

CHAPTER ONE

THE DARK LORD ASCENDING

The two men appeared out of nowhere, a few yards apart in the narrow, moonlit lane. For a second they stood quite h other, they stowed their wands beneath their cloaks and started walking briskly in the same direction.

"News?" asked the taller of the two.

"The best," replied Severus Snape.

The lane was bordered on the left by wild, low-growing brambles, on the right by a high, neatly manicured hedge. The "Thought I might be late," said Yaxley, his blunt features sliding in and out of sight as the branches of overhanging trees obstructed. But I hope he will be satisfied. You sound confident that your reception will be good?"

Snape nodded, but did not elaborate. They turned right, into a wide driveway that led off the lane. The high hedge cut off an impressive wrought-iron gates barring the men's way. Neither of them broke step: In silence both raised their left hands as the dark metal were smoke.

The yew hedges muffled the sound of the men's footsteps. There was a rustle somewhere to their right: Yaxley drew his wand. The source of the noise proved to be nothing more than a pure-white peacock, strutting majestically along the top of the hedge. "He always did himself well, Lucius. Peacocks . . ." Yaxley thrust his wand back under his cloak with a snort.

A handsome manor house grew out of the darkness at the end of the straight drive, lights glinting in the diamond-patterned glass. A fountain was playing. Gravel crackled beneath their feet as Snape and Yaxley sped toward the front door, which stood ajar.

The hallway was large, dimly lit, and sumptuously decorated, with a magnificent carpet covering most of the stone floor. Snape and Yaxley as they strode past. The two men halted at a heavy wooden door leading into the next room, hesitating.

The drawing room was full of silent people, sitting at a long and ornate table. The room's usual furniture had been pushed back, and a roaring fire beneath a handsome marble mantelpiece surmounted by a gilded mirror. Snape and Yaxley lingered for a moment. Of light, they were drawn upward to the strangest feature of the scene: an apparently unconscious human figure hanging from an invisible rope, and reflected in the mirror and in the bare, polished surface of the table below. None of the people seemed to notice. Yaxley, Snape, said a high, clear voice from the head of the table. "You are very nearly late."

The speaker was seated directly in front of the fireplace, so that it was difficult, at first, for the new arrivals to make out his face. It shone through the gloom, hairless, snakelike, with slits for nostrils and gleaming red eyes whose pupils were like black holes.

"Severus, here," said Voldemort, indicating the seat on his immediate right. "Yaxley — beside Dolohov."

The two men took their allotted places. Most of the eyes around the table followed Snape, and it was to him that Voldemort first spoke. "So?"

"My Lord, the Order of the Phoenix intends to move Harry Potter from his current place of safety on Saturday next, and the interest around the table sharpened palpably: Some stiffened, others fidgeted, all gazing at Snape and Voldemort. "Saturday . . . at nightfall," repeated Voldemort. His red eyes fastened upon Snape's black ones with such intensity that they themselves would be scorched by the ferocity of the gaze. Snape, however, looked calmly back into Voldemort's face, into something like a smile.

"Good. Very good. And this information comes —"

"— from the source we discussed," said Snape.

"My Lord."

Yaxley had leaned forward to look down the long table at Voldemort and Snape. All faces turned to him.

"My Lord, I have heard differently."

Yaxley waited, but Voldemort did not speak, so he went on, "Dawlish, the Auror, let slip that Potter will not be moved."

Snape was smiling.

"My source told me that there are plans to lay a false trail; this must be it. No doubt a Confundus Charm has been placed on the boy to be susceptible."

"I assure you, my Lord, Dawlish seemed quite certain," said Yaxley.

"If he has been Confunded, naturally he is certain," said Snape. "I assure you, Yaxley, the Auror Office will play no further tricks that we have infiltrated the Ministry."

"The Order's got one thing right, then, eh?" said a squat man sitting a short distance from Yaxley; he gave a wheezy grin. Voldemort did not laugh. His gaze had wandered upward to the body revolving slowly overhead, and he seemed to be waiting.

"My Lord," Yaxley went on, "Dawlish believes an entire party of Aurors will be used to transfer the boy —"

Voldemort held up a large white hand, and Yaxley subsided at once, watching resentfully as Voldemort turned back to the other members of the Order.

"Where are they going to hide the boy next?"

"At the home of one of the Order," said Snape. "The place, according to the source, has been given every protection that we can give it; there is little chance of taking him once he is there, my Lord, unless, of course, the Ministry has fallen before next Saturday. I can undo enough of the enchantments to break through the rest."

"Well, Yaxley?" Voldemort called down the table, the firelight glinting strangely in his red eyes. "Will the Ministry have any more to say?"

Once again, all heads turned. Yaxley squared his shoulders.

"My Lord, I have good news on that score. I have — with difficulty, and after great effort — succeeded in placing an Invisibility Cloak on that boy. Many of those sitting around Yaxley looked impressed; his neighbor, Dolohov, a man with a long, twisted face, clapped his hands. "It is a start," said Voldemort. "But Thicknesse is only one man. Scrimgeour must be surrounded by our people before we can take him on a long way."

"Yes — my Lord, that is true — but you know, as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Thicknesse has the support of all the Heads of all the other Ministry departments. It will, I think, be easy now that we have such a high-ranking official under our thumb. We will all work together to bring Scrimgeour down."

"As long as our friend Thicknesse is not discovered before he has converted the rest," said Voldemort. "At any rate, it will be done by Saturday. If we cannot touch the boy at his destination, then it must be done while he travels."

"We are at an advantage there, my Lord," said Yaxley, who seemed determined to receive some portion of approval. "If he attempts to Transport. If Potter Apparates or uses the Floo Network, we shall know immediately."

"He will not do either," said Snape. "The Order is eschewing any form of transport that is controlled or regulated by the Ministry. All the better," said Voldemort. "He will have to move in the open. Easier to take, by far."

Again, Voldemort looked up at the slowly revolving body as he went on, "I shall attend to the boy in person. There have been too many of them have been my own. That Potter lives is due more to my errors than to his triumphs."

The company around the table watched Voldemort apprehensively, each of them, by his or her expression, afraid that he might do something, but Voldemort, however, seemed to be speaking more to himself than to any of them, still addressing the unconscious body as he went on.

"I have been careless, and so have been thwarted by luck and chance, those wreckers of all but the best-laid plans. But I shall understand before. I must be the one to kill Harry Potter, and I shall be."

At these words, seemingly in response to them, a sudden wail sounded, a terrible, drawn-out cry of misery and pain. It seemed to issue from below their feet.

"Wormtail," said Voldemort, with no change in his quiet, thoughtful tone, and without removing his eyes from the revolving body, "is the prisoner quiet?"

"Yes, m-my Lord," gasped a small man halfway down the table, who had been sitting so low in his chair that it had appeared as if he were on his seat and scurried from the room, leaving nothing behind him but a curious gleam of silver.

"As I was saying," continued Voldemort, looking again at the tense faces of his followers, "I understand better now. I shall go to kill Potter."

The faces around him displayed nothing but shock; he might have announced that he wanted to borrow one of their wands. "No volunteers?" said Voldemort. "Let's see . . . Lucius, I see no reason for you to have a wand anymore."

Lucius Malfoy looked up. His skin appeared yellowish and waxy in the firelight, and his eyes were sunken and shadowed. "My Lord?"

"Your wand, Lucius. I require your wand."

"I . . ."

Malfoy glanced sideways at his wife. She was staring straight ahead, quite as pale as he was, her long blonde hair hanging down her back. He looked briefly on his wrist. At her touch, Malfoy put his hand into his robes, withdrew a wand, and passed it along to Voldemort. "Thank you, my Lord," he said, and then he turned away, looking down at the wand in his hand.

"What is it?"

"Elm, my Lord," whispered Malfoy.

"And the core?"

"Dragon — dragon heartstring."

"Good," said Voldemort. He drew out his own wand and compared the lengths. Lucius Malfoy made an involuntary movement. Voldemort took the wand in exchange for his own. The gesture was not missed by Voldemort, whose eyes widened maliciously.

"Give you my wand, Lucius? My wand?"

Some of the throng sniggered.

"I have given you your liberty, Lucius, is that not enough for you? But I have noticed that you and your family seem less at home that displeases you, Lucius?"

"Nothing — nothing, my Lord!"

"Such lies, Lucius . . ."

The soft voice seemed to hiss on even after the cruel mouth had stopped moving. One or two of the wizards barely moved, but a low sound could be heard sliding across the floor beneath the table.

The huge snake emerged to climb slowly up Voldemort's chair. It rose, seemingly endlessly, and came to rest across his lap. Its eyes, with their vertical slits for pupils, unblinking. Voldemort stroked the creature absently with long thin fingers, smiling.

"Why do the Malfoys look so unhappy with their lot? Is my return, my rise to power, not the very thing they professed to desire?"

"Of course, my Lord," said Lucius Malfoy. His hand shook as he wiped sweat from his upper lip. "We did desire it — we did. To Malfoy's left, his wife made an odd, stiff nod, her eyes averted from Voldemort and the snake. To his right, his son looked quickly at Voldemort and away again, terrified to make eye contact.

"My Lord," said a dark woman halfway down the table, her voice constricted with emotion, "it is an honor to have you here. She sat beside her sister, as unlike her in looks, with her dark hair and heavily lidded eyes, as she was in bearing and manner. She leaned toward Voldemort, for mere words could not demonstrate her longing for closeness.

"No higher pleasure," repeated Voldemort, his head tilted a little to one side as he considered Bellatrix. "That means Her face flooded with color; her eyes welled with tears of delight.

"My Lord knows I speak nothing but the truth!"

"No higher pleasure . . . even compared with the happy event that, I hear, has taken place in your family this week?" She stared at him, her lips parted, evidently confused.

"I don't know what you mean, my Lord."

"I'm talking about your niece, Bellatrix. And yours, Lucius and Narcissa. She has just married the werewolf, Remus Lupin. There was an eruption of jeering laughter from around the table. Many leaned forward to exchange gleeful looks; a few, in the disturbance, opened their mouths wide and hissed angrily, but the Death Eaters did not hear it, so jubilant were they. One who recently flushed with happiness, had turned an ugly, blotchy red.

"She is no niece of ours, my Lord," she cried over the outpouring of mirth. "We — Narcissa and I — have never set eyes on anything to do with either of us, nor any beast she marries."

"What say you, Draco?" asked Voldemort, and though his voice was quiet, it carried clearly through the catcalls and jeers. The hilarity mounted; Draco Malfoy looked in terror at his father, who was staring down into his own lap, then caught himself and resumed her own deadpan stare at the opposite wall.

"Enough," said Voldemort, stroking the angry snake. "Enough."

And the laughter died at once.

"Many of our oldest family trees become a little diseased over time," he said as Bellatrix gazed at him, breathless and a little pale. "Cut away those parts that threaten the health of the rest."

"Yes, my Lord," whispered Bellatrix, and her eyes swam with tears of gratitude again. "At the first chance!"

"You shall have it," said Voldemort. "And in your family, so in the world . . . we shall cut away the canker that infects us all." Voldemort raised Lucius Malfoy's wand, pointed it directly at the slowly revolving figure suspended over the table, and it began to struggle against invisible bonds.

"Do you recognize our guest, Severus?" asked Voldemort.

Snape raised his eyes to the upside-down face. All of the Death Eaters were looking up at the captive now, as though he had to face the firelight, the woman said in a cracked and terrified voice, "Severus! Help me!"

"Ah, yes," said Snape as the prisoner turned slowly away again.

"And you, Draco?" asked Voldemort, stroking the snake's snout with his wand-free hand. Draco shook his head jerkily.

More.

"But you would not have taken her classes," said Voldemort. "For those of you who do not know, we are joined here by the Headmaster of the School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

There were small noises of comprehension around the table. A broad, hunched woman with pointed teeth cackled.

"Yes . . . Professor Burbage taught the children of witches and wizards all about Muggles . . . how they are not so different. One of the Death Eaters spat on the floor. Charity Burbage revolved to face Snape again.

"Severus . . . please . . . please . . ."

"Silence," said Voldemort, with another twitch of Malfoy's wand, and Charity fell silent as if gagged. "Not content with last week Professor Burbage wrote an impassioned defense of Mudbloods in the Daily Prophet. Wizards, she says, must marry the purebloods is, says Professor Burbage, a most desirable circumstance. . . . She would have us all mate with Muggles. Nobody laughed this time: There was no mistaking the anger and contempt in Voldemort's voice. For the third time, he pointed his wand into her hair. Snape looked back at her, quite impassive, as she turned slowly away from him again.

"Avada Kedavra."

The flash of green light illuminated every corner of the room. Charity fell, with a resounding crash, onto the table before her. She was swept back in their chairs. Draco fell out of his onto the floor.

"Dinner, Nagini," said Voldemort softly, and the great snake swayed and slithered from his shoulders onto the polished floor.

CHAPTER TWO IN MEMORIAM

Harry was bleeding. Clutching his right hand in his left and swearing under his breath, he shouldered open his bedroom door and found a cup of cold tea that had been sitting on the floor outside his bedroom door.

"What the — ?"

He looked around; the landing of number four, Privet Drive, was deserted. Possibly the cup of tea was Dudley's idea. He scraped the fragments of cup together with the other hand and threw them into the already crammed bin just visible at the end of the landing. He ran his finger under the tap.

It was stupid, pointless, irritating beyond belief that he still had four days left of being unable to perform magic . . . but he knew his finger would have defeated him. He had never learned how to repair wounds, and now he came to think of it — partly because of a gap in his magical education. Making a mental note to ask Hermione how it was done, he used a large wad of toilet paper to mop up the blood in his bedroom and slamming the door behind him.

Harry had spent the morning completely emptying his school trunk for the first time since he had packed it six years ago. He had skimmed off the topmost three quarters of the contents and replaced or updated them, leaving a layer of general detritus at the bottom of the trunk that no longer fit. Minutes previously, Harry had plunged his hand into this mulch, experienced a stabbing pain in

lot of blood.

He now proceeded a little more cautiously. Kneeling down beside the trunk again, he groped around in the bottom and found a small, round, cracked and worn-out Sneakoscope, and a gold locket inside which a note told him that it had done the damage. He recognized it at once. It was a two-inch-long fragment of the enchanted mirror that his godfather had given him. He felt cautiously around the trunk for the rest, but nothing more remained of his godfather's last gift except powdered glass and grit.

Harry sat up and examined the jagged piece on which he had cut himself, seeing nothing but his own bright green eyes staring back at him. He turned to the left, picked up the morning's Daily Prophet, which lay unread on the bed, and attempted to stem the sudden upsurge of bitter memories that the accident had occasioned, by attacking the rest of the rubbish in the trunk.

It took another hour to empty it completely, throw away the useless items, and sort the remainder in piles according to use. Quidditch robes, cauldron, parchment, quills, and most of his textbooks were piled in a corner, to be left behind. He took the rest in the dead of night, probably, as if they were the evidence of some dreadful crime. His Muggle clothing, Invisibility Cloak, the Hagrid had once given him, a stack of letters, and his wand had been repacked into an old rucksack. In a front pocket was a small locket, A.B. inside it. The locket was accorded this place of honor not because it was valuable — in all usual senses it was worthless. This left a sizable stack of newspapers sitting on his desk beside his snowy owl, Hedwig: one for each of the days Harry had been in London. He got up off the floor, stretched, and moved across to his desk. Hedwig made no movement as he began to flick through the papers. The owl was asleep, or else faking; she was angry with Harry about the limited amount of time she was allowed out of her cage. As he neared the bottom of the pile of newspapers, Harry slowed down, searching for one particular issue that he knew would be from the summer; he remembered that there had been a small mention on the front about the resignation of Charity Burbage. On turning to page ten, he sank into his desk chair and reread the article he had been looking for.

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE REMEMBERED

by Elphias Doge

I met Albus Dumbledore at the age of eleven, on our first day at Hogwarts. Our mutual attraction was undoubtedly contracted dragon pox shortly before arriving at school, and while I was no longer contagious, my pockmarked visage, I suspect, was a factor. At the time, Albus had arrived at Hogwarts under the burden of unwanted notoriety. Scarcely a year previously, his father, Percival, had been killed by a Muggle upon three young Muggles.

Albus never attempted to deny that his father (who was to die in Azkaban) had committed this crime; on the contrary, he tried to convince his father to be guilty. Beyond that, Dumbledore refused to speak of the sad business, though many attempted to nudge him in that direction and assumed that Albus too was a Muggle-hater. They could not have been more mistaken: As anybody who knew him would know, Albus was a Muggle-lover. Indeed, his determined support for Muggle rights gained him many enemies in subsequent years.

In a matter of months, however, Albus's own fame had begun to eclipse that of his father. By the end of his first year, he was regarded as nothing more or less than the most brilliant student ever seen at the school. Those of us who were privileged to know him received his praise and encouragement, with which he was always generous. He confessed to me in later life that he knew even then that he was exceptional. He not only won every prize of note that the school offered, he was soon in regular correspondence with the most noted wizards of the day: the celebrated alchemist; Bathilda Bagshot, the noted historian; and Adalbert Waffling, the magical theoretician. Several of his books, *Transfiguration Today*, *Challenges in Charming*, and *The Practical Potioneer*. Dumbledore's future career seemed likely to lead him to become Minister of Magic. Though it was often predicted in later years that he was on the point of taking the job, he never did. Three years after we had started at Hogwarts, Albus's brother, Aberforth, arrived at school. They were not alike; Aberforth was more argumentative, preferring arguments by dueling rather than through reasoned discussion. However, it is quite wrong to suggest, as some have done, that Albus was only as two such different boys could do. In fairness to Aberforth, it must be admitted that living in Albus's shadow cannot have been an occupationally hazardous or pleasurable as a brother. When Albus and I left Hogwarts we intended to take the then-traditional tour of the world together, visiting and observing the various magical communities. However, tragedy intervened. On the very eve of our trip, Albus's mother, Kendra, died, leaving Albus the head, and sole heir, of the family. I had to go to pay my respects at Kendra's funeral, then left for what was now to be a solitary journey. With a younger brother, it would no longer be any question of Albus accompanying me.

That was the period of our lives when we had least contact. I wrote to Albus, describing, perhaps insensitively, the work we were doing, and he wrote back, telling me of the experiments of the Egyptian alchemists. His letters told me little of his day-to-day life, which I guessed to be similar to my own experiences, it was with horror that I heard, toward the end of my year's travels, that yet another tragedy had befallen the Potters. Though Ariana had been in poor health for a long time, the blow, coming so soon after the loss of their mother, had proved too much for her. Albus — and I count myself one of that lucky number — agree that Ariana's death, and Albus's feeling of personal responsibility for it, had left a deep and lasting mark upon him forevermore.

I returned home to find a young man who had experienced a much older person's suffering. Albus was more reserved than I was. The loss of Ariana had led, not to a renewed closeness between Albus and Aberforth, but to an estrangement. (In time their relationship, then certainly a cordial one.) However, he rarely spoke of his parents or of Ariana from then on, and his silence was not a sign of indifference. Other quills will describe the triumphs of the following years. Dumbledore's innumerable contributions to the store of wizarding knowledge, his gifts of dragon's blood, will benefit generations to come, as will the wisdom he displayed in the many judgments he made. The WIZARDING duel ever matched that between Dumbledore and Grindelwald in 1945. Those who witnessed it have written of it as the most extraordinary wizards do battle. Dumbledore's triumph, and its consequences for the WIZARDING world, are considered a turning point in the history of the International Statute of Secrecy or the downfall of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Albus Dumbledore was never proud or vain; he could find something to value in anyone, however apparently insignificant.

ith great humanity and sympathy. I shall miss his friendship more than I can say, but my loss is as nothing compared to the loss of my best loved of all Hogwarts headmasters cannot be in question. He died as he lived: working always for the greater good. A small boy with dragon pox as he was on the day that I met him.

Harry finished reading but continued to gaze at the picture accompanying the obituary. Dumbledore was wearing his round spectacles, he gave the impression, even in newsprint, of X-raying Harry, whose sadness mingled with a sense of loss. He had thought he knew Dumbledore quite well, but ever since reading this obituary he had been forced to recognize Dumbledore's childhood or youth; it was as though he had sprung into being as Harry had known him, venerable and wise, like trying to imagine a stupid Hermione or a friendly Blast-Ended Skrewt.

He had never thought to ask Dumbledore about his past. No doubt it would have felt strange, impertinent even, but he had been part in that legendary duel with Grindelwald, and Harry had not thought to ask Dumbledore what that had been like, or how he had discussed Harry, Harry's past, Harry's future, Harry's plans . . . and it seemed to Harry now, despite the fact that his father had had irreplaceable opportunities when he had failed to ask Dumbledore more about himself, even though the only person he suspected that Dumbledore had not answered honestly:

"What do you see when you look in the mirror?"

"I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks."

After several minutes' thought, Harry tore the obituary out of the Prophet, folded it carefully, and tucked it inside the book on the Dark Arts. Then he threw the rest of the newspaper onto the rubbish pile and turned to face the room. It was empty except for the Prophet, still lying on the bed, and on top of it, the piece of broken mirror.

Harry moved across the room, slid the mirror fragment off today's Prophet, and unfolded the newspaper. He had missed the owl from the delivery owl early that morning and thrown it aside, after noting that it said nothing about Voldemort. Harry had seen the news about Voldemort. It was only now, therefore, that he saw what he had missed.

Across the bottom half of the front page a smaller headline was set over a picture of Dumbledore striding along looking thoughtful. **DUMBLEDORE — THE TRUTH AT LAST?**

Coming next week, the shocking story of the flawed genius considered by many to be the greatest wizard of his generation. In this special issue, Rita Skeeter reveals the disturbed childhood, the lawless youth, the lifelong feuds, and the guilty secrets that have led the Minister of Magic content to remain a mere headmaster? WHAT was the real purpose of the secret organization known as the Order of the Phoenix?

The answers to these and many more questions are explored in the explosive new biography, *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* by Rita Skeeter, page 13, inside.

Harry ripped open the paper and found page thirteen. The article was topped with a picture showing another familiar face. Rita Skeeter, with her wild red hair, her teeth bared in what was clearly supposed to be a winning smile, wiggling her fingers up at him. Doing her best to look like a cat. In person, Rita Skeeter is much warmer and softer than her famously ferocious quill-portraits might suggest. Greeting him in the kitchen for a cup of tea, a slice of pound cake and, it goes without saying, a steaming vat of freshest gossip.

"Well, of course, Dumbledore is a biographer's dream," says Skeeter. "Such a long, full life. I'm sure my book will be the best. I've been working on it for a long time. Skeeter was certainly quick off the mark. Her nine-hundred-page book was completed a mere four weeks after Dumbledore's death. A real feat.

"Oh, when you've been a journalist as long as I have, working to a deadline is second nature. I knew that the Wizarding World needed a book like this. I was the first to meet that need."

I mention the recent, widely publicized remarks of Elphias Doge, Special Advisor to the Wizengamot and longstanding friend of Dumbledore, that he was a fact than a Chocolate Frog card."

Skeeter throws back her head and laughs.

"Darling Dodgy! I remember interviewing him a few years back about merpeople rights, bless him. Completely gaga, but he was a bit of a fish. He kept telling me to watch out for trout."

And yet Elphias Doge's accusations of inaccuracy have been echoed in many places. Does Skeeter really feel that four weeks is a long time to write about a man whose life was so long and extraordinary?

"Oh, my dear," beams Skeeter, rapping me affectionately across the knuckles, "you know as well as I do how much in demand I am. I've heard the word 'no,' and a nice sharp Quick-Quotes Quill! People were queuing to dish the dirt on Dumbledore anyway. He's got a lot of important toes. But old Dodgy Doge can get off his high hippogriff, because I've had access to a source no one else has. A source who has spoken in public before and who was close to Dumbledore during the most turbulent and disturbing phase of his young life. The advance publicity for Skeeter's biography has certainly suggested that there will be shocks in store for those who read it. The biggest surprises she uncovered, I ask?"

"Now, come off it, Betty, I'm not giving away all the highlights before anybody's bought the book!" laughs Skeeter. "But I can tell you that white as his beard is in for a rude awakening! Let's just say that nobody hearing him rage against You-Know-Who would have been surprised. And for a wizard who spent his later years pleading for tolerance, he wasn't exactly broad-minded when he was young. He had a very fishy family, which he worked so hard to keep hushed up."

I ask whether Skeeter is referring to Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth, whose conviction by the Wizengamot for misusing magic was a major scandal.

"Oh, Aberforth is just the tip of the dung heap," laughs Skeeter. "No, no, I'm talking about much worse than a brother. I'm talking about the Muggle-maiming father — Dumbledore couldn't keep either of them quiet anyway, they were both charged by the Wizengamot. I did a little digging uncovered a positive nest of nastiness — but, as I say, you'll have to wait for chapters nine to twelve. Dumbledore never talked about how his nose got broken."

Family skeletons notwithstanding, does Skeeter deny the brilliance that led to Dumbledore's many magical discoveries? "He had brains," she concedes, "although many now question whether he could really take full credit for all of his successes. As you may recall, my source — the boy who claims he had already discovered eight uses of dragon's blood when Dumbledore 'borrowed' his papers." But the importance of some of Dumbledore's achievements cannot, I venture, be denied. What of his famous defeat of the Dark Lord? "Oh, now, I'm glad you mentioned Grindelwald," says Skeeter with a tantalizing smile. "I'm afraid those who go dewy-eyed at the mention of a bombshell — or perhaps a Dungbomb. Very dirty business indeed. All I'll say is, don't be so sure that there really was a white handkerchief. It's possible, of course, that people may be forced to conclude that Grindelwald simply conjured a white handkerchief from the end of his wand. But Skeeter refuses to give any more away on this intriguing subject, so we turn instead to the relationship that will undoubtedly be the heart of the book. "Oh yes," says Skeeter, nodding briskly, "I devote an entire chapter to the whole Potter-Dumbledore relationship. It's a long story, but you'll have to buy my book for the whole story, but there is no question that Dumbledore took an unnatural interest in Potter. It's certainly an open secret that Potter has had a most troubled adolescence." I ask whether Skeeter is still in touch with Harry Potter, whom she so famously interviewed last year: a breakthrough interview with the You-Know-Who had returned.

"Oh, yes, we've developed a close bond," says Skeeter. "Poor Potter has few real friends, and we met at one of the many parties he threw. He's probably one of the only people alive who can say that they know the real Harry Potter." Which leads us neatly to the many rumors still circulating about Dumbledore's final hours. Does Skeeter believe that Potter was pushed? "Well, I don't want to say too much — it's all in the book — but eyewitnesses inside Hogwarts castle saw Potter running away from the castle. He was pushed. Potter later gave evidence against Severus Snape, a man against whom he has a notorious grudge. Is everyone satisfied? — once they've read my book."

