left . . . right . . . left again . . . Twice he found himself facing dead ends. He did the Four-Point Spell again and found a right turn, and saw an odd golden mist floating ahead of him.

Harry approached it cautiously, pointing the wand's beam at it. This looked like some kind of enchantment. He wondered, "Reducto!" he said.

The spell shot straight through the mist, leaving it intact. He supposed he should have known better; the Reductor Curse didn't touch the mist? Was it worth chancing it, or should he double back?

He was still hesitating when a scream shattered the silence.

"Fleur?" Harry yelled.

There was silence. He stared all around him. What had happened to her? Her scream seemed to have come from so far away. The world turned upside down. Harry was hanging from the ground, with his hair on end, his glasses dangling off his nose to the end of his nose and hung there, terrified. It felt as though his feet were glued to the grass, which had now stretched endlessly. He felt as though if he tried to move one of his feet, he would fall away from the earth completely. Think, he told himself, as all the blood rushed to his head, think . . .

But not one of the spells he had practiced had been designed to combat a sudden reversal of ground and sky. Did he have a choice? He had two choices — try and move, or send up red sparks, and get rescued and disqualified from the task.

He shut his eyes, so he wouldn't be able to see the view of endless space below him, and pulled his right foot as hard as he could. Immediately, the world righted itself. Harry fell forward onto his knees onto the wonderfully solid ground. He felt terrible. Then he got up again and hurried forward, looking back over his shoulder as he ran away from the golden mist, which twisted and shimmered.

He paused at a junction of two paths and looked around for some sign of Fleur. He was sure it had been she who had sent up the red sparks — did that mean she had got herself out of trouble, or was she in such trouble that she couldn't reach him? He felt a sense of unease . . . but at the same time, he couldn't help thinking, One champion down . . .

The Cup was somewhere close by, and it sounded as though Fleur was no longer in the running. He'd got this far, he thought for the first time since he'd found himself champion, he saw again that image of himself, raising the Triwizard Cup in front of him. He met nothing for ten minutes, but kept running into dead ends. Twice he took the same wrong turning. Finally, he reached a dead end, making his shadow flicker and distort on the hedge walls. Then he rounded another corner and found himself facing a giant scorpion. Cedric was right — it was enormous. Ten feet long, it looked more like a giant scorpion than anything. Its long sting was raised toward Harry's wand, which he pointed at it.

"Stupefy!"

The spell hit the skrewt's armor and rebounded; Harry ducked just in time, but could smell burning hair; it had singed his hair and flew forward toward him.

"Impedimenta!" Harry yelled. The spell hit the skrewt's armor again and ricocheted off; Harry staggered back a few paces. The skrewt was inches from him when it froze — he had managed to hit it on its fleshy, shell-less underside. Panting and twitching in the direction — the Impediment Curse was not permanent; the skrewt would be regaining the use of its legs at any moment.

He took a left path and hit a dead end, a right, and hit another; forcing himself to stop, heart hammering, he performed the Impediment Curse, at would take him northwest.

He had been hurrying along the new path for a few minutes, when he heard something in the path running parallel to his. "What are you doing?" yelled Cedric's voice. "What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

And then Harry heard Krum's voice.

"Crucio!"

The air was suddenly full of Cedric's yells. Horrified, Harry began sprinting up his path, trying to find a way into Cedric's maze. It wasn't very effective, but it burned a small hole in the hedge through which Harry forced his leg, kicking at the thick hedge; he struggled through it, tearing his robes, and looking to his right, saw Cedric jerking and twitching on the ground, Harry pulled himself up and pointed his wand at Krum just as Krum looked up. Krum turned and began to run.

"Stupefy!" Harry yelled.

The spell hit Krum in the back; he stopped dead in his tracks, fell forward, and lay motionless, facedown in the grass. Harry stood there panting, his hands over his face.

"Are you all right?" Harry said roughly, grabbing Cedric's arm.

"Yeah," panted Cedric. "Yeah . . . I don't believe it . . . he crept up behind me. . . . I heard him, I turned around, and he was there. Cedric got up. He was still shaking. He and Harry looked down at Krum.

"I can't believe this . . . I thought he was all right," Harry said, staring at Krum.

"So did I," said Cedric.

"Did you hear Fleur scream earlier?" said Harry.

"Yeah," said Cedric. "You don't think Krum got her too?"

"I don't know," said Harry slowly.

"Should we leave him here?" Cedric muttered.

"No," said Harry. "I reckon we should send up red sparks. Someone'll come and collect him . . . otherwise he'll probably stay here."

"He'd deserve it," Cedric muttered, but all the same, he raised his wand and shot a shower of red sparks into the air, and they disappeared.

Harry and Cedric stood there in the darkness for a moment, looking around them. Then Cedric said, "Well . . . I s'pose we should go."

"What?" said Harry. "Oh . . . yeah . . . right . . ."

It was an odd moment. He and Cedric had been briefly united against Krum — now the fact that they were opponents was a little awkward. But they didn't say anything, then Harry turned left, and Cedric right. Cedric's footsteps soon died away.

Harry moved on, continuing to use the Four-Point Spell, making sure he was moving in the right direction. It was better than before, but he could hardly believe what he'd just seen Krum do. The use of an Unforgivable Curse was what Moody had told them. Krum surely couldn't have wanted the Triwizard Cup that badly. . . . Harry sped up.

Every so often he hit more dead ends, but the increasing darkness made him feel sure he was getting near the heart of the maze. He moved forward once again, and his beam of wandlight hit an extraordinary creature, one which he had only seen in pictures.

It was a sphinx. It had the body of an over-large lion: great clawed paws and a long yellowish tail ending in a brown tuft. It had almond-shaped eyes upon Harry as he approached. He raised his wand, hesitating. She was not crouching as if to attack. She was looking at him. She was not speaking. Then she spoke, in a deep, hoarse voice.

"You are very near your goal. The quickest way is past me."

"So . . . so will you move, please?" said Harry, knowing what the answer was going to be.

"No," she said, continuing to pace. "Not unless you can answer my riddle. Answer on your first guess — I let you pass if you can. If not, you stay away from me unscathed."

Harry's stomach slipped several notches. It was Hermione who was good at this sort of thing, not him. He weighed his options. He could try to go straight away from the sphinx unharmed, and try and find an alternative route to the center.

"Okay," he said. "Can I hear the riddle?"

The sphinx sat down upon her hind legs, in the very middle of the path, and recited:

"First think of the person who lives in disguise,

Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.

Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,

The middle of middle and end of the end?

And finally give me the sound often heard

During the search for a hard-to-find word.

Now string them together, and answer me this,

Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"

Harry gaped at her.

"Could I have it again . . . more slowly?" he asked tentatively.

She blinked at him, smiled, and repeated the poem.

"All the clues add up to a creature I wouldn't want to kiss?" Harry asked.

She merely smiled her mysterious smile. Harry took that for a "yes." Harry cast his mind around. There were plenty of creatures in the maze, but nothing that fit the clues. . . .

"A person in disguise," Harry muttered, staring at her, "who lies . . . er . . . that'd be a — an imposter. No, that's not my answer. Give me the next clue again, please?"

She repeated the next lines of the poem.

"The last thing to mend," Harry repeated. "Er . . . no idea . . . 'middle of middle' . . . could I have the last bit again?"

She gave him the last four lines.

"The sound often heard during the search for a hard-to-find word," said Harry. "Er . . . that'd be . . . er . . . hang on — I don't know."

The sphinx smiled at him.

"Spy . . . er . . . spy . . . er . . ." said Harry, pacing up and down. "A creature I wouldn't want to kiss . . . a spider!"

The sphinx smiled more broadly. She got up, stretched her front legs, and then moved aside for him to pass.

"Thanks!" said Harry, and, amazed at his own brilliance, he dashed forward.

He had to be close now, he had to be. . . . His wand was telling him he was bang on course; as long as he didn't meet any more dead ends, he was safe. Harry broke into a run. He had a choice of paths up ahead. "Point Me!" he whispered again to his wand, and it spun around and saw light ahead.

The Triwizard Cup was gleaming on a plinth a hundred yards away. Suddenly a dark figure hurtled out onto the path. Cedric was going to get there first. Cedric was sprinting as fast as he could toward the cup, and Harry knew he would be close behind.



Then Harry saw something immense over a hedge to his left, moving quickly along a path that intersected with his own. Cedric, his eyes on the cup, had not seen it —

"Cedric!" Harry bellowed. "On your left!"

Cedric looked around just in time to hurl himself past the thing and avoid colliding with it, but in his haste, he tripped. A spider stepped into the path and began to bear down upon Cedric.

"Stupefy!" Harry yelled; the spell hit the spider's gigantic, hairy black body, but for all the good it did, he might as well have thrown a stone. The spider spun around, and ran at Harry instead.

"Stupefy! Impedimenta! Stupefy!"

But it was no use — the spider was either so large, or so magical, that the spells were doing no more than aggravating it. It came at Harry with its pincers and razor-sharp pincers before it was upon him.

He was lifted into the air in its front legs; struggling madly, he tried to kick it; his leg connected with the pincers and he fell. Cedric yelled "Stupefy!" too, but his spell had no more effect than Harry's — Harry raised his wand as the spider opened its mouth. It worked — the Disarming Spell made the spider drop him, but that meant that Harry fell twelve feet onto his already aching back. Cedric, on the other hand, aimed high at the spider's underbelly, as he had done with the skrewt, and shouted "Stupefy!" just as Cedric yelped. The two spells combined did what one alone had not: The spider keeled over sideways, flattening a nearby hedge, and Harry landed on his feet.

"Harry!" he heard Cedric shouting. "You all right? Did it fall on you?"

"No," Harry called back, panting. He looked down at his leg. It was bleeding freely. He could see some sort of thick, glistening web on it. He tried to get up, but his leg was shaking badly and did not want to support his weight. He leaned against the hedge, gasping.

Cedric was standing feet from the Triwizard Cup, which was gleaming behind him.

"Take it, then," Harry panted to Cedric. "Go on, take it. You're there."

But Cedric didn't move. He merely stood there, looking at Harry. Then he turned to stare at the cup. Harry saw the locket around Cedric's neck, and Cedric looked around at Harry again, who was now holding onto the hedge to support himself. Cedric took a deep breath.

"You take it. You should win. That's twice you've saved my neck in here."

"That's not how it's supposed to work," Harry said. He felt angry; his leg was very painful, he was aching all over from the fall, and Cedric had beaten him to it, just as he'd beaten Harry to ask Cho to the ball. "The one who reaches the cup first gets the cup. That's how it works in every race on this leg."

Cedric took a few paces nearer to the Stunned spider, away from the cup, shaking his head.

"No," he said.

"Stop being noble," said Harry irritably. "Just take it, then we can get out of here."

Cedric watched Harry steady himself, holding tight to the hedge.

"You told me about the dragons," Cedric said. "I would've gone down in the first task if you hadn't told me what was coming."

"I had help on that too," Harry snapped, trying to mop up his bloody leg with his robes. "You helped me with the egg."

"I had help on the egg in the first place," said Cedric.

"We're still square," said Harry, testing his leg gingerly; it shook violently as he put weight on it; he had sprained his ankle.

"You should've got more points on the second task," said Cedric mulishly. "You stayed behind to get all the hostages."

"I was the only one who was thick enough to take that song seriously!" said Harry bitterly. "Just take the cup!"

"No," said Cedric.

He stepped over the spider's tangled legs to join Harry, who stared at him. Cedric was serious. He was walking away from the cup.

"Go on," Cedric said. He looked as though this was costing him every ounce of resolution he had, but his face was set.

Harry looked from Cedric to the cup. For one shining moment, he saw himself emerging from the maze, holding it. He saw the crowd, saw Cho's face shining with admiration, more clearly than he had ever seen it before . . . and then the picture faded.

born face.

"Both of us," Harry said.

"What?"

"We'll take it at the same time. It's still a Hogwarts victory. We'll tie for it."

Cedric stared at Harry. He unfolded his arms.

"You — you sure?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah . . . we've helped each other out, haven't we? We both got here. Let's just take it together."

For a moment, Cedric looked as though he couldn't believe his ears; then his face split in a grin.

"You're on," he said. "Come here."

He grabbed Harry's arm below the shoulder and helped Harry limp toward the plinth where the cup stood. When they reached it, they both grasped the ring handles.

"On three, right?" said Harry. "One — two — three —"

He and Cedric both grasped a handle.

Instantly, Harry felt a jerk somewhere behind his navel. His feet had left the ground. He could not unclench the hand holding the handle. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, a swirl of wind and swirling color, Cedric at his side.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

### FLESH, BLOOD, AND BONE

Harry felt his feet slam into the ground; his injured leg gave way, and he fell forward; his hand let go of the Triwizard Cup.

"Where are we?" he said.

Cedric shook his head. He got up, pulled Harry to his feet, and they looked around.

They had left the Hogwarts grounds completely; they had obviously traveled miles — perhaps hundreds of miles — finding instead in a dark and overgrown graveyard; the black outline of a small church was visible beyond a large yew tree. Cedric could just make out the outline of a fine old house on the hillside.

Cedric looked down at the Triwizard Cup and then up at Harry.

"Did anyone tell you the Cup was a Portkey?" he asked.