On that intriguing note, I take my leave. There can be no doubt that Skeeter has quilled an instant bestseller. Dumbledore's story is what is soon to emerge about their hero.

Harry reached the bottom of the article, but continued to stare blankly at the page. Revulsion and fury rose in him like a tidal wave, at the wall, where it joined the rest of the rubbish heaped around his overflowing bin.

He began to stride blindly around the room, opening empty drawers and picking up books only to replace them on the shelves. Rita's article echoed in his head: An entire chapter to the whole Potter-Dumbledore relationship . . . It's been a long time since I've seen a book like this. . . . I've had access to a source most journalists would swap their wands for . . .

"Lies!" Harry bellowed, and through the window he saw the next-door neighbor, who had paused to restart his lawn mower. Harry sat down hard on the bed. The broken bit of mirror danced away from him; he picked it up and turned it over in his hand, which Rita Skeeter was defaming him. . . .

A flash of brightest blue. Harry froze, his cut finger slipping on the jagged edge of the mirror again. He had imagined the wall was a sickly peach color of Aunt Petunia's choosing: There was nothing blue there for the mirror to reflect. He picked up the mirror, his own bright green eye looking back at him.

He had imagined it, there was no other explanation; imagined it, because he had been thinking of his dead headmaster. But Dumbledore would never pierce him again.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DURSLEYS DEPARTING

The sound of the front door slamming echoed up the stairs and a voice yelled, "Oi! You!"

Sixteen years of being addressed thus left Harry in no doubt whom his uncle was calling; nevertheless, he did not immediately answer. For a split second, he had thought he saw Dumbledore's eye. It was not until his uncle bellowed, "BOY!" that Harry remembered to add the piece of broken mirror to the rucksack filled with things he would be taking with him.

"You took your time!" roared Vernon Dursley when Harry appeared at the top of the stairs. "Get down here, I want a word with you." Harry strolled downstairs, his hands deep in his jeans pockets. When he reached the living room he found all three Dursleys waiting for him. His father in a dark blue zip-up jacket, Aunt Petunia in a neat salmon-colored coat, and Dudley, Harry's large, blond, muscular cousin, in his leather jacket. "Yes?" asked Harry.

"Sit down!" said Uncle Vernon. Harry raised his eyebrows. "Please!" added Uncle Vernon, wincing slightly as though the words hurt. Harry sat. He thought he knew what was coming. His uncle began to pace up and down, Aunt Petunia and Dudley following him. His face crumpled with concentration, Uncle Vernon stopped in front of Harry and spoke.

"I've changed my mind," he said.

"What a surprise," said Harry.

"Don't you take that tone —" began Aunt Petunia in a shrill voice, but Vernon Dursley waved her down.

"It's all a lot of claptrap," said Uncle Vernon, glaring at Harry with piggy little eyes. "I've decided I don't believe a word of it. You've been lying to me all these years. Harry looked up at his uncle and felt a mixture of exasperation and amusement. Vernon Dursley had been changing his mind so often that Harry had learned to expect it. He had been unpacking and repacking the car with every change of heart. Harry's favorite moment had been the one when Uncle Vernon had decided to leave the car in the garage. The last time it had been unpacked, had attempted to hoist it back into the boot and collapsed with roars of pain and protest.

"According to you," Vernon Dursley said now, resuming his pacing up and down the living room, "we — Petunia, Dudley, and I — have decided to let you stay here."

"Some of 'my lot,' right," said Harry.

"Well, I don't believe it," repeated Uncle Vernon, coming to a halt in front of Harry again. "I was awake half the night thinking about it. The house?" repeated Harry. "What house?"

"This house!" shrieked Uncle Vernon, the vein in his forehead starting to pulse. "Our house! House prices are skyrocketing to do a bit of hocus-pocus and before we know it the deeds will be in your name and —"

"Are you out of your mind?" demanded Harry. "A plot to get this house? Are you actually as stupid as you look?"

"Don't you dare — !" squealed Aunt Petunia, but again, Vernon waved her down: Sights on his personal appearance.

"Just in case you've forgotten," said Harry, "I've already got a house, my godfather left me one. So why would I want this?"

There was silence. Harry thought he had rather impressed his uncle with this argument.

"You claim," said Uncle Vernon, starting to pace yet again, "that this Lord Thing —"

"— Voldemort," said Harry impatiently, "and we've been through this about a hundred times already. This isn't a claim, it's a fact."

Uncle Vernon hunched his shoulders angrily, and Harry guessed that his uncle was attempting to ward off recollections of two fully grown wizards. The arrival on the doorstep of Kingsley Shacklebolt and Arthur Weasley had come as a surprise, that as Mr. Weasley had once demolished half of the living room, his reappearance could not have been expected.

"— Kingsley and Mr. Weasley explained it all as well," Harry pressed on remorselessly. "Once I'm seventeen, the protection will be as well as me. The Order is sure Voldemort will target you, whether to torture you to try and find out where I am, or to kill you and rescue you."

Uncle Vernon's and Harry's eyes met. Harry was sure that in that instant they were both wondering the same thing. To hide and the Order wants to help. You're being offered serious protection, the best there is.

Uncle Vernon said nothing, but continued to pace up and down. Outside the sun hung low over the privet hedges. The sky was a deep purple.

"I thought there was a Ministry of Magic?" asked Vernon Dursley abruptly.

"There is," said Harry, surprised.

"Well, then, why can't they protect us? It seems to me that, as innocent victims, guilty of nothing more than harboring a wizard, we should be protected."

Harry laughed; he could not help himself. It was so very typical of his uncle to put his hopes in the establishment, even when it was clearly failing.

"You heard what Mr. Weasley and Kingsley said," Harry replied. "We think the Ministry has been infiltrated."

Uncle Vernon strode to the fireplace and back, breathing so heavily that his great black mustache rippled, his face stretched.

"All right," he said, stopping in front of Harry yet again. "All right, let's say, for the sake of argument, we accept this protection. What then, sley bloke."

Harry managed not to roll his eyes, but with difficulty. This question had also been addressed half a dozen times.

"As I've told you," he said through gritted teeth, "Kingsley is protecting the Mug — I mean, your Prime Minister."

"Exactly — he's the best!" said Uncle Vernon, pointing at the blank television screen. The Dursleys had spotted Kingsley when he visited a hospital. This, and the fact that Kingsley had mastered the knack of dressing like a Muggle, his deep voice, had caused the Dursleys to take to Kingsley in a way that they had certainly not done with any other wizard.

"Well, he's taken," said Harry. "But Hestia Jones and Dedalus Diggle are more than up to the job —"

"If we'd even seen CVs . . ." began Uncle Vernon, but Harry lost patience. Getting to his feet, he advanced on his uncle.

"These accidents aren't accidents — the crashes and explosions and derailments and whatever else has happened since the war — it's all because of Voldemort. I've told you this over and over again, he kills Muggles for fun. Even the fogs — they're caused by him. He'll kill your son!"

Dudley's hands jerked upward to cover his mouth. With his parents' and Harry's eyes upon him, he slowly lowered them.

"More?" laughed Harry. "More than the two that attacked us, you mean? Of course there are, there are hundreds, millions of them."

"All right, all right," blustered Vernon Dursley. "You've made your point —"

"I hope so," said Harry, "because once I'm seventeen, all of them — Death Eaters, dementors, maybe even Inferi — will be looking for you and will certainly attack you. And if you remember the last time you tried to outrun wizards, I think you'll agree."

There was a brief silence in which the distant echo of Hagrid smashing down a wooden front door seemed to reverberate in the house.

Uncle Vernon; Dudley was staring at Harry. Finally Uncle Vernon blurted out, "But what about my work? What about Dudley's school?"

"Don't you understand?" shouted Harry. "They will torture and kill you like they did my parents!"

"Dad," said Dudley in a loud voice, "Dad — I'm going with these Order people."

"Dudley," said Harry, "for the first time in your life, you're talking sense."

He knew that the battle was won. If Dudley was frightened enough to accept the Order's help, his parents would accept it too.

"They'll be here in about five minutes," he said, and when none of the Dursleys replied, he left the room. The prospect of leaving home was one that he was able to contemplate quite cheerfully, but there was nevertheless a certain awkwardness in the way that his parents' solid dislike?

Back in his bedroom, Harry fiddled aimlessly with his rucksack, then poked a couple of owl nuts through the bars of his cage.

"We're leaving soon, really soon," Harry told her. "And then you'll be able to fly again."

The doorbell rang. Harry hesitated, then headed back out of his room and downstairs. It was too much to expect Hedwig to be waiting.

"Harry Potter!" squeaked an excited voice, the moment Harry had opened the door; a small man in a mauve top hat and a long white beard.

"Thanks, Dedalus," said Harry, bestowing a small and embarrassed smile upon the dark-haired Hestia. "It's really good to see you."

and cousin. . . ."

"Good day to you, Harry Potter's relatives!" said Dedalus happily, striding into the living room. The Dursleys did not let it bring about any other change of mind. Dudley shrank nearer to his mother at the sight of the witch and wizard.

"I see you are packed and ready. Excellent! The plan, as Harry has told you, is a simple one," said Dedalus, pulling an armful of luggage. "We shall be leaving before Harry does. Due to the danger of using magic in your house — Harry being still underage, he will not be driving, say, ten miles or so, before Disapparating to the safe location we have picked out for you. You know how to use a car, don't you?"

"Know how to — ? Of course I ruddy well know how to drive!" spluttered Uncle Vernon.

"Very clever of you, sir, very clever, I personally would be utterly bamboozled by all those buttons and knobs," said Dedalus, looking at the ring Vernon Dursley, who was visibly losing confidence in the plan with every word Dedalus spoke.

"Can't even drive," he muttered under his breath, his mustache rippling indignantly, but fortunately neither Dedalus nor Harry heard him.

"You, Harry," Dedalus continued, "will wait here for your guard. There has been a little change in the arrangements —"

"What d'you mean?" said Harry at once. "I thought Mad-Eye was going to come and take me by Side-Along-Apparition."

"Can't do it," said Hestia tersely. "Mad-Eye will explain."

The Dursleys, who had listened to all of this with looks of utter incomprehension on their faces, jumped as a loud voice came from the pocket watch. They were realizing that the voice had issued from Dedalus's pocket watch.

"Quite right, we're operating to a very tight schedule," said Dedalus, nodding at his watch and tucking it back into his pocket. "We'll be leaving the house with your family's Disapparition, Harry; thus, the charm breaks at the moment you all head for safety." He turned to the others. "None of them answered him. Uncle Vernon was still staring, appalled, at the bulge in Dedalus's waistcoat pocket.

"Perhaps we should wait outside in the hall, Dedalus," murmured Hestia. She clearly felt that it would be tactless for her to be present at the aged loving, possibly tearful farewells.

"There's no need," Harry muttered, but Uncle Vernon made any further explanation unnecessary by saying loudly,

"Well, this is good-bye, then, boy."

He swung his right arm upward to shake Harry's hand, but at the last moment seemed unable to face it, and merely waved. Harry bowed and returned to the front room.

"Ready, Diddy?" asked Aunt Petunia, fussily checking the clasp of her handbag so as to avoid looking at Harry altogether. Dudley did not answer, but stood there with his mouth slightly ajar, reminding Harry a little of the giant, Grawp.

"Come along, then," said Uncle Vernon.

He had already reached the living room door when Dudley mumbled, "I don't understand."

"What don't you understand, popkin?" asked Aunt Petunia, looking up at her son.

Dudley raised a large, hamlike hand to point at Harry.

"Why isn't he coming with us?"

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia froze where they stood, staring at Dudley as though he had just expressed a desire to go to the moon.

"What?" said Uncle Vernon loudly.

"Why isn't he coming too?" asked Dudley.

"Well, he — he doesn't want to," said Uncle Vernon, turning to glare at Harry and adding, "You don't want to, do you?"

"Not in the slightest," said Harry.

"There you are," Uncle Vernon told Dudley. "Now come on, we're off."

He marched out of the room. They heard the front door open, but Dudley did not move and after a few faltering steps he returned.

"What now?" barked Uncle Vernon, reappearing in the doorway.

It seemed that Dudley was struggling with concepts too difficult to put into words. After several moments of apparent silence he said, "I don't know."

Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon looked at each other. It was clear that Dudley was frightening them. Hestia Jones brought a tray of tea.

"But . . . surely you know where your nephew is going?" she asked, looking bewildered.

"Certainly we know," said Vernon Dursley. "He's off with some of your lot, isn't he? Right, Dudley, let's get in the car, you two."

Again, Vernon Dursley marched as far as the front door, but Dudley did not follow.

"Off with some of our lot?"

Hestia looked outraged. Harry had met this attitude before: Witches and wizards seemed stunned that his closest living relatives should be so prejudiced.

"It's fine," Harry assured her. "It doesn't matter, honestly."

"Doesn't matter?" repeated Hestia, her voice rising ominously. "Don't these people realize what you've been through? The danger of the anti-Voldemort movement?"

"Er — no, they don't," said Harry. "They think I'm a waste of space, actually, but I'm used to —"

"I don't think you're a waste of space."

If Harry had not seen Dudley's lips move, he might not have believed it. As it was, he stared at Dudley for several seconds before he spoke; for one thing, Dudley had turned red. Harry was embarrassed and astonished himself.

"Well . . . er . . . thanks, Dudley."

Again, Dudley appeared to grapple with thoughts too unwieldy for expression before mumbling, "You saved my life."

"Not really," said Harry. "It was your soul the dementor would have taken. . . ."

He looked curiously at his cousin. They had had virtually no contact during this summer or last, as Harry had come back to school. Now dawned on Harry, however, that the cup of cold tea on which he had trodden that morning might not have been the last. He was relieved that Dudley appeared to have exhausted his ability to express his feelings. After opening his mouth once or twice, he gave up.

Aunt Petunia burst into tears. Hestia Jones gave her an approving look that changed to outrage as Aunt Petunia ran to him. "S-so sweet, Dudders . . ." she sobbed into his massive chest. "S-such a lovely b-boy . . . s-saying thank you . . ."

"But he hasn't said thank you at all!" said Hestia indignantly. "He only said he didn't think Harry was a waste of space!"

"Yeah, but coming from Dudley that's like 'I love you,'" said Harry, torn between annoyance and a desire to laugh as Aunt Petunia hugged Harry from a burning building.

"Are we going or not?" roared Uncle Vernon, reappearing yet again at the living room door. "I thought we were on a trip!"

"Yes — yes, we are," said Dedalus Diggle, who had been watching these exchanges with an air of bemusement and indignation. He tripped forward and wrung Harry's hand with both of his own.

"— good luck. I hope we meet again. The hopes of the Wizarding world rest upon your shoulders."

"Oh," said Harry, "right. Thanks."

"Farewell, Harry," said Hestia, also clasping his hand. "Our thoughts go with you."

"I hope everything's okay," said Harry with a glance toward Aunt Petunia and Dudley.

"Oh, I'm sure we shall end up the best of chums," said Diggle brightly, waving his hat as he left the room. Hestia followed him.

Dudley gently released himself from his mother's clutches and walked toward Harry, who had to repress an urge to tell him to get lost.

"Blimey, Dudley," said Harry over Aunt Petunia's renewed sobs, "did the dementors blow a different personality into you?"

"Dunno," muttered Dudley. "See you, Harry."

"Yeah . . ." said Harry, taking Dudley's hand and shaking it. "Maybe. Take care, Big D."

Dudley nearly smiled, then lumbered from the room. Harry heard his heavy footfalls on the graveled drive, and then the door slammed.

Aunt Petunia, whose face had been buried in her handkerchief, looked around at the sound. She did not seem to have noticed Dudley's departure. She pulled the handkerchief into her pocket, she said, "Well — good-bye," and marched toward the door without looking at him.

"Good-bye," said Harry.

She stopped and looked back. For a moment Harry had the strangest feeling that she wanted to say something to him, but then, with a little jerk of her head, she bustled out of the room after her husband and son.

CHAPTER FOUR THE SEVEN POTTERS

Harry ran back upstairs to his bedroom, arriving at the window just in time to see the Dursleys' car swinging out of the driveway between Aunt Petunia and Dudley in the backseat. The car turned right at the end of Privet Drive, its windows burned so dark that Harry picked up Hedwig's cage, his Firebolt, and his rucksack, gave his unnaturally tidy bedroom one last sweeping look, and where he deposited cage, broomstick, and bag near the foot of the stairs. The light was fading rapidly now, the hall floor was cold, and here in the silence and know that he was about to leave the house for the last time. Long ago, when he had been alone, hours of solitude had been a rare treat: Pausing only to sneak something tasty from the fridge, he had rushed upstairs to his room, unlocked through the channels to his heart's content. It gave him an odd, empty feeling to remember those times; it was like remembering a life that had never been.

"Don't you want to take a last look at the place?" he asked Hedwig, who was still sulking with her head under her wing. "I mean, look at this doormat. What memories . . . Dudley puked on it after I saved him from the dementors? . . . And last summer, Dumbledore walked through that front door. . . ."

Harry lost the thread of his thoughts for a moment and Hedwig did nothing to help him retrieve it, but continued to look out the front door.

"And under here, Hedwig" — Harry pulled open a door under the stairs — "is where I used to sleep! You never knew I used to sleep here!"

Harry looked around at the stacked shoes and umbrellas, remembering how he used to wake every morning looking for a spider or two. Those had been the days before he had known anything about his true identity; before he had known that it often happened around him. But Harry could still remember the dreams that had dogged him, even in those days: the car that had nearly crashed when Harry had recounted it — a flying motorbike . . .

There was a sudden, deafening roar from somewhere nearby. Harry straightened up with a jerk and smacked the table with his hand. Uncle Vernon's choicest swear words, he staggered back into the kitchen, clutching his head and staring out of the window. The darkness seemed to be rippling, the air itself quivering. Then, one by one, figures began to pop into sight as they came in. A man in a helmet and goggles and sitting astride an enormous motorbike with a black sidecar attached. All around him were skeletal, black winged horses.

Wrenching open the back door, Harry hurtled into their midst. There was a general cry of greeting as Hermione flung her arms around him, "All right, Harry? Ready for the off?"

"Definitely," said Harry, beaming around at them all. "But I wasn't expecting this many of you!"

"Change of plan," growled Mad-Eye, who was holding two enormous, bulging sacks, and whose magical eye was spinning. "We've got to get undercover before we talk you through it."

Harry led them all back into the kitchen where, laughing and chattering, they settled on chairs, sat themselves upon the spotless appliances: Ron, long and lanky; Hermione, her bushy hair tied back in a long plait; Fred and George, grinning and laughing, kind-faced, balding, his spectacles a little awry; Mad-Eye, battle-worn, one-legged, his bright blue magical eye whizzing; Sirius, a shade of bright pink; Lupin, grayer, more lined; Fleur, slender and beautiful, with her long silvery blonde hair; Kingsley, a large man and beard, standing hunchbacked to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling; and Mundungus Fletcher, small, dirty, and sly. Harry's heart seemed to expand and glow at the sight: He felt incredibly fond of all of them, even Mundungus, whom he had once called a "Kingsley, I thought you were looking after the Muggle Prime Minister?" he called across the room.

"He can get along without me for one night," said Kingsley. "You're more important."

"Harry, guess what?" said Tonks from her perch on top of the washing machine, and she wiggled her left hand at him.

"You got married?" Harry yelped, looking from her to Lupin.

"I'm sorry you couldn't be there, Harry, it was very quiet."

"That's brilliant, congrat —"

"All right, all right, we'll have time for a cozy catch-up later!" roared Moody over the hubbub, and silence fell in the kitchen. "As Dedalus probably told you, we had to abandon Plan A. Pius Thicknesse has gone over, which gives us a big problem. We need to get you out of here. We can use the Floo Network, place a Portkey here, or Apparate in or out. All done in the name of your protection, to prevent your mother's charm from breaking. What he's really done is to stop you getting out of here safely."

"Second problem: You're underage, which means you've still got the Trace on you."

"I don't —"

"The Trace, the Trace!" said Mad-Eye impatiently. "The charm that detects magical activity around under-seventeens, anyone around you, casts a spell to get you out of here, Thicknesse is going to know about it, and so will the Death Eaters."

"We can't wait for the Trace to break, because the moment you turn seventeen you'll lose all the protection your mother's charm gave you. It's red good and proper."

Harry could not help but agree with the unknown Thicknesse.

"So what are we going to do?"

"We're going to use the only means of transport left to us, the only ones the Trace can't detect, because we don't need a broom or a motorbike."

Harry could see flaws in this plan; however, he held his tongue to give Mad-Eye the chance to address them.

"Now, your mother's charm will only break under two conditions: when you come of age, or" — Moody gestured around the room. "Your aunt and uncle are going your separate ways tonight, in the full understanding that you're never going to live to see them again. Harry nodded.

"So this time, when you leave, there'll be no going back, and the charm will break the moment you get outside its range. We're waiting for You-Know-Who to come and seize you the moment you turn seventeen."

"The one thing we've got on our side is that You-Know-Who doesn't know we're moving you tonight. We've leaked a false date the thirtieth. However, this is You-Know-Who we're dealing with, so we can't just rely on him getting the date wrong; he's too clever for that. We've given a dozen different houses every protection we can throw at them. They're all got some connection with the Order: my house, Kingsley's place, Molly's Auntie Muriel's — you get the idea."

"Yeah," said Harry, not entirely truthfully, because he could still spot a gaping hole in the plan.

"You'll be going to Tonks's parents. Once you're within the boundaries of the protective enchantments we've put on them, you're safe. Questions?"

"Er — yes," said Harry. "Maybe they won't know which of the twelve secure houses I'm heading for at first, but won't it be fourteen of us fly off toward Tonks's parents?"

"Ah," said Moody, "I forgot to mention the key point. Fourteen of us won't be flying to Tonks's parents'. There will be six of us, each with a companion, each pair heading for a different safe house."

From inside his cloak Moody now withdrew a flask of what looked like mud. There was no need for him to say anything else.

"No!" he said loudly, his voice ringing through the kitchen. "No way!"

"I told them you'd take it like this," said Hermione with a hint of complacency.

"If you think I'm going to let six people risk their lives —!"

"— because it's the first time for all of us," said Ron.

"This is different, pretending to be me —"

"Well, none of us really fancy it, Harry," said Fred earnestly. "Imagine if something went wrong and we were stuck as we are. Harry did not smile.

"You can't do it if I don't cooperate, you need me to give you some hair."

"Well, that's that plan scuppered," said George. "Obviously there's no chance at all of us getting a bit of your hair unless you agree."

"Yeah, thirteen of us against one bloke who's not allowed to use magic; we've got no chance," said Fred.

"Funny," said Harry, "really amusing."

"If it has to come to force, then it will," growled Moody, his magical eye now quivering a little in its socket as he glared at them. "I'm all prepared to take the risk."

Mundungus shrugged and grimaced; the magical eye swerved sideways to glare at him out of the side of Moody's head.

"Let's have no more arguments. Time's wearing on. I want a few of your hairs, boy, now."

"But this is mad, there's no need —"

"No need!" snarled Moody. "With You-Know-Who out there and half the Ministry on his side? Potter, if we're lucky he'll be after you on the thirtieth, but he'd be mad not to have a Death Eater or two keeping an eye out, it's what I'd do. They might not get the arm holds, but it's about to break and they know the rough position of the place. Our only chance is to use decoys. Eaten by a dragon. Harry caught Hermione's eye and looked away at once.

"So, Potter — some of your hair, if you please."

Harry glanced at Ron, who grimaced at him in a just-do-it sort of way.

"Now!" barked Moody.

With all of their eyes upon him, Harry reached up to the top of his head, grabbed a hank of hair, and pulled.

"Good," said Moody, limping forward as he pulled the stopper out of the flask of potion. "Straight in here, if you please." Harry dropped the hair into the mudlike liquid. The moment it made contact with its surface, the potion began to froth. "Ooh, you look much tastier than Crabbe and Goyle, Harry," said Hermione, before catching sight of Ron's raised eyebrows. "Goyle's potion looked like bogies."

"Right then, fake Potters line up over here, please," said Moody.

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Fleur lined up in front of Aunt Petunia's gleaming sink.

"We're one short," said Lupin.

"Here," said Hagrid gruffly, and he lifted Mundungus by the scruff of the neck and dropped him down beside Fleur, with Ron, Hermione, and George instead.

"I've told you, I'd sooner be a protector," said Mundungus.

"Shut it," growled Moody. "As I've already told you, you spineless worm, any Death Eaters we run into will be aiming to kill you. Who would want to finish Potter in person. It'll be the protectors who have got the most to worry about, the Death Eaters. Mundungus did not look particularly reassured, but Moody was already pulling half a dozen eggcup-sized glasses from his pocket and pouring Polyjuice Potion into each one.

"Altogether, then . . ."

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, Fleur, and Mundungus drank. All of them gasped and grimaced as the potion hit their stomachs. It was like swallowing a bar of tallow. Hermione and Mundungus were shooting upward; Ron, Fred, and George were shrinking; their hair was darkening.

Moody, quite unconcerned, was now loosening the ties of the large sacks he had brought with him. When he straightened up, he was in front of him.

Fred and George turned to each other and said together, "Wow — we're identical!"

"I dunno, though, I think I'm still better-looking," said Fred, examining his reflection in the kettle.

"Bah," said Fleur, checking herself in the microwave door, "Bill, don't look at me — I'm hideous."

"Those whose clothes are a bit roomy, I've got smaller here," said Moody, indicating the first sack, "and vice versa. Do as you're told. And when you're dressed, there's luggage in the other sack."

The real Harry thought that this might just be the most bizarre thing he had ever seen, and he had seen some extremely bizarre things. The fake Harrys took out sets of clothes, putting on glasses, stuffing their own things away. He felt like asking them to show him how they were ripping off with impunity, clearly much more at ease with displaying his body than they would have been with their own.

"I knew Ginny was lying about that tattoo," said Ron, looking down at his bare chest.

"Harry, your eyesight really is awful," said Hermione, as she put on glasses.

Once dressed, the fake Harrys took rucksacks and owl cages, each containing a stuffed snowy owl, from the second sack.

"Good," said Moody, as at last seven dressed, bespectacled, and luggage-laden Harrys faced him. "The pairs will be a bit different."

"Why'm I with you?" grunted the Harry nearest the back door.

"Because you're the one that needs watching," growled Moody, and sure enough, his magical eye did not waver from the Harry nearest the back door.

"I'm George," said the twin at whom Moody was pointing. "Can't you even tell us apart when we're Harry?"

"Sorry, George —"

"I'm only yanking your wand, I'm Fred really —"

"Enough messing around!" snarled Moody. "The other one — George or Fred or whoever you are — you're with Remus."

"I'm taking Fleur on a thestral," said Bill. "She's not that fond of brooms."

Fleur walked over to stand beside him, giving him a soppy, slavish look that Harry hoped with all his heart would never be repeated.

"Miss Granger with Kingsley, again by thestral —"

Hermione looked reassured as she answered Kingsley's smile; Harry knew that Hermione too lacked confidence on a thestral.

"Which leaves you and me, Ron!" said Tonks brightly, knocking over a mug tree as she waved at him.

Ron did not look quite as pleased as Hermione.

"An' you're with me, Harry. That all right?" said Hagrid, looking a little anxious. "We'll be on the bike, brooms an' thestrals. You can eat with me on it, though, so you'll be in the sidecar."

"That's great," said Harry, not altogether truthfully.

"We think the Death Eaters will expect you to be on a broom," said Moody, who seemed to guess how Harry was feeling. "It's never mentioned before, so if we do run into any Death Eaters, we're betting they'll choose one of the Potters who's got the sack with the fake Potters' clothes in it and leading the way back to the door, 'I make it three minutes until we get out.' We can't keep the Death Eaters out when they come looking. . . . Come on. . . ."

Harry hurried into the hall to fetch his rucksack, Firebolt, and Hedwig's cage before joining the others in the dark back garden. Hermione had already been helped up onto a great black thestral by Kingsley, Fleur onto the other by Bill. Hagrid was waiting.

"Is this it? Is this Sirius's bike?"

"The very same," said Hagrid, beaming down at Harry. "An' the last time yeh was on it, Harry, I could fit yeh in one hand. Yeh could not help but feel a little humiliated as he got into the sidecar. It placed him several feet below everybody else, like a child in a bumper car. Harry stuffed his rucksack and broomstick down by his feet and rammed Hedwig's cage between his feet.

"Arthur's done a bit o' tinkerin'," said Hagrid, quite oblivious to Harry's discomfort. He settled himself astride the motorcycle. "It's got a few tricks up its handlebars now. That one was my idea."

"Please be careful, Hagrid," said Mr. Weasley, who was standing beside them, holding his broomstick. "I'm still not sure about the emergency procedures."

"Hold tight now, Ron," said Tonks, and Harry saw Ron throw a furtive, guilty look at Lupin before placing his hands on the seat. It roared like a dragon, and the sidecar began to vibrate.

There was a great roar from the motorbike, and Harry felt the sidecar give a nasty lurch: He was rising through the air. Around him brooms were soaring upward too; the long black tail of a thestral flicked past. His legs, jammed into

And then, out of nowhere, out of nothing, they were surrounded. At least thirty hooded figures, suspended in midair, risen, oblivious —

"No — HEDWIG!"

"No — NO!"

But the owl lay motionless and pathetic as a toy on the floor of her cage. He could not take it in, and his terror for the
a mass of people moving, flares of green light, two pairs of people on brooms soaring off into the distance, but he c

"My job's ter get you there safe, Harry!" bellowed Hagrid, and he opened the throttle.

"Stop — STOP!" Harry shouted, but as he looked back again two jets of green light flew past his left ear: Four Death Eaters aiming for Hagrid's broad back. Hagrid swerved, but the Death Eaters were keeping up with the bike; more curses shot

hem. Wriggling around he cried, "Stupefy!" and a red bolt of light shot from his own wand, cleaving a gap between the two. "Hold on, Harry, this'll do for 'em!" roared Hagrid, and Harry looked up just in time to see Hagrid slamming a thick fin-

A wall, a solid brick wall, erupted out of the exhaust pipe. Craning his neck, Harry saw it expand into being in midair. Urth was not so lucky: He vanished from view and then dropped like a boulder from behind it, his broomstick broken.

d the airborne wall were swallowed by darkness as Hagrid leaned low over the handlebars and sped up. More Killing Curses flew past Harry's head from the two remaining Death Eaters' wands; they were aiming for Hagrid

ded in midair in a shower of multicolored sparks, and Harry thought wildly of fireworks, and the Muggles below who
 "Here we go again, Harry, hold on!" yelled Hagrid, and he jabbed at a second button. This time a great net burst from

only did they swerve to avoid it, but the companion who had slowed to save their unconscious friend had caught up
e pursuing the motorbike, all shooting curses after it.

"This'll do it, Harry, hold on tight!" yelled Hagrid, and Harry saw him slam his whole hand onto the purple button beside the door. With an unmistakable bellowing roar, dragon fire burst from the exhaust, white-hot and blue, and the motorbike shot forward.

the Death Eaters swerve out of sight to avoid the deadly trail of flame, and at the same time felt the sidecar sway on the force of acceleration.

"It's all righ', Harry!" bellowed Hagrid, now thrown flat onto his back by the surge of speed; nobody was steering now slipstream.

"I'm on it, Harry, don' worry!" Hagrid yelled, and from inside his jacket pocket he pulled his flowery pink umbrella.

"Hagrid! No! Let me!"

“REPARO!”

There was a deafening bang and the sidecar broke away from the bike completely. Harry sped forward, propelled by ght —

In desperation Harry pointed his wand at the sidecar and shouted, "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The sidecar rose like a cork, unsteerable but at least still airborne: He had but a split second's relief, however, as more singing in.

"I'm comin', Harry!" Hagrid yelled from out of the darkness, but Harry could feel the sidecar beginning to sink again: (oncoming figures and yelled, "Impedimenta!"

The jinx hit the middle Death Eater in the chest. For a moment the man was absurdly spread-eagled in midair as tho
ided with him —
Then the sidecar began to fall in earnest, and the remaining Death Eater shot a curse so close to Harry that he had

Then the sidecar began to fall in earnest, and the remaining Death Eater shot a curse so close to Harry that he had to
e of his seat —
"I'm coming! I'm coming!"

I'm comin', Harry, I'm comin'!

A huge hand seized the back of Harry's robes and hoisted him out of the plummeting sidecar; Harry pulled his rucksack and himself back-to-back with Hagrid. As they soared upward, away from the two remaining Death Eaters, Harry spat and yelled, "Confringo!"

He knew a dreadful, gut-wrenching pang for Hedwig as it exploded; the Death Eater nearest it was blasted off his broom.

"Harry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," moaned Hagrid, "I shouldn'ta tried ter repair it meself — yeh've got no room —"

"It's not a problem, just keep flying!" Harry shouted back, as two more Death Eaters emerged out of the darkness, driving the curses.

As the curses came shooting across the intervening space again, Hagrid swerved and zigzagged: Harry knew that Hagrid was so insecurely.

Harry sent Stunning Spell after Stunning Spell back at their pursuers, barely holding them off. He shot forward to avoid it and his hood slipped, and by the red light of his next Stunning Spell, Harry saw the strangely blank face of the hooded Death Eater.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry yelled.

"That's him, it's him, it's the real one!"

The hooded Death Eater's shout reached Harry even above the thunder of the motorbike's engine: Next moment, both he and Hagrid were falling.

"Harry, what's happened?" bellowed Hagrid. "Where've they gone?"

"I don't know!"

But Harry was afraid: The hooded Death Eater had shouted "It's the real one!"; how had he known? He gazed around in the darkness, trying to find the real one.

He clambered around on the seat to face forward and seized hold of the back of Hagrid's jacket.

"Hagrid, do the dragon-fire thing again, let's get out of here!"

"Hold on tight, then, Harry!"

There was a deafening, screeching roar again and the white-blue fire shot from the exhaust: Harry felt himself slipping backward upon him, barely maintaining his grip on the handlebars —

"I think we've lost 'em Harry, I think we've done it!" yelled Hagrid.

But Harry was not convinced: Fear lapped at him as he looked left and right for pursuers he was sure would come. . . .

It's him . . . it's the real one. . . . They had said it right after he had tried to Disarm Stan. . . .

"We're nearly there, Harry, we've nearly made it!" shouted Hagrid.

Harry felt the bike drop a little, though the lights down on the ground still seemed remote as stars.

Then the scar on his forehead burned like fire; as a Death Eater appeared on either side of the bike, two Killing Curses were cast.

And then Harry saw him. Voldemort was flying like smoke on the wind, without broomstick or thestral to hold him, his wand raised high.

raising his wand again —

Hagrid let out a bellow of fear and steered the motorbike into a vertical dive. Clinging on for dear life, Harry sent Stunning Spell after Stunning Spell.

With a body fly past him and knew he had hit one of them, but then he heard a bang and saw sparks from the engine; the motorbike was falling.

Green jets of light shot past them again. Harry had no idea which way was up, which down: His scar was still burning.

His feet were from him, he saw it raise its arm —

"NO!"

With a shout of fury Hagrid launched himself off the bike at the Death Eater; to his horror, Harry saw both Hagrid and the Death Eater falling.

Barely gripping the plummeting bike with his knees, Harry heard Voldemort scream, "Mine!"

It was over: He could not see or hear where Voldemort was; he glimpsed another Death Eater swooping out of the darkness.

As the pain from Harry's scar forced his eyes shut, his wand acted of its own accord. He felt it drag his hand around his head.

half-closed eyelids, heard a crack and a scream of fury. The remaining Death Eater yelled; Voldemort screamed, "No!"

on. He punched it with his wand-free hand and the bike shot more flames into the air, hurtling straight toward the ground.

"Hagrid!" Harry called, holding on to the bike for dear life. "Hagrid — Accio Hagrid!"

The motorbike sped up, sucked toward the earth. Face level with the handlebars, Harry could see nothing but darkness.

There was nothing he could do about it. Behind him came another scream, "Your wand, Selwyn, give me your wand!"

He felt Voldemort before he saw him. Looking sideways, he stared into the red eyes and was sure they would be the eyes of the real one.

—

And then Voldemort vanished. Harry looked down and saw Hagrid spread-eagled on the ground below him. He pulled himself forward, and with an earsplitting, ground-trembling crash, he smashed into a muddy pond.

CHAPTER FIVE

FALLEN WARRIOR

Hagrid?"

Harry struggled to raise himself out of the debris of metal and leather that surrounded him; his hands sank into inches of mud. He knew where Voldemort had gone and expected him to swoop out of the darkness at any moment. Something hot and wet splashed on his face, and he stumbled toward the great dark mass on the ground that was Hagrid.

"Hagrid? Hagrid, talk to me —"

But the dark mass did not stir.

"Who's there? Is it Potter? Are you Harry Potter?"

Harry did not recognize the man's voice. Then a woman shouted, "They've crashed, Ted! Crashed in the garden!"

Harry's head was swimming.

"Hagrid," he repeated stupidly, and his knees buckled.

The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back on what felt like cushions, with a burning sensation in his ribs and his forehead was still throbbing.

"Hagrid?"

He opened his eyes and saw that he was lying on a sofa in an unfamiliar, lamplit sitting room. His rucksack lay on the floor. A large, round-bellied man was watching Harry anxiously.

"Hagrid's fine, son," said the man, "the wife's seeing to him now. How are you feeling? Anything else broken? I've fixed your wand — Dora's father."

Harry sat up too quickly: Lights popped in front of his eyes and he felt sick and giddy.

"Voldemort —"

"Easy, now," said Ted Tonks, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder and pushing him back against the cushions. "That was a bit wrong with the bike? Arthur Weasley overstretch himself again, him and his Muggle contraptions?"

"No," said Harry, as his scar pulsed like an open wound. "Death Eaters, loads of them — we were chased —"

"Death Eaters?" said Ted sharply. "What d'you mean, Death Eaters? I thought they didn't know you were being moved."

"They knew," said Harry.

Ted Tonks looked up at the ceiling as though he could see through it to the sky above.

"Well, we know our protective charms hold, then, don't we? They shouldn't be able to get within a hundred yards of the house."

Now Harry understood why Voldemort had vanished; it had been at the point when the motorbike crossed the barrier.

He imagined Voldemort, a hundred yards above them as they spoke, looking for a way to penetrate what Harry visualized as a wall.

He swung his legs off the sofa; he needed to see Hagrid with his own eyes before he would believe that he was alive.

He squeezed through it, his face covered in mud and blood, limping a little but miraculously alive.

"Harry!"

Knocking over two delicate tables and an aspidistra, he covered the floor between them in two strides and pulled Harry up. "Well, yeh, Harry, how did yeh get out o' that? I thought we were both goners."

"Yeah, me too. I can't believe —"

Harry broke off. He had just noticed the woman who had entered the room behind Hagrid.

"You!" he shouted, and he thrust his hand into his pocket, but it was empty.

"Your wand's here, son," said Ted, tapping it on Harry's arm. "It fell right beside you, I picked it up. And that's my wife."

"Oh, I'm — I'm sorry."

As she moved forward into the room, Mrs. Tonks's resemblance to her sister Bellatrix became much less pronounced. Nevertheless, she looked a little haughty after Harry's exclamation.

"What happened to our daughter?" she asked. "Hagrid said you were ambushed; where is Nymphadora?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "We don't know what happened to anyone else."

She and Ted exchanged looks. A mixture of fear and guilt gripped Harry at the sight of their expressions; if any of the others had been involved in the plan, given them his hair. . . .

"The Portkey," he said, remembering all of a sudden. "We've got to get back to the Burrow and find out — then we'll know."

"Dora'll be okay, 'Dromeda," said Ted. "She knows her stuff, she's been in plenty of tight spots with the Aurors. The Portkey'll be ready to leave in three minutes, if you want to take it."

"Yeah, we do," said Harry. He seized his rucksack, swung it onto his shoulders. "I —"

He looked at Mrs. Tonks, wanting to apologize for the state of fear in which he left her and for which he felt so terribly sorry. His voice came out thin and hollow and insincere.

"I'll tell Tonks — Dora — to send word, when she . . . Thanks for patching us up, thanks for everything. I —"

He was glad to leave the room and follow Ted Tonks along a short hallway and into a bedroom. Hagrid came after them.

"There you go, son. That's the Portkey."

Mr. Tonks was pointing to a small, silver-backed hairbrush lying on the dressing table.

"Thanks," said Harry, reaching out to place a finger on it, ready to leave.

"Wait a moment," said Hagrid, looking around. "Harry, where's Hedwig?"

"She . . . she got hit," said Harry.

The realization crashed over him: He felt ashamed of himself as the tears stung his eyes. The owl had been his companion. He had been forced to return to the Dursleys.

Hagrid reached out a great hand and patted him painfully on the shoulder.

"Never mind," he said gruffly. "Never mind. She had a great old life —"

"Hagrid!" said Ted Tonks warningly, as the hairbrush glowed bright blue, and Hagrid only just got his forefinger to it in time.

With a jerk behind the navel as though an invisible hook and line had dragged him forward, Harry was pulled into the air. He and Hagrid hurtled away from Mr. Tonks. Seconds later Harry's feet slammed onto hard ground and he fell on his back.

Throwing aside the no longer glowing hairbrush, Harry stood up, swaying slightly, and saw Mrs. Weasley and Ginny Weasley. They had both collapsed on landing, clambered laboriously to his feet.

"Harry? You are the real Harry? What happened? Where are the others?" cried Mrs. Weasley.

"What d'you mean? Isn't anyone else back?" Harry panted.

The answer was clearly etched in Mrs. Weasley's pale face.

"The Death Eaters were waiting for us," Harry told her. "We were surrounded the moment we took off — they knew it, they chased us, it was all we could do to get away, and then Voldemort caught up with us —"

He could hear the self-justifying note in his voice, the plea for her to understand why he did not know what had happened.

"Thank goodness you're all right," she said, pulling him into a hug he did not feel he deserved.

"Haven't got any brandy, have yeh, Molly?" asked Hagrid a little shakily. "For medicinal purposes?"

She could have summoned it by magic, but as she hurried back toward the crooked house, Harry knew that she wanted a plea for information at once.

"Ron and Tonks should have been back first, but they missed their Portkey, it came back without them," she said, pointing at an ancient sneaker, "should have been Dad and Fred's, they were supposed to be second. You and George and Lupin ought to be back in about a minute."

Mrs. Weasley reappeared carrying a bottle of brandy, which she handed to Hagrid. He uncorked it and drank it straight.

"Mum!" shouted Ginny, pointing to a spot several feet away.

A blue light had appeared in the darkness: It grew larger and brighter, and Lupin and George appeared, spinning and falling. Lupin was supporting George, who was unconscious and whose face was covered in blood.

Harry ran forward and seized George's legs. Together, he and Lupin carried George into the house and through the kitchen. A lamplight fell across George's head, Ginny gasped and Harry's stomach lurched: One of George's ears was missing. The blood let blood.

No sooner had Mrs. Weasley bent over her son than Lupin grabbed Harry by the upper arm and dragged him, none the less his bulk through the back door.

"Oi!" said Hagrid indignantly. "Le' go of him! Le' go of Harry!"

Lupin ignored him.

"What creature sat in the corner the first time that Harry Potter visited my office at Hogwarts?" he said, giving Harry a look.

"A — a grindylow in a tank, wasn't it?"

Lupin released Harry and fell back against a kitchen cupboard.

"Wha' was tha' about?" roared Hagrid.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I had to check," said Lupin tersely. "We've been betrayed. Voldemort knew that you were being directly involved in the plan. You might have been an impostor."

"So why aren't you checkin' me?" panted Hagrid, still struggling to fit through the door.

"You're half-giant," said Lupin, looking up at Hagrid. "The Polyjuice Potion is designed for human use only."

"None of the Order would have told Voldemort we were moving tonight," said Harry. The idea was dreadful to him, but when he came toward the end, he didn't know which one he was in the beginning. If he'd been in on the plan he'd have known for sure.

"Voldemort caught up with you?" said Lupin sharply. "What happened? How did you escape?"

Harry explained briefly how the Death Eaters pursuing them had seemed to recognize him as the true Harry, how the snake had appeared just before he and Hagrid had reached the sanctuary of Tonks's parents.

"They recognized you? But how? What had you done?"

"I . . ." Harry tried to remember; the whole journey seemed like a blur of panic and confusion. "I saw Stan Shunpike. . . . He was supposed to take us? And I tried to Disarm him instead of — well, he doesn't know what he's doing, does he? He must be Imperiused!"

Lupin looked aghast.

"Harry, the time for Disarming is past! These people are trying to capture and kill you! At least Stun if you aren't prepared to fight!"

"We were hundreds of feet up! Stan's not himself, and if I Stunned him and he'd fallen, he'd have died the same as if he'd been killed a year or two years ago," Harry added defiantly. Lupin was reminding him of the sneering Hufflepuff Zacharias Smith, who had jeered him.

"Yes, Harry," said Lupin with painful restraint, "and a great number of Death Eaters witnessed that happening! Forgiveness is not an option. Repeating it tonight in front of Death Eaters who either witnessed or heard about the first occasion was clearly a mistake."

"So you think I should have killed Stan Shunpike?" said Harry angrily.

"Of course not," said Lupin, "but the Death Eaters — frankly, most people! — would have expected you to attack back. It's your signature move, and I urge you not to let it become so!"

Lupin was making Harry feel idiotic, and yet there was still a grain of defiance inside him.

"I won't blast people out of my way just because they're there," said Harry. "That's Voldemort's job."

Lupin's retort was lost: Finally succeeding in squeezing through the door, Hagrid staggered to a chair and sat down; in the meantime, Harry addressed Lupin again.

"Will George be okay?"

All Lupin's frustration with Harry seemed to drain away at the question.

"I think so, although there's no chance of replacing his ear, not when it's been cursed off —"

There was a scuffling from outside. Lupin dived for the back door; Harry leapt over Hagrid's legs and sprinted into the garden.

Two figures had appeared in the yard, and as Harry ran toward them he realized they were Hermione, now returning from her patrol. She was angry. Hermione flung herself into Harry's arms, but Kingsley showed no pleasure at the sight of any of them. Over her shoulder, she looked at Lupin's chest.

"The last words Albus Dumbledore spoke to the pair of us?"

"Harry is the best hope we have. Trust him," said Lupin calmly.

Kingsley turned his wand on Harry, but Lupin said, "It's him, I've checked!"

"All right, all right!" said Kingsley, stowing his wand back beneath his cloak. "But somebody betrayed us! They knew, t

"So it seems," replied Lupin, "but apparently they did not realize that there would be seven Harrys."

"Small comfort!" snarled Kingsley. "Who else is back?"

"Only Harry, Hagrid, George, and me."

Hermione stifled a little moan behind her hand.

"What happened to you?" Lupin asked Kingsley.

"Followed by five, injured two, might've killed one," Kingsley reeled off, "and we saw You-Know-Who as well, he joined he can —"

"Fly," supplied Harry. "I saw him too, he came after Hagrid and me."

"So that's why he left, to follow you!" said Kingsley. "I couldn't understand why he'd vanished. But what made him cha

"Harry behaved a little too kindly to Stan Shunpike," said Lupin.

"Stan?" repeated Hermione. "But I thought he was in Azkaban?"

Kingsley let out a mirthless laugh.

"Hermione, there's obviously been a mass breakout which the Ministry has hushed up. Travers's hood fell off when I ou, Remus? Where's George?"

"He lost an ear," said Lupin.

"Lost an — ?" repeated Hermione in a high voice.

"Snape's work," said Lupin.

"Snape?" shouted Harry. "You didn't say —"

"He lost his hood during the chase. Sectumsempra was always a speciality of Snape's. I wish I could say I'd paid him b oom after he was injured, he was losing so much blood."

Silence fell between the four of them as they looked up at the sky. There was no sign of movement; the stars stared e was Ron? Where were Fred and Mr. Weasley? Where were Bill, Fleur, Tonks, Mad-Eye, and Mundungus?

"Harry, give us a hand!" called Hagrid hoarsely from the door, in which he was stuck again. Glad of something to do, back into the sitting room, where Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were still tending to George. Mrs. Weasley had staunched ole where George's ear had been.

"How is he?"

Mrs. Weasley looked around and said, "I can't make it grow back, not when it's been removed by Dark Magic. But it c

"Yeah," said Harry. "Thank God."

"Did I hear someone else in the yard?" Ginny asked.

"Hermione and Kingsley," said Harry.

"Thank goodness," Ginny whispered. They looked at each other; Harry wanted to hug her, hold on to her; he did not on the impulse there was a great crash from the kitchen.

"I'll prove who I am, Kingsley, after I've seen my son, now back off if you know what's good for you!"

Harry had never heard Mr. Weasley shout like that before. He burst into the living room, his bald patch gleaming wit ut uninjured.

"Arthur!" sobbed Mrs. Weasley. "Oh thank goodness!"

"How is he?"

Mr. Weasley dropped to his knees beside George. For the first time since Harry had known him, Fred seemed to be l d as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

Perhaps roused by the sound of Fred and their father's arrival, George stirred.

"How do you feel, Georgie?" whispered Mrs. Weasley.

George's fingers groped for the side of his head.

"Saintlike," he murmured.

"What's wrong with him?" croaked Fred, looking terrified. "Is his mind affected?"

"Saintlike," repeated George, opening his eyes and looking up at his brother. "You see . . . I'm holy. Holey, Fred, geddi

Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever. Color flooded Fred's pale face.

"Pathetic," he told George. "Pathetic! With the whole wide world of ear-related humor before you, you go for holey?"

"Ah well," said George, grinning at his tear-soaked mother. "You'll be able to tell us apart now, anyway, Mum."

He looked around.

"Hi, Harry — you are Harry, right?"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry, moving closer to the sofa.

"Well, at least we got you back okay," said George. "Why aren't Ron and Bill huddled round my sickbed?"

"They're not back yet, George," said Mrs. Weasley. George's grin faded. Harry glanced at Ginny and motioned to her t she said in a low voice,

"Ron and Tonks should be back by now. They didn't have a long journey; Auntie Muriel's not that far from here."

Harry said nothing. He had been trying to keep fear at bay ever since reaching the Burrow, but now it enveloped him his throat. As they walked down the back steps into the dark yard, Ginny took his hand.

Kingsley was striding backward and forward, glancing up at the sky every time he turned. Harry was reminded of Un

one, and Lupin stood shoulder to shoulder, gazing upward in silence. None of them looked around when Harry and The minutes stretched into what might as well have been years. The slightest breath of wind made them all jump and the missing Order members might leap unscathed from its leaves —

And then a broom materialized directly above them and streaked toward the ground —

"It's them!" screamed Hermione.

Tonks landed in a long skid that sent earth and pebbles everywhere.

"Remus!" Tonks cried as she staggered off the broom into Lupin's arms. His face was set and white: He seemed unable

"You're okay," he mumbled, before Hermione flew at him and hugged him tightly.

"I thought — I thought —"

"M all right," said Ron, patting her on the back. "M fine."

"Ron was great," said Tonks warmly, relinquishing her hold on Lupin. "Wonderful. Stunned one of the Death Eaters, sent him a flying broom —"

"You did?" said Hermione, gazing up at Ron with her arms still around his neck.

"Always the tone of surprise," he said a little grumpily, breaking free. "Are we the last back?"

"No," said Ginny, "we're still waiting for Bill and Fleur and Mad-Eye and Mundungus. I'm going to tell Mum and Dad you're here. She ran back inside.

"So what kept you? What happened?" Lupin sounded almost angry at Tonks.

"Bellatrix," said Tonks. "She wants me quite as much as she wants Harry, Remus, she tried very hard to kill me. I just dodged. . . . Then we got to Ron's Auntie Muriel's and we'd missed our Portkey and she was fussing over us —"

A muscle was jumping in Lupin's jaw. He nodded, but seemed unable to say anything else.

"So what happened to you lot?" Tonks asked, turning to Harry, Hermione, and Kingsley.

They recounted the stories of their own journeys, but all the time the continued absence of Bill, Fleur, Mad-Eye, and Sirius seemed harder and harder to ignore.

"I'm going to have to get back to Downing Street, I should have been there an hour ago," said Kingsley finally, after a moment.

Lupin nodded. With a wave to the others, Kingsley walked away into the darkness toward the gate. Harry thought he saw a shadow's boundaries.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley came racing down the back steps, Ginny behind them. Both parents hugged Ron before turning to the others.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Weasley, "for our sons."

"Don't be silly, Molly," said Tonks at once.

"How's George?" asked Lupin.

"What's wrong with him?" piped up Ron.

"He's lost —"

But the end of Mrs. Weasley's sentence was drowned in a general outcry: A thestral had just soared into sight and landed in the courtyard swept but unhurt.

"Bill! Thank God, thank God —"

Mrs. Weasley ran forward, but the hug Bill bestowed upon her was perfunctory. Looking directly at his father, he said nothing. Nobody spoke, nobody moved. Harry felt as though something inside him was falling, falling through the earth, leaving a void.

"We saw it," said Bill; Fleur nodded, tear tracks glittering on her cheeks in the light from the kitchen window. "It happened so close by us, they were heading north too. Voldemort — he can fly — went straight for them. Dung panicked, I know, but Voldemort's curse hit Mad-Eye full in the face, he fell backward off his broom and — there was nothing we could do, it was over." Bill's voice broke.

"Of course you couldn't have done anything," said Lupin.