"Nope," said Harry. He was looking around the graveyard. It was completely silent and slightly eerie. "Is this supposed to be?"

"I dunno," said Cedric. He sounded slightly nervous. "Wands out, d'you reckon?"

"Yeah," said Harry, glad that Cedric had made the suggestion rather than him.

They pulled out their wands. Harry kept looking around him. He had, yet again, the strange feeling that they were being watched.

"Someone's coming," he said suddenly.

Squinting tensely through the darkness, they watched the figure drawing nearer, walking steadily toward them between the tombstones. As the figure was walking and holding its arms, he could tell that it was carrying something. Whoever it was, he was short, and well-dressed.

And — several paces nearer, the gap between them closing all the time — Harry saw that the thing in the person's arms was a bundle of robes.

Harry lowered his wand slightly and glanced sideways at Cedric. Cedric shot him a quizzical look. They both turned back to the figure.

It stopped beside a towering marble headstone, only six feet from them. For a second, Harry and Cedric and the short man looked at each other.

And then, without warning, Harry's scar exploded with pain. It was agony such as he had never felt in all his life; his vision blurred; his knees buckled; he was on the ground and he could see nothing at all; his head was about to split open.

From far away, above his head, he heard a high, cold voice say, "Kill the spare."

A swishing noise and a second voice, which screeched the words to the night: "Avada Kedavra!"

A blast of green light blazed through Harry's eyelids, and he heard something heavy fall to the ground beside him; then the light diminished; terrified of what he was about to see, he opened his stinging eyes.

Cedric was lying spread-eagled on the ground beside him. He was dead.

For a second that contained an eternity, Harry stared into Cedric's face, at his open gray eyes, blank and expressionless. Then he looked away, which looked slightly surprised. And then, before Harry's mind had accepted what he was seeing, before he could feel the ground beneath his feet.

The short man in the cloak had put down his bundle, lit his wand, and was dragging Harry toward the marble headstone. Harry was forced around and slammed against it.

TOM RIDDLE

The cloaked man was now conjuring tight cords around Harry, tying him from neck to ankles to the headstone. Harry struggled, and the man hit him — hit him with a hand that had a finger missing. And Harry realized who was under the cloak.

"You!" he gasped.

But Wormtail, who had finished conjuring the ropes, did not reply; he was busy checking the tightness of the cords, making sure that Harry was bound so tightly to the headstone that he couldn't move an inch. Wormtail drew a length of snake from his pocket and slipped it into Harry's mouth; then, without a word, he turned from Harry and hurried away. Harry couldn't make a sound. He tried to see beyond the headstone; he could see only what was right in front of him.

Cedric's body was lying some twenty feet away. Some way beyond him, glinting in the starlight, lay the Triwizard Cup. Harry noticed that the bundle of robes that Harry had thought was a baby was close by, at the foot of the grave. It seemed to be stirring fretfully. Harry noticed that the bundle of robes was suddenly knew that he didn't want to see what was in those robes . . . he didn't want that bundle opened. . . .

He could hear noises at his feet. He looked down and saw a gigantic snake slithering through the grass, circling the headstone. The noise was growing louder again. It sounded as though he was forcing something heavy across the ground. Then he came back with a cauldron to the foot of the grave. It was full of what seemed to be water — Harry could hear it slopping around — and the snake was curled up on its belly large enough for a full-grown man to sit in.

The thing inside the bundle of robes on the ground was stirring more persistently, as though it was trying to free itself. Harry noticed that the cauldron with a wand. Suddenly there were crackling flames beneath it. The large snake slithered away into the darkness.

The liquid in the cauldron seemed to heat very fast. The surface began not only to bubble, but to send out fiery sparks. Harry noticed that the outline of Wormtail tending the fire. The movements beneath the robes became more agitated. And Harry heard the voice.

"Hurry!"

The whole surface of the water was alight with sparks now. It might have been encrusted with diamonds.

"It is ready, Master."

"Now . . ." said the cold voice.

Wormtail pulled open the robes on the ground, revealing what was inside them, and Harry let out a yell that was strangled by his own hands. It was as though Wormtail had flipped over a stone and revealed something ugly, slimy, and blind — but worse, a human child.

It was a crouched human child, except that Harry had never seen anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly-looking, and feeble, and its face — no child alive ever had a face like that — flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes.

The thing seemed almost helpless; it raised its thin arms, put them around Wormtail's neck, and Wormtail lifted it. As he did, Harry noticed a glint of light on Wormtail's weak, pale face in the firelight as he carried the creature to the rim of the cauldron. For one moment the creature was on the surface of the potion. And then Wormtail lowered the creature into the cauldron; there was a hiss, and the bottom with a soft thud.

Let it drown, Harry thought, his scar burning almost past endurance, please . . . let it drown. . . .

Wormtail was speaking. His voice shook; he seemed frightened beyond his wits. He raised his wand, closed his eyes, "Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

The surface of the grave at Harry's feet cracked. Horrified, Harry watched as a fine trickle of dust rose into the air at the diamond surface of the water broke and hissed; it sent sparks in all directions and turned a vivid, poisonous-looking blue. And now Wormtail was whimpering. He pulled a long, thin, shining silver dagger from inside his cloak. His voice broke. "Flesh — of the servant — w-willingly given — you will — revive — your master."

He stretched his right hand out in front of him — the hand with the missing finger. He gripped the dagger very tightly. Harry realized what Wormtail was about to do a second before it happened — he closed his eyes as tightly as he could. Wormtail went through Harry as though he had been stabbed with the dagger too. He heard something fall to the ground, heard a glass being dropped into the cauldron. Harry couldn't stand to look . . . but the potion had turned a burning red; the light came from Wormtail was gasping and moaning with agony. Not until Harry felt Wormtail's anguished breath on his face did he realize. "B-blood of the enemy . . . forcibly taken . . . you will . . . resurrect your foe."

Harry could do nothing to prevent it, he was tied too tightly. . . . Squinting down, struggling hopelessly at the ropes binding Wormtail's remaining hand. He felt its point penetrate the crook of his right arm and blood seeping down the sleeve of his robe. He reached into his pocket for a glass vial and held it to Harry's cut, so that a dribble of blood fell into it.

He staggered back to the cauldron with Harry's blood. He poured it inside. The liquid within turned, instantly, a brilliant blue. Wormtail slumped sideways and lay on the ground, cradling the bleeding stump of his arm, gasping and sobbing. The cauldron was simmering, sending its diamond sparks in all directions, so blindingly bright that it turned all else to shadow. Let it have drowned, Harry thought, let it have gone wrong. . . .

And then, suddenly, the sparks emanating from the cauldron were extinguished. A surge of white steam billowed thick from the cauldron, so that he couldn't see Wormtail or Cedric or anything but vapor hanging in the air. . . . It's gone wrong, he thought. . . . dead. . . .

But then, through the mist in front of him, he saw, with an icy surge of terror, the dark outline of a man, tall and skeletal. "Robe me," said the high, cold voice from behind the steam, and Wormtail, sobbing and moaning, still cradling his mangled arm, got to his feet, reached up, and pulled them one-handed over his master's head.

The thin man stepped out of the cauldron, staring at Harry . . . and Harry stared back into the face that had haunted him. . . . livid scarlet eyes and a nose that was flat as a snake's with slits for nostrils . . .

Lord Voldemort had risen again.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### THE DEATH EATERS

Voldemort looked away from Harry and began examining his own body. His hands were like large, pale spiders; his livid red eyes, whose pupils were slits, like a cat's, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. He held up his hands and saw that he took not the slightest notice of Wormtail, who lay twitching and bleeding on the ground, nor of the great snake, which was coiled around him. Voldemort slipped one of those unnaturally long-fingered hands into a deep pocket and drew out a wand. He cast a spell. Wormtail, who was lifted off the ground and thrown against the headstone where Harry was tied; he fell to the foot of it and stared up at Voldemort's eyes upon Harry, laughing a high, cold, mirthless laugh.

Wormtail's robes were shining with blood now; he had wrapped the stump of his arm in them.

"My Lord . . ." he choked, "my Lord . . . you promised . . . you did promise . . ."

"Hold out your arm," said Voldemort lazily.

"Oh Master . . . thank you, Master . . ."

He extended the bleeding stump, but Voldemort laughed again.

"The other arm, Wormtail."

"Master, please . . . please . . ."

Voldemort bent down and pulled out Wormtail's left arm; he forced the sleeve of Wormtail's robes up past his elbow, revealing a livid red tattoo — a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth — the image that had appeared in the sky at the Quidditch World Cup. He ignored Wormtail's uncontrollable weeping.

"It is back," he said softly, "they will all have noticed it . . . and now, we shall see . . . now we shall know . . ."

He pressed his long white forefinger to the brand on Wormtail's arm.

The scar on Harry's forehead seared with a sharp pain again, and Wormtail let out a fresh howl; Voldemort removed his hand. . . . jet black.

A look of cruel satisfaction on his face, Voldemort straightened up, threw back his head, and stared around at the darkness.

"How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it?" he whispered, his gleaming red eyes fixed upon the stars in the sky. He began to pace up and down before Harry and Wormtail, eyes sweeping the graveyard all the while. After a minute he stopped. . . . snake-like face.

"You stand, Harry Potter, upon the remains of my late father," he hissed softly. "A Muggle and a fool . . . very like you. . . . Your mother died to defend you as a child . . . and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death. . . ."

Voldemort laughed again. Up and down he paced, looking all around him as he walked, and the snake continued to coil around him.

"You see that house upon the hillside, Potter? My father lived there. My mother, a witch who lived here in this village. . . ."

from what she was. . . . He didn't like magic, my father . . .

"He left her and returned to his Muggle parents before I was even born, Potter, and she died giving birth to me, leaving him . . . I revenged myself upon him, that fool who gave me his name . . . Tom Riddle. . . ."

Still he paced, his red eyes darting from grave to grave.

"Listen to me, reliving family history . . ." he said quietly, "why, I am growing quite sentimental. . . . But look, Harry! My robes! The air was suddenly full of the swishing of cloaks. Between graves, behind the yew tree, in every shadowy space, where they were by one they moved forward . . . slowly, cautiously, as though they could hardly believe their eyes. Voldemort stood before them, to his knees, crawled toward Voldemort, and kissed the hem of his black robes.

"Master . . . Master . . ." he murmured.

The Death Eaters behind him did the same; each of them approaching Voldemort on his knees and kissing his robes. They gathered around the enclosed Tom Riddle's grave, Harry, Voldemort, and the sobbing and twitching heap that was Wormtail. Yet they left him, however, did not seem to expect more. He looked around at the hooded faces, and though there was no wind, a rustle of robes. "Welcome, Death Eaters," said Voldemort quietly. "Thirteen years . . . thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answered me under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?"

He put back his terrible face and sniffed, his slit-like nostrils widening.

"I smell guilt," he said. "There is a stench of guilt upon the air."

A second shiver ran around the circle, as though each member of it longed, but did not dare, to step back from him.

"I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact — such prompt appearances! — and I ask myself . . . why did you not come to whom they swore eternal loyalty?"

No one spoke. No one moved except Wormtail, who was upon the ground, still sobbing over his bleeding arm.

"And I answer myself," whispered Voldemort, "they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped away, and bewitchment. . . ."

"And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, longed for proofs of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?"

"And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort. Perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?"

At the mention of Dumbledore's name, the members of the circle stirred, and some muttered and shook their heads.

"It is a disappointment to me . . . I confess myself disappointed. . . ."

One of the men suddenly flung himself forward, breaking the circle. Trembling from head to foot, he collapsed at Voldemort's feet.

"Master!" he shrieked, "Master, forgive me! Forgive us all!"

Voldemort began to laugh. He raised his wand.

"Crucio!"

The Death Eater on the ground writhed and shrieked; Harry was sure the sound must carry to the houses around. . . . Nothing . . .

Voldemort raised his wand. The tortured Death Eater lay flat upon the ground, gasping.

"Get up, Avery," said Voldemort softly. "Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years ago, you betrayed me. I forgive you. Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, have you not, Wormtail?"

He looked down at Wormtail, who continued to sob.

"You returned to me, not out of loyalty, but out of fear of your old friends. You deserve this pain, Wormtail. You know it."

"Yes, Master," moaned Wormtail, "please, Master . . . please . . ."

"Yet you helped return me to my body," said Voldemort coolly, watching Wormtail sob on the ground. "Worthless and cowardly as his helpers. . . ."

Voldemort raised his wand again and whirled it through the air. A streak of what looked like molten silver hung shining in the air, then formed itself into a gleaming replica of a human hand, bright as moonlight, which soared downward and fixed itself upon Wormtail's head. Wormtail's sobbing stopped abruptly. His breathing harsh and ragged, he raised his head and stared in disbelief at the hand. The hand was wearing a dazzling glove. He flexed the shining fingers, then, trembling, picked up a small twig on the ground and broke it. "My Lord," he whispered. "Master . . . it is beautiful . . . thank you . . . thank you. . . ."

He scrambled forward on his knees and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes.

"May your loyalty never waver again, Wormtail," said Voldemort.

"No, my Lord . . . never, my Lord . . ."

Wormtail stood up and took his place in the circle, staring at his powerful new hand, his face still shining with tears. "Lucius, my slippery friend," he whispered, halting before him. "I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, but I am ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius. . . . Your exploits in the past might not your energies have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?"