They all stood looking at each other. Harry could not quite comprehend it. Mad-Eye dead; it could not be. . . . Mad-Eye was dead. At last it seemed to dawn on everyone, though nobody said it, that there was no point waiting in the yard anymore, and that they should go in, through the kitchen, and into the living room, where Fred and George were laughing together.

"What's wrong?" said Fred, scanning their faces as they entered. "What's happened? Who's — ?"

"Mad-Eye," said Mr. Weasley. "Dead."

The twins' grins turned to grimaces of shock. Nobody seemed to know what to do. Tonks was crying silently into a handkerchief and his protégée at the Ministry of Magic. Hagrid, who had sat down on the floor in the corner where he had most often hid, hid his face.

Bill walked over to the sideboard and pulled out a bottle of firewhisky and some glasses.

"Here," he said, and with a wave of his wand he sent twelve full glasses soaring through the room to each of them, his eyes on the twins.

"Mad-Eye," they all said, and drank.

"Mad-Eye," echoed Hagrid, a little late, with a hiccup.

The firewhisky seared Harry's throat. It seemed to burn feeling back into him, dispelling the numbness and sense of loss.

"So Mundungus disappeared?" said Lupin, who had drained his own glass in one.

The atmosphere changed at once. Everybody looked tense, watching Lupin, both wanting him to go on, it seemed to them, and not wanting to.

"I know what you're thinking," said Bill, "and I wondered that too, on the way back here, because they seemed to be expecting us."

They didn't know there would be seven Harrys, that confused them the moment we appeared, and in case you've forgotten

. Why wouldn't he have told them the essential point? I think Dung panicked, it's as simple as that. He didn't want to go straight for them. It was enough to make anyone panic."

"You-Know-Who acted exactly as Mad-Eye expected him to," sniffed Tonks. "Mad-Eye said he'd expect the real Harry to, and when Mundungus gave them away he switched to Kingsley. . . ."

"Yes, and zat eez all very good," snapped Fleur, "but still eet does not explain 'ow zey knew we were moving 'Arry ton ze date to an outsider. It is ze only explanation for zem knowing ze date but not ze 'ole plan."

She glared around at them all, tear tracks still etched on her beautiful face, silently daring any of them to contradict her. At that moment, Hagrid hiccuped from behind his handkerchief. Harry glanced at Hagrid, who had just risked his own life to save him, and then back at the others. He had been tricked into giving Voldemort crucial information in exchange for a dragon's egg. . . .

"No," Harry said aloud, and they all looked at him, surprised: The firewhisky seemed to have amplified his voice. "I mean, something slip, I know they didn't mean to do it. It's not their fault," he repeated, again a little louder than he would have if he had said it all of you, I don't think anyone in this room would ever sell me to Voldemort."

More silence followed his words. They were all looking at him; Harry felt a little hot again, and drank some more firewhisky. Mad-Eye had always been scathing about Dumbledore's willingness to trust people.

"Well said, Harry," said Fred unexpectedly.

"Yeah, 'ear, 'ear," said George, with half a glance at Fred, the corner of whose mouth twitched.

Lupin was wearing an odd expression as he looked at Harry. It was close to pitying.

"You think I'm a fool?" demanded Harry.

"No, I think you're like James," said Lupin, "who would have regarded it as the height of dishonor to mistrust his friend. Harry knew what Lupin was getting at: that his father had been betrayed by his friend, Peter Pettigrew. He felt irritated at him, set down his glass upon a side table, and addressed Bill, "There's work to do. I can ask Kingsley whether —"

"No," said Bill at once, "I'll do it, I'll come."

"Where are you going?" said Tonks and Fleur together.

"Mad-Eye's body," said Lupin. "We need to recover it."

"Can't it — ?" began Mrs. Weasley with an appealing look at Bill.

"Wait?" said Bill. "Not unless you'd rather the Death Eaters took it?"

Nobody spoke. Lupin and Bill said good-bye and left.

The rest of them now dropped into chairs, all except for Harry, who remained standing. The suddenness and completeness of the change surprised them.

"I've got to go too," said Harry.

Ten pairs of startled eyes looked at him.

"Don't be silly, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley. "What are you talking about?"

"I can't stay here."

He rubbed his forehead; it was prickling again, it had not hurt like this for more than a year.

"You're all in danger while I'm here. I don't want —"

"But don't be so silly!" said Mrs. Weasley. "The whole point of tonight was to get you here safely, and thank goodness you're here. In France, we've arranged everything so that we can all stay together and look after you —"

She did not understand; she was making him feel worse, not better.

"If Voldemort finds out I'm here —"

"But why should he?" asked Mrs. Weasley.

"There are a dozen places you might be now, Harry," said Mr. Weasley. "He's got no way of knowing which safe house I'm in."

"It's not me I'm worried for!" said Harry.

"We know that," said Mr. Weasley quietly, "but it would make our efforts tonight seem rather pointless if you left."

"Yer not goin' anywhere," growled Hagrid. "Blimey, Harry, after all we wen' through ter get you here?"

"Yeah, what about my bleeding ear?" said George, hoisting himself up on his cushions.

"I know that —"

"Mad-Eye wouldn't want —"

"I KNOW!" Harry bellowed.

He felt beleaguered and blackmailed: Did they think he did not know what they had done for him, didn't they understand that he was in danger, before they had to suffer any more on his behalf? There was a long and awkward silence in which his scar continued to burn.

"Where's Hedwig, Harry?" she said coaxingly. "We can put her up with Pigwidgeon and give her something to eat."

His insides clenched like a fist. He could not tell her the truth. He drank the last of his firewhisky to avoid answering.

"Wait till it gets out yeh did it again, Harry," said Hagrid. "Escaped him, fought him off when he was right on top of yer head?"

"It wasn't me," said Harry flatly. "It was my wand. My wand acted of its own accord."

After a few moments, Hermione said gently, "But that's impossible, Harry. You mean that you did magic without meaning to?"

"No," said Harry. "The bike was falling, I couldn't have told you where Voldemort was, but my wand spun in my hand and it happened. I recognized. I've never made gold flames appear before."

"Often," said Mr. Weasley, "when you're in a pressured situation you can produce magic you never dreamed of. Small magic, but magic."

"It wasn't like that," said Harry through gritted teeth. His scar was burning: He felt angry and frustrated; he hated the way he felt about Voldemort's.

No one said anything. He knew that they did not believe him. Now that he came to think of it, he had never heard of his scar seared with pain; it was all he could do not to moan aloud. Muttering about fresh air, he set down his glass and went out. As he crossed the dark yard, the great skeletal thestral looked up, rustled its enormous batlike wings, then resumed its flight out at its overgrown plants, rubbing his pounding forehead and thinking of Dumbledore. Dumbledore would have believed him, he knew it. Dumbledore would have known how and why Harry's wand had reacted about wands, had explained to Harry the strange connection that existed between his wand and Voldemort's . . . But the poor owl, all were gone where Harry could never talk to them again. He felt a burning in his throat that had nothing to do with the pain. And then, out of nowhere, the pain in his scar peaked. As he clutched his forehead and closed his eyes, a voice screamed in his head. "You told me the problem would be solved by using another's wand!" And into his mind burst the vision of an emaciated old man lying in rags upon a stone floor, screaming, a horrible, dreadful sound. "No! No! I beg you, I beg you. . . ." "You lied to Lord Voldemort, Ollivander!" "I did not. . . . I swear I did not. . . ." "You sought to help Potter, to help him escape me!" "I swear I did not . . . I believed a different wand would work. . . ." "Explain, then, what happened. Lucius's wand is destroyed!" "I cannot understand . . . The connection . . . exists only . . . between your two wands. . . ." "Lies!" "Please . . . I beg you. . . ." And Harry saw the white hand raise its wand and felt Voldemort's surge of vicious anger, saw the frail old man on the ground. "Harry?" It was over as quickly as it had come: Harry stood shaking in the darkness, clutching the gate into the garden, his head pounding. Before he realized that Ron and Hermione were at his side. "Harry, come back in the house," Hermione whispered. "You aren't still thinking of leaving?" "Yeah, you've got to stay, mate," said Ron, thumping Harry on the back. "Are you all right?" Hermione asked, close enough now to look into Harry's face. "You look awful!" "Well," said Harry shakily, "I probably look better than Ollivander. . . ." When he had finished telling them what he had seen, Ron looked appalled, but Hermione downright terrified. "But it was supposed to have stopped! Your scar — it wasn't supposed to do this anymore! You mustn't let that connection control you!" When he did not reply, she gripped his arm. "Harry, he's taking over the Ministry and the newspapers and half the Wizarding world! Don't let him inside your head!"

CHAPTER SIX

THE GHOUL IN PAJAMAS

The shock of losing Mad-Eye hung over the house in the days that followed; Harry kept expecting to see him stumping in and out to relay news. Harry felt that nothing but action would assuage his feelings of guilt and grief and that he could do as soon as possible. "Well, you can't do anything about the" — Ron mouthed the word *Horcruxes* — "till you're seventeen. You've still got to wait, we? Or," he dropped his voice to a whisper, "d'you reckon you already know where the You-Know-Whats are?" "No," Harry admitted. "I think Hermione's been doing a bit of research," said Ron. "She said she was saving it for when you got here." They were sitting at the breakfast table; Mr. Weasley and Bill had just left for work. Mrs. Weasley had gone upstairs to take a bath. "The Trace'll break on the thirty-first," said Harry. "That means I only need to stay here four days. Then I can —" "Five days," Ron corrected him firmly. "We've got to stay for the wedding. They'll kill us if we miss it." Harry understood "they" to mean Fleur and Mrs. Weasley. "It's one extra day," said Ron, when Harry looked mutinous. "Don't they realize how important —?" "Course they don't," said Ron. "They haven't got a clue. And now you mention it, I wanted to talk to you about that." Ron glanced toward the door into the hall to check that Mrs. Weasley was not returning yet, then leaned in closer to Harry. "Mum's been trying to get it out of Hermione and me. What we're off to do. She'll try you next, so brace yourself. Dad told you not to tell anyone except us, they dropped it. Not Mum, though. She's determined." Ron's prediction came true within hours. Shortly before lunch, Mrs. Weasley detached Harry from the others by asking him to bring out his rucksack. Once she had him cornered in the tiny scullery off the kitchen, she started. "Ron and Hermione seem to think that the three of you are dropping out of Hogwarts," she began in a light, casual tone. "Oh," said Harry. "Well, yeah. We are." The mangle turned of its own accord in a corner, wringing out what looked like one of Mr. Weasley's vests. "May I ask why you are abandoning your education?" said Mrs. Weasley. "Well, Dumbledore left me . . . stuff to do," mumbled Harry. "Ron and Hermione know about it, and they want to come with me. What sort of 'stuff'?"

"I'm sorry, I can't —"

"Well, frankly, I think Arthur and I have a right to know, and I'm sure Mr. and Mrs. Granger would agree!" said Mrs. Weasley. He forced himself to look directly into her eyes, noticing as he did so that they were precisely the same shade of brown. "Dumbledore didn't want anyone else to know, Mrs. Weasley. I'm sorry. Ron and Hermione don't have to come, it's their choice. I don't see that you have to go either!" she snapped, dropping all pretense now. "You're barely of age, any of you! It's your whole Order at his command! Harry, you must have misunderstood him. Probably he was telling you something he didn't want to say."

"I didn't misunderstand," said Harry flatly. "It's got to be me."

He handed her back the single sock he was supposed to be identifying, which was patterned with golden bulrushes. "And that's not mine, I don't support Puddlemere United."

"Oh, of course not," said Mrs. Weasley with a sudden and rather unnerving return to her casual tone. "I should have thought of that. Mind helping with the preparations for Bill and Fleur's wedding, will you? There's still so much to do."

"No — I — of course not," said Harry, disconcerted by this sudden change of subject.

"Sweet of you," she replied, and she smiled as she left the scullery.

From that moment on, Mrs. Weasley kept Harry, Ron, and Hermione so busy with preparations for the wedding that it was a wonder how any behavior would have been that Mrs. Weasley wanted to distract them all from thoughts of Mad-Eye and the terrors of the war. It was color-matching favors, ribbons, and flowers, of de-gnoming the garden and helping Mrs. Weasley cook vast batches of food. All the jobs she handed out seemed to keep him, Ron, and Hermione away from one another; he had not had a chance to tell them about Voldemort torturing Ollivander.

"I think Mum thinks that if she can stop the three of you getting together and planning, she'll be able to delay you long enough to get dinner on the third night of his stay."

"And then what does she think's going to happen?" Harry muttered. "Someone else might kill off Voldemort while she's gone." He had spoken without thinking, and saw Ginny's face whiten.

"So it's true?" she said. "That's what you're trying to do?"

"I — not — I was joking," said Harry evasively.

They stared at each other, and there was something more than shock in Ginny's expression. Suddenly Harry became aware of those stolen hours in secluded corners of the Hogwarts grounds. He was sure she was remembering them too. Bill walked in.

They were often joined by other Order members for dinner now, because the Burrow had replaced number twelve, Grimmauld Place, after the death of Dumbledore, their Secret-Keeper, each of the people to whom Dumbledore had confided Grimmauld Place. "And as there are around twenty of us, that greatly dilutes the power of the Fidelius Charm. Twenty times as many as before. We can't expect it to hold much longer."

"But surely Snape will have told the Death Eaters the address by now?" asked Harry.

"Well, Mad-Eye set up a couple of curses against Snape in case he turns up there again. We hope they'll be strong enough to talk about the place, but we can't be sure. It would have been insane to keep using the place as headquarters now though. The kitchen was so crowded that evening it was difficult to maneuver knives and forks. Harry found himself crammed in. It made him wish they had been separated by a few more people. He was trying so hard to avoid brushing her arm he didn't notice."

"No news about Mad-Eye?" Harry asked Bill.

"Nothing," replied Bill.

They had not been able to hold a funeral for Moody, because Bill and Lupin had failed to recover his body. It had been a mess and the confusion of the battle.

"The Daily Prophet hasn't said a word about him dying or about finding the body," Bill went on. "But that doesn't mean anything."

"And they still haven't called a hearing about all the underage magic I used escaping the Death Eaters?" Harry called out.

"Because they know I had no choice or because they don't want me to tell the world Voldemort attacked me?"

"The latter, I think. Scrimgeour doesn't want to admit that You-Know-Who is as powerful as he is, nor that Azkaban's not safe."

"Yeah, why tell the public the truth?" said Harry, clenching his knife so tightly that the faint scars on the back of his right hand ached. "He lies."

"Isn't anyone at the Ministry prepared to stand up to him?" asked Ron angrily.

"Of course, Ron, but people are terrified," Mr. Weasley replied, "terrified that they will be next to disappear, their children kidnapped; I for one don't believe the Muggle Studies professor at Hogwarts resigned. She hasn't been seen for weeks. We just hope he's working on a plan."

There was a pause in which Mrs. Weasley magicked the empty plates onto the work surface and served apple tart.

"We must decide how you will be disguised, Harry," said Fleur, once everyone had pudding. "For ze wedding," she added. "The Death Eaters, but we cannot guarantee zat zey will not let something slip after zey 'ave 'ad champagne."

From this, Harry gathered that she still suspected Hagrid.

"Yes, good point," said Mrs. Weasley from the top of the table, where she sat, spectacles perched on the end of her nose. "I've written a very long piece of parchment. Now, Ron, have you cleaned out your room yet?"

"Why?" exclaimed Ron, slamming his spoon down and glaring at his mother. "Why does my room have to be cleaned?"

"We are holding your brother's wedding here in a few days' time, young man —"

"And are they getting married in my bedroom?" asked Ron furiously. "No! So why in the name of Merlin's saggy left leg?"

"Don't talk to your mother like that," said Mr. Weasley firmly. "And do as you're told."

Ron scowled at both his parents, then picked up his spoon and attacked the last few mouthfuls of his apple tart.

"I can help, some of it's my mess," Harry told Ron, but Mrs. Weasley cut across him.

"No, Harry, dear, I'd much rather you helped Arthur muck out the chickens, and Hermione, I'd be ever so grateful if you were here when they're arriving at eleven tomorrow morning."

But as it turned out, there was very little to do for the chickens.

"There's no need to, er, mention it to Molly," Mr. Weasley told Harry, blocking his access to the coop, "but, er, Ted Tonks is a bit of a mess — he's hiding — that's to say, keeping — it in here. Fantastic stuff: There's an exhaust gaskin, as I believe it's called, the muggle way to find out how brakes work. I'm going to try and put it all back together again when Molly's not — I mean, when I've finished."

When they returned to the house, Mrs. Weasley was nowhere to be seen, so Harry slipped upstairs to Ron's attic bedroom.

"I'm doing it, I'm doing it — ! Oh, it's you," said Ron in relief, as Harry entered the room. Ron lay back down on the bed, exhausted as it had been all week; the only change was that Hermione was now sitting in the far corner, her fluffy ginger cat curled up on his lap, recognized as his own, into two enormous piles.

"Hi, Harry," she said, as he sat down on his camp bed.

"And how did you manage to get away?"

"Oh, Ron's mum forgot that she asked Ginny and me to change the sheets yesterday," said Hermione. She threw Nymphadora Tonks' Arts onto the other.

"We were just talking about Mad-Eye," Ron told Harry. "I reckon he might have survived."

"But Bill saw him hit by the Killing Curse," said Harry.

"Yeah, but Bill was under attack too," said Ron. "How can he be sure what he saw?"

"Even if the Killing Curse missed, Mad-Eye still fell about a thousand feet," said Hermione, now weighing Quidditch Texts.

"He could have used a Shield Charm —"

"Fleur said his wand was blasted out of his hand," said Harry.

"Well, all right, if you want him to be dead," said Ron grumpily, punching his pillow into a more comfortable shape.

"Of course we don't want him to be dead!" said Hermione, looking shocked. "It's dreadful that he's dead! But we're better off without him. For the first time, Harry imagined Mad-Eye's body, broken as Dumbledore's had been, yet with that one eye still whirling, and he wanted to laugh.

"The Death Eaters probably tidied up after themselves, that's why no one's found him," said Ron wisely.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Like Barty Crouch, turned into a bone and buried in Hagrid's front garden. They probably transfigured him."

"Don't!" squealed Hermione. Startled, Harry looked over just in time to see her burst into tears over her copy of Spellman's Syllabary.

"Oh no," said Harry, struggling to get up from the old camp bed. "Hermione, I wasn't trying to upset —"

But with a great creaking of rusty bedsprings, Ron bounded off the bed and got there first. One arm around Hermione, he pulled out a rag and a handkerchief that he had used to clean out the oven earlier. Hastily pulling out his wand, he pointed it at the rag and the handkerchief.

The wand siphoned off most of the grease. Looking rather pleased with himself, Ron handed the slightly smoking handkerchief to Hermione. "Oh . . . thanks, Ron. . . . I'm sorry. . . ." She blew her nose and hiccuped. "It's just so awful, isn't it? Right after Dumbledore's funeral, somehow, he seemed so tough!"

"Yeah, I know," said Ron, giving her a squeeze. "But you know what he'd say to us if he was here?"

"Constant vigilance," said Hermione, mopping her eyes.

"That's right," said Ron, nodding. "He'd tell us to learn from what happened to him. And what I've learned is not to trust anyone but you and Hermione. And what I've learned is not to trust anyone but you and Hermione."

Hermione gave a shaky laugh and leaned forward to pick up two more books. A second later, Ron had snatched his arm and pulled her back.

"f Monsters on his foot. The book had broken free from its restraining belt and snapped viciously at Ron's ankle.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Hermione cried as Harry wrenched the book from Ron's leg and retied it shut.

"What are you doing with all those books anyway?" Ron asked, limping back to his bed.

"Just trying to decide which ones to take with us," said Hermione. "When we're looking for the Horcruxes."

"Oh, of course," said Ron, clapping a hand to his forehead. "I forgot we'll be hunting down Voldemort in a mobile library."

"Ha ha," said Hermione, looking down at Spellman's Syllabary. "I wonder . . . will we need to translate runes? It's possible."

She dropped the syllabary onto the larger of the two piles and picked up Hogwarts: A History.

"Listen," said Harry.

He had sat up straight. Ron and Hermione looked at him with similar mixtures of resignation and defiance.

"I know you said after Dumbledore's funeral that you wanted to come with me," Harry began.

"Here he goes," Ron said to Hermione, rolling his eyes.

"As we knew he would," she sighed, turning back to the books. "You know, I think I will take Hogwarts: A History. Even if I didn't have it with —"

"Listen!" said Harry again.

"No, Harry, you listen," said Hermione. "We're coming with you. That was decided months ago — years, really."

"But —"

"Shut up," Ron advised him.

"— are you sure you've thought this through?" Harry persisted.

"Let's see," said Hermione, slamming Travels with Trolls onto the discarded pile with a rather fierce look. "I've been planning this for a while, which for your information has included doing some pretty difficult magic, not to mention smuggling Mad-Eye's wand."

"I've also modified my parents' memories so that they're convinced they're really called Wendell and Monica Wilkins, and that they're both teachers at Hogwarts."

ey have now done. That's to make it more difficult for Voldemort to track them down and interrogate them about me
ou.

"Assuming I survive our hunt for the Horcruxes, I'll find Mum and Dad and lift the enchantment. If I don't — well, I think
Wendell and Monica Wilkins don't know that they've got a daughter, you see."

Hermione's eyes were swimming with tears again. Ron got back off the bed, put his arm around her once more, and
ould not think of anything to say, not least because it was highly unusual for Ron to be teaching anyone else tact.

"I — Hermione, I'm sorry — I didn't —"

"Didn't realize that Ron and I know perfectly well what might happen if we come with you? Well, we do. Ron, show Harry."

"Nah, he's just eaten," said Ron.

"Go on, he needs to know!"

"Oh, all right. Harry, come here."

For the second time Ron withdrew his arm from around Hermione and stumped over to the door.

"C'mon."

"Why?" Harry asked, following Ron out of the room onto the tiny landing.

"Descendo," muttered Ron, pointing his wand at the low ceiling. A hatch opened right over their heads and a ladder s
und came out of the square hole, along with an unpleasant smell like open drains.

"That's your ghoul, isn't it?" asked Harry, who had never actually met the creature that sometimes disrupted the night

"Yeah, it is," said Ron, climbing the ladder. "Come and have a look at him."

Harry followed Ron up the few short steps into the tiny attic space. His head and shoulders were in the room before
st asleep in the gloom with its large mouth wide open.

"But it . . . it looks . . . do ghouls normally wear pajamas?"

"No," said Ron. "Nor have they usually got red hair or that number of pustules."

Harry contemplated the thing, slightly revolted. It was human in shape and size, and was wearing what, now that Harry
Ron's pajamas. He was also sure that ghouls were generally rather slimy and bald, rather than distinctly hairy and co

"He's me, see?" said Ron.

"No," said Harry. "I don't."

"I'll explain it back in my room, the smell's getting to me," said Ron. They climbed back down the ladder, which Ron re
rting books.

"Once we've left, the ghoul's going to come and live down here in my room," said Ron. "I think he's really looking forw
moan and drool — but he nods a lot when you mention it. Anyway, he's going to be me with spattergroit. Good, eh?"

Harry merely looked his confusion.

"It is!" said Ron, clearly frustrated that Harry had not grasped the brilliance of the plan. "Look, when we three don't tu
and I must be with you, right? Which means the Death Eaters will go straight for our families to see if they've got info

"But hopefully it'll look like I've gone away with Mum and Dad; a lot of Muggle-borns are talking about going into hidi

"We can't hide my whole family, it'll look too fishy and they can't all leave their jobs," said Ron. "So we're going to put
hich is why I can't go back to school. If anyone comes calling to investigate, Mum or Dad can show them the ghoul in
o they're not going to want to go near him. It won't matter that he can't say anything, either, because apparently you

"And your mum and dad are in on this plan?" asked Harry.

"Dad is. He helped Fred and George transform the ghoul. Mum . . . well, you've seen what she's like. She won't accept

There was silence in the room, broken only by gentle thuds as Hermione continued to throw books onto one pile or
her, unable to say anything. The measures they had taken to protect their families made him realize, more than anyt

h him and that they knew exactly how dangerous that would be. He wanted to tell them what that meant to him, but

Through the silence came the muffled sounds of Mrs. Weasley shouting from four floors below.

"Ginny's probably left a speck of dust on a poxy napkin ring," said Ron. "I dunno why the Delacours have got to come

"Fleur's sister's a bridesmaid, she needs to be here for the rehearsal, and she's too young to come on her own," said

"Well, guests aren't going to help Mum's stress levels," said Ron.

"What we really need to decide," said Hermione, tossing Defensive Magical Theory into the bin without a second glan
where we're going after we leave here. I know you said you wanted to go to Godric's Hollow first, Harry, and I unders

our priority?"

"If we knew where any of the Horcruxes were, I'd agree with you," said Harry, who did not believe that Hermione rea
s' graves were only part of the attraction: He had a strong, though inexplicable, feeling that the place held answers fo

survived Voldemort's Killing Curse; now that he was facing the challenge of repeating the feat, Harry was drawn to th

"Don't you think there's a possibility that Voldemort's keeping a watch on Godric's Hollow?" Hermione asked. "He mig

re free to go wherever you like?"

This had not occurred to Harry. While he struggled to find a counterargument, Ron spoke up, evidently following his

"This R.A.B. person," he said. "You know, the one who stole the real locket?"

Hermione nodded.

"He said in his note he was going to destroy it, didn't he?"

Harry dragged his rucksack toward him and pulled out the fake Horcrux in which R.A.B.'s note was still folded.

"I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can," Harry read out.

"Well, what if he did finish it off?" said Ron.

"Or she," interposed Hermione.

"Whichever," said Ron, "it'd be one less for us to do!"

"Yes, but we're still going to have to try and trace the real locket, aren't we?" said Hermione, "to find out whether or not."

"And once we get hold of it, how do you destroy a Horcrux?" asked Ron.

"Well," said Hermione, "I've been researching that."

"How?" asked Harry. "I didn't think there were any books on Horcruxes in the library?"

"There weren't," said Hermione, who had turned pink. "Dumbledore removed them all, but he — he didn't destroy them."

Ron sat up straight, wide-eyed.

"How in the name of Merlin's pants have you managed to get your hands on those Horcrux books?"

"It — it wasn't stealing!" said Hermione, looking from Harry to Ron with a kind of desperation. "They were still library books, y'know. Anyway, if he really didn't want anyone to get at them, I'm sure he would have made it much harder to —"

"Get to the point!" said Ron.

"Well . . . it was easy," said Hermione in a small voice. "I just did a Summoning Charm. You know — Accio. And — they came right to my dormitory."

"But when did you do this?" Harry asked, regarding Hermione with a mixture of admiration and incredulity.