"My Lord, I was constantly on the alert," came Lucius Malfoy's voice swiftly from beneath the hood. "Had there been a Death Eater at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me —"

"And yet you ran from my Mark, when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer?" said Voldemort lazily, looking at that, Lucius. . . . You have disappointed me. . . . I expect more faithful service in the future."

"Of course, my Lord, of course. . . . You are merciful, thank you. . . ."

Voldemort moved on, and stopped, staring at the space — large enough for two people — that separated Malfoy and

"The Lestranges should stand here," said Voldemort quietly. "But they are entombed in Azkaban. They were faithful. As soon as the tomb is broken open, the Lestranges will be honored beyond their dreams. The dementors will join us . . . they are our natural enemies. I have all my devoted servants returned to me, and an army of creatures whom all fear. . . ."

He walked on. Some of the Death Eaters he passed in silence, but he paused before others and spoke to them.

"Macnair . . . destroying dangerous beasts for the Ministry of Magic now, Wormtail tells me? You shall have better victims than those." . . .

"Thank you, Master . . . thank you," murmured Macnair.

"And here" — Voldemort moved on to the two largest hooded figures — "we have Crabbe . . . you will do better this time than last." . . .

They bowed clumsily, muttering dully.

"Yes, Master . . ."

"We will, Master. . . ."

"The same goes for you, Nott," said Voldemort quietly as he walked past a stooped figure in Mr. Goyle's shadow.

"My Lord, I prostrate myself before you, I am your most faithful —"

"That will do," said Voldemort.

He had reached the largest gap of all, and he stood surveying it with his blank, red eyes, as though he could see people in the distance.

"And here we have six missing Death Eaters . . . three dead in my service. One, too cowardly to return . . . he will pay. . . ."

led, of course . . . and one, who remains my most faithful servant, and who has already reentered my service."

The Death Eaters stirred, and Harry saw their eyes dart sideways at one another through their masks.

"He is at Hogwarts, that faithful servant, and it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived here tonight. . . ."

"Yes," said Voldemort, a grin curling his lipless mouth as the eyes of the circle flashed in Harry's direction. "Harry Potter. . . . He goes so far as to call him my guest of honor."

There was a silence. Then the Death Eater to the right of Wormtail stepped forward, and Lucius Malfoy's voice spoke.

"Master, we crave to know . . . we beg you to tell us . . . how you have achieved this . . . this miracle . . . how you managed it." . . .

"Ah, what a story it is, Lucius," said Voldemort. "And it begins — and ends — with my young friend here."

He walked lazily over to stand next to Harry, so that the eyes of the whole circle were upon the two of them. The snakes hissed.

"You know, of course, that they have called this boy my downfall?" Voldemort said softly, his red eyes upon Harry, who stared at him. "You all know that on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill him. His mother died in the attempt. I did not admit I had not foreseen. . . . I could not touch the boy."

Voldemort raised one of his long white fingers and put it very close to Harry's cheek.

"His mother left upon him the traces of her sacrifice. . . . This is old magic, I should have remembered it, I was foolish. . . ."

Harry felt the cold tip of the long white finger touch him, and thought his head would burst with the pain. Voldemort moved on, addressing the Death Eaters.

"I miscalculated, my friends, I admit it. My curse was deflected by the woman's foolish sacrifice, and it rebounded upon me. I should have prepared me for it. I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost . . . but still I was able to have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal — to conquer death. And it has almost worked . . . for I had not been killed, though the curse should have done it. Nevertheless, I was as powerless as a ghost. . . . for I had no body, and every spell that might have helped me required the use of a wand. . . ."

"I remember only forcing myself, sleeplessly, endlessly, second by second, to exist. . . . I settled in a faraway place, in a hidden room. The Death Eaters would try and find me . . . one of them would come and perform the magic I could not, to restore me to my body. . . ."

The shiver ran once more around the circle of listening Death Eaters. Voldemort let the silence spiral horribly before he spoke. "Only one power remained to me. I could possess the bodies of others. But I dared not go where other humans were. I had to find a place for me. I sometimes inhabited animals — snakes, of course, being my preference — but I was little better off inside them. . . . I could perform magic . . . and my possession of them shortened their lives; none of them lasted long. . . ."

"Then . . . four years ago . . . the means for my return seemed assured. A wizard — young, foolish, and gullible — was sent to me. He seemed the very chance I had been dreaming of . . . for he was a teacher at Dumbledore's school . . . he was easy to bribe. For a while, I took possession of his body, to supervise him closely as he carried out my orders. But my plan failed. I did not achieve the assured immortal life. I was thwarted . . . thwarted, once again, by Harry Potter. . . ."

Silence once more; nothing was stirring, not even the leaves on the yew tree. The Death Eaters were quite motionless. . . . Harry stared at him.

"The servant died when I left his body, and I was left as weak as ever I had been," Voldemort continued. "I returned to my cave. I didn't then fear that I might never regain my powers. . . . Yes, that was perhaps my darkest hour . . . I could not hope. . . . I had given up hope, now, that any of my Death Eaters cared what had become of me. . . ."

One or two of the masked wizards in the circle moved uncomfortably, but Voldemort took no notice.

"And then, not even a year ago, when I had almost abandoned hope, it happened at last . . . a servant returned to me. . . . He was driven out of hiding by those he had once counted friends, and decided to return to his master. He sought me in the forest, of course, by the rats he met along the way. Wormtail has a curious affinity with rats, do you not, Wormtail? His father was a wizard, a member of the Lestrange family, that they avoided, where small animals like themselves had met their deaths by a dark shadow that passed through the banian forest, that they avoided, where small animals like themselves had met their deaths by a dark shadow that passed through the forest. . . ."

"But his journey back to me was not smooth, was it, Wormtail? For, hungry one night, on the edge of the very forest where I hid, he sought some food . . . and who should he meet there, but one Bertha Jorkins, a witch from the Ministry of Magic."

"Now see the way that fate favors Lord Voldemort. This might have been the end of Wormtail, and of my last hope for the return of my body. . . ."



"And now — we duel."

Voldemort raised his wand, and before Harry could do anything to defend himself, before he could even move, he had been all-consuming, that he no longer knew where he was. . . . White-hot knives were piercing every inch of his skin, his hands, his feet, louder than he'd ever screamed in his life —

And then it stopped. Harry rolled over and scrambled to his feet; he was shaking as uncontrollably as Wormtail had been the night of the wall of watching Death Eaters, and they pushed him away, back toward Voldemort.

"A little break," said Voldemort, the slit-like nostrils dilating with excitement, "a little pause . . . That hurt, didn't it, Harry?" Harry didn't answer. He was going to die like Cedric, those pitiless red eyes were telling him so . . . he was going to die. He wasn't going to play along. He wasn't going to obey Voldemort . . . he wasn't going to beg. . . .

"I asked you whether you want me to do that again," said Voldemort softly. "Answer me! Imperio!"

And Harry felt, for the third time in his life, the sensation that his mind had been wiped of all thought. . . . Ah, it was back. Screaming . . . just answer no . . . say no . . . just answer no. . . .

I will not, said a stronger voice, in the back of his head, I won't answer. . . .

Just answer no. . . .

I won't do it, I won't say it. . . .

Just answer no. . . .

"I WON'T!"

And these words burst from Harry's mouth; they echoed through the graveyard, and the dream state was lifted as suddenly as the pain. The aches that the Cruciatus Curse had left all over his body — back rushed the realization of where he was, and what he was doing. . . .

"You won't?" said Voldemort quietly, and the Death Eaters were not laughing now. "You won't say no? Harry, obedient Harry, a little more of that, another little dose of pain?"

Voldemort raised his wand, but this time Harry was ready; with the reflexes born of his Quidditch training, he flung himself back, his hand on the headstone of Voldemort's father, and he heard it crack as the curse missed him.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Harry," said Voldemort's soft, cold voice, drawing nearer, as the Death Eaters laughed. "Do you want to end our duel? Does this mean that you would prefer me to finish it now, Harry? Come out, Harry . . . come out and play, then." . . .

I would not know . . . I have never died. . . .

Harry crouched behind the headstone and knew the end had come. There was no hope . . . no help to be had. And a part of him was beyond fear or reason: He was not going to die crouching here like a child playing hide-and-seek; he was not going to die upright like his father, and he was going to die trying to defend himself, even if no defense was possible. . . .

Before Voldemort could stick his snakelike face around the headstone, Harry stood up . . . he gripped his wand tightly, and he stepped forward, around the headstone, facing Voldemort.

Voldemort was ready. As Harry shouted, "Expelliarmus!" Voldemort cried, "Avada Kedavra!"

A jet of green light issued from Voldemort's wand just as a jet of red light blasted from Harry's — they met in midair. . . . The Death Eaters in charge were surging through it; his hand seized up around it; he couldn't have released it if he'd wanted to — and a brilliant green, but bright, deep gold. Harry, following the beam with his astonished gaze, saw that Voldemort's long white hair was blowing in the wind. . . .

And then — nothing could have prepared Harry for this — he felt his feet lift from the ground. He and Voldemort were floating in a hat thread of shimmering golden light. They glided away from the tombstone of Voldemort's father and then came to a stop. . . .

The Death Eaters were shouting; they were asking Voldemort for instructions; they were closing in, reforming the circle around them. . . . The Death Eaters, some of them drawing their wands —

The golden thread connecting Harry and Voldemort splintered; though the wands remained connected, a thousand tiny sparks of light, like sparks from a fire, were scattered all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a cage of light, beyond which the Death Eaters circled. . . .

"Do nothing!" Voldemort shrieked to the Death Eaters, and Harry saw his red eyes wide with astonishment at what was happening. . . . Connecting his wand with Harry's; Harry held onto his wand more tightly, with both hands, and the golden thread remained. . . . to the Death Eaters.

And then an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air. . . . It was coming from every thread of the light-spun web. . . . Harry recognized, though he had heard it only once before in his life: phoenix song.

It was the sound of hope to Harry . . . the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life. . . . He felt a warmth in his chest. . . . It was the sound he connected with Dumbledore, and it was almost as though a friend were speaking in his ear. . . . Don't break the connection.

I know, Harry told the music, I know I mustn't . . . but no sooner had he thought it, than the thing became much harder. . . . and now the beam between him and Voldemort changed too . . . it was as though large beads of light were sliding down his wand. . . . He gave a shudder under his hand as the light beads began to slide slowly and steadily his way. . . . The direction of the beam changed. . . . He felt his wand shudder angrily. . . .

As the closest bead of light moved nearer to Harry's wand-tip, the wood beneath his fingers grew so hot he feared it would burn. . . . Harry's wand vibrated; he was sure his wand would not survive contact with it; it felt as though it was about to shatter. . . . He concentrated every last particle of his mind upon forcing the bead back toward Voldemort, his ears full of phoenix song. . . . The beads quivered to a halt, and then, just as slowly, they began to move the other way . . . and it was Voldemort's wand that vibrated. . . . astonished, and almost fearful. . . .

One of the beads of light was quivering, inches from the tip of Voldemort's wand. Harry didn't understand why he was so afraid. . . . He concentrated as he had never done in his life on forcing that bead of light right back into Voldemort's wand . . . and slowly

. . . it trembled for a moment . . . and then it connected. . . .

At once, Voldemort's wand began to emit echoing screams of pain . . . then — Voldemort's red eyes widened with shock . . . the ghost of the hand he had made Wormtail . . . more shouts of pain . . . and then something much larger began to emerge that looked as though it were made of the solidest, densest smoke. . . . It was a head . . . now a chest and arms . . . then a body. If ever Harry might have released his wand from shock, it would have been then, but instinct kept him clutching his wand, even though the thick gray ghost of Cedric Diggory (was it a ghost? it looked so solid) emerged in its entirety from the wand. It came out of a very narrow tunnel . . . and this shade of Cedric stood up, and looked up and down the golden thread of light. "Hold on, Harry," it said.

Its voice was distant and echoing. Harry looked at Voldemort . . . his wide red eyes were still shocked . . . he had no time to hear the frightened yells of the Death Eaters, prowling around the edges of the golden dome. . . .

More screams of pain from the wand . . . and then something else emerged from its tip . . . the dense shadow of a serpent Harry had seen only in a dream was now pushing himself out of the end of the wand just as Cedric had done . . . and his head, and surveyed Harry and Voldemort, and the golden web, and the connected wands, with mild surprise, leaning on his wand. "He was a real wizard, then?" the old man said, his eyes on Voldemort. "Killed me, that one did. . . . You fight him, boy?" But already, yet another head was emerging . . . and this head, gray as a smoky statue, was a woman's. . . . Harry, both hands dropping to the ground and straighten up like the others, staring. . . .

The shadow of Bertha Jorkins surveyed the battle before her with wide eyes.

"Don't let go, now!" she cried, and her voice echoed like Cedric's as though from very far away. "Don't let him get you!" She and the other two shadowy figures began to pace around the inner walls of the golden web, while the Death Eaters' screams whispered as they circled the duelers, whispered words of encouragement to Harry, and hissed words Harry could not hear. And now another head was emerging from the tip of Voldemort's wand . . . and Harry knew when he saw it who it was. It was Cedric had appeared from the wand . . . knew, because the woman appearing was the one he'd thought of more than any other. The smoky shadow of a young woman with long hair fell to the ground as Bertha had done, straightened up, and looked into the ghostly face of his mother.