"Just after his — Dumbledore's — funeral," said Hermione in an even smaller voice. "Right after we agreed we'd leave the castle. I went to my room to get my things — it just occurred to me that the more we knew about them, the better it would be . . . and I went straight in through the open window and I — I packed them."

She swallowed and then said imploringly, "I can't believe Dumbledore would have been angry, it's not as though we're stealing anything!"

"Can you hear us complaining?" said Ron. "Where are these books anyway?"

Hermione rummaged for a moment and then extracted from the pile a large volume, bound in faded black leather. She opened it to a page showing a picture of something recently dead.

"This is the one that gives explicit instructions on how to make a Horcrux. Secrets of the Darkest Art — it's a horrible book. Dumbledore removed it from the library. . . . If he didn't do it until he was headmaster, I bet Voldemort got all the instructions from it."

"Why did he have to ask Slughorn how to make a Horcrux, then, if he'd already read that?" asked Ron.

"He only approached Slughorn to find out what would happen if you split your soul into seven," said Harry. "Dumbledore told him not to. He asked Slughorn about them. I think you're right, Hermione, that could easily have been where he got the information."

"And the more I've read about them," said Hermione, "the more horrible they seem, and the less I can believe that he would do the rest of your soul by ripping it, and that's just by making one Horcrux!"

Harry remembered what Dumbledore had said about Voldemort moving beyond "usual evil."

"Isn't there any way of putting yourself back together?" Ron asked.

"Yes," said Hermione with a hollow smile, "but it would be excruciatingly painful."

"Why? How do you do it?" asked Harry.

"Remorse," said Hermione. "You've got to really feel what you've done. There's a footnote. Apparently the pain of it can kill you."

"No," said Ron, before Harry could answer. "So does it say how to destroy Horcruxes in that book?"

"Yes," said Hermione, now turning the fragile pages as if examining rotting entrails, "because it warns Dark wizards not to do it. That I've read, what Harry did to Riddle's diary was one of the few really foolproof ways of destroying a Horcrux."

"What, stabbing it with a basilisk fang?" asked Harry.

"Oh well, lucky we've got such a large supply of basilisk fangs, then," said Ron. "I was wondering what we were going to do with all those fangs."

"It doesn't have to be a basilisk fang," said Hermione patiently. "It has to be something so destructive that the Horcrux is destroyed and it's incredibly rare —"

"— phoenix tears," said Harry, nodding.

"Exactly," said Hermione. "Our problem is that there are very few substances as destructive as basilisk venom, and that's the one we're going to have to solve, though, because ripping, smashing, or crushing a Horcrux won't do the trick. You've got to destroy it."

"But even if we wreck the thing it lives in," said Ron, "why can't the bit of soul in it just go and live in something else?"

"Because a Horcrux is the complete opposite of a human being."

Seeing that Harry and Ron looked thoroughly confused, Hermione hurried on, "Look, if I picked up a sword right now and stabbed it, it would be destroyed, but the bit of soul trapped in it could no longer exist. Ginny tried to get rid of the diary, but it came back good as new."

"Which would be a real comfort to me, I'm sure," said Ron. Harry laughed.

"It should be, actually! But my point is that whatever happens to your body, your soul will survive, untouched," said Hermione. "The fragment of soul inside it depends on its container, its enchanted body, for survival. It can't exist without it."

"That diary sort of died when I stabbed it," said Harry, remembering ink pouring like blood from the punctured pages. "It was destroyed, but the bit of soul trapped in it could no longer exist. Ginny tried to get rid of the diary, but it came back good as new."

"Hang on," said Ron, frowning. "The bit of soul in that diary was possessing Ginny, wasn't it? How does that work, the bit of soul inside it depends on its container, its enchanted body, for survival. It can't exist without it."

"While the magical container is still intact, the bit of soul inside it can flit in and out of someone if they get too close to it," she added before Ron could speak. "I mean close emotionally. Ginny poured her heart into it, so it was attached to her. It's nothing to do with touching it," she added before Ron could speak. "I mean close emotionally. Ginny poured her heart into it, so it was attached to her. It's nothing to do with touching it," she added before Ron could speak.

ou're in trouble if you get too fond of or dependent on the Horcrux."

"I wonder how Dumbledore destroyed the ring?" said Harry. "Why didn't I ask him? I never really . . ."

His voice tailed away: He was thinking of all the things he should have asked Dumbledore, and of how, since the headmaster's death, he had missed the opportunities when Dumbledore had been alive, to find out more . . . to find out everything. . . .

The silence was shattered as the bedroom door flew open with a wall-shaking crash. Hermione shrieked and dropped to the floor, lying indignantly; Ron jumped off the bed, skidded on a discarded Chocolate Frog wrapper, and smacked his head on the wall, realizing that he was looking up at Mrs. Weasley, whose hair was disheveled and whose face was contorted with rage. "I'm so sorry to break up this cozy little gathering," she said, her voice trembling. "I'm sure you all need your rest . . . but I need to get back to bed. I've been working hard and I was under the impression that you had agreed to help."

"Oh yes," said Hermione, looking terrified as she leapt to her feet, sending books flying in every direction, "we will . . . of course. With an anguished look at Harry and Ron, Hermione hurried out of the room after Mrs. Weasley.

"It's like being a house-elf," complained Ron in an undertone, still massaging his head as he and Harry followed. "Excuse me, but I'm a bit tired, the happier I'll be."

"Yeah," said Harry, "then we'll have nothing to do except find Horcruxes. . . . It'll be like a holiday, won't it?"

Ron started to laugh, but at the sight of the enormous pile of wedding presents waiting for them in Mrs. Weasley's room, he stopped.

The Delacours arrived the following morning at eleven o'clock. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were feeling quite relaxed, but when they saw the Delacours, Ron stumped back upstairs to put on matching socks, and Harry attempted to flatten his hair. Once they had finished, they went to the kitchen to await the visitors.

Harry had never seen the place looking so tidy. The rusty cauldrons and old Wellington boots that usually littered the kitchen were gone, replaced by bushes standing either side of the door in large pots; though there was no breeze, the leaves waved lazily, giving an impression of movement. The yard had been swept, and the nearby garden had been pruned, plucked, and generally spruced up, although Harry noticed a few forlorn without its usual contingent of capering gnomes.

He had lost track of how many security enchantments had been placed upon the Burrow by both the Order and the Ministry. He had never traveled by magic directly into the place. Mr. Weasley had therefore gone to meet the Delacours on top of a nearby hill. When he saw their approach was an unusually high-pitched laugh, which turned out to be coming from Mr. Weasley, who appeared at the door. He was followed by a blonde woman in long, leaf-green robes, who could only be Fleur's mother.

"Maman!" cried Fleur, rushing forward to embrace her. "Papa!"

Monsieur Delacour was nowhere near as attractive as his wife; he was a head shorter and extremely plump, with a large nose. As he walked toward Mrs. Weasley on high-heeled boots, he kissed her twice on each cheek, leaving her flustered.

"You 'ave been to much trouble," he said in a deep voice. "Fleur tells us you 'ave been working very 'ard."

"Oh, it's been nothing, nothing!" trilled Mrs. Weasley. "No trouble at all!"

Ron relieved his feelings by aiming a kick at a gnome who was peering out from behind one of the new Flutterby bushes.

"Dear lady!" said Monsieur Delacour, still holding Mrs. Weasley's hand between his own two plump ones and beaming at her. "Let me present my wife, Apolline."

Madame Delacour glided forward and stooped to kiss Mrs. Weasley too.

"Enchantée," she said. "Your 'usband 'as been telling us such amusing stories!"

Mr. Weasley gave a maniacal laugh; Mrs. Weasley threw him a look, upon which he became immediately silent and averted his eyes.

"And, of course, you 'ave met my leetle daughter, Gabrielle!" said Monsieur Delacour. Gabrielle was Fleur in miniature. When she gave Mrs. Weasley a dazzling smile and hugged her, then threw Harry a glowing look, batting her eyelashes.

"Well, come in, do!" said Mrs. Weasley brightly, and she ushered the Delacours into the house, with many "No, please, no more."

The Delacours, it soon transpired, were helpful, pleasant guests. They were pleased with everything and keen to assist. They discussed everything from the seating plan to the bridesmaids' shoes. "Charmant!" Madame Delacour was most accomplished. Gabrielle followed her elder sister around, trying to assist in any way she could and jabbering away in rapid French.

On the downside, the Burrow was not built to accommodate so many people. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were now sleeping in the living room, and the girls were sleeping in the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley's protests and insisted they take their bedroom. Gabrielle was sleeping with Fleur in Percy's old room, and Bill would be sleeping in the room from Romania. Opportunities to make plans together became virtually nonexistent, and it was in desperation that Harry decided to escape the overcrowded house.

"But she still won't leave us alone!" snarled Ron, as their second attempt at a meeting in the yard was foiled by the arrival of the Delacours in her arms.

"Oh, good, you've fed the chickens," she called as she approached them. "We'd better shut them away again before they get too big. He explained, pausing to lean against the henhouse. She looked exhausted. "Millamant's Magic Marquees . . . they're perfect. While they're here, Harry. I must say it does complicate organizing a wedding, having all these security spells around the place. "I'm sorry," said Harry humbly.

"Oh, don't be silly, dear!" said Mrs. Weasley at once. "I didn't mean — well, your safety's much more important! Actually, it's your birthday, Harry. Seventeen, after all, it's an important day. . . ."

"I don't want a fuss," said Harry quickly, envisaging the additional strain this would put on them all. "Really, Mrs. Weasley, I'll be home before the wedding. . . ."

"Oh, well, if you're sure, dear. I'll invite Remus and Tonks, shall I? And how about Hagrid?"

"That'd be great," said Harry. "But please don't go to loads of trouble."

"Not at all, not at all . . . It's no trouble. . . ."

She looked at him, a long, searching look, then smiled a little sadly, straightened up, and walked away. Harry watched as he rose into the air to hang himself up, and suddenly he felt a great wave of remorse for the inconvenience and

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WILL OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

He was walking along a mountain road in the cool blue light of dawn. Far below, swathed in mist, was the shadow of a valley so badly he could think of little else, the man who held the answer, the answer to his problem . . . ?

"Oi, wake up."

Harry opened his eyes. He was lying again on the camp bed in Ron's dingy attic room. The sun had not yet risen and he was under his tiny wing. The scar on Harry's forehead was prickling.

"You were muttering in your sleep."

"Was I?"

"Yeah. 'Gregorovitch.' You kept saying 'Gregorovitch.'"

Harry was not wearing his glasses; Ron's face appeared slightly blurred.

"Who's Gregorovitch?"

"I dunno, do I? You were the one saying it."

Harry rubbed his forehead, thinking. He had a vague idea he had heard the name before, but he could not think where.

"I think Voldemort's looking for him."

"Poor bloke," said Ron fervently.

Harry sat up, still rubbing his scar, now wide awake. He tried to remember exactly what he had seen in the dream, but the little village cradled in a deep valley.

"I think he's abroad."

"Who, Gregorovitch?"

"Voldemort. I think he's somewhere abroad, looking for Gregorovitch. It didn't look like anywhere in Britain."

"You reckon you were seeing into his mind again?"

Ron sounded worried.

"Do me a favor and don't tell Hermione," said Harry. "Although how she expects me to stop seeing stuff in my sleep . . ."

He gazed up at little Pigwidgeon's cage, thinking . . . Why was the name "Gregorovitch" familiar?

"I think," he said slowly, "he's got something to do with Quidditch. There's some connection, but I can't — I can't think of it."

"Quidditch?" said Ron. "Sure you're not thinking of Gorgovitch?"

"Who?"

"Dragomir Gorgovitch, Chaser, transferred to the Chudley Cannons for a record fee two years ago. Record holder for fastest bludger."

"No," said Harry. "I'm definitely not thinking of Gorgovitch."

"I try not to either," said Ron. "Well, happy birthday anyway."

"Wow — that's right, I forgot! I'm seventeen!"

Harry seized the wand lying beside his camp bed, pointed it at the cluttered desk where he had left his glasses, and saw them fly. There was something immensely satisfying about seeing them zoom toward him, at least until they poked him in the forehead.

"Slick," snorted Ron.

Reveling in the removal of his Trace, Harry sent Ron's possessions flying around the room, causing Pigwidgeon to wobble. He untied the laces of his trainers by magic (the resultant knot took several minutes to untie by hand) and, purely for the pleasure of it, changed the posters bright blue.

"I'd do your fly by hand, though," Ron advised Harry, sniggering when Harry immediately checked it. "Here's your present."

"A book?" said Harry as he took the rectangular parcel. "Bit of a departure from tradition, isn't it?"

"This isn't your average book," said Ron. "It's pure gold: Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches. Explains everything you need to know to get rid of Lavender and I would've known how to get going with . . . Well, Fred and George. It's not all about wandwork, either."

When they arrived in the kitchen they found a pile of presents waiting on the table. Bill and Monsieur Delacour were waiting for them over the frying pan.

"Arthur told me to wish you a happy seventeenth, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley, beaming at him. "He had to leave early."

Harry sat down, took the square parcel she had indicated, and unwrapped it. Inside was a watch very like the one Mr. Weasley had given him, with stars circling around the face instead of hands.

"It's traditional to give a wizard a watch when he comes of age," said Mrs. Weasley, watching him anxiously from beside the stove. "Actually my brother Fabian's and he wasn't terribly careful with his possessions, it's a bit dented on the back, but —"

The rest of her speech was lost; Harry had got up and hugged her. He tried to put a lot of unsaid things into the hug, but he was clumsy when he released her, then waved her wand in a slightly random way, causing half a pack of bacon to flop out of the cupboard.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" said Hermione, hurrying into the kitchen and adding her own present to the top of the pile. "I hope you like it."

He added to Ron, who seemed not to hear her.

"Come on, then, open Hermione's!" said Ron.

She had bought him a new Sneakoscope. The other packages contained an enchanted razor from Bill and Fleur ("Ah,

r Delacour assured him, "but you must tell it clearly what you want . . . otherwise you might find you 'ave a leetle less ours, and an enormous box of the latest Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes merchandise from Fred and George. Harry, Ron, and Hermione did not linger at the table, as the arrival of Madame Delacour, Fleur, and Gabrielle made t "I'll pack these for you," Hermione said brightly, taking Harry's presents out of his arms as the three of them headed of your underpants to come out of the wash, Ron —"

Ron's splutter was interrupted by the opening of a door on the first-floor landing.

"Harry, will you come in here a moment?"

It was Ginny. Ron came to an abrupt halt, but Hermione took him by the elbow and tugged him on up the stairs. Fee He had never been inside it before. It was small, but bright. There was a large poster of the Wizarding band the Weir the all-witch Quidditch team the Holyhead Harpies, on the other. A desk stood facing the open window, which looked e Quidditch with Ron and Hermione, and which now housed a large, pearly white marquee. The golden flag on top w Ginny looked up into Harry's face, took a deep breath, and said, "Happy seventeenth."

"Yeah . . . thanks."

She was looking at him steadily; he, however, found it difficult to look back at her; it was like gazing into a brilliant lig

"Nice view," he said feebly, pointing toward the window.

She ignored this. He could not blame her.

"I couldn't think what to get you," she said.

"You didn't have to get me anything."

She disregarded this too.

"I didn't know what would be useful. Nothing too big, because you wouldn't be able to take it with you."

He chanced a glance at her. She was not tearful; that was one of the many wonderful things about Ginny, she was ra have toughened her up.

She took a step closer to him.

"So then I thought, I'd like you to have something to remember me by, you know, if you meet some veela when you'r

"I think dating opportunities are going to be pretty thin on the ground, to be honest."

"There's the silver lining I've been looking for," she whispered, and then she was kissing him as she had never kissed I oblivion, better than firewhisky; she was the only real thing in the world, Ginny, the feel of her, one hand at her bac The door banged open behind them and they jumped apart.

"Oh," said Ron pointedly. "Sorry."

"Ron!" Hermione was just behind him, slightly out of breath. There was a strained silence, then Ginny said in a flat litt

"Well, happy birthday anyway, Harry."

Ron's ears were scarlet; Hermione looked nervous. Harry wanted to slam the door in their faces, but it felt as though shining moment had popped like a soap bubble. All the reasons for ending his relationship with Ginny, for staying w and all happy forgetfulness was gone.

He looked at Ginny, wanting to say something, though he hardly knew what, but she had turned her back on him. He not do anything to comfort her in front of Ron.

"I'll see you later," he said, and followed the other two out of the bedroom.

Ron marched downstairs, through the still-crowded kitchen and into the yard, and Harry kept pace with him all the w Once he reached the seclusion of the freshly mown lawn, Ron rounded on Harry.

"You ditched her. What are you doing now, messing her around?"

"I'm not messing her around," said Harry, as Hermione caught up with them.

"Ron —"

But Ron held up a hand to silence her.

"She was really cut up when you ended it —"

"So was I. You know why I stopped it, and it wasn't because I wanted to."

"Yeah, but you go snogging her now and she's just going to get her hopes up again —"

"She's not an idiot, she knows it can't happen, she's not expecting us to — to end up married, or —"

As he said it, a vivid picture formed in Harry's mind of Ginny in a white dress, marrying a tall, faceless, and unpleasant r future was free and unencumbered, whereas his . . . he could see nothing but Voldemort ahead.

"If you keep groping her every chance you get —"

"It won't happen again," said Harry harshly. The day was cloudless, but he felt as though the sun had gone in. "Okay?"

Ron looked half resentful, half sheepish; he rocked backward and forward on his feet for a moment, then said, "Righ

Ginny did not seek another one-to-one meeting with Harry for the rest of the day, nor by any look or gesture did she oom. Nevertheless, Charlie's arrival came as a relief to Harry. It provided a distraction, watching Mrs. Weasley force C ce that he was about to get a proper haircut.

As Harry's birthday dinner would have stretched the Burrow's kitchen to breaking point even before the arrival of Ch o end in the garden. Fred and George bewitched a number of purple lanterns, all emblazoned with a large number 1 rations, George's wound was neat and clean, but Harry was not yet used to the dark hole in the side of his head, des Hermione made purple and gold streamers erupt from the end of her wand and drape themselves artistically over th

"Nice," said Ron, as with one final flourish of her wand, Hermione turned the leaves on the crabapple tree to gold. "Y

"Thank you, Ron!" said Hermione, looking both pleased and a little confused. Harry turned away, smiling to himself. He found time to peruse his copy of Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches; he caught Ginny's eye and grinned up at a conversation with Monsieur Delacour.

"Out of the way, out of the way!" sang Mrs. Weasley, coming through the gate with what appeared to be a giant, bearing a cake. He realized that it was his birthday cake, which Mrs. Weasley was suspending with her wand, rather than risk carrying it to the middle of the table, Harry said,

"That looks amazing, Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, it's nothing, dear," she said fondly. Over her shoulder, Ron gave Harry the thumbs-up and mouthed, Good one. By seven o'clock all the guests had arrived, led into the house by Fred and George, who had waited for them at the entrance, and horrible, hairy brown suit. Although Lupin smiled as he shook Harry's hand, Harry thought he looked rather uncomfortable.

"Happy birthday, Harry," she said, hugging him tightly.

"Seventeen, eh!" said Hagrid as he accepted a bucket-sized glass of wine from Fred. "Six years ter the day since we met."

"Vaguely," said Harry, grinning up at him. "Didn't you smash down the front door, give Dudley a pig's tail, and tell me to go?"

"I forge' the details," Hagrid chortled. "All righ', Ron, Hermione?"

"We're fine," said Hermione. "How are you?"

"Ar, not bad. Bin busy, we got some newborn unicorns, I'll show yeh when yeh get back —" Harry avoided Ron's and Hermione's eyes. "I uddn' think what ter get yeh, but then I remembered this." He pulled out a small, slightly furry drawstring pouch with a pocket. "Mokeskin. Hide anythin' in there an' no one but the owner can get it out. They're rare, them."

"Hagrid, thanks!"

"S'nothin'," said Hagrid with a wave of a dustbin-lid-sized hand. "An' there's Charlie! Always liked him — hey! Charlie!" Charlie approached, running his hand slightly ruefully over his new, brutally short haircut. He was shorter than Ron, but more muscular.

"Hi, Hagrid, how's it going?"

"Bin meanin' ter write fer ages. How's Norbert doin'?"

"Norbert?" Charlie laughed. "The Norwegian Ridgeback? We call her Norberta now."

"Wha — Norbert's a girl?"

"Oh yeah," said Charlie.

"How can you tell?" asked Hermione.

"They're a lot more vicious," said Charlie. He looked over his shoulder and dropped his voice. "Wish Dad would hurry. They all looked over at Mrs. Weasley. She was trying to talk to Madame Delacour while glancing repeatedly at the gate. "I think we'd better start without Arthur," she called to the garden at large after a moment or two. "He must have been there." They all saw it at the same time: a streak of light that came flying across the yard and onto the table, where it resolved into a pair of legs and spoke with Mr. Weasley's voice.

"Minister of Magic coming with me."

The Patronus dissolved into thin air, leaving Fleur's family peering in astonishment at the place where it had vanished.

"We shouldn't be here," said Lupin at once. "Harry — I'm sorry — I'll explain another time —"

He seized Tonks's wrist and pulled her away; they reached the fence, climbed over it, and vanished from sight. Mrs. Weasley called after them.

"The Minister — but why — ? I don't understand —"

But there was no time to discuss the matter; a second later, Mr. Weasley had appeared out of thin air at the gate, accompanied by a man with a beard of grizzled hair.

The two newcomers marched across the yard toward the garden and the lantern-lit table, where everybody sat in silence. In the lantern light, Harry saw that he looked much older than the last time they had met, scraggy and grim.

"Sorry to intrude," said Scrimgeour, as he limped to a halt before the table. "Especially as I can see that I am gate-crashing." His eyes lingered for a moment on the giant Snitch cake.

"Many happy returns."

"Thanks," said Harry.

"I require a private word with you," Scrimgeour went on. "Also with Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger."

"Us?" said Ron, sounding surprised. "Why us?"

"I shall tell you that when we are somewhere more private," said Scrimgeour. "Is there such a place?" he demanded of Mr. Weasley.

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Weasley, who looked nervous. "The, er, sitting room, why don't you use that?"

"You can lead the way," Scrimgeour said to Ron. "There will be no need for you to accompany us, Arthur."

Harry saw Mr. Weasley exchange a worried look with Mrs. Weasley as he, Ron, and Hermione stood up. As they led the way, he was thinking the same as he was: Scrimgeour must, somehow, have learned that the three of them were planning to do something. Scrimgeour did not speak as they all passed through the messy kitchen and into the Burrow's sitting room. Although it was already dark in here: Harry flicked his wand at the oil lamps as he entered and they illuminated the shabby but cozy room. They were normally occupied, leaving Harry, Ron, and Hermione to squeeze side by side onto the sofa. Once they had done so, Scrimgeour said, "I have some questions for the three of you, and I think it will be best if we do it individually. If you two" — he pointed at Ron and Hermione —

"We're not going anywhere," said Harry, while Hermione nodded vigorously. "You can speak to us together, or not at all."

Scrimgeour gave Harry a cold, appraising look. Harry had the impression that the Minister was wondering whether it was worth the effort. "Very well then, together," he said, shrugging. He cleared his throat. "I am here, as I'm sure you know, because of Albus Dumbledore. Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another.

"A surprise, apparently! You were not aware then that Dumbledore had left you anything?"

"A-all of us?" said Ron. "Me and Hermione too?"

"Yes, all of —"

But Harry interrupted.

"Dumbledore died over a month ago. Why has it taken this long to give us what he left us?"

"Isn't it obvious?" said Hermione, before Scrimgeour could answer. "They wanted to examine whatever he's left us. You can't do that immediately."

"I had every right," said Scrimgeour dismissively. "The Decree for Justifiable Confiscation gives the Ministry the power to seize anything that might be dangerous to the public."

"That law was created to stop wizards passing on Dark artifacts," said Hermione, "and the Ministry is supposed to have examined everything before seizing them! Are you telling me that you thought Dumbledore was trying to pass us something cursed?"

"Are you planning to follow a career in Magical Law, Miss Granger?" asked Scrimgeour.

"No, I'm not," retorted Hermione. "I'm hoping to do some good in the world!"

Ron laughed. Scrimgeour's eyes flickered toward him and away again as Harry spoke.

"So why have you decided to let us have our things now? Can't think of a pretext to keep them?"

"No, it'll be because the thirty-one days are up," said Hermione at once. "They can't keep the objects longer than that."

"Would you say you were close to Dumbledore, Ronald?" asked Scrimgeour, ignoring Hermione. Ron looked startled.

"Me? Not — not really . . . It was always Harry who . . ."

Ron looked around at Harry and Hermione, to see Hermione giving him a stop-talking-now! sort of look, but the damage was done. He had expected, and wanted, to hear. He swooped like a bird of prey upon Ron's answer.

"If you were not very close to Dumbledore, how do you account for the fact that he remembered you in his will? He remembered your possessions — his private library, his magical instruments, and other personal effects — were left to Hogwarts. Why?"

"I . . . dunno," said Ron. "I . . . when I say we weren't close . . . I mean, I think he liked me. . . ."

"You're being modest, Ron," said Hermione. "Dumbledore was very fond of you."

This was stretching the truth to breaking point; as far as Harry knew, Ron and Dumbledore had never been alone together. Scrimgeour did not seem to be listening. He put his hand inside his cloak and drew out a drawstring pouch much larger than it looked. He pulled out a roll of parchment which he unrolled and read aloud.

"The Last Will and Testament of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore' . . . Yes, here we are . . . 'To Ronald Bilius Weasley, my friend, I leave my Deluminator. I hope it will be of use to you. Remember me when he uses it.'"

Scrimgeour took from the bag an object that Harry had seen before: It looked something like a silver cigarette lighter, but it was a Deluminator. Scrimgeour leaned forward and passed the Deluminator to Ron, who took it and turned it on.

"That is a valuable object," said Scrimgeour, watching Ron. "It may even be unique. Certainly it is of Dumbledore's own. Ron shook his head, looking bewildered.

"Dumbledore must have taught thousands of students," Scrimgeour persevered. "Yet the only ones he remembered were you and Mr. Weasley. I'd put his Deluminator, Mr. Weasley?"

"Put out lights, I s'pose," mumbled Ron. "What else could I do with it?"

Evidently Scrimgeour had no suggestions. After squinting at Ron for a moment or two, he turned back to Hermione.

"To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard, in the hope that she will find it entertaining."

Scrimgeour now pulled out of the bag a small book that looked as ancient as the copy of Secrets of the Darkest Art which he had given her. Hermione took it from Scrimgeour without a word. She held the book in her lap and gazed at it. Harry saw that the title was in red ink, splashed onto the embossed symbols.

"Why do you think Dumbledore left you that book, Miss Granger?" asked Scrimgeour.

"He . . . he knew I liked books," said Hermione in a thick voice, mopping her eyes with her sleeve.

"But why that particular book?"

"I don't know. He must have thought I'd enjoy it."

"Did you ever discuss codes, or any means of passing secret messages, with Dumbledore?"

"No, I didn't," said Hermione, still wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "And if the Ministry hasn't found any hidden codes in the books, why would he?" She suppressed a sob. They were wedged together so tightly that Ron had difficulty extracting his arm to put it around her.

"To Harry James Potter," he read, and Harry's insides contracted with a sudden excitement, "I leave the Snitch he caught. It is a symbol of the rewards of perseverance and skill."

As Scrimgeour pulled out the tiny, walnut-sized golden ball, its silver wings fluttered rather feebly, and Harry could not help but stare.

"Why did Dumbledore leave you this Snitch?" asked Scrimgeour.

"No idea," said Harry. "For the reasons you just read out, I suppose . . . to remind me what you can get if you . . . persevere."

"You think this a mere symbolic keepsake, then?"

"I suppose so," said Harry. "What else could it be?"

"I'm asking the questions," said Scrimgeour, shifting his chair a little closer to the sofa. Dusk was really falling outside now, and the light was ebbing over the hedge.

"I notice that your birthday cake is in the shape of a Snitch," Scrimgeour said to Harry. "Why is that?"

Hermione laughed derisively.

"Oh, it can't be a reference to the fact Harry's a great Seeker, that's way too obvious," she said. "There must be a secret." "I don't think there's anything hidden in the icing," said Scrimgeour, "but a Snitch would be a very good hiding place for Harry." Harry shrugged. Hermione, however, answered: "Because Snitches have flesh memories," she said.

"What?" said Harry and Ron together; both considered Hermione's Quidditch knowledge negligible.

"Correct," said Scrimgeour. "A Snitch is not touched by bare skin before it is released, not even by the maker, who was the first human to lay hands upon it, in case of a disputed capture. This Snitch" — he held up the tiny golden ball — "is made of pure gold, who had prodigious magical skill, whatever his other faults, might have enchanted this Snitch so that it will open Harry's heart was beating rather fast. He was sure that Scrimgeour was right. How could he avoid taking the Snitch with him?" "You don't say anything," said Scrimgeour. "Perhaps you already know what the Snitch contains?"

"No," said Harry, still wondering how he could appear to touch the Snitch without really doing so. If only he knew Legilimens, he would practically hear her brain whirring beside him.

"Take it," said Scrimgeour quietly.

Harry met the Minister's yellow eyes and knew he had no option but to obey. He held out his hand, and Scrimgeour dropped the concealed ball into Harry's palm.

Nothing happened. As Harry's fingers closed around the Snitch, its tired wings fluttered and were still. Scrimgeour, Ron, and Hermione concealed their faces, as if still hoping it might transform in some way.

"That was dramatic," said Harry coolly. Both Ron and Hermione laughed.

"That's all, then, is it?" asked Hermione, making to prise herself off the sofa.

"Not quite," said Scrimgeour, who looked bad-tempered now. "Dumbledore left you a second bequest, Potter."

"What is it?" asked Harry, excitement rekindling.

Scrimgeour did not bother to read from the will this time.

"The sword of Godric Gryffindor," he said.

Hermione and Ron both stiffened. Harry looked around for a sign of the ruby-encrusted hilt, but Scrimgeour did not. The sword was too small to contain it.

"So where is it?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Unfortunately," said Scrimgeour, "that sword was not Dumbledore's to give away. The sword of Godric Gryffindor is not a gift."

"It belongs to Harry!" said Hermione hotly. "It chose him, he was the one who found it, it came to him out of the Sorting Hat."

"According to reliable historical sources, the sword may present itself to any worthy Gryffindor," said Scrimgeour. "That is what ever Dumbledore may have decided." Scrimgeour scratched his badly shaven cheek, scrutinizing Harry. "Why do you doubt me?"

"— Dumbledore wanted to give me the sword?" said Harry, struggling to keep his temper. "Maybe he thought it would be a good idea."

"This is not a joke, Potter!" growled Scrimgeour. "Was it because Dumbledore believed that only the sword of Godric Gryffindor could slay the He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"Interesting theory," said Harry. "Has anyone ever tried sticking a sword in Voldemort? Maybe the Ministry should put down Deluminators or covering up breakouts from Azkaban. So is this what you've been doing, Minister, shut up in your office and nearly one of them — Voldemort chased me across three counties, he killed Mad-Eye Moody, but there's been no word from him to contact us to cooperate with you!"

"You go too far!" shouted Scrimgeour, standing up; Harry jumped to his feet too. Scrimgeour limped toward Harry and punched a hole in Harry's T-shirt like a lit cigarette.

"Oi!" said Ron, jumping up and raising his own wand, but Harry said,

"No! D'you want to give him an excuse to arrest us?"

"Remembered you're not at school, have you?" said Scrimgeour, breathing hard into Harry's face. "Remembered that you may wear that scar like a crown, Potter, but it is not up to a seventeen-year-old boy to tell me how to do my job?"

"It's time you earned it," said Harry.

The floor trembled; there was a sound of running footsteps, then the door to the sitting room burst open and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley entered. "We — we thought we heard —" began Mr. Weasley, looking thoroughly alarmed at the sight of Harry and the Minister.

"— raised voices," panted Mrs. Weasley.

Scrimgeour took a couple of steps back from Harry, glancing at the hole he had made in Harry's T-shirt. He seemed to be looking at it with some interest.

"It — it was nothing," he growled. "I . . . regret your attitude," he said, looking Harry full in the face once more. "You should have what Dumbledore — desired. We ought to be working together."

"I don't like your methods, Minister," said Harry. "Remember?"

For the second time, he raised his right fist and displayed to Scrimgeour the scars that still showed white on the back of his hand, now hardened. He turned away without another word and limped from the room. Mrs. Weasley hurried after him; Harry's T-shirt was gone!

"What did he want?" Mr. Weasley asked, looking around at Harry, Ron, and Hermione as Mrs. Weasley came hurrying in. "To give us what Dumbledore left us," said Harry. "They've only just released the contents of his will."

Outside in the garden, over the dinner tables, the three objects Scrimgeour had given them were passed from hand to hand. Mr. Weasley edle the Bard and lamented the fact that Scrimgeour had refused to pass on the sword, but none of them could offer any more than a Snitch. As Mr. Weasley examined the Deluminator for the third or fourth time, Mrs. Weasley said tentatively, "Harry, do you think he was right?"

you. . . Shall I serve dinner now?"

They all ate rather hurriedly and then, after a hasty chorus of "Happy Birthday" and much gulping of cake, the party lay, but was far too bulky to sleep in the overstretched Burrow, left to set up a tent for himself in a neighboring field.

"Meet us upstairs," Harry whispered to Hermione, while they helped Mrs. Weasley restore the garden to its normal state.

Up in the attic room, Ron examined his Deluminator, and Harry filled Hagrid's mokeskin purse, not with gold, but with the things they were: the Marauder's Map, the shard of Sirius's enchanted mirror, and R.A.B.'s locket. He pulled the strings tight and the old Snitch and watching its wings flutter feebly. At last, Hermione tapped on the door and tiptoed inside.

"Muffliato," she whispered, waving her wand in the direction of the stairs.

"Thought you didn't approve of that spell?" said Ron.

"Times change," said Hermione. "Now, show us that Deluminator."

Ron obliged at once. Holding it up in front of him, he clicked it. The solitary lamp they had lit went out at once.

"The thing is," whispered Hermione through the dark, "we could have achieved that with Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder."

There was a small click, and the ball of light from the lamp flew back to the ceiling and illuminated them all once more.

"Still, it's cool," said Ron, a little defensively. "And from what they said, Dumbledore invented it himself!"

"I know, but surely he wouldn't have singled you out in his will just to help us turn out the lights!"

"D'you think he knew the Ministry would confiscate his will and examine everything he'd left us?" asked Harry.

"Definitely," said Hermione. "He couldn't tell us in the will why he was leaving us these things, but that still doesn't explain it."

". . . why he couldn't have given us a hint when he was alive?" asked Ron.

"Well, exactly," said Hermione, now flicking through *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. "If these things are important enough, he'd have let us know why . . . unless he thought it was obvious?"

"Thought wrong, then, didn't he?" said Ron. "I always said he was mental. Brilliant and everything, but cracked. Leaving things like this to us?"

"I've no idea," said Hermione. "When Scrimgeour made you take it, Harry, I was so sure that something was going to happen."

"Yeah, well," said Harry, his pulse quickening as he raised the Snitch in his fingers. "I wasn't going to try too hard in front of you."

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione.

"The Snitch I caught in my first ever Quidditch match?" said Harry. "Don't you remember?"

Hermione looked simply bemused. Ron, however, gasped, pointing frantically from Harry to the Snitch and back again.

"That was the one you nearly swallowed!"

"Exactly," said Harry, and with his heart beating fast, he pressed his mouth to the Snitch.

It did not open. Frustration and bitter disappointment welled up inside him: He lowered the golden sphere, but then he remembered.

"Writing! There's writing on it, quick, look!"

He nearly dropped the Snitch in surprise and excitement. Hermione was quite right. Engraved upon the smooth golden surface were words written in the thin, slanting handwriting that Harry recognized as Dumbledore's:

I open at the close.

He had barely read them when the words vanished again.

"I open at the close . . . 'What's that supposed to mean?"

Hermione and Ron shook their heads, looking blank.

"I open at the close . . . at the close . . . I open at the close . . ."

But no matter how often they repeated the words, with many different inflections, they were unable to wring any meaning from them.

"And the sword," said Ron finally, when they had at last abandoned their attempts to divine meaning in the Snitch's instructions.

"And why couldn't he just have told me?" Harry said quietly. "It was there, it was right there on the wall of his office during the war, why didn't he just give it to me then?"

He felt as though he were sitting in an examination with a question he ought to have been able to answer in front of him. Had he missed in the long talks with Dumbledore last year? Ought he to know what it all meant? Had Dumbledore expected him to know?

"And as for this book," said Hermione, "*The Tales of Beedle the Bard* . . . I've never even heard of them!"

"You've never heard of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*?" said Ron incredulously. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not!" said Hermione in surprise. "Do you know them, then?"

"Well, of course I do!"

Harry looked up, diverted. The circumstance of Ron having read a book that Hermione had not was unprecedented.

"Oh come on! All the old kids' stories are supposed to be Beedle's, aren't they? 'The Fountain of Fair Fortune' . . . 'The Enchanted Turnip' . . . 'The Cackling Stump' . . ."

"Excuse me?" said Hermione, giggling. "What was that last one?"

"Come off it!" said Ron, looking in disbelief from Harry to Hermione. "You must've heard of Babbitty Rabbitty —"

"Ron, you know full well Harry and I were brought up by Muggles!" said Hermione. "We didn't hear stories like that that we did 'Cinderella' —"

"What's that, an illness?" asked Ron.

"So these are children's stories?" asked Hermione, bending again over the runes.

"Yeah," said Ron uncertainly, "I mean, that's just what you hear, you know, that all these old stories came from Beedle's book."

"But I wonder why Dumbledore thought I should read them?"

Something creaked downstairs.

"Probably just Charlie, now Mum's asleep, sneaking off to regrow his hair," said Ron nervously.

"All the same, we should get to bed," whispered Hermione. "It wouldn't do to oversleep tomorrow."

"No," agreed Ron. "A brutal triple murder by the bridegroom's mother might put a bit of a damper on the wedding. I—" And he clicked the Deluminator once more as Hermione left the room.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WEDDING

Three o'clock on the following afternoon found Harry, Ron, Fred, and George standing outside the great white marquee. Harry had taken a large dose of Polyjuice Potion and was now the double of a redheaded Muggle boy from the local village, summoning Charm. The plan was to introduce Harry as "Cousin Barny" and trust to the great number of Weasley relatives. All four of them were clutching seating plans, so that they could help show people to the right seats. A host of white-jacketed band, and all of these wizards were currently sitting a short distance away under a tree; Harry could see a lot. Behind Harry, the entrance to the marquee revealed rows and rows of fragile golden chairs set on either side of a long red and gold flowers. Fred and George had fastened an enormous bunch of golden balloons over the exact point where E. W. Brownies and bees were hovering lazily over the grass and hedgerow. Harry was rather uncomfortable. The Muggle boy whose dress robes felt hot and tight in the full glare of a summer's day.

"When I get married," said Fred, tugging at the collar of his own robes, "I won't be bothering with any of this nonsense and Curse on Mum until it's all over."

"She wasn't too bad this morning, considering," said George. "Cried a bit about Percy not being here, but who wants brightly colored figures were appearing, one by one, out of nowhere at the distant boundary of the yard. Within minutes through the garden toward the marquee. Exotic flowers and bewitched birds fluttered on the witches' hats, while precious chatter grew louder and louder, drowning the sound of the bees as the crowd approached the tent."

"Excellent, I think I see a few veela cousins," said George, craning his neck for a better look. "They'll need help under-

"Not so fast, Your Holey-ness," said Fred, and darting past the gaggle of middle-aged witches heading the procession, pretty French girls, who giggled and allowed him to escort them inside. George was left to deal with the middle-aged w-

ue Perkins, while a rather deaf old couple fell to Harry's lot. "Wotcher," said a familiar voice as he came out of the marquee again and found Tonks and Lupin at the front of the - were the one with the curly hair. Sorry about last night," she added in a whisper as Harry led them up the aisle. "The - ght our presence might not do you any favors."

"It's fine, I understand," said Harry, speaking more to Lupin than Tonks. Lupin gave him a swift smile, but as they turned - ry. He did not understand it, but there was no time to dwell on the matter: Hagrid was causing a certain amount of d - elf, not upon the magically enlarged and reinforced seat set aside for him in the back row, but on five seats that now - While Mr. Weasley repaired the damage and Hagrid shouted apologies to anybody who would listen, Harry hurried b - king wizard. Slightly cross-eyed, with shoulder-length white hair the texture of candyfloss, he wore a cap whose tasse - de of egg-yolk yellow. An odd symbol, rather like a triangular eye, glistened from a golden chain around his neck.

"Xenophilius Lovegood," he said, extending a hand to Harry, "my daughter and I live just over the hill, so kind of the g - added to Ron.

"Yes," said Ron. "Isn't she with you?"

"She lingered in that charming little garden to say hello to the gnomes, such a glorious infestation! How few wizards - or, to give them their correct name, the Gernumbli gardensi."

"Ours do know a lot of excellent swear words," said Ron, "but I think Fred and George taught them those."

He led a party of warlocks into the marquee as Luna rushed up.

"Hello, Harry!" she said.

"Er — my name's Barny," said Harry, flummoxed.

"Oh, have you changed that too?" she asked brightly.

"How did you know — ?"

"Oh, just your expression," she said.

Like her father, Luna was wearing bright yellow robes, which she had accessorized with a large sunflower in her hair - was quite pleasant. At least there were no radishes dangling from her ears.

Xenophilius, who was deep in conversation with an acquaintance, had missed the exchange between Luna and Harry - er finger and said, "Daddy, look — one of the gnomes actually bit me!"

"How wonderful! Gnome saliva is enormously beneficial!" said Mr. Lovegood, seizing Luna's outstretched finger and - d feel any burgeoning talent today — perhaps an unexpected urge to sing opera or to declaim in Mermish — do not - Ron, passing them in the opposite direction, let out a loud snort.

"Ron can laugh," said Luna serenely as Harry led her and Xenophilius toward their seats, "but my father has done a l-

"Really?" said Harry, who had long since decided not to challenge Luna or her father's peculiar views. "Are you sure y-

"Oh, it's fine," said Luna, sucking her finger in a dreamy fashion and looking Harry up and down. "You look smart. I to - elieves you ought to wear sun colors to a wedding, for luck, you know."

As she drifted off after her father, Ron reappeared with an elderly witch clutching his arm. Her beaky nose, red-rim - ed flamingo.

". . . and your hair's much too long, Ronald, for a moment I thought you were Ginevra. Merlin's beard, what is Xenoph-

?" she barked at Harry.

"Oh yeah, Auntie Muriel, this is our cousin Barny."

"Another Weasley? You breed like gnomes. Isn't Harry Potter here? I was hoping to meet him. I thought he was a friend."

"No — he couldn't come —"

"Hmm. Made an excuse, did he? Not as gormless as he looks in press photographs, then. I've just been instructing the in-made, you know, and been in my family for centuries. She's a good-looking girl, but still — French. Well, well, find a way not to be on my feet too long."

Ron gave Harry a meaningful look as he passed and did not reappear for some time: When next they met at the entrance, the tent was nearly full now, and for the first time there was no queue outside.

"Nightmare, Muriel is," said Ron, mopping his forehead on his sleeve. "She used to come for Christmas every year, then she was nearly killed by a Dungbomb under her chair at dinner. Dad always says she'll have written them out of her will — like they care, they're all going. . . . Wow," he added, blinking rather rapidly as Hermione came hurrying toward them. "You look great!"

"Always the tone of surprise," said Hermione, though she smiled. She was wearing a floaty, lilac-colored dress with many layers. "Aunt Muriel doesn't agree, I just met her upstairs while she was giving Fleur the tiara. She said, 'Oh dear, is this the Muggle?'"

"Don't take it personally, she's rude to everyone," said Ron.

"Talking about Muriel?" inquired George, reemerging from the marquee with Fred. "Yeah, she's just told me my ears are big; he was a right laugh at weddings."

"Wasn't he the one who saw a Grim and died twenty-four hours later?" asked Hermione.

"Well, yeah, he went a bit odd toward the end," conceded George.

"But before he went loopy he was the life and soul of the party," said Fred. "He used to down an entire bottle of firewhisky and start pulling bunches of flowers out of his —"

"Yes, he sounds a real charmer," said Hermione, while Harry roared with laughter.

"Never married, for some reason," said Ron.

"You amaze me," said Hermione.

They were all laughing so much that none of them noticed the latecomer, a dark-haired young man with a large, curly mustache, who came up to Ron and said, with his eyes on Hermione, "You look vunderful."

"Viktor!" she shrieked, and dropped her small beaded bag, which made a loud thump quite disproportionate to its size. "I don't know you were — goodness — it's lovely to see — how are you?"

Ron's ears had turned bright red again. After glancing at Krum's invitation as if he did not believe a word of it, he said to Harry,

"Fleur invited me," said Krum, eyebrows raised.

Harry, who had no grudge against Krum, shook hands; then, feeling that it would be prudent to remove Krum from the tent,

"Your friend is not pleased to see me," said Krum as they entered the now packed marquee. "Or is he a relative?" he asked.

"Cousin," Harry muttered, but Krum was not really listening. His appearance was causing a stir, particularly amongst the girls.

While people were still craning their necks to get a good look at him, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George came hurrying up to Harry.

"Time to sit down," Fred told Harry, "or we're going to get run over by the bride."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione took their seats in the second row behind Fred and George. Hermione looked rather pink.

Harry, "Did you see he's grown a stupid little beard?"

Harry gave a noncommittal grunt.

A sense of jittery anticipation had filled the warm tent, the general murmuring broken by occasional spurts of excitement and waving at relatives; Mrs. Weasley was wearing a brand-new set of amethyst-colored robes with a matching hat.

A moment later Bill and Charlie stood up at the front of the marquee, both wearing dress robes, with large white roses pinned to their lapels. There was a great deal of giggling from the veela cousins. Then the crowd fell silent as music swelled from what seemed to be the gold band.

"Ooooh!" said Hermione, swiveling around in her seat to look at the entrance.

A great collective sigh issued from the assembled witches and wizards as Monsieur Delacour and Fleur came walking down the aisle.

Fleur was wearing a very simple white dress and seemed to be emitting a strong, silvery glow. While her radiance was not blinding, everybody it fell upon. Ginny and Gabrielle, both wearing golden dresses, looked even prettier than usual, and once Fleur had passed, the girls were all looking at her.

Fenrir Greyback.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said a slightly singsong voice, and with a slight shock, Harry saw the same small, tufty-haired wizard in front of Bill and Fleur. "We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of two faithful souls . . ."

"Yes, my tiara sets off the whole thing nicely," said Auntie Muriel in a rather carrying whisper. "But I must say, Ginevra, you look lovely." Ginny glanced around, grinning, winked at Harry, then quickly faced the front again. Harry's mind wandered a long way to the lonely parts of the school grounds. They seemed so long ago; they had always seemed too good to be true, as though they were a person without a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. . . .

"Do you, William Arthur, take Fleur Isabelle . . . ?"

In the front row, Mrs. Weasley and Madame Delacour were both sobbing quietly into scraps of lace. Trumpetlike sounds came from one of his own tablecloth-sized handkerchiefs. Hermione turned and beamed at Harry; her eyes too were full of tears.

". . . then I declare you bonded for life."

The tufty-haired wizard waved his wand high over the heads of Bill and Fleur and a shower of silver stars fell upon them. Then George led a round of applause, the golden balloons overhead burst: Birds of paradise and tiny golden bells flew and flared.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" called the tufty-haired wizard. "If you would please stand up!"

They all did so, Auntie Muriel grumbling audibly; he waved his wand again. The seats on which they had been sitting vanished, so that they stood beneath a canopy supported by golden poles, with a glorious view of the sunlit orchard above. From the center of the tent to form a gleaming dance floor; the hovering chairs grouped themselves around small, white-clothed tables, and the golden-jacketed band trooped toward a podium.

"Smooth," said Ron approvingly as the waiters popped up on all sides, some bearing silver trays of pumpkin juice, but most with sandwiches.

"We should go and congratulate them!" said Hermione, standing on tiptoe to see the place where Bill and Fleur had vanished.

"We'll have time later," shrugged Ron, snatching three butterbeers from a passing tray and handing one to Harry. "Hurry, before Auntie Muriel —"

Ron led the way across the empty dance floor, glancing left and right as he went: Harry felt sure that he was keeping track of the marquee, most of the tables were occupied: The emptiest was the one where Luna sat alone.

"All right if we join you?" asked Ron.

"Oh yes," she said happily. "Daddy's just gone to give Bill and Fleur our present."

"What is it, a lifetime's supply of Gurdyroots?" asked Ron.

Hermione aimed a kick at him under the table, but caught Harry instead. Eyes watering in pain, Harry lost track of the conversation. The band had begun to play. Bill and Fleur took to the dance floor first, to great applause; after a while, Mr. Weasley and Fleur's father.

"I like this song," said Luna, swaying in time to the waltzlike tune, and a few seconds later she stood up and glided onto the dance floor, eyes closed and waving her arms.

"She's great, isn't she?" said Ron admiringly. "Always good value."

But the smile vanished from his face at once: Viktor Krum had dropped into Luna's vacant seat. Hermione looked displeased. With a scowl on his face he said, "Who is that man in the yellow?"

"That's Xenophilius Lovegood, he's the father of a friend of ours," said Ron. His pugnacious tone indicated that they were on holiday. "Come and dance," he added abruptly to Hermione.

She looked taken aback, but pleased too, and got up. They vanished together into the growing throng on the dance floor.

"Ah, they are together now?" asked Krum, momentarily distracted.

"Er — sort of," said Harry.

"Who are you?" Krum asked.

"Barney Weasley."

They shook hands.

"You, Barney — you know this man Lovegood vell?"

"No, I only met him today. Why?"

Krum glowered over the top of his drink, watching Xenophilius, who was chatting to several warlocks on the other side of the tent.

"Because," said Krum, "if he was not a guest of Fleur's, I would duel him, here and now, for wearing that filthy sign upon his chest."

"Sign?" said Harry, looking over at Xenophilius too. The strange triangular eye was gleaming on his chest. "Why? What does it mean?"

"Grindelwald. That is Grindelwald's sign."

"Grindelwald . . . the Dark wizard Dumbledore defeated?"

"Exactly."

Krum's jaw muscles worked as if he were chewing, then he said, "Grindelwald killed many people, my grandfather, for example, said he feared Dumbledore — and rightly, seeing how he was finished. But this" — he pointed a finger at Xenophilius — "is a sign of a traitor. He put it into a vial at Durmstrang when he was a pupil there. Some idiots copied it onto their books and clothes, thinking that they had lost family members to Grindelwald taught them better."

Krum cracked his knuckles menacingly and glowered at Xenophilius. Harry felt perplexed. It seemed incredibly unlikely that anyone else in the tent seemed to have recognized the triangular, runelike shape.

"Are you — er — quite sure it's Grindelwald's —?"

"I am not mistaken," said Krum coldly. "I walked past that sign for several years, I know it vell."

"Well, there's a chance," said Harry, "that Xenophilius doesn't actually know what the symbol means. The Lovegoods are stupid and think it's a cross section of the head of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack or something."

"The cross section of a vot?"

"Well, I don't know what they are, but apparently he and his daughter go on holiday looking for them. . . ."

Harry felt he was doing a bad job explaining Luna and her father.

"That's her," he said, pointing at Luna, who was still dancing alone, waving her arms around her head like someone at a party.

"Why is she doing that?" asked Krum.

"Probably trying to get rid of a Wrackspurt," said Harry, who recognized the symptoms.

Krum did not seem to know whether or not Harry was making fun of him. He drew his wand from inside his robes and pointed it at Harry.

"Gregorovitch!" said Harry loudly, and Krum started, but Harry was too excited to care; the memory had come back to him. He looked at the wand carefully before the Triwizard Tournament.

"Vot about him?" asked Krum suspiciously.

"He's a wandmaker!"

"I know that," said Krum.

"He made your wand! That's why I thought — Quidditch —"

Krum was looking more and more suspicious.

"How do you know Gregorovitch made my wand?"

"I . . . I read it somewhere, I think," said Harry. "In a — a fan magazine," he improvised wildly and Krum looked mollified.

"I had not realized I ever discussed my wand with fans," he said.

"So . . . er . . . where is Gregorovitch these days?"

Krum looked puzzled.

"He retired several years ago. I was one of the last to purchase a Gregorovitch wand. They are the best — although I know better."

Harry did not answer. He pretended to watch the dancers, like Krum, but he was thinking hard. So Voldemort was looking for a reason: It was surely because of what Harry's wand had done on the night that Voldemort had pursued him. He had borrowed a wand, something that Ollivander had not anticipated or understood. Would Gregorovitch know better? Or would Ollivander have known that Ollivander did not?

"This girl is very nice-looking," Krum said, recalling Harry to his surroundings. Krum was pointing at Ginny, who had just arrived.

"Yeah," said Harry, suddenly irritated, "and she's seeing someone. Jealous type. Big bloke. You wouldn't want to cross him."

Krum grunted.

"Vot," he said, draining his goblet and getting to his feet again, "is the point of being an international Quidditch player."

And he strode off, leaving Harry to take a sandwich from a passing waiter and make his way around the edge of the dance floor.