"Your father's coming. . . ." she said quietly. "Hold on for your father. . . . It will be all right. . . . Hold on. . . ."

And he came . . . first his head, then his body . . . tall and untidy-haired like Harry, the smoky, shadowy form of James Potter rose from the ground, and straightened like his wife. He walked close to Harry, looking down at him, and he spoke in the same voice. "Hold on, Harry!" But his face now livid with fear as his victims prowled around him, could not hear. . . .

"When the connection is broken, we will linger for only moments . . . but we will give you time . . . you must get to the end of the thread, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry gasped, fighting now to keep a hold on his wand, which was slipping and sliding beneath his fingers.

"Harry . . ." whispered the figure of Cedric, "take my body back, will you? Take my body back to my parents. . . ."

"I will," said Harry, his face screwed up with the effort of holding the wand.

"Do it now," whispered his father's voice, "be ready to run . . . do it now. . . ."

"NOW!" Harry yelled; he didn't think he could have held on for another moment anyway — he pulled his wand upward. The light vanished, the phoenix song died — but the shadowy figures of Voldemort's victims did not disappear — they were still there. And Harry ran as he had never run in his life, knocking two stunned Death Eaters aside as he passed; he zigzagged between the headstones — he was dodging curses and graves, pelting toward Cedric's body, no longer aware of the pain in his legs.

"Stun him!" he heard Voldemort scream.

Ten feet from Cedric, Harry dived behind a marble angel to avoid the jets of red light and saw the tip of its wing shattered and ashed out from behind the angel —

"Impedimenta!" he bellowed, pointing his wand wildly over his shoulder at the Death Eaters running at him.

From a muffled yell, he thought he had stopped at least one of them, but there was no time to stop and look; he jumped forward; more jets of light flew over his head as he fell, stretching out his hand to grab Cedric's arm —

"Stand aside! I will kill him! He is mine!" shrieked Voldemort.

Harry's hand had closed on Cedric's wrist; one tombstone stood between him and Voldemort, but Cedric was too heavy to move. Voldemort's red eyes flamed in the darkness. Harry saw his mouth curl into a smile, saw him raise his wand.

"Accio!" Harry yelled, pointing his wand at the Triwizard Cup.

It flew into the air and soared toward him. Harry caught it by the handle —

He heard Voldemort's scream of fury at the same moment that he felt the jerk behind his navel that meant the Portkey was activated, and Cedric along with him. . . . They were going back.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

### VERITASERUM

Harry felt himself slam flat into the ground; his face was pressed into grass; the smell of it filled his nostrils. He had closed his eyes, but he kept them closed now. He did not move. All the breath seemed to have been knocked out of him; his head was swimming like the deck of a ship. To hold himself steady, he tightened his hold on the two things he was still clutching: the smooth handle of his wand, and the Triwizard Cup. It felt as though he would slide away into the blackness gathering at the edges of his brain if he let go of either of them. So he waited, the smell of the grass, waiting . . . waiting for someone to do something . . . something to happen . . . and all the while, his ears were ringing. A torrent of sound deafened and confused him; there were voices everywhere, footsteps, screams. . . . He remained



ere a nightmare that would pass. . . .

Then a pair of hands seized him roughly and turned him over.

"Harry! Harry!"

He opened his eyes.

He was looking up at the starry sky, and Albus Dumbledore was crouched over him. The dark shadows of a crowd of people moved beneath his head reverberating with their footsteps.

He had come back to the edge of the maze. He could see the stands rising above him, the shapes of people moving in the distance.

Harry let go of the Cup, but he clutched Cedric to him even more tightly. He raised his free hand and seized Dumbledore's wrist.

"He's back," Harry whispered. "He's back. Voldemort."

"What's going on? What's happened?"

The face of Cornelius Fudge appeared upside down over Harry; it looked white, appalled.

"My God — Diggory!" it whispered. "Dumbledore — he's dead!"

The words were repeated, the shadowy figures pressing in on them gasped it to those around them . . . and then others gasped it to those around them. "Dead!" "Cedric Diggory! Dead!"

"Harry, let go of him," he heard Fudge's voice say, and he felt fingers trying to pry him from Cedric's limp body, but Harry would not let go. The air grew still blurred and misted, came closer.

"Harry, you can't help him now. It's over. Let go."

"He wanted me to bring him back," Harry muttered — it seemed important to explain this. "He wanted me to bring him back."

"That's right, Harry . . . just let go now. . . ."

Dumbledore bent down, and with extraordinary strength for a man so old and thin, raised Harry from the ground and held him. His thin, bent leg would no longer support his weight. The crowd around them jostled, fighting to get closer, pressing darkly in on them. "Dead!"

"He'll need to go to the hospital wing!" Fudge was saying loudly. "He's ill, he's injured — Dumbledore, Diggory's parents!"

"I'll take Harry, Dumbledore, I'll take him —"

"No, I would prefer —"

"Dumbledore, Amos Diggory's running . . . he's coming over. . . . Don't you think you should tell him — before he sees —"

"Harry, stay here —"

Girls were screaming, sobbing hysterically. . . . The scene flickered oddly before Harry's eyes. . . .

"It's all right, son, I've got you . . . come on . . . hospital wing . . ."

"Dumbledore said stay," said Harry thickly, the pounding in his scar making him feel as though he was about to throw up.

"You need to lie down. . . . Come on now. . . ."

Someone larger and stronger than he was was half pulling, half carrying him through the frightened crowd. Harry heard a path being made for him. He was pushed a path through them, taking him back to the castle. Across the lawn, past the lake and the Durmstrang ships, he was taken to the castle. He was pushed a path through them, taking him back to the castle. Across the lawn, past the lake and the Durmstrang ships, he was taken to the castle. He was pushed a path through them, taking him back to the castle. Across the lawn, past the lake and the Durmstrang ships, he was taken to the castle.

him walk.

"What happened, Harry?" the man asked at last as he lifted Harry up the stone steps. Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. It was Madam Pomfrey.

"Cup was a Portkey," said Harry as they crossed the entrance hall. "Took me and Cedric to a graveyard . . . and Voldemort was there."

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Up the marble stairs . . .

"The Dark Lord was there? What happened then?"

"Killed Cedric . . . they killed Cedric. . . ."

"And then?"

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Along the corridor . . .

"Made a potion . . . got his body back. . . ."

"The Dark Lord got his body back? He's returned?"

"And the Death Eaters came . . . and then we dueled. . . ."

"You dueled with the Dark Lord?"

"Got away . . . my wand . . . did something funny. . . . I saw my mum and dad . . . they came out of his wand. . . ."

"In here, Harry . . . in here, and sit down. . . . You'll be all right now . . . drink this. . . ."

Harry heard a key scrape in a lock and felt a cup being pushed into his hands.

"Drink it . . . you'll feel better . . . come on, now, Harry, I need to know exactly what happened. . . ."

Moody helped tip the stuff down Harry's throat; he coughed, a peppery taste burning his throat. Moody's office came into view. It was as white as Fudge had looked, and both eyes were fixed unblinkingly upon Harry's face.

"Voldemort's back, Harry? You're sure he's back? How did he do it?"

"He took stuff from his father's grave, and from Wormtail, and me," said Harry. His head felt clearer; his scar wasn't hurting. He could still hear screaming and shouting from the distant Quidditch field.

"What did the Dark Lord take from you?" said Moody.

"Blood," said Harry, raising his arm. His sleeve was ripped where Wormtail's dagger had torn it.

Moody let out his breath in a long, low hiss.

"And the Death Eaters? They returned?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Loads of them . . ."

"How did he treat them?" Moody asked quietly. "Did he forgive them?"

But Harry had suddenly remembered. He should have told Dumbledore, he should have said it straightaway — "There's a Death Eater at Hogwarts! There's a Death Eater here — they put my name in the Goblet of Fire, they made Harry tried to get up, but Moody pushed him back down.

"I know who the Death Eater is," he said quietly.

"Karkaroff?" said Harry wildly. "Where is he? Have you got him? Is he locked up?"

"Karkaroff?" said Moody with an odd laugh. "Karkaroff fled tonight, when he felt the Dark Mark burn upon his arm. He o meet them . . . but I doubt he will get far. The Dark Lord has ways of tracking his enemies."

"Karkaroff's gone? He ran away? But then — he didn't put my name in the goblet?"

"No," said Moody slowly. "No, he didn't. It was I who did that."

Harry heard, but didn't believe.

"No, you didn't," he said. "You didn't do that . . . you can't have done . . ."

"I assure you I did," said Moody, and his magical eye swung around and fixed upon the door, and Harry knew he was dy drew out his wand and pointed it at Harry.

"He forgave them, then?" he said. "The Death Eaters who went free? The ones who escaped Azkaban?"

"What?" said Harry.

He was looking at the wand Moody was pointing at him. This was a bad joke, it had to be.

"I asked you," said Moody quietly, "whether he forgave the scum who never even went to look for him. Those treache , worthless bits of filth who were brave enough to cavort in masks at the Quidditch World Cup, but fled at the sight o

"You fired . . . What are you talking about . . . ?"

"I told you, Harry . . . I told you. If there's one thing I hate more than any other, it's a Death Eater who walked free. Th st. I expected him to punish them. I expected him to torture them. Tell me he hurt them, Harry. . . ." Moody's face wa

I, I alone remained faithful . . . prepared to risk everything to deliver to him the one thing he wanted above all . . . yo

"You didn't . . . it — it can't be you. . . ."

"Who put your name in the Goblet of Fire, under the name of a different school? I did. Who frightened off every pers e tournament? I did. Who nudged Hagrid into showing you the dragons? I did. Who helped you see the only way youo

Moody's magical eye had now left the door. It was fixed upon Harry. His lopsided mouth leered more widely than ev

"It hasn't been easy, Harry, guiding you through these tasks without arousing suspicion. I have had to use every ounce in your success. Dumbledore would have been very suspicious if you had managed everything too easily. As long as I knew, I would have a chance of getting rid of the other champions and leaving your way clear. But I also had to con

was most afraid we would fail. I was keeping watch on you, Potter. I knew you hadn't worked out the egg's clue, so I h

"You didn't," Harry said hoarsely. "Cedric gave me the clue —"

"Who told Cedric to open it underwater? I did. I trusted that he would pass the information on to you. Decent people to repay you for telling him about the dragons, and so he did. But even then, Potter, even then you seemed likely to ibrary. Didn't you realize that the book you needed was in your dormitory all along? I planted it there early on, I gave Plants of the Mediterranean. It would have told you all you needed to know about gillyweed. I expected you to ask ev you in an instant. But you did not . . . you did not. . . . You have a streak of pride and independence that might have r

"So what could I do? Feed you information from another innocent source. You told me at the Yule Ball a house-elf ca the staffroom to collect some robes for cleaning. I staged a loud conversation with Professor McGonagall about the l gillyweed. And your little elf friend ran straight to Snape's office and then hurried to find you. . . ."

Moody's wand was still pointing directly at Harry's heart. Over his shoulder, foggy shapes were moving in the Foe-Gla

"You were so long in that lake, Potter, I thought you had drowned. But luckily, Dumbledore took your idiocy for nobil

"You had an easier time of it than you should have in that maze tonight, of course," said Moody. "I was patrolling aro y obstacles out of your way. I Stunned Fleur Delacour as she passed. I put the Imperius Curse on Krum, so that he wo

Harry stared at Moody. He just didn't see how this could be. . . . Dumbledore's friend, the famous Auror . . . the one v . . . no sense at all. . . .

The foggy shapes in the Foe-Glass were sharpening, had become more distinct. Harry could see the outlines of three wasn't watching them. His magical eye was upon Harry.

"The Dark Lord didn't manage to kill you, Potter, and he so wanted to," whispered Moody. "Imagine how he will rewa thing he needed above all to regenerate — and then I killed you for him. I will be honored beyond all other Death Ea than a son. . . ."

Moody's normal eye was bulging, the magical eye fixed upon Harry. The door was barred, and Harry knew he would

"The Dark Lord and I," said Moody, and he looked completely insane now, towering over Harry, leering down at him, ing fathers . . . very disappointing indeed. Both of us suffered the indignity, Harry, of being named after those fathers ure . . . of killing our fathers to ensure the continued rise of the Dark Order!"

"You're mad," Harry said — he couldn't stop himself — "you're mad!"

"Mad, am I?" said Moody, his voice rising uncontrollably. "We'll see! We'll see who's mad, now that the Dark Lord has d not conquer him — and now — I conquer you!"

Moody raised his wand, he opened his mouth; Harry plunged his own hand into his robes —

"Stupefy!" There was a blinding flash of red light, and with a great splintering and crashing, the door of Moody's offic

Moody was thrown backward onto the office floor. Harry, still staring at the place where Moody's face had been, saw

ng back at him out of the Foe-Glass. He looked around and saw the three of them standing in the doorway, Dumbledore. At that moment, Harry fully understood for the first time why people said Dumbledore was the only wizard Voldemort feared. At the unconscious form of Mad-Eye Moody was more terrible than Harry could have ever imagined. There was no blood on his spectacles. There was cold fury in every line of the ancient face; a sense of power radiated from Dumbledore as though he was a dragon. He stepped into the office, placed a foot underneath Moody's unconscious body, and kicked him over onto his back, his head against the Foe-Glass, where his own face was still visible, glaring into the room. Professor McGonagall went straight to Harry. "Come along, Potter," she whispered. The thin line of her mouth was twitching as though she was about to cry. "Come along, Harry."