Gregorovitch, but Ron was dancing with Hermione out in the middle of the floor. Harry leaned up against one of the golden pillars.

George's friend Lee Jordan, trying not to feel resentful about the promise he had given Ron.

He had never been to a wedding before, so he could not judge how Wizarding celebrations differed from Muggle ones.

The wedding cake topped with two model phoenixes that took flight when the cake was cut, or bottles of champagne that floated in the air.

When the band began to swoop under the canopy, now lit with floating golden lanterns, the revelry became more and more uncontrollable.

A pair of Fleur's cousins; Charlie, Hagrid, and a squat wizard in a purple porkpie hat were singing "Ode to the Hero" in a booming voice.

Wandering through the crowd so as to escape a drunken uncle of Ron's who seemed unsure whether or not Harry was a wizard.

His wild white hair made him look rather like an aged dandelion clock and was topped by a moth-eaten fez. He was wearing a purple robe.

His name was Elphias Doge, member of the Order of the Phoenix and the writer of Dumbledore's obituary.

Harry approached him.

"May I sit down?"

"Of course, of course," said Doge; he had a rather high-pitched, wheezy voice.

Harry leaned in.

"Mr. Doge, I'm Harry Potter."

Doge gasped.

"My dear boy! Arthur told me you were here, disguised. . . . I am so glad, so honored!"

In a flutter of nervous pleasure Doge poured Harry a goblet of champagne.

"I thought of writing to you," he whispered, "after Dumbledore . . . the shock . . . and for you, I am sure . . ."

Doge's tiny eyes filled with sudden tears.

"I saw the obituary you wrote for the Daily Prophet," said Harry. "I didn't realize you knew Professor Dumbledore so well."

"As well as anyone," said Doge, dabbing his eyes with a napkin. "Certainly I knew him longest, if you don't count Abernathy."

"Speaking of the Daily Prophet . . . I don't know whether you saw, Mr. Doge — ?"

"Oh, please call me Elphias, dear boy."

"Elphias, I don't know whether you saw the interview Rita Skeeter gave about Dumbledore?"

Doge's face flooded with angry color.

"Oh yes, Harry, I saw it. That woman, or vulture might be a more accurate term, positively pestered me to talk to her. She was interfering trout, which resulted, as you may have seen, in aspersions cast upon my sanity."

"Well, in that interview," Harry went on, "Rita Skeeter hinted that Professor Dumbledore was involved in the Dark Arts."

"Don't believe a word of it!" said Doge at once. "Not a word, Harry! Let nothing tarnish your memories of Albus Dumbledore."

Harry looked into Doge's earnest, pained face and felt, not reassured, but frustrated. Did Doge really think it was that simple?

Doge understood Harry's need to be sure, to know everything?

Perhaps Doge suspected Harry's feelings, for he looked concerned and hurried on, "Harry, Rita Skeeter is a dreadful woman."

But he was interrupted by a shrill cackle.

"Rita Skeeter? Oh, I love her, always read her!"

Harry and Doge looked up to see Auntie Muriel standing there, the plumes dancing on her hat, a goblet of champagne in her hand.

"Hello, Muriel," said Doge. "Yes, we were just discussing —"

"You there! Give me your chair, I'm a hundred and seven!"

Another redheaded Weasley cousin jumped off his seat, looking alarmed, and Auntie Muriel swung it around with surprising agility.

"Hello again, Barry, or whatever your name is," she said to Harry. "Now, what were you saying about Rita Skeeter, Elphias? I must remember to place an order at Flourish and Blotts!"

Doge looked stiff and solemn at this, but Auntie Muriel drained her goblet and clicked her bony fingers at a passing waiter. She belched, and then said, "There's no need to look like a pair of stuffed frogs! Before he became so respected and married."

rs about Albus!"

"Ill-informed sniping," said Doge, turning radish-colored again.

"You would say that, Elphias," cackled Auntie Muriel. "I noticed how you skated over the sticky patches in that obituary."

"I'm sorry you think so," said Doge, more coldly still. "I assure you I was writing from the heart."

"Oh, we all know you worshipped Dumbledore; I daresay you'll still think he was a saint even if it does turn out that he was a Squib!"

"Muriel!" exclaimed Doge.

A chill that had nothing to do with the iced champagne was stealing through Harry's chest.

"What do you mean?" he asked Muriel. "Who said his sister was a Squib? I thought she was ill?"

"Thought wrong, then, didn't you, Barry!" said Auntie Muriel, looking delighted at the effect she had produced. "Anyways, she was ill for

ned years and years before you were even thought of, my dear, and the truth is that those of us who were alive then didn't know what Skeeter's unearthed! Dumbledore kept that sister of his quiet for a long time!"

"Untrue!" wheezed Doge. "Absolutely untrue!"

"He never told me his sister was a Squib," said Harry, without thinking, still cold inside.

"And why on earth would he tell you?" screeched Muriel, swaying a little in her seat as she attempted to focus upon Harry.

"The reason Albus never spoke about Ariana," began Elphias in a voice stiff with emotion, "is, I should have thought, obvious."

"Why did nobody ever see her, Elphias?" squawked Muriel. "Why did half of us never even know she existed, until the war?"

Where was saintly Albus while Ariana was locked in the cellar? Off being brilliant at Hogwarts, and never mind what was going on at home?

"What d'you mean, locked in the cellar?" asked Harry. "What is this?"

Doge looked wretched. Auntie Muriel cackled again and answered Harry.

"Dumbledore's mother was a terrifying woman, simply terrifying. Muggle-born, though I heard she pretended otherwise."

"She never pretended anything of the sort! Kendra was a fine woman," whispered Doge miserably, but Auntie Muriel didn't hear him.

"— proud and very domineering, the sort of witch who would have been mortified to produce a Squib —"

"Ariana was not a Squib!" wheezed Doge.

"So you say, Elphias, but explain, then, why she never attended Hogwarts!" said Auntie Muriel. She turned back to Harry. "She was too delicate to do so, to the extreme of actually imprisoning a little girl in the house and pretending she didn't exist —"

"I tell you, that's not what happened!" said Doge, but Auntie Muriel steamrolled on, still addressing Harry.

"Squibs were usually shipped off to Muggle schools and encouraged to integrate into the Muggle community . . . much to the chagrin of those of us who knew where they must always be second class; but naturally Kendra Dumbledore wouldn't have dreamed of letting her daughter do that."

"Ariana was delicate!" said Doge desperately. "Her health was always too poor to permit her —"

"— to permit her to leave the house?" cackled Muriel. "And yet she was never taken to St. Mungo's and no Healer was ever consulted?"

"Really, Muriel, how you can possibly know whether —"

"For your information, Elphias, my cousin Lancelot was a Healer at St. Mungo's at the time, and he told my family in some detail that he was the most suspicious, Lancelot thought!"

Doge looked to be on the verge of tears. Auntie Muriel, who seemed to be enjoying herself hugely, snapped her fingers. "She was locked up and once shut him up, locked him away, kept him out of sight, all for the crime of being a wizard. Had Dumbledore's sister been a Squib?"

f magic? And had Dumbledore truly left her to her fate while he went off to Hogwarts, to prove himself brilliant and to prove himself a wizard?"

"Now, if Kendra hadn't died first," Muriel resumed, "I'd have said that it was she who finished off Ariana —"

"How can you, Muriel?" groaned Doge. "A mother kill her own daughter? Think what you are saying!"

"If the mother in question was capable of imprisoning her daughter for years on end, why not?" shrugged Auntie Muriel. "She was a Squib, Ariana — of what, nobody ever seemed sure —"

"Oh, no doubt Ariana murdered her," said Doge with a brave attempt at scorn. "Why not?"

"Yes, Ariana might have made a desperate bid for freedom and killed Kendra in the struggle," said Auntie Muriel thoughtfully. "But what about Ariana's funeral, were you not?"

"Yes I was," said Doge, through trembling lips. "And a more desperately sad occasion I cannot remember. Albus was there, of course."

"His heart wasn't the only thing. Didn't Aberforth break Albus's nose halfway through the service?"

If Doge had looked horrified before this, it was nothing to how he looked now. Muriel might have stabbed him. She could have done it with her own hand. "You own her chin."

"How do you — ?" croaked Doge.

"My mother was friendly with old Bathilda Bagshot," said Auntie Muriel happily. "Bathilda described the whole thing to me."

The way Bathilda told it, Aberforth shouted that it was all Albus's fault that Ariana was dead and then punched him in the nose. "I told myself, and that's odd enough in itself, Albus could have destroyed Aberforth in a duel with both hands tied behind his back."

Muriel swigged yet more champagne. The recitation of these old scandals seemed to elate her as much as they horrified her. "She told the truth, and yet all Doge did was sit there and bleat feebly that Ariana had been ill. Harry could hardly believe that she was

happening inside his own house, and yet there was undoubtedly something odd about the story."

"And I'll tell you something else," Muriel said, hiccuping slightly as she lowered her goblet. "I think Bathilda has spilled the beans in an interview about an important source close to the Dumbledores — goodness knows she was there all through the Ariana business."

"Bathilda would never talk to Rita Skeeter!" whispered Doge.

"Bathilda Bagshot?" Harry said. "The author of A History of Magic?"

The name was printed on the front of one of Harry's textbooks, though admittedly not one of the ones he had read much of.

"Yes," said Doge, clutching at Harry's question like a drowning man at a life belt. "A most gifted magical historian and a most

"Quite gaga these days, I've heard," said Auntie Muriel cheerfully.

"If that is so, it is even more dishonorable for Skeeter to have taken advantage of her," said Doge, "and no reliance ca

"Oh, there are ways of bringing back memories, and I'm sure Rita Skeeter knows them all," said Auntie Muriel. "But ev
d photographs, maybe even letters. She knew the Dumbledores for years. . . . Well worth a trip to Godric's Hollow, I c
Harry, who had been taking a sip of butterbeer, choked. Doge banged him on the back as Harry coughed, looking at
ce again, he asked, "Bathilda Bagshot lives in Godric's Hollow?"

"Oh yes, she's been there forever! The Dumbledores moved there after Percival was imprisoned, and she was their n

"The Dumbledores lived in Godric's Hollow?"

"Yes, Barry, that's what I just said," said Auntie Muriel testily.

Harry felt drained, empty. Never once, in six years, had Dumbledore told Harry that they had both lived and lost love
to Dumbledore's mother and sister? Had Dumbledore visited their graves, perhaps walked past Lily's and James's to

y . . .

And why it was so important, Harry could not explain even to himself, yet he felt it had been tantamount to a lie not
ommon. He stared ahead of him, barely noticing what was going on around him, and did not realize that Hermione h

"I simply can't dance anymore," she panted, slipping off one of her shoes and rubbing the sole of her foot. "Ron's gor
een Viktor storming away from Luna's father, it looked like they'd been arguing —" She dropped her voice, staring at
Harry did not know where to begin, but it did not matter. At that moment, something large and silver came falling th
lynx landed lightly in the middle of the astonished dancers. Heads turned, as those nearest it froze absurdly in mid-d
e loud, deep, slow voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming."

CHAPTER NINE

A PLACE TO HIDE

Everything seemed fuzzy, slow. Harry and Hermione jumped to their feet and drew their wands. Many people were c
ll turning toward the silver cat as it vanished. Silence spread outward in cold ripples from the place where the Patron
Harry and Hermione threw themselves into the panicking crowd. Guests were sprinting in all directions; many were
ken.

"Ron!" Hermione cried. "Ron, where are you?"

As they pushed their way across the dance floor, Harry saw cloaked and masked figures appearing in the crowd; the
shout, "Protego!", a cry that was echoed on all sides —

"Ron! Ron!" Hermione called, half sobbing as she and Harry were buffeted by terrified guests: Harry seized her hand
over their heads, whether a protective charm or something more sinister he did not know —

And then Ron was there. He caught hold of Hermione's free arm, and Harry felt her turn on the spot; sight and sound
eel was Hermione's hand as he was squeezed through space and time, away from the Burrow, away from the descen

"Where are we?" said Ron's voice.

Harry opened his eyes. For a moment he thought they had not left the wedding after all: They still seemed to be surr
"Tottenham Court Road," panted Hermione. "Walk, just walk, we need to find somewhere for you to change."

Harry did as she asked. They half walked, half ran up the wide dark street thronged with late-night revelers and lined
bus rumbled by and a group of merry pub-goers ogled them as they passed; Harry and Ron were still wearing dress

"Hermione, we haven't got anything to change into," Ron told her, as a young woman burst into raucous giggles at th

"Why didn't I make sure I had the Invisibility Cloak with me?" said Harry, inwardly cursing his own stupidity. "All last y

"It's okay, I've got the Cloak, I've got clothes for both of you," said Hermione. "Just try and act naturally until — this wi

She led them down a side street, then into the shelter of a shadowy alleyway.

"When you say you've got the Cloak, and clothes . . ." said Harry, frowning at Hermione, who was carrying nothing ex

"Yes, they're here," said Hermione, and to Harry and Ron's utter astonishment, she pulled out a pair of jeans, a sweat
Cloak.

"How the ruddy hell — ?"

"Undetectable Extension Charm," said Hermione. "Tricky, but I think I've done it okay; anyway, I managed to fit every
e shake and it echoed like a cargo hold as a number of heavy objects rolled around inside it. "Oh, damn, that'll be the
d by subject. . . . Oh well. . . . Harry, you'd better take the Invisibility Cloak. Ron, hurry up and change. . . ."

"When did you do all this?" Harry asked as Ron stripped off his robes.

"I told you at the Burrow, I've had the essentials packed for days, you know, in case we needed to make a quick getav
d, and put it in here. . . . I just had a feeling. . . ."

"You're amazing, you are," said Ron, handing her his bundled-up robes.

"Thank you," said Hermione, managing a small smile as she pushed the robes into the bag. "Please, Harry, get that Cl
Harry threw the Invisibility Cloak around his shoulders and pulled it up over his head, vanishing from sight. He was o

"The others — everyone at the wedding —"

"We can't worry about that now," whispered Hermione. "It's you they're after, Harry, and we'll just put everyone in ev

"She's right," said Ron, who seemed to know that Harry was about to argue, even if he could not see his face. "Most c
Harry nodded, then remembered that they could not see him, and said, "Yeah." But he thought of Ginny, and fear bu

"Come on, I think we ought to keep moving," said Hermione.

They moved back up the side street and onto the main road again, where a group of men on the opposite side was shouting. "Just as a matter of interest, why Tottenham Court Road?" Ron asked Hermione.

"I've no idea, it just popped into my head, but I'm sure we're safer out in the Muggle world, it's not where they'll expect us."

"True," said Ron, looking around, "but don't you feel a bit — exposed?"

"Where else is there?" asked Hermione, cringing as the men on the other side of the road started wolf-whistling at her. "Grimmauld Place is out if Snape can get in there. . . . I suppose we could try my parents' house, though I think there's a chance they'll catch us."

"All right, darling?" the drunkest of the men on the other pavement was yelling. "Fancy a drink? Ditch ginger and come on!"

"Let's sit down somewhere," Hermione said hastily as Ron opened his mouth to shout back across the road. "Look, there's a café."

It was a small and shabby all-night café. A light layer of grease lay on all the Formica-topped tables, but it was at least clean. Hermione sat down opposite Ron, who had his back to the entrance and did not like it: She glanced over her shoulder so frequently that it was tiring; walking had given the illusion that they had a goal. Beneath the Cloak he could feel the last vestiges of Polyjuice Potion and shape. He pulled his glasses out of his pocket and put them on again.

After a minute or two, Ron said, "You know, we're not far from the Leaky Cauldron here, it's only in Charing Cross —"

"Ron, we can't!" said Hermione at once.

"Not to stay there, but to find out what's going on!"

"We know what's going on! Voldemort's taken over the Ministry, what else do we need to know?"

"Okay, okay, it was just an idea!"

They relapsed into a prickly silence. The gum-chewing waitress shuffled over and Hermione ordered two cappuccinos.

A pair of burly workmen entered the café and squeezed into the next booth. Hermione dropped her voice to a whisper.

"I say we find a quiet place to Disapparate and head for the countryside. Once we're there, we could send a message to the Order."

"Can you do that talking Patronus thing, then?" asked Ron.

"I've been practicing and I think so," said Hermione.

"Well, as long as it doesn't get them into trouble, though they might've been arrested already. God, that's revolting," Hermione said. The waitress had heard; she shot Ron a nasty look as she shuffled off to take the new customers' orders. The larger of the two workmen looked at him, waved her away. She stared, affronted.

"Let's get going, then, I don't want to drink this muck," said Ron. "Hermione, have you got Muggle money to pay for the drinks?"

"Yes, I took out all my Building Society savings before I came to the Burrow. I'll bet all the change is at the bottom," said Hermione.

The two workmen made identical movements, and Harry mirrored them without conscious thought: All three of them lunged across the table, pushing Hermione sideways onto her bench. The force of the Death Eaters' spells shattered the table. Hermione fell invisible, yelled, "Stupefy!"

The great blond Death Eater was hit in the face by a jet of red light: He slumped sideways, unconscious. His companion, a thinning black ropes flew from his wand-tip and bound Ron head to foot — the waitress screamed and ran for the door. The Death Eater's face was a stony mask, but the spell missed, rebounded on the window, and hit the waitress, who collapsed. "Expulso!" bellowed the Death Eater, and the table behind which Harry was standing blew up: The force of the explosion sent the Cloak slipping off him.

"Petrificus Totalus!" screamed Hermione from out of sight, and the Death Eater fell forward like a statue to land with a crash. Hermione crawled out from underneath the bench, shaking bits of glass ashtray out of her hair and trembling all over.

"D-diffindo," she said, pointing her wand at Ron, who roared in pain as she slashed open the knee of his jeans, leaving a deep wound. "Do it!"

The severed ropes fell away. Ron got to his feet, shaking his arms to regain feeling in them. Harry picked up his wand. The Death Eater was sprawled across the bench.

"I should've recognized him, he was there the night Dumbledore died," he said. He turned over the darker Death Eater's head and Hermione.

"That's Dolohov," said Ron. "I recognize him from the old wanted posters. I think the big one's Thorfinn Rowle."

"Never mind what they're called!" said Hermione a little hysterically. "How did they find us? What are we going to do? Somehow her panic seemed to clear Harry's head.

"Lock the door," he told her, "and Ron, turn out the lights."

He looked down at the paralyzed Dolohov, thinking fast as the lock clicked and Ron used the Deluminator to plunge the room into darkness. Hermione earlier, yelling at another girl in the distance.

"What are we going to do with them?" Ron whispered to Harry through the dark; then, even more quietly, "Kill them?" Hermione shuddered and took a step backward. Harry shook his head.

"We just need to wipe their memories," said Harry. "It's better like that, it'll throw them off the scent. If we killed them, they'd be missed."

"You're the boss," said Ron, sounding profoundly relieved. "But I've never done a Memory Charm."

"Nor have I," said Hermione, "but I know the theory."

She took a deep, calming breath, then pointed her wand at Dolohov's forehead and said, "Obliviate."

At once, Dolohov's eyes became unfocused and dreamy.

"Brilliant!" said Harry, clapping her on the back. "Take care of the other one and the waitress while Ron and I clear up."

"Clear up?" said Ron, looking around at the partly destroyed café. "Why?"

"Don't you think they might wonder what's happened if they wake up and find themselves in a place that looks like it?"

"Oh right, yeah . . ."

Ron struggled for a moment before managing to extract his wand from his pocket.

"It's no wonder I can't get it out, Hermione, you packed my old jeans, they're tight."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," hissed Hermione, and as she dragged the waitress out of sight of the windows, Harry heard her mumble an apology.

Once the café was restored to its previous condition, they heaved the Death Eaters back into their booth and propped the door open.

"But how did they find us?" Hermione asked, looking from one inert man to the other. "How did they know where we were?"

She turned to Harry.

"You — you don't think you've still got your Trace on you, do you, Harry?"

"He can't have," said Ron. "The Trace breaks at seventeen, that's Wizarding law, you can't put it on an adult."

"As far as you know," said Hermione. "What if the Death Eaters have found a way to put it on a seventeen-year-old?"

"But Harry hasn't been near a Death Eater in the last twenty-four hours. Who's supposed to have put a Trace back on him?"

Hermione did not reply. Harry felt contaminated, tainted: Was that really how the Death Eaters had found them?

"If I can't use magic, and you can't use magic near me, without us giving away our position —" he began.

"We're not splitting up!" said Hermione firmly.

"We need a safe place to hide," said Ron. "Give us time to think things through."

"Grimmauld Place," said Harry.

The other two gaped.

"Don't be silly, Harry, Snape can get in there!"

"Ron's dad said they've put up jinxes against him — and even if they haven't worked," he pressed on as Hermione began to protest.

"But —"

"Hermione, where else is there? It's the best chance we've got. Snape's only one Death Eater. If I've still got the Trace on me, we go."

She could not argue, though she looked as if she would have liked to. While she unlocked the café door, Ron clicked the jinxes off the three, and before the waitress or either of the Death Eaters could turn on the spot and vanished into the compressing darkness once more.

Seconds later Harry's lungs expanded gratefully and he opened his eyes: They were now standing in the middle of a large, empty room. The door was open, and from every side. Number twelve was visible to them, for they had been told of its existence by Dumbledore. They saw how yards that they were not being followed or observed. They raced up the stone steps, and Harry tapped the front door. The clatter of a chain, then the door swung open with a creak and they hurried over the threshold.

As Harry closed the door behind them, the old-fashioned gas lamps sprang into life, casting flickering light along the corridors. The house was eerie, cobwebbed, the outlines of the house-elf heads on the wall throwing odd shadows up the staircase. Long dark shadows. The one thing that was out of place was the troll's leg umbrella stand, which was lying on its side as if Tonks had just knocked it over.

"I think somebody's been in here," Hermione whispered, pointing toward it.

"That could've happened as the Order left," Ron murmured back.

"So where are these jinxes they put up against Snape?" Harry asked.

"Maybe they're only activated if he shows up?" suggested Ron.

Yet they remained close together on the doormat, backs against the door, scared to move farther into the house.

"Well, we can't stay here forever," said Harry, and he took a step forward.

"Severus Snape?"

Mad-Eye Moody's voice whispered out of the darkness, making all three of them jump back in fright. "We're not Snape!"

and his tongue curled backward on itself, making it impossible to speak. Before he had time to feel inside his mouth, he was gone.

The other two seemed to have experienced the same unpleasant sensation. Ron was making retching noises; Hermione was holding her stomach.

"Set up for Snape!"

Gingerly Harry took another step forward. Something shifted in the shadows at the end of the hall, and before any of them could react, a large, rapt, tall, dust-colored, and terrible figure appeared. Hermione screamed and so did Mrs. Black, her curtains flying open; the gray figure of a woman with hair and beard streaming behind it, its face sunken, fleshless, with empty eye sockets: Horribly familiar, dreadfully terrifying.

"No!" Harry shouted, and though he had raised his wand no spell occurred to him. "No! It wasn't us! We didn't kill you!"

On the word kill, the figure exploded in a great cloud of dust: Coughing, his eyes watering, Harry looked around to see the figure's head, and Ron, who was shaking from head to foot, patting her clumsily on the shoulder and saying, "It's all right, it's all right."

Dust swirled around Harry like mist, catching the blue gaslight, as Mrs. Black continued to scream.

"Mudbloods, filth, stains of dishonor, taint of shame on the house of my fathers —"

"SHUT UP!" Harry bellowed, directing his wand at her, and with a bang and a burst of red sparks, the curtains swung shut.

"That . . . that was . . ." Hermione whimpered, as Ron helped her to her feet.

"Yeah," said Harry, "but it wasn't really him, was it? Just something to scare Snape."

Had it worked, Harry wondered, or had Snape already blasted the horror-figure aside as casually as he had killed the others? He looked at the hall, half-expecting some new terror to reveal itself, but nothing moved except for a mouse skittering along the skirting board.

"Before we go any farther, I think we'd better check," whispered Hermione, and she raised her wand and said, "Homenum Revelo."

Nothing happened.

"Well, you've just had a big shock," said Ron kindly. "What was that supposed to do?"

"It did what I meant it to do!" said Hermione rather crossly. "That was a spell to reveal human presence, and there's no one there."

"And old Dusty," said Ron, glancing at the patch of carpet from which the corpse-figure had risen.

"Let's go up," said Hermione with a frightened look at the same spot, and she led the way up the creaking stairs to the third floor. Hermione waved her wand to ignite the old gas lamps, then, shivering slightly in the drafty room, she perched on the windowsill and moved the heavy velvet curtain aside an inch.

"Can't see anyone out there," he reported. "And you'd think, if Harry still had a Trace on him, they'd have followed us up here?"

Harry had given a cry of pain: His scar had burned again as something flashed across his mind like a bright light on water, then it pounded through his body, violent and brief as an electric shock.

"What did you see?" Ron asked, advancing on Harry. "Did you see him at my place?"

"No, I just felt anger — he's really angry —"

"But that could be at the Burrow," said Ron loudly. "What else? Didn't you see anything? Was he cursing someone?"

"No, I just felt anger — I couldn't tell —"

Harry felt badgered, confused, and Hermione did not help as she said in a frightened voice, "Your scar, again? But what?"

"It did, for a while," muttered Harry; his scar was still painful, which made it hard to concentrate. "I — I think it's started to use to —"

"But then you've got to close your mind!" said Hermione shrilly. "Harry, Dumbledore didn't want you to use that connection. He wanted you to use Occlumency! Otherwise Voldemort can plant false images in your mind, remember —"

"Yeah, I do remember, thanks," said Harry through gritted teeth; he did not need Hermione to tell him that Voldemort had used the connection to lead him into a trap, nor that it had resulted in Sirius's death. He wished that he had not told them what he had seen and felt; he pressed his back against the window of the room, and still the pain in his scar was building and he fought it: It was like resisting the tide. He turned his back on Ron and Hermione, pretending to examine the old tapestry of the Black family tree on the wall. He had hoped to see a silver Patronus soar through the drawing room window and land upon the floor in front of them, where it belonged.

"Family safe, do not reply, we are being watched."

The Patronus dissolved into nothingness. Ron let out a noise between a whimper and a groan and dropped onto the floor.

"They're all right, they're all right!" she whispered, and Ron half laughed and hugged her.

"Harry," he said over Hermione's shoulder, "I —"

"It's not a problem," said Harry, sickened by the pain in his head. "It's your family, 'course you're worried. I'd feel the same way. The pain in his scar was reaching a peak, burning as it had done in the garden of the Burrow. Faintly he heard Hermione say, 'I've brought my bags I've brought and camp in here tonight?'"

He heard Ron agree. He could not fight the pain much longer: He had to succumb.

"Bathroom," he muttered, and he left the room as fast as he could without running.