"No," said Dumbledore sharply.

"Dumbledore, he ought to — look at him — he's been through enough tonight —"

"He will stay, Minerva, because he needs to understand," said Dumbledore curtly. "Understanding is the first step to knowing who has put him through the ordeal he has suffered tonight, and why."

"Moody," Harry said. He was still in a state of complete disbelief. "How can it have been Moody?"

"This is not Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore quietly. "You have never known Alastor Moody. The real Moody would have been dead the moment he took you, I knew — and I followed."

Dumbledore bent down over Moody's limp form and put a hand inside his robes. He pulled out Moody's hip flask and a small bottle of Snape's.

"Severus, please fetch me the strongest Truth Potion you possess, and then go down to the kitchens and bring up the trunk, where you will find a large black dog sitting in the pumpkin patch. Take the dog up to my office, tell him I will be with him. If either Snape or McGonagall found these instructions peculiar, they hid their confusion. Both turned at once and left. The keys, fitted the first key in the lock, and opened it. It contained a mass of spellbooks. Dumbledore closed the trunk, placed the second key in the lock, and opened it. The spellbooks had vanished; this time it contained an assortment of broken Sneakoscopes, some parchment and a broken wand. He touched, astounded, as Dumbledore placed the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth keys in their respective locks, reopening the trunk. He placed the seventh key in the lock, threw open the lid, and Harry let out a cry of amazement.

He was looking down into a kind of pit, an underground room, and lying on the floor some ten feet below, apparently dead, was Moody. His wooden leg was gone, the socket that should have held the magical eye looked empty beneath its lid, and his head was tucked, between the sleeping Moody in the trunk and the unconscious Moody lying on the floor of the office.

Dumbledore climbed into the trunk, lowered himself, and fell lightly onto the floor beside the sleeping Moody. He breathed a sigh. "Stunned — controlled by the Imperius Curse — very weak," he said. "Of course, they would have needed to keep him alive. Pomfrey will need to see him, but he seems in no immediate danger."

Harry did as he was told; Dumbledore covered Moody in the cloak, tucked it around him, and clambered out of the trunk. He unscrewed it, and turned it over. A thick glutinous liquid splattered onto the office floor.

"Polyjuice Potion, Harry," said Dumbledore. "You see the simplicity of it, and the brilliance. For Moody never does drink the potion needed, of course, to keep the real Moody close by, so that he could continue making the potion. You see his hair? The imposter has been cutting it off all year, see where it is uneven? But I think, in the excitement of tonight, our fake Moody would have done . . . on the hour . . . every hour. . . . We shall see."

Dumbledore pulled out the chair at the desk and sat down upon it, his eyes fixed upon the unconscious Moody on the floor. Then, before Harry's very eyes, the face of the man on the floor began to change. The scars were disappearing, the skin began to shrink. The long mane of grizzled gray hair was withdrawing into the scalp and turning the color of straw. Suddenly the man's hair grew in its place; next moment, the magical eyeball had popped out of the man's face as a real eye replaced it; it rolled back into its direction.

Harry saw a man lying before him, pale-skinned, slightly freckled, with a mop of fair hair. He knew who he was. He had been taken away from court by the dementors, trying to convince Mr. Crouch that he was innocent . . . but he was lined around the eyes. There were hurried footsteps outside in the corridor. Snape had returned with Winky at his heels. Professor McGonagall came. "Crouch!" Snape said, stopping dead in the doorway. "Barty Crouch!"

"Good heavens," said Professor McGonagall, stopping dead and staring down at the man on the floor.

Filthy, disheveled, Winky peered around Snape's legs. Her mouth opened wide and she let out a piercing shriek. "Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you doing here?"

She flung herself forward onto the young man's chest.

"You is killed him! You is killed him! You is killed Master's son!"

"He is simply Stunned, Winky," said Dumbledore. "Step aside, please. Severus, you have the potion?"

Snape handed Dumbledore a small glass bottle of completely clear liquid: the Veritaserum with which he had threatened Harry, and pulled him into a sitting position against the wall beneath the Foe-Glass, in which the reflections of Dumbledore and Harry were visible. Winky remained on her knees, trembling, her hands over her face. Dumbledore forced the man's mouth open and pressed a finger to his lips. "Rest and said, 'Rennervate.'"

Crouch's son opened his eyes. His face was slack, his gaze unfocused. Dumbledore knelt before him, so that their faces were close. "Can you hear me?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

The man's eyelids flickered.

"Yes," he muttered.

"I would like you to tell us," said Dumbledore softly, "how you came to be here. How did you escape from Azkaban?"

Crouch took a deep, shuddering breath, then began to speak in a flat, expressionless voice.

"My mother saved me. She knew she was dying. She persuaded my father to rescue me as a last favor to her. He loved her. He gave me a draught of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my mother's hairs. She took a draught of Polyjuice Potion and became me. Winky was shaking her head, trembling.

"Say no more, Master Barty, say no more, you are getting your father into trouble!"

But Crouch took another deep breath and continued in the same flat voice.

"The dementors are blind. They sensed one healthy, one dying person entering Azkaban. They sensed one healthy, one dying person, my mother, in case any prisoners were watching through their doors.

"My mother died a short while afterward in Azkaban. She was careful to drink Polyjuice Potion until the end. She was careful to make it seem as if she had died her to be me."

The man's eyelids flickered.

"And what did your father do with you, when he had got you home?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Staged my mother's death. A quiet, private funeral. That grave is empty. The house-elf nursed me back to health. Then he used a number of spells to subdue me. When I had recovered my strength, I thought only of finding my master . . ."

"How did your father subdue you?" said Dumbledore.

"The Imperius Curse," Crouch said. "I was under my father's control. I was forced to wear an Invisibility Cloak day and night. My mother was my caretaker. She pitied me. She persuaded my father to give me occasional treats. Rewards for my good behavior."

"Master Barty, Master Barty," sobbed Winky through her hands. "You shouldn't ought to tell them, we are getting in trouble."

"Did anybody ever discover that you were still alive?" said Dumbledore softly. "Did anyone know except your father and me?"

"Yes," said Crouch, his eyelids flickering again. "A witch in my father's office. Bertha Jorkins. She came to the house with my father. Winky showed her inside and returned to the kitchen, to me. But Bertha Jorkins heard Winky talking to me. She came to my father. He took the Invisibility Cloak. My father arrived home. She confronted him. He put a very powerful Memory Charm on her to make her forget everything. Her memory permanently."

"Why is she coming to nose into my master's private business?" sobbed Winky. "Why isn't she leaving us be?"

"Tell me about the Quidditch World Cup," said Dumbledore.

"Winky talked my father into it," said Crouch, still in the same monotonous voice. "She spent months persuading him to let me go, she said. He will be in his Invisibility Cloak. He can watch. Let him smell fresh air for once. She said my mother wanted me to die to give me freedom. She had not saved me for a life of imprisonment. He agreed in the end.

"It was carefully planned. My father led me and Winky up to the Top Box early in the day. Winky was to say that she was alone. When everyone had left the box, we would emerge. Winky would appear to be alone. Nobody would ever know.

"But Winky didn't know that I was growing stronger. I was starting to fight my father's Imperius Curse. There were times when I seemed outside his control. It happened, there, in the Top Box. It was like waking from a deep sleep. I found myself holding a wand sticking out of a boy's pocket. I had not been allowed a wand since before Azkaban. I stole it. Winky was shocked. She hid it."

"Master Barty, you bad boy!" whispered Winky, tears trickling between her fingers.

"So you took the wand," said Dumbledore, "and what did you do with it?"

"We went back to the tent," said Crouch. "Then we heard them. We heard the Death Eaters. The ones who had never turned their backs on him. They were not enslaved, as I was. They were free to seek him, but they did not. They were loyal to him. They loved him. They took care of me. My mind was clearer than it had been in years. I was angry. I had the wand. I wanted to attack them for their loyalty to him. I wanted to free the Muggles. Winky was afraid to see me so angry. She used her own brand of magic to bind me to her. She used the Imperius Curse. I tried to hold her back. I wanted to return to the campsite. I wanted to show those Death Eaters what I was capable of. I used the stolen wand to cast the Dark Mark into the sky.

"Ministry wizards arrived. They shot Stunning Spells everywhere. One of the spells came through the trees where Winky was hiding. She was killed."

"When Winky was discovered, my father knew I must be nearby. He searched the bushes where she had been found. He found me. He left the forest. He put me back under the Imperius Curse and took me home. He dismissed Winky. She had failed him. She was a failure. Winky let out a wail of despair.

"Now it was just Father and I, alone in the house. And then . . . and then . . ." Crouch's head rolled on his neck, and he died.

"He arrived at our house late one night in the arms of his servant Wormtail. My master had found out that I was still alive. He loved her. She told him a great deal. She told him about the Triwizard Tournament. She told him the old Auror, Moody, told him about the Memory Charm my father had placed upon her. She told him I had escaped from Azkaban. She told him my master knew that I was still his faithful servant — perhaps the most faithful of all. My master conceived a plan, but he was too old. He arrived at our house near midnight. My father answered the door."

The smile spread wider over Crouch's face, as though recalling the sweetest memory of his life. Winky's petrified brother came forward to speak.

"It was very quick. My father was placed under the Imperius Curse by my master. Now my father was the one imprisoned. He was forced to act as though nothing was wrong. And I was released. I awoke. I was myself again, alive as I hadn't been in years."

"And what did Lord Voldemort ask you to do?" said Dumbledore.

"He asked me whether I was ready to risk everything for him. I was ready. It was my dream, my greatest ambition, to be a faithful servant at Hogwarts. A servant who would guide Harry Potter through the Triwizard Tournament without a mistake."

re he reached the Triwizard Cup. Turn the Cup into a Portkey, which would take the first person to touch it to my master's house. You needed Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore. His blue eyes were blazing, though his voice remained calm. "Wormtail and I did it. We had prepared the Polyjuice Potion beforehand. We journeyed to his house. Moody put up a lot of time. Forced him into a compartment of his own magical trunk. Took some of his hair and added it to the potion. I drank it. I was ready to face Arthur Weasley when he arrived to sort out the Muggles who had heard a disturbance. I made the dunderbuns in my yard, who had set off the dustbins. Then I packed up Moody's clothes and Dark Detectors, put them in the trunk. I used the Imperius Curse. I wanted to be able to question him. To find out about his past, learn his habits, so that I could use the Polyjuice Potion. The other ingredients were easy. I stole boomslang skin from the dungeons. When the Potions master asked me, I said, 'And what became of Wormtail after you attacked Moody?' said Dumbledore. "Wormtail returned to care for my master, in my father's house, and to keep watch over my father." "But your father escaped," said Dumbledore. "Yes. After a while he began to fight the Imperius Curse just as I had done. There were periods when he knew what was wrong and tried to leave the house. He forced him to send letters to the Ministry instead. He made him write and say he was ill. But he never escaped. My master guessed that he was heading for Hogwarts. My father was going to tell Dumbledore everything. He was in Azkaban. "My master sent me word of my father's escape. He told me to stop him at all costs. So I waited and watched. I used the Polyjuice Potion. I killed everything." "Map?" said Dumbledore quickly. "What map is this?" "Potter's map of Hogwarts. Potter saw me on it. Potter saw me stealing more ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion from the castle. He had the same first name. I took the map from Potter that night. I told him my father hated Dark wizards. Potter believed me. "For a week I waited for my father to arrive at Hogwarts. At last, one evening, the map showed my father entering the castle. I waited for him. He was walking around the edge of the forest. Then Potter came, and Krum. I waited. I could not hurt Potter; not yet. I killed my father." "Noooo!" wailed Winky. "Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you saying?" "You killed your father," Dumbledore said, in the same soft voice. "What did you do with the body?" "Carried it into the forest. Covered it with the Invisibility Cloak. I had the map with me. I watched Potter run into the castle. Potter bringing Dumbledore out of the castle. I walked back out of the forest, doubled around behind them, went to meet them. "Dumbledore told me to go and look for my father. I went back to my father's body. Watched the map. When everyone found it, I buried it, while wearing the Invisibility Cloak, in the freshly dug earth in front of Hagrid's cabin." There was complete silence now, except for Winky's continued sobs. Then Dumbledore said, "And tonight . . ." "I offered to carry the Triwizard Cup into the maze before dinner," whispered Barty Crouch. "Turned it into a Portkey. It was honored by him beyond the dreams of wizards." The insane smile lit his features once more, and his head drooped onto his shoulder as Winky wailed and sobbed at the top of her lungs.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

### THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

Dumbledore stood up. He stared down at Barty Crouch for a moment with disgust on his face. Then he raised his wand and cast a spell around Barty Crouch, binding him tightly. He turned to Professor McGonagall. "Minerva, could I ask you to stand guard here while I take Harry upstairs?" "Of course," said Professor McGonagall. She looked slightly nauseous, as though she had just watched someone being tortured. Barty Crouch, her hand was quite steady. "Severus" — Dumbledore turned to Snape — "please tell Madam Pomfrey to come down here; we need to get Alastor Moody, Sirius Black, and Sirius Fudge, and bring him up to this office. He will undoubtedly want to question Crouch himself. Tell him I will be in." Snape nodded silently and swept out of the room. "Harry?" Dumbledore said gently. Harry got up and swayed again; the pain in his leg, which he had not noticed all the time he had been listening to Crouch, was shaking. Dumbledore gripped his arm and helped him out into the dark corridor. "I want you to come up to my office first, Harry," he said quietly as they headed up the passageway. "Sirius is waiting for you. He will be able to tell you what happened. Harry nodded. A kind of numbness and a sense of complete unreality were upon him, but he did not care; he was even more numb than he had felt since he had first touched the Triwizard Cup. He didn't want to have to examine the memories, fresh and unaltered, of Alastor Moody, inside the trunk. Wormtail, slumped on the ground, cradling his stump of an arm. Voldemort, rising from the shadows. He returned to his parents. . . . "Professor," Harry mumbled, "where are Mr. and Mrs. Diggle?" "They are with Professor Sprout," said Dumbledore. His voice, which had been so calm throughout the interrogation, was now stern. "Go to the head of Cedric's House, and know him best." They had reached the stone gargoyle. Dumbledore gave the password, it sprang aside, and he and Harry went up the stairs. Sirius was standing there. His face was white and gaunt as it had been when he had escaped Azkaban. In one swift movement, he took Harry by the arm and led him to a room. "Harry, are you all right? I knew it — I knew something like this — what happened?" His hands shook as he helped Harry into a chair in front of the desk. "What happened?" he asked more urgently.

Dumbledore began to tell Sirius everything Barty Crouch had said. Harry was only half listening. So tired every bone undisturbed, for hours and hours, until he fell asleep and didn't have to think or feel anymore.

There was a soft rush of wings. Fawkes the phoenix had left his perch, flown across the office, and landed on Harry's shoulder. "Lo, Fawkes," said Harry quietly. He stroked the phoenix's beautiful scarlet-and-gold plumage. Fawkes blinked peacefully.

Dumbledore stopped talking. He sat down opposite Harry, behind his desk. He was looking at Harry, who avoided his eyes. Harry relived everything.

"I need to know what happened after you touched the Portkey in the maze, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"We can leave that till morning, can't we, Dumbledore?" said Sirius harshly. He had put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry felt a rush of gratitude toward Sirius, but Dumbledore took no notice of Sirius's words. He leaned forward toward those blue eyes.

"If I thought I could help you," Dumbledore said gently, "by putting you into an enchanted sleep and allowing you to relive what happened tonight, I would do it. But I know better. Numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you finally wake up. I expect of you. I ask you to demonstrate your courage one more time. I ask you to tell us what happened."

The phoenix let out one soft, quavering note. It shivered in the air, and Harry felt as though a drop of hot liquid had fallen on his forehead, strengthening him.

He took a deep breath and began to tell them. As he spoke, visions of everything that had passed that night seemed to flood his mind. In that had revived Voldemort; he saw the Death Eaters Apparating between the graves around them; he saw Cedric's death. Once or twice, Sirius made a noise as though about to say something, his hand still tight on Harry's shoulder, but Dumbledore silenced him, because it was easier to keep going now he had started. It was even a relief; he felt almost as though something positive had come out of the bit of determination he had to keep talking, yet he sensed that once he had finished, he would feel better.

When Harry told of Wormtail piercing his arm with the dagger, however, Sirius let out a vehement exclamation and Dumbledore rose from around the desk and told Harry to stretch out his arm. Harry showed them both the place where his robes were torn. "He said my blood would make him stronger than if he'd used someone else's," Harry told Dumbledore. "He said the blood was his — he could touch me without hurting himself, he touched my face."

For a fleeting instant, Harry thought he saw a gleam of something like triumph in Dumbledore's eyes. But next second, when he returned to his seat behind the desk, he looked as old and weary as Harry had ever seen him.

"Very well," he said, sitting down again. "Voldemort has overcome that particular barrier. Harry, continue, please."

Harry went on; he explained how Voldemort had emerged from the cauldron, and told them all he could remember. Sirius untied him, returned his wand to him, and prepared to duel.

But when he reached the part where the golden beam of light had connected his and Voldemort's wands, he found himself at a loss. What had come out of Voldemort's wand were flooding into his mind. He could see Cedric emerging, see the old man, Barty Crouch. He was glad when Sirius broke the silence.

"The wands connected?" he said, looking from Harry to Dumbledore. "Why?"

Harry looked up at Dumbledore again, on whose face there was an arrested look.

"Prio-ri Incan-ta-tem," he muttered.

His eyes gazed into Harry's and it was almost as though an invisible beam of understanding shot between them.

"The Reverse Spell effect?" said Sirius sharply.

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "Harry's wand and Voldemort's wand share cores. Each of them contains a feather from Fawkes. He pointed at the scarlet-and-gold bird, perching peacefully on Harry's knee.

"My wand's feather came from Fawkes?" Harry said, amazed.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Mr. Ollivander wrote to tell me you had bought the second wand, the moment you left his shop."

"So what happens when a wand meets its brother?" said Sirius.

"They will not work properly against each other," said Dumbledore. "If, however, the owners of the wands force the wands to work together, the wands will force the other to regurgitate spells it has performed — in reverse. The most recent first . . . and then the next, and so on. He looked interrogatively at Harry, and Harry nodded.

"Which means," said Dumbledore slowly, his eyes upon Harry's face, "that some form of Cedric must have reappeared. Harry nodded again.

"Diggory came back to life?" said Sirius sharply.

"No spell can reawaken the dead," said Dumbledore heavily. "All that would have happened is a kind of reverse echo. . . . am I correct, Harry?"

"He spoke to me," Harry said. He was suddenly shaking again. "The . . . the ghost Cedric, or whatever he was, spoke."

"An echo," said Dumbledore, "which retained Cedric's appearance and character. I am guessing other such forms appear. . . ."

"An old man," Harry said, his throat still constricted. "Bertha Jorkins. And . . ."

"Your parents?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Yes," said Harry.

Sirius's grip on Harry's shoulder was now so tight it was painful.

"The last murders the wand performed," said Dumbledore, nodding. "In reverse order. More would have appeared, and then the echoes, these shadows . . . what did they do?"

Harry described how the figures that had emerged from the wand had prowled the edges of the golden web, how Voldemort

old him what to do, how Cedric's had made its final request.

At this point, Harry found he could not continue. He looked around at Sirius and saw that he had his face in his hand. Harry suddenly became aware that Fawkes had left his knee. The phoenix had fluttered to the floor. It was resting its head on its wings, and its tears were falling from its eyes onto the wound left by the spider. The pain vanished. The skin mended. His leg was re-

"I will say it again," said Dumbledore as the phoenix rose into the air and resettled itself upon the perch beside the door. "I expect of you tonight, Harry. You have shown bravery equal to those who died fighting Voldemort at the height of his power. You are as brave as yourself equal to it — and you have now given us all that we have a right to expect. You will come with me to the hospital wing. Sleeping Potion, and some peace . . . Sirius, would you like to stay with him?"

Sirius nodded and stood up. He transformed back into the great black dog and walked with Harry and Dumbledore down the hospital wing.

When Dumbledore pushed open the door, Harry saw Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermione grouped around a harrowing sight of Harry and what had happened to him. All of them whipped around as Harry, Dumbledore, and the black dog entered the room.

"Harry! Oh Harry!"

She started to hurry toward him, but Dumbledore moved between them.

"Molly," he said, holding up a hand, "please listen to me for a moment. Harry has been through a terrible ordeal tonight. He is tired, and in need of sleep, and peace, and quiet. If he would like you all to stay with him," he added, looking around at Ron, Hermione, and Sirius, "I will leave you until he is ready to answer, and certainly not this evening."

Mrs. Weasley nodded. She was very white. She rounded on Ron, Hermione, and Bill as though they were being noisy.

"Headmaster," said Madam Pomfrey, staring at the great black dog that was Sirius, "may I ask what —?"

"This dog will be remaining with Harry for a while," said Dumbledore simply. "I assure you, he is extremely well trained and obedient."

Harry felt an inexpressible sense of gratitude to Dumbledore for asking the others not to question him. It wasn't as though he wanted to relive it all over again, the idea of reliving it one more time, was more than he could stand.

"I will be back to see you as soon as I have met with Fudge, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I would like you to remain here tonight."

As Madam Pomfrey led Harry to a nearby bed, he caught sight of the real Moody lying motionless in a bed at the far end of the ward, his head on his bedside table.

"Is he okay?" Harry asked.

"He'll be fine," said Madam Pomfrey, giving Harry some pajamas and pulling screens around him. He took off his robes. Mrs. Weasley, and the black dog came around the screen and settled themselves in chairs on either side of him. Ron and Hermione sat on the bed with him.

"I'm all right," he told them. "Just tired."

Mrs. Weasley's eyes filled with tears as she smoothed his bedcovers unnecessarily.

Madam Pomfrey, who had bustled off to her office, returned holding a small bottle of some purple potion and a goblet.

"You'll need to drink all of this, Harry," she said. "It's a potion for dreamless sleep."

Harry took the goblet and drank a few mouthfuls. He felt himself becoming drowsy at once. Everything around him blurred. He saw his friends at him in a friendly way through the screen around his bed; his body felt as though it was sinking deeper into the warmth of the bed. Before he could say another word, his exhaustion had carried him off to sleep.

Harry woke up, so warm, so very sleepy, that he didn't open his eyes, wanting to drop off again. The room was still dark. He realized that he couldn't have been asleep very long.

Then he heard whispering around him.

"They'll wake him if they don't shut up!"

"What are they shouting about? Nothing else can have happened, can it?"

Harry opened his eyes blearily. Someone had removed his glasses. He could see the fuzzy outlines of Mrs. Weasley and Sirius.

"That's Fudge's voice," she whispered. "And that's Minerva McGonagall's, isn't it? But what are they arguing about?"

Now Harry could hear them too: people shouting and running toward the hospital wing.

"Regrettable, but all the same, Minerva —" Cornelius Fudge was saying loudly.

"You should never have brought it inside the castle!" yelled Professor McGonagall. "When Dumbledore finds out —"

Harry heard the hospital doors burst open. Unnoticed by any of the people around his bed, all of whom were staring at the commotion, he slipped on his glasses back on.

Fudge came striding up the ward. Professors McGonagall and Snape were at his heels.

"Where's Dumbledore?" Fudge demanded of Mrs. Weasley.

"He's not here," said Mrs. Weasley angrily. "This is a hospital wing, Minister, don't you think you'd do better to —"

But the door opened, and Dumbledore came sweeping up the ward.

"What has happened?" said Dumbledore sharply, looking from Fudge to Professor McGonagall. "Why are you disturbing me? I am on guard over Barty Crouch —"

"There is no need to stand guard over him anymore, Dumbledore!" she shrieked. "The Minister has seen to that!"

Harry had never seen Professor McGonagall lose control like this. There were angry blotches of color in her cheeks, and her voice was shrill.

"When we told Mr. Fudge that we had caught the Death Eater responsible for tonight's events," said Snape, in a low voice, "he insisted on summoning a dementor to accompany him into the castle. He brought it up to the office where Barty Crouch was kept."

"I told him you would not agree, Dumbledore!" Professor McGonagall fumed. "I told him you would never allow dementors in the castle."

"My dear woman!" roared Fudge, who likewise looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him, "as Minister of Magic, it is my duty to interview a possibly dangerous —"

But Professor McGonagall's voice drowned Fudge's.

"The moment that — that thing entered the room," she screamed, pointing at Fudge, trembling all over, "it swooped at Harry. Harry felt a chill in his stomach as Professor McGonagall struggled to find words to describe what had happened. He must have done. It had administered its fatal Kiss to Barty Crouch. It had sucked his soul out through his mouth. He —"

"By all accounts, he is no loss!" blustered Fudge. "It seems he has been responsible for several deaths!"

"But he cannot now give testimony, Cornelius," said Dumbledore. He was staring hard at Fudge, as though seeing him for the first time. "He killed those people."

"Why he killed them? Well, that's no mystery, is it?" blustered Fudge. "He was a raving lunatic! From what Minerva and I heard all on You-Know-Who's instructions!"

"Lord Voldemort was giving him instructions, Cornelius," Dumbledore said. "Those people's deaths were mere by-products. He succeeded. Voldemort has been restored to his body."

Fudge looked as though someone had just swung a heavy weight into his face. Dazed and blinking, he stared back at Dumbledore. He began to sputter, still goggling at Dumbledore.

"You-Know-Who . . . returned? Preposterous. Come now, Dumbledore . . ."

"As Minerva and Severus have doubtless told you," said Dumbledore, "we heard Barty Crouch confess. Under the influence of the Imperius Curse, and how Voldemort — learning of his continued existence from Bertha Jorkins — went to free him from his father's prison. It was his father's help that helped Voldemort to return."

"See here, Dumbledore," said Fudge, and Harry was astonished to see a slight smile dawning on his face, "you — you are now . . . certainly, Crouch may have believed himself to be acting upon You-Know-Who's orders — but to take the word of a madman? No. When Harry touched the Triwizard Cup tonight, he was transported straight to Voldemort," said Dumbledore steadily. "I will tell you if you will step up to my office."

Dumbledore glanced around at Harry and saw that he was awake, but shook his head and said, "I am afraid I cannot do that. Fudge's curious smile lingered. He too glanced at Harry, then looked back at Dumbledore, and said, "You are — er —"

There was a moment's silence, which was broken by Sirius growling. His hackles were raised, and he was baring his teeth.

"Certainly, I believe Harry," said Dumbledore. His eyes were blazing now. "I heard Crouch's confession, and I heard Harry's. Both up; the two stories make sense, they explain everything that has happened since Bertha Jorkins disappeared last summer. Fudge still had that strange smile on his face. Once again, he glanced at Harry before answering.

"You are prepared to believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, on the word of a lunatic murderer, and a boy who has just been rescued? Fudge shot Harry another look, and Harry suddenly understood.

"You've been reading Rita Skeeter, Mr. Fudge," he said quietly.

Ron, Hermione, Mrs. Weasley, and Bill all jumped. None of them had realized that Harry was awake.

Fudge reddened slightly, but a defiant and obstinate look came over his face.

"And if I have?" he said, looking at Dumbledore. "If I have discovered that you've been keeping certain facts about the war over the place —"

"I assume that you are referring to the pains Harry has been experiencing in his scar?" said Dumbledore coolly.

"You admit that he has been having these pains, then?" said Fudge quickly. "Headaches? Nightmares? Possibly — hardly —"

"Listen to me, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, taking a step toward Fudge, and once again, he seemed to radiate that infuriating calm. "Stunned young Crouch. "Harry is as sane as you or I. That scar upon his forehead has not addled his brains. I believe in a particularly murderous."

Fudge had taken half a step back from Dumbledore, but he looked no less stubborn.

"You'll forgive me, Dumbledore, but I've never heard of a curse scar acting as an alarm bell before. . . ."

"Look, I saw Voldemort come back!" Harry shouted. He tried to get out of bed again, but Mrs. Weasley forced him back. "Foy —"

Snape made a sudden movement, but as Harry looked at him, Snape's eyes flew back to Fudge.

"Malfoy was cleared!" said Fudge, visibly affronted. "A very old family — donations to excellent causes —"

"Macnair!" Harry continued.

"Also cleared! Now working for the Ministry!"

"Avery — Nott — Crabbe — Goyle —"

"You are merely repeating the names of those who were acquitted of being Death Eaters thirteen years ago!" said Fudge. "The trials! For heaven's sake, Dumbledore — the boy was full of some crackpot story at the end of last year too — his tale of a boy who can talk to snakes, Dumbledore, and you still think he's trustworthy?"

"You fool!" Professor McGonagall cried. "Cedric Diggory! Mr. Crouch! These deaths were not the random work of a lunatic. I see no evidence to the contrary!" shouted Fudge, now matching her anger, his face purpling. "It seems to me that you are doing everything we have worked for these last thirteen years!"

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had always thought of Fudge as a kindly figure, a little blustering, a little angry wizard stood before him, refusing, point-blank, to accept the prospect of disruption in his comfortable and orderly world.

"Voldemort has returned," Dumbledore repeated. "If you accept that fact straightaway, Fudge, and take the necessary and most essential step is to remove Azkaban from the control of the dementors —"





Mrs. Weasley screamed and leapt back from the bed.

"Sirius Black!" she shrieked, pointing at him.

"Mum, shut up!" Ron yelled. "It's okay!"

Snape had not yelled or jumped backward, but the look on his face was one of mingled fury and horror.

"Him!" he snarled, staring at Sirius, whose face showed equal dislike. "What is he doing here?"

"He is here at my invitation," said Dumbledore, looking between them, "as are you, Severus. I trust you both. It is time to move."

Harry thought Dumbledore was asking for a near miracle. Sirius and Snape were eyeing each other with the utmost suspicion.

"I will settle, in the short term," said Dumbledore, with a bite of impatience in his voice, "for a lack of open hostility. Your situation is short, and unless the few of us who know the truth stand united, there is no hope for any of us."

Very slowly — but still glaring at each other as though each wished the other nothing but ill — Sirius and Snape moved forward.

"That will do to be going on with," said Dumbledore, stepping between them once more. "Now I have work for each of you. Sirius, I need you to set off at once. You are to alert Remus Lupin, Arabella Figg, Mundungus Fletcher — the old crowd."

"But —" said Harry.

He wanted Sirius to stay. He did not want to have to say good-bye again so quickly.

"You'll see me very soon, Harry," said Sirius, turning to him. "I promise you. But I must do what I can, you understand?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah . . . of course I do."

Sirius grasped his hand briefly, nodded to Dumbledore, transformed again into the black dog, and ran the length of the corridor as fast as he could.

"Severus," said Dumbledore, turning to Snape, "you know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready . . . if you are prepared."

"I am," said Snape.

He looked slightly paler than usual, and his cold, black eyes glittered strangely.

"Then good luck," said Dumbledore, and he watched, with a trace of apprehension on his face, as Snape swept wordlessly from the room.

It was several minutes before Dumbledore spoke again.

"I must go downstairs," he said finally. "I must see the Diggorys. Harry — take the rest of your potion. I will see all of you again."

Harry slumped back against his pillows as Dumbledore disappeared. Hermione, Ron, and Mrs. Weasley were all looking at him.

"You've got to take the rest of your potion, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said at last. Her hand nudged the sack of gold on his bed.

"You have a good long sleep. Try and think about something else for a while . . . think about what you're going to buy for Christmas."

"I don't want that gold," said Harry in an expressionless voice. "You have it. Anyone can have it. I shouldn't have won it."

The thing against which he had been fighting on and off ever since he had come out of the maze was threatening to break through the inner corners of his eyes. He blinked and stared up at the ceiling.

"It wasn't your fault, Harry," Mrs. Weasley whispered.

"I told him to take the Cup with me," said Harry.

Now the burning feeling was in his throat too. He wished Ron would look away.

Mrs. Weasley set the potion down on the bedside cabinet, bent down, and put her arms around Harry. He had no memory of everything he had seen that night seemed to fall in upon him as Mrs. Weasley held him to her. His mother's face was all that he could see.

It all started spinning in his head until he could hardly bear it, until he was screwing up his face against the howl of misery.

There was a loud slamming noise, and Mrs. Weasley and Harry broke apart. Hermione was standing by the window.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"Your potion, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley quickly, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand.

Harry drank it in one gulp. The effect was instantaneous. Heavy, irresistible waves of dreamless sleep broke over him.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### THE BEGINNING

When he looked back, even a month later, Harry found he had only scattered memories of the next few days. It was the few memories he did have were very painful. The worst, perhaps, was the meeting with the Diggorys that took place the following day.

They did not blame him for what had happened; on the contrary, both thanked him for returning Cedric's body to them. His grief seemed to be beyond tears.

"He suffered very little then," she said, when Harry had told her how Cedric had died. "And after all, Amos . . . he died a free man."

When they got to their feet, she looked down at Harry and said, "You look after yourself, now."

Harry seized the sack of gold on the bedside table.

"You take this," he muttered to her. "It should've been Cedric's, he got there first, you take it —"

But she backed away from him.

"Oh no, it's yours, dear, I couldn't . . . you keep it."

Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower the following evening. From what Hermione and Ron told him, Dumbledore had said that they leave Harry alone, that nobody ask him questions or badger him to tell the story of what had happened in the maze, avoiding his eyes. Some whispered behind their hands as he passed. He guessed that many of them had believed what he was. Perhaps they were formulating their own theories about how Cedric had died. He found he didn't care very much.

re talking about other things, or else letting him sit in silence while they played chess. He felt as though all three of them were waiting for some sign, some word, of what was going on outside Hogwarts — and that it was something for certain. The only time they touched upon the subject was when Ron told Harry about a meeting Mrs. Weasley had with the Durmstrang headmaster. "She went to ask him if you could come straight to us this summer," he said. "But he wants you to go back to the Durmstrang school." "Why?" said Harry.

"She said Dumbledore's got his reasons," said Ron, shaking his head darkly. "I suppose we've got to trust him, haven't we?" The only person apart from Ron and Hermione that Harry felt able to talk to was Hagrid. As there was no longer a Durmstrang school, they used the one on Thursday afternoon to go down and visit Hagrid in his cabin. It was a bright and sunny day; Hagrid was wagging his tail madly.

"Who's that?" called Hagrid, coming to the door. "Harry!"

He strode out to meet them, pulled Harry into a one-armed hug, ruffled his hair, and said, "Good ter see yeh, mate. Come in." They saw two bucket-size cups and saucers on the wooden table in front of the fireplace when they entered Hagrid's cabin.

"Bin havin' a cuppa with Olympe," Hagrid said. "She's jus' left."

"Who?" said Ron curiously.

"Madame Maxime, o' course!" said Hagrid.

"You two made up, have you?" said Ron.

"Dunno what yeh're talkin' about," said Hagrid airily, fetching more cups from the dresser. When he had made tea and sat in his chair and surveyed Harry closely through his beetle-black eyes.

"You all right?" he said gruffly.

"Yeah," said Harry.

"No, yeh're not," said Hagrid. "'Course yeh're not. But yeh will be."

Harry said nothing.

"Knew he was goin' ter come back," said Hagrid, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up at him, shocked. "Known it was bound ter happen. Well, now it has, an' we'll jus' have ter get on with it. We'll fight. Might be able ter stop him before he gets a chance to see Dumbledore. 'S long as we've got him, I'm not too worried."

Hagrid raised his bushy eyebrows at the disbelieving expressions on their faces.

"No good sittin' worryin' about it," he said. "What's comin' will come, an' we'll meet it when it does. Dumbledore told me to tell you that." Hagrid's chest swelled as he looked at Harry.

"Yeh did as much as yer father would've done, an' I can't give yeh no higher praise than that."

Harry smiled back at him. It was the first time he'd smiled in days. "What's Dumbledore asked you to do, Hagrid?" he asked. "He said to meet him — that night."

"Got a little job fer me over the summer," said Hagrid. "Secret, though. I'm not s'posed ter talk about it, no, not even to you. I'll be n' with me. I think she will. Think I got her persuaded."

"Is it to do with Voldemort?"

Hagrid flinched at the sound of the name.

"Might be," he said evasively. "Now . . . who'd like ter come an' visit the las' skrewt with me? I was jokin' — jokin'!" he said. "I was jokin'."

It was with a heavy heart that Harry packed his trunk up in the dormitory on the night before his return to Privet Drive. He had no time for celebration, when the winner of the Inter-House Championship would be announced. He had avoided being in the Great Hall, preferring to eat when it was nearly empty to avoid the stares of his fellow students.

When he, Ron, and Hermione entered the Hall, they saw at once that the usual decorations were missing. The Great Hall was in mourning for the Leaving Feast. Tonight, however, there were black drapes on the wall behind the teachers' table. Harry knew instantly that the real Mad-Eye Moody was at the staff table now, his wooden leg and his magical eye back in place. He was extremely nervous; Moody's fear of attack was bound to have been increased by his ten-month imprisonment in his own trunk. He was down with the other Gryffindors, where Karkaroff was now, and whether Voldemort had caught up with him.

Madame Maxime was still there. She was sitting next to Hagrid. They were talking quietly together. Further along the table, Harry lingered on Harry for a moment as Harry looked at him. His expression was difficult to read. He looked as sour and angry as he had looked away.

What was it that Snape had done on Dumbledore's orders, the night that Voldemort had returned? And why . . . why? He had been their spy, Dumbledore had said so in the Pensieve. Snape had turned spy against Voldemort, "at great personal risk," he had said. "He had contact with the Death Eaters, perhaps? Pretended that he had never really gone over to Dumbledore, that he had stayed loyal to the school?" Harry's musings were ended by Professor Dumbledore, who stood up at the staff table. The Great Hall, which in any case had been very quiet.

"The end," said Dumbledore, looking around at them all, "of another year."

He paused, and his eyes fell upon the Hufflepuff table. There had been the most subdued table before he had gotten up. It was now empty in the Hall.

"There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight," said Dumbledore, "but I must first acknowledge the loss of Cedric Diggory to the Hufflepuffs, "enjoying our feast with us. I would like you all, please, to stand, and raise your glasses, to Cedric Diggory." They did it, all of them; the benches scraped as everyone in the Hall stood, and raised their goblets, and echoed, in one voice, "To Cedric Diggory." Harry caught a glimpse of Cho through the crowd. There were tears pouring silently down her face. He looked down at his own glass. "Cedric was a person who exemplified many of the qualities that distinguish Hufflepuff House," Dumbledore continued.

lay. His death has affected you all, whether you knew him well or not. I think that you have the right, therefore, to know the truth. Harry raised his head and stared at Dumbledore.

"Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort."

A panicked whisper swept the Great Hall. People were staring at Dumbledore in disbelief, in horror. He looked perfectly calm. "The Ministry of Magic," Dumbledore continued, "does not wish me to tell you this. It is possible that some of your parents may not believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, or because they think I should not tell you so, young as you are, or because they are unable to believe the truth, or because they are afraid to lie, and that any attempt to pretend that Cedric died as the result of an accident, or some sort of blunder of his, would be a lie. Stunned and frightened, every face in the Hall was turned toward Dumbledore now . . . or almost every face. Over at the end, where Crabbe and Goyle. Harry felt a hot, sick swoop of anger in his stomach. He forced himself to look back at Dumbledore. "There is somebody else who must be mentioned in connection with Cedric's death," Dumbledore went on. "I am talking about the Triwizard Tournament. A kind of ripple crossed the Great Hall as a few heads turned in Harry's direction before flicking back to face Dumbledore. "Harry Potter managed to escape Lord Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "He risked his own life to return Cedric's body to his family. A few wizards have ever shown in facing Lord Voldemort, and for this, I honor him."

Dumbledore turned gravely to Harry and raised his goblet once more. Nearly everyone in the Great Hall followed suit. But through a gap in the standing figures, Harry saw that Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and many of the other Slytherins were looking at him. Dumbledore, who after all possessed no magical eye, did not see them.

When everyone had once again resumed their seats, Dumbledore continued, "The Triwizard Tournament's aim was to bring peace to the wizarding world — of Lord Voldemort's return — such ties are more important than ever before."

Dumbledore looked from Madame Maxime and Hagrid, to Fleur Delacour and her fellow Beauxbatons students, to the Slytherins. He looked wary, almost frightened, as though he expected Dumbledore to say something harsh.

"Every guest in this Hall," said Dumbledore, and his eyes lingered upon the Durmstrang students, "will be welcomed here once again — in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. But we are strong. We are great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are no barrier. We are all one. We are all wizards. Our hearts are open."

"It is my belief — and never have I so hoped that I am mistaken — that we are all facing dark and difficult times. Some of our families have been torn asunder. A week ago, a student was taken from our midst. Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, choose what is right, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory."

Harry's trunk was packed; Hedwig was back in her cage on top of it. He, Ron, and Hermione were waiting in the crowd outside the castle gates that would take them back to Hogsmeade station. It was another beautiful summer's day. He supposed that Privet Drive would be there that evening. The thought gave him no pleasure at all.

"Arry!"

He looked around. Fleur Delacour was hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Beyond her, far across the grounds, the giant horses were being led into their harness. The Beauxbatons carriage was about to take off.

"We will see each other again, I hope," said Fleur as she reached him, holding out her hand. "I am hoping to get a job 'ere."

"It's very good already," said Ron in a strangled sort of voice. Fleur smiled at him; Hermione scowled.

"Good-bye, 'Arry," said Fleur, turning to go. "It 'az been a pleasure meeting you!"

Harry's spirits couldn't help but lift slightly as he watched Fleur hurry back across the lawns to Madame Maxime, her head bowed.

"Wonder how the Durmstrang students are getting back," said Ron. "D'you reckon they can steer that ship without Krum?"

"Karkaroff did not steer," said a gruff voice. "He stayed in his cabin and let us do the work."

Krum had come to say good-bye to Hermione.

"Could I have a word?" he asked her.

"Oh . . . yes . . . all right," said Hermione, looking slightly flustered, and following Krum through the crowd and out of the castle grounds.

"You'd better hurry up!" Ron called loudly after her. "The carriages'll be here in a minute!"

He let Harry keep a watch for the carriages, however, and spent the next few minutes craning his neck over the crowd. The carriages came quite soon. Ron stared at Hermione, but her face was quite impassive.

"I liked Diggory," said Krum abruptly to Harry. "He was always polite to me. Always. Even though I was from Durmstrang."

"Have you got a new headmaster yet?" said Harry.

Krum shrugged. He held out his hand as Fleur had done, shook Harry's hand, and then Ron's. Ron looked as though he was about to start walking away when Ron burst out, "Can I have your autograph?"

Hermione turned away, smiling at the horseless carriages that were now trundling toward them up the drive, as Krum and Ron.

The weather could not have been more different on the journey back to King's Cross than it had been on their way to school. The sky was blue. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had managed to get a compartment to themselves. Pigwidgeon was once again hiding under her wing, and Crookshanks was curled up in a spare seat like a large, furry ginger cushion. They had all week as the train sped them southward. Harry felt as though Dumbledore's speech at the Leaving Feast had happened now. They broke off their conversation about what action Dumbledore might be taking, even now, to stop Voldemort. When Hermione returned from the trolley and put her money back into her schoolbag, she dislodged a copy of the Daily Prophet. He was unsure whether he really wanted to know what it might say, but Hermione, seeing him looking at it, said calmly, "The Prophet says you won the tournament. Congratulations. I've been checking every day. Just a small piece the day after the third task saying you won the tournament."

If you ask me, Fudge is forcing them to keep quiet."

"He'll never keep Rita quiet," said Harry. "Not on a story like this."

"Oh, Rita hasn't written anything at all since the third task," said Hermione in an oddly constrained voice. "As a matter of fact, a Skeeter isn't going to be writing anything at all for a while. Not unless she wants me to spill the beans on her."

"What are you talking about?" said Ron.

"I found out how she was listening in on private conversations when she wasn't supposed to be coming onto the grounds," said Harry. "Harry had the impression that Hermione had been dying to tell them this for days, but that she had restrained herself."

"How was she doing it?" said Harry at once.

"How did you find out?" said Ron, staring at her.

"Well, it was you, really, who gave me the idea, Harry," she said.

"Did I?" said Harry, perplexed. "How?"

"Bugging," said Hermione happily.

"But you said they didn't work —"

"Oh not electronic bugs," said Hermione. "No, you see . . . Rita Skeeter" — Hermione's voice trembled with quiet triumph. "Hermione pulled a small sealed glass jar out of her bag."

"— into a beetle."

"You're kidding," said Ron. "You haven't . . . she's not . . ."

"Oh yes she is," said Hermione happily, brandishing the jar at them.

Inside were a few twigs and leaves and one large, fat beetle.

"That's never — you're kidding —" Ron whispered, lifting the jar to his eyes.

"No, I'm not," said Hermione, beaming. "I caught her on the windowsill in the hospital wing. Look very closely, and you'll see the same foul glasses she wears."

Harry looked and saw that she was quite right. He also remembered something.

"There was a beetle on the statue the night we heard Hagrid telling Madame Maxime about his mum!"

"Exactly," said Hermione. "And Viktor pulled a beetle out of my hair after we'd had our conversation by the lake. And it was in the Divination class the day your scar hurt. She's been buzzing around for stories all year."

"When we saw Malfoy under that tree . . ." said Ron slowly.

"He was talking to her, in his hand," said Hermione. "He knew, of course. That's how she's been getting all those nice stories — she was doing something illegal, as long as they were giving her horrible stuff about us and Hagrid."

Hermione took the glass jar back from Ron and smiled at the beetle, which buzzed angrily against the glass.

"I've told her I'll let her out when we get back to London," said Hermione. "I've put an Unbreakable Charm on the jar, so she can't escape her quill to herself for a whole year. See if she can't break the habit of writing horrible lies about people."

Smiling serenely, Hermione placed the beetle back inside her schoolbag.

The door of the compartment slid open.

"Very clever, Granger," said Draco Malfoy.

Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him. All three of them looked more pleased with themselves, more arrogant.

"So," said Malfoy slowly, advancing slightly into the compartment and looking slowly around at them, a smirk quivering on his lips. "Dumbledore's favorite boy again. Big deal."

His smirk widened. Crabbe and Goyle leered.

"Trying not to think about it, are we?" said Malfoy softly, looking around at all three of them. "Trying to pretend it hasn't happened?"

"Get out," said Harry.

He had not been this close to Malfoy since he had watched him muttering to Crabbe and Goyle during Dumbledore's funeral. "His hand gripped his wand under his robes."

"You've picked the losing side, Potter! I warned you! I told you you ought to choose your company more carefully, remember? You not to hang around with riffraff like this!" He jerked his head at Ron and Hermione. "Too late now, Potter! They'll be the first to get the guggle-lovers first! Well — second — Diggory was the first!"

It was as though someone had exploded a box of fireworks within the compartment. Blinded by the blaze of the spell, Harry blinked and looked down at the floor.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were all lying unconscious in the doorway. He, Ron, and Hermione were on their feet, all three of them having done so.

"Thought we'd see what those three were up to," said Fred matter-of-factly, stepping onto Goyle and into the compartment. "He tried to tread on Malfoy as he followed Fred inside."

"Interesting effect," said George, looking down at Crabbe. "Who used the Furnunculus Curse?"

"Me," said Harry.

"Odd," said George lightly. "I used Jelly-Legs. Looks as though those two shouldn't be mixed. He seems to have sprouted legs. In here, they don't add much to the decor."

Ron, Harry, and George kicked, rolled, and pushed the unconscious Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle — each of whom looked like they had been hit — out into the corridor, then came back into the compartment and rolled the door shut.

"Exploding Snap, anyone?" said Fred, pulling out a pack of cards.

They were halfway through their fifth game when Harry decided to ask them.

"You going to tell us, then?" he said to George. "Who you were blackmailing?"

"Oh," said George darkly. "That."

"It doesn't matter," said Fred, shaking his head impatiently. "It wasn't anything important. Not now, anyway."

"We've given up," said George, shrugging.

But Harry, Ron, and Hermione kept on asking, and finally, Fred said, "All right, all right, if you really want to know . . ."

"Bagman?" said Harry sharply. "Are you saying he was involved in —"

"Nah," said George gloomily. "Nothing like that. Stupid git. He wouldn't have the brains."

"Well, what, then?" said Ron.

Fred hesitated, then said, "You remember that bet we had with him at the Quidditch World Cup? About how Ireland v

"Yeah," said Harry and Ron slowly.

"Well, the git paid us in leprechaun gold he'd caught from the Irish mascots."

"So?"

"So," said Fred impatiently, "it vanished, didn't it? By next morning, it had gone!"

"But — it must've been an accident, mustn't it?" said Hermione.

George laughed very bitterly.

"Yeah, that's what we thought, at first. We thought if we just wrote to him, and told him he'd made a mistake, he'd come to talk to him about it at Hogwarts, but he was always making some excuse to get away from us."

"In the end, he turned pretty nasty," said Fred. "Told us we were too young to gamble, and he wasn't giving us anything."

"So we asked for our money back," said George, glowering.

"He didn't refuse!" gasped Hermione.

"Right in one," said Fred.

"But that was all your savings!" said Ron.

"Tell me about it," said George. "Course, we found out what was going on in the end. Lee Jordan's dad had had a bit of trouble with the goblins. Borrowed loads of gold off them. A gang of them cornered him in the woods after the World Cup to cover all his debts. They followed him all the way to Hogwarts to keep an eye on him. He's lost everything gambling. The idiot tried to pay the goblins back?"

"How?" said Harry.

"He put a bet on you, mate," said Fred. "Put a big bet on you to win the tournament. Bet against the goblins."

"So that's why he kept trying to help me win!" said Harry. "Well — I did win, didn't I? So he can pay you your gold!"

"Nope," said George, shaking his head. "The goblins play as dirty as him. They say you drew with Diggory, and Bagman did run for it right after the third task."

George sighed deeply and started dealing out the cards again.

The rest of the journey passed pleasantly enough; Harry wished it could have gone on all summer, in fact, and that he had not taken the hard way that year, time will not slow down when something unpleasant lies ahead, and all too soon, the Hogwarts Express's usual confusion and noise filled the corridors as the students began to disembark. Ron and Hermione struggled out first, stayed put.

"Fred — George — wait a moment."

The twins turned. Harry pulled open his trunk and drew out his Triwizard winnings.

"Take it," he said, and he thrust the sack into George's hands.

"What?" said Fred, looking flabbergasted.

"Take it," Harry repeated firmly. "I don't want it."

"You're mental," said George, trying to push it back at Harry.

"No, I'm not," said Harry. "You take it, and get inventing. It's for the joke shop."

"He is mental," Fred said in an almost awed voice.

"Listen," said Harry firmly. "If you don't take it, I'm throwing it down the drain. I don't want it and I don't need it. But I want your laughs. I've got a feeling we're going to need them more than usual before long."

"Harry," said George weakly, weighing the money bag in his hands, "there's got to be a thousand Galleons in here."

"Yeah," said Harry, grinning. "Think how many Canary Creams that is."

The twins stared at him.

"Just don't tell your mum where you got it . . . although she might not be so keen for you to join the Ministry anymore."

"Harry," Fred began, but Harry pulled out his wand.

"Look," he said flatly, "take it, or I'll hex you. I know some good ones now. Just do me one favor, okay? Buy Ron some. He left the compartment before they could say another word, stepping over Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were still asleep. Uncle Vernon was waiting beyond the barrier. Mrs. Weasley was close by him. She hugged Harry very tightly when she came to us later in the summer. Keep in touch, Harry."

"See you, Harry," said Ron, clapping him on the back.

"Bye, Harry!" said Hermione, and she did something she had never done before, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Harry — thanks," George muttered, while Fred nodded fervently at his side.

Harry winked at them, turned to Uncle Vernon, and followed him silently from the station. There was no point worrying about the car.

As Hagrid had said, what would come, would come . . . and he would have to meet it when it did.