He barely made it: Bolting the door behind him with trembling hands, he grasped his pounding head and fell to the floor. He felt as if he belonged to him, as if he possessed his soul, saw a long room lit only by firelight, and the great blond Death Eater on the floor, so close that he could reach out, wand outstretched, while Harry spoke in a high, cold, merciless voice.

"More, Rowle, or shall we end it and feed you to Nagini? Lord Voldemort is not sure that he will forgive this time. . . . You've escaped again? Draco, give Rowle another taste of our displeasure . . . Do it, or feel my wrath yourself!"

A log fell in the fire: Flames reared, their light darting across a terrified, pointed white face — with a sense of emerging from the shadows. His eyes.

He was spread-eagled on the cold black marble floor, his nose inches from one of the silver serpent tails that supported the chandelier. It seemed branded on the inside of his eyes. Harry felt sickened by what he had seen, by the use to which Draco was made. There was a sharp rap on the door, and Harry jumped as Hermione's voice rang out.

"Harry, do you want your toothbrush? I've got it here."

"Yeah, great, thanks," he said, fighting to keep his voice casual as he stood up to let her in.

CHAPTER TEN

KREACHER'S TALE

Harry woke early next morning, wrapped in a sleeping bag on the drawing room floor. A chink of sky was visible between the curtains, somewhere between night and dawn, and everything was quiet except for Ron and Hermione's slow, deep breathing. He looked at them. Ron had had a fit of gallantry and insisted that Hermione sleep on the cushions from the sofa, so that her silhouette was inches from Ron's. Harry wondered whether they had fallen asleep holding hands. The idea made him feel strange. He looked up at the shadowy ceiling, the cobwebbed chandelier. Less than twenty-four hours ago, he had been standing in the middle of a wedding reception, surrounded by guests. It seemed a lifetime away. What was going to happen now? He lay on the floor and he thought of the things he had seen. . . . Dumbledore . . .

The grief that had possessed him since Dumbledore's death felt different now. The accusations he had heard from Muggles, the things, infecting his memories of the wizard he had idolized. Could Dumbledore have let such things happen? Had he known, would it have affected him? Could he have turned his back on a sister who was being imprisoned and hidden?

Harry thought of Godric's Hollow, of graves Dumbledore had never mentioned there; he thought of mysterious objects.

led in the darkness. Why hadn't Dumbledore told him? Why hadn't he explained? Had Dumbledore actually cared about him? He had been polished and honed, but not trusted, never confided in?

Harry could not stand lying there with nothing but bitter thoughts for company. Desperate for something to do, for a distraction, he got up, slipped on his robe, and crept out of the room. On the landing he whispered, "Lumos," and started to climb the stairs by wandlight. On the second landing was the bedroom in which he and Ron had slept last time they had been here; he glanced into it and then turned back. Harry remembered the overturned troll leg downstairs. Somebody had searched the house since the Order of the Phoenix had been there. Had they searched his house both before and after Sirius died? Harry's gaze wandered to the portrait that sometimes contained Phineas Nigellus, but was now showing nothing but a stretch of muddy backdrop. Phineas Nigellus was evidently spending the night in the headmaster's study. Harry continued up the stairs until he reached the topmost landing, where there were only two doors. The one facing left was the godfather's bedroom before. He pushed open the door, holding his wand high to cast light as widely as possible. The room was large, with a large bed with a carved wooden headboard, a tall window obscured by long velvet curtains, and a chandelier thickly coated with old wax hanging in frostlike drips. A fine film of dust covered the pictures on the walls and the bed's headboard; a spiderweb hung from the corner of a large wooden wardrobe, and as Harry moved deeper into the room, he heard a scurrying of disturbed mice. The teenage Sirius had plastered the walls with so many posters and pictures that little of the walls' silvery-gray silk wallpaper had been able to remove the Permanent Sticking Charm that kept them on the wall, because he was sure they would come off. It seemed to have gone out of his way to annoy his parents. There were several large Gryffindor banners, faded scarlet and gold, and the Slytherin family. There were many pictures of Muggle motorcycles, and also (Harry had to admire Sirius's nerve) some of the Weasleys, though they were Muggles because they remained quite stationary within their pictures, faded smiles and glazed eyes frozen in time. A photograph on the walls, which was a picture of four Hogwarts students standing arm in arm, laughing at the camera. With a leap of pleasure, Harry recognized his father; his untidy black hair stuck up at the back like Harry's, and he too had that slightly arrogant face so much younger and happier than Harry had ever seen it alive. To Sirius's right stood Pettigrew, who seemed with pleasure at his inclusion in this coolest of gangs, with the much-admired rebels that James and Sirius had been. But he had the same air of delighted surprise at finding himself liked and included . . . or was it simply because Harry was now? He tried to take it from the wall; it was his now, after all, Sirius had left him everything, but it would not budge. Sirius had decorated his room.

Harry looked around at the floor. The sky outside was growing brighter: A shaft of light revealed bits of paper, books, and other things. Sirius's bedroom had been searched too, although its contents seemed to have been judged mostly, if not entirely, worthless. Books were lying about with their covers, and sundry pages littered the floor.

Harry bent down, picked up a few of the pieces of paper, and examined them. He recognized one as part of an old envelope, the other two belonging to a motorcycle maintenance manual. The third was handwritten and crumpled. He smoothed it out.

Dear Padfoot,

Thank you thank you, for Harry's birthday present! It was his favorite by far. One year old and already zooming along, but he's losing a picture so you can see. You know it only rises about two feet off the ground, but he nearly killed the cat and caused a lot of complaints there). Of course, James thought it was so funny, says he's going to be a great Quidditch player, but we've got to keep our eyes off him when he gets going.

We had a very quiet birthday tea, just us and old Bathilda, who has always been sweet to us and who dotes on Harry. But first, and Harry's not old enough to know it's his birthday anyway! James is getting a bit frustrated shut up here, he tries to go out, but he's got his Invisibility Cloak, so no chance of little excursions. If you could visit, it would cheer him up so much. Wormy was probably the news about the McKinnons; I cried all evening when I heard.

Bathilda drops in most days, she's a fascinating old thing with the most amazing stories about Dumbledore, I'm not sure I believe them, actually, because it seems incredible that Dumbledore

Harry's extremities seemed to have gone numb. He stood quite still, holding the miraculous paper in his nerveless fingers. Thundering in equal measure through his veins. Lurching to the bed, he sat down.

He read the letter again, but could not take in any more meaning than he had done the first time, and was reduced to the way he did: He searched through the letter for every one of them, and each felt like a friendly little wave glimpsed through the fog of that Lily Potter had lived, really lived, that her warm hand had once moved across this parchment, tracing ink into the parchment. Impatiently brushing away the wetness in his eyes, he reread the letter, this time concentrating on the meaning. It was a letter from his mother. They had had a cat . . . perhaps it had perished, like his parents, at Godric's Hollow . . . or else fled when there was no room for it on the broomstick. . . . His parents had known Bathilda Bagshot; had Dumbledore introduced them? Dumbledore's still got the cloak.

Harry paused, pondering his mother's words. Why had Dumbledore taken James's Invisibility Cloak? Harry distinctly remembered his mother saying, "I gave the cloak to become invisible." Perhaps some less gifted Order member had needed its assistance, and Dumbledore had taken it from him. Wormy was here . . . Pettigrew, the traitor, had seemed "down," had he? Was he aware that he was seeing James and Sirius? And finally Bathilda again, who told incredible stories about Dumbledore. It seems incredible that Dumbledore — that Dumbledore what? But there were any number of things that would seem incredible about Dumbledore; that he was so old, or had taken up goat-charming like Aberforth. . . .

Harry got to his feet and scanned the floor: Perhaps the rest of the letter was here somewhere. He seized papers, tried to find the original searcher; he pulled open drawers, shook out books, stood on a chair to run his hand over the top of the wardrobe. At last, lying facedown on the floor, he spotted what looked like a torn piece of paper under the chest of drawers. What was it? It was what his mother had described in her letter. A black-haired baby was zooming in and out of the picture on a tiny broom, roaring with

She released Harry, leaned over the banister, and screamed, "Ron! RON! Get up here, quick!"

Ron appeared, panting, a minute later, his wand ready in his hand.

"What's up? If it's massive spiders again I want breakfast before I —"

He frowned at the sign on Regulus's door, to which Hermione was silently pointing.

"What? That was Sirius's brother, wasn't it? Regulus Arcturus . . . Regulus . . . R.A.B.! The locket — you don't reckon —"

"Let's find out," said Harry. He pushed the door: It was locked. Hermione pointed her wand at the handle and said, "Alohamora!"

They moved over the threshold together, gazing around. Regulus's bedroom was slightly smaller than Sirius's, though not so small as to advertise his difference from the rest of the family, Regulus had striven to emphasize the opposite. The Slytherin motto, the walls, and the windows. The Black family crest was painstakingly painted over the bed, along with its motto, *Totus in uno*. The portraits, all stuck together to make a ragged collage. Hermione crossed the room to examine them.

"They're all about Voldemort," she said. "Regulus seems to have been a fan for a few years before he joined the Death Eaters."

A little puff of dust rose from the bedcovers as she sat down to read the clippings. Harry, meanwhile, had noticed another portrait on the wall, looking out of the frame. He moved closer and saw the snakes emblazoned on their chests: Slytherins. Regulus was instantly recognizable.

He had the same dark hair and slightly haughty look of his brother, though he was smaller, slighter, and rather less handsome.

"He played Seeker," said Harry.

"What?" said Hermione vaguely; she was still immersed in Voldemort's press clippings.

"He's sitting in the middle of the front row, that's where the Seeker . . . Never mind," said Harry, realizing that nobody would find anything under the wardrobe. Harry looked around the room for likely hiding places and approached the desk. Yet again, something he had noticed over recently, the dust disturbed, but there was nothing of value there: old quills, out-of-date textbooks that bore evidence of age, its sticky residue covering the contents of the drawer.

"There's an easier way," said Hermione, as Harry wiped his inky fingers on his jeans. She raised her wand and said, "Alohamora!" Nothing happened. Ron, who had been searching the folds of the faded curtains, looked disappointed.

"Is that it, then? It's not here?"

"Oh, it could still be here, but under counter-enchantments," said Hermione. "Charms to prevent it being summoned."

"Like Voldemort put on the stone basin in the cave," said Harry, remembering how he had been unable to Summon the stone.

"How are we supposed to find it then?" asked Ron.

"We search manually," said Hermione.

"That's a good idea," said Ron, rolling his eyes, and he resumed his examination of the curtains.

They combed every inch of the room for more than an hour, but were forced, finally, to conclude that the locket was not in the room. The sun had risen now; its light dazzled them even through the grimy landing windows.

"It could be somewhere else in the house, though," said Hermione in a rallying tone as they walked back downstairs: they were becoming more determined. "Whether he'd managed to destroy it or not, he'd want to keep it hidden from Voldemort. Where would he hide it? In the room we were here last time? That clock that shot bolts at everyone and those old robes that tried to strangle Ron; Regulus's room, for instance, even though we didn't realize it at . . . at . . ."

Harry and Ron looked at her. She was standing with one foot in midair, with the dumbstruck look of one who had just realized something.

" . . . at the time," she finished in a whisper.

"Something wrong?" asked Ron.

"There was a locket."

"What?" said Harry and Ron together.

"In the cabinet in the drawing room. Nobody could open it. And we . . . we . . ."

Harry felt as though a brick had slid down through his chest into his stomach. He remembered: He had even handled the cabinet. It had been tossed into a sack of rubbish, along with the snuffbox of Wartcap powder and the music box that Sirius had given him.

"Kreacher nicked loads of things back from us," said Harry. It was the only chance, the only slender hope left to them. "He had a whole stash of stuff in his cupboard in the kitchen. C'mon."

He ran down the stairs taking two steps at a time, the other two thundering along in his wake. They made so much noise that the house-elf came running through the hall.

"Filth! Mudbloods! Scum!" she screamed after them as they dashed down into the basement kitchen and slammed the door. Harry ran the length of the room, skidded to a halt at the door of Kreacher's cupboard, and wrenched it open. There were no clothes in there, but they were no longer glittering with the trinkets Kreacher had salvaged. The only thing there was an old clock. To his surprise, Harry snatched up the blankets and shook them. A dead mouse fell out and rolled dismally across the floor. Hermione closed her eyes.

"It's not over yet," said Harry, and he raised his voice and called, "Kreacher!"

There was a loud crack and the house-elf that Harry had so reluctantly inherited from Sirius appeared out of nowhere. He was still wearing the familiar, his pale skin hanging off him in folds, white hair sprouting copiously from his batlike ears. He was still wearing the familiar, frowning look he bent upon Harry showed that his attitude to his change of ownership had altered no more than his outward appearance.

"Master," croaked Kreacher in his bullfrog's voice, and he bowed low, muttering to his knees, "back in my Mistress's chambers."

"I forbid you to call anyone 'blood traitor' or 'Mudblood,'" growled Harry. He would have found Kreacher, with his snuffbox and his music box, even if the elf had not betrayed Sirius to Voldemort.

"I've got a question for you," said Harry, his heart beating rather fast as he looked down at the elf, "and I order you to answer it."

"Yes, Master," said Kreacher, bowing low again: Harry saw his lips moving soundlessly, undoubtedly framing the insult.

"Two years ago," said Harry, his heart now hammering against his ribs, "there was a big gold locket in the drawing room. There was a moment's silence, during which Kreacher straightened up to look Harry full in the face. Then he said, 'Where is it now?'" asked Harry jubilantly as Ron and Hermione looked gleeful. Kreacher closed his eyes as though he could not bear to see their reactions to his next word.

"Gone."

"Gone?" echoed Harry, elation flooding out of him. "What do you mean, it's gone?"

The elf shivered. He swayed.

"Kreacher," said Harry fiercely, "I order you —"

"Mundungus Fletcher," croaked the elf, his eyes still tight shut. "Mundungus Fletcher stole it all: Miss Bella's and Miss Barty's, First Class, the goblets with the family crest, and — and —"

Kreacher was gulping for air: His hollow chest was rising and falling rapidly, then his eyes flew open and he uttered a word — and the locket, Master Regulus's locket, Kreacher did wrong, Kreacher failed in his orders!"

Harry reacted instinctively: As Kreacher lunged for the poker standing in the grate, he launched himself upon the elf, and Harry bellowed louder than both of them: "Kreacher, I order you to stay still!"

He felt the elf freeze and released him. Kreacher lay flat on the cold stone floor, tears gushing from his sagging eyes.

"Harry, let him up!" Hermione whispered.

"So he can beat himself up with the poker?" snorted Harry, kneeling beside the elf. "I don't think so. Right, Kreacher, I order you to get the locket?"

"Kreacher saw him!" gasped the elf as tears poured over his snout and into his mouth full of graying teeth. "Kreacher tried to find Kreacher's treasures. Kreacher told the sneak thief to stop, but Mundungus Fletcher laughed and ran. . . ."

"You called the locket 'Master Regulus's,'" said Harry. "Why? Where did it come from? What did Regulus have to do with it?"

The elf sat up, curled into a ball, placed his wet face between his knees, and began to rock backward and forward. Words came out, echoing kitchen.

"Master Sirius ran away, good riddance, for he was a bad boy and broke my Mistress's heart with his lawless ways. But he was of Black and the dignity of his pure blood. For years he talked of the Dark Lord, who was going to bring the wizardry back and when he was sixteen years old, Master Regulus joined the Dark Lord. So proud, so proud, so happy to serve . . ."

"And one day, a year after he had joined, Master Regulus came down to the kitchen to see Kreacher. Master Regulus said, 'Kreacher, I order you to get the locket.' The old elf rocked faster than ever.

". . . he said that the Dark Lord required an elf."

"Voldemort needed an elf?" Harry repeated, looking around at Ron and Hermione, who looked just as puzzled as he.

"Oh yes," moaned Kreacher. "And Master Regulus had volunteered Kreacher. It was an honor, said Master Regulus, and the Dark Lord ordered him to do . . . and then to come home."

Kreacher rocked still faster, his breath coming in sobs.

"So Kreacher went to the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord did not tell Kreacher what they were to do, but took Kreacher with him to a cavern, and in the cavern was a great black lake . . ."

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood up. Kreacher's croaking voice seemed to come to him from across that dark distance.

". . . There was a boat . . ."

Of course there had been a boat; Harry knew the boat, ghostly green and tiny, bewitched so as to carry one wizard at a time. . . .

Voldemort had tested the defenses surrounding the Horcrux: by borrowing a disposable creature, a house-elf . . .

"There was a basin full of potion on the island. The Dark Lord made Kreacher drink it. . . ."

The elf quaked from head to foot.

"Kreacher drank, and as he drank, he saw terrible things . . . Kreacher's insides burned . . . Kreacher cried for Master Regulus, but the Dark Lord only laughed . . . He made Kreacher drink all the potion . . . He dropped a locket into the empty basin. . . ."

"And then the Dark Lord sailed away, leaving Kreacher on the island. . . ."

Harry could see it happening. He watched Voldemort's white, snakelike face vanishing into darkness, those red eyes disappearing in minutes, whenever he succumbed to the desperate thirst that the burning potion caused its victim. . . . But here, Harry knew Kreacher had escaped.

"Kreacher needed water, he crawled to the island's edge and he drank from the black lake . . . and hands, dead hands . . ."

"How did you get away?" Harry asked, and he was not surprised to hear himself whispering.

Kreacher raised his ugly head and looked at Harry with his great, bloodshot eyes.

"Master Regulus told Kreacher to come back," he said.

"I know — but how did you escape the Inferi?"

Kreacher did not seem to understand.

"Master Regulus told Kreacher to come back," he repeated.

"I know, but —"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it, Harry?" said Ron. "He Disapparated!"

"But . . . you couldn't Apparate in and out of that cave," said Harry, "otherwise Dumbledore —"

"Elf magic isn't like wizard's magic, is it?" said Ron. "I mean, they can Apparate and Disapparate in and out of Hogwarts. There was silence as Harry digested this. How could Voldemort have made such a mistake? But even as he thought that, he remembered that of course, Voldemort would have considered the ways of house-elves far beneath his notice, just like all the purebloods. He had told him that they might have magic that he didn't."

"The house-elf's highest law is his Master's bidding," intoned Kreacher. "Kreacher was told to come home, so Kreacher came. Well, then, you did what you were told, didn't you?" said Hermione kindly. "You didn't disobey orders at all!"

Kreacher shook his head, rocking as fast as ever.

"So what happened when you got back?" Harry asked. "What did Regulus say when you told him what had happened?"

"Master Regulus was very worried, very worried," croaked Kreacher. "Master Regulus told Kreacher to stay hidden and wait. . . . Master Regulus came to find Kreacher in his cupboard one night, and Master Regulus was strange, not as he usually was. He asked Kreacher to take him to the cave, the cave where Kreacher had gone with the Dark Lord. . . ."

And so they had set off. Harry could visualize them quite clearly, the frightened old elf and the thin, dark Seeker who had known the concealed entrance to the underground cavern, knew how to raise the tiny boat; this time it was his beloved Regulus who was in the boat.

"And he made you drink the potion?" said Harry, disgusted.

But Kreacher shook his head and wept. Hermione's hands leapt to her mouth: She seemed to have understood something.

"M-Master Regulus took from his pocket a locket like the one the Dark Lord had," said Kreacher, tears pouring down his face. "He put it in the basin, and when the basin was empty, to switch the lockets. . . ."

Kreacher's sobs came in great rasps now; Harry had to concentrate hard to understand him.

"And he ordered — Kreacher to leave — without him. And he told Kreacher — to go home — and never to tell my Mistress anything. . . . All the potion — and Kreacher swapped the lockets — and watched . . . as Master Regulus . . . was dragged back to the castle. . . ."

"Oh, Kreacher!" wailed Hermione, who was crying. She dropped to her knees beside the elf and tried to hug him. At once Kreacher's sobs stopped.

"The Mudblood touched Kreacher, he will not allow it, what would his Mistress say?"

"I told you not to call her 'Mudblood!'" snarled Harry, but the elf was already punishing himself: He fell to the ground and sobbed.

"Stop him — stop him!" Hermione cried. "Oh, don't you see now how sick it is, the way they've got to obey?"

"Kreacher — stop, stop!" shouted Harry.

The elf lay on the floor, panting and shivering, green mucus glistening around his snout, a bruise already blooming on his forehead. He was pale and bloodshot and swimming in tears. Harry had never seen anything so pitiful.

"So you brought the locket home," he said relentlessly, for he was determined to know the full story. "And you tried to destroy it?"

"Nothing Kreacher did made any mark upon it," moaned the elf. "Kreacher tried everything, everything he knew, but it wouldn't open. . . . Kreacher punished himself. . . . Kreacher failed to obey orders, Kreacher could not destroy the locket! And his Mistress was mad with grief, because Master Regulus had died. . . . At that had happened, no, because Master Regulus had f-f-forbidden him to tell any of the f-f-family what happened in the cave. . . . Kreacher began to sob so hard that there were no more coherent words. Tears flowed down Hermione's cheeks as she watched. . . . Kreacher was no fan of Kreacher's, looked troubled. Harry sat back on his heels and shook his head, trying to clear it.

"I don't understand you, Kreacher," he said finally. "Voldemort tried to kill you, Regulus died to bring Voldemort down, and Kreacher and I were happy to go to Narcissa and Bellatrix, and pass information to Voldemort through them. . . ."

"Harry, Kreacher doesn't think like that," said Hermione, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand. "He's a slave; house-elves are slaves. What he did to Kreacher wasn't that far out of the common way. What do wizard wars mean to an elf like Kreacher? He's loyal to his Master. Master Regulus certainly was, so he served them willingly and parroted their beliefs. I know what you're going to say," she whispered. "But he doesn't seem to have explained that to Kreacher, does he? And I think I know why. Kreacher and Regulus were both loyal to the same Master. Kreacher was trying to protect them all."

"Sirius —"

"Sirius was horrible to Kreacher, Harry, and it's no good looking like that, you know it's true. Kreacher had been alone for so long. . . . Obviously starving for a bit of affection. I'm sure 'Miss Cissy' and 'Miss Bella' were perfectly lovely to Kreacher when he told them what he wanted to know. I've said all along that wizards would pay for how they treat house-elves. Well, Voldemort did. . . . Harry had no retort. As he watched Kreacher sobbing on the floor, he remembered what Dumbledore had said to him about Kreacher as a being with feelings as acute as a human's. . . ."

"Kreacher," said Harry after a while, "when you feel up to it, er . . . please sit up."

It was several minutes before Kreacher hiccuped himself into silence. Then he pushed himself into a sitting position.

"Kreacher, I am going to ask you to do something," said Harry. He glanced at Hermione for assistance. He wanted to make sure that it was not an order. However, the change in his tone seemed to have gained her approval: She smiled encouragingly.

"Kreacher, I want you, please, to go and find Mundungus Fletcher. We need to find out where the locket — where Master Regulus worked. . . . He worked where Master Regulus started, we want to — er — ensure that he didn't die in vain."

Kreacher dropped his fists and looked up at Harry.

"Find Mundungus Fletcher?" he croaked.

"And bring him here, to Grimmauld Place," said Harry. "Do you think you could do that for us?"

As Kreacher nodded and got to his feet, Harry had a sudden inspiration. He pulled out Hagrid's purse and took out the note to Voldemort.

"Kreacher, I'd, er, like you to have this," he said, pressing the locket into the elf's hand. "This belonged to Regulus and"

for what you —"

"Overkill, mate," said Ron as the elf took one look at the locket, let out a howl of shock and misery, and threw himself back. It took them nearly half an hour to calm down Kreacher, who was so overcome to be presented with a Black family heirloom properly. When finally he was able to totter a few steps they all accompanied him to his cupboard, watched him tuck away the locket, and they would make its protection their first priority while he was away. He then made two low bows to Harry and Ron, which might have been an attempt at a respectful salute, before disappearing with the usual loud crack.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE BRIBE

If Kreacher could escape a lake full of Inferi, Harry was confident that the capture of Mundungus would take a few hours at the most. High anticipation. However, Kreacher did not return that morning or even that afternoon. By nightfall, Harry felt disappointed, and upon which Hermione had tried a variety of unsuccessful Transfigurations, did nothing to help.

Kreacher did not return the following day, nor the day after that. However, two cloaked men had appeared in the square, gazing in the direction of the house that they could not see.

"Death Eaters, for sure," said Ron, as he, Harry, and Hermione watched from the drawing room windows. "Reckon they'll get in?"

"I don't think so," said Hermione, though she looked frightened, "or they'd have sent Snape in after us, wouldn't they?"

"D'you reckon he's been in here and had his tongue tied by Moody's curse?" asked Ron.

"Yes," said Hermione, "otherwise he'd have been able to tell that lot how to get in, wouldn't he? But they're probably just looking at the house, after all."

"How do they — ?" began Harry.

"Wizarding wills are examined by the Ministry, remember? They'll know Sirius left you the place."

The presence of the Death Eaters outside increased the ominous mood inside number twelve. They had not heard a sound, and the strain was starting to tell. Restless and irritable, Ron had developed an annoying habit of playing with the Deluminator, who was whiling away the wait for Kreacher by studying *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* and did not appreciate the wait.

"Will you stop it!" she cried on the third evening of Kreacher's absence, as all light was sucked from the drawing room.

"Sorry, sorry!" said Ron, clicking the Deluminator and restoring the lights. "I don't know I'm doing it!"

"Well, can't you find something useful to occupy yourself?"

"What, like reading kids' stories?"

"Dumbledore left me this book, Ron —"

"— and he left me the Deluminator, maybe I'm supposed to use it!"

Unable to stand the bickering, Harry slipped out of the room unnoticed by either of them. He headed downstairs to the kitchen, where Kreacher was most likely to reappear. Halfway down the flight of stairs into the hall, however, he heard a tap on the door and a chain.

Every nerve in his body seemed to tauten: He pulled out his wand, moved into the shadows beside the decapitated elf in the square outside, and a cloaked figure edged into the hall and closed the door behind it. The intruder took a step forward, and the figure rose from the end of the hall and rushed him, raising its dead hand.

"It was not I who killed you, Albus," said a quiet voice.

The jinx broke: The dust-figure exploded again, and it was impossible to make out the newcomer through the dense cloud of dust. Harry pointed his wand into the middle of it.

"Don't move!"

He had forgotten the portrait of Mrs. Black: At the sound of his yell, the curtains hiding her flew open and she began to scream. Ron and Hermione came crashing down the stairs behind Harry, wands pointing, like his, at the unknown man now standing in the hall.

"Hold your fire, it's me, Remus!"

"Oh, thank goodness," said Hermione weakly, pointing her wand at Mrs. Black instead; with a bang, the curtains swung shut, and Mrs. Black's cry did not.

"Show yourself!" he called back.

Lupin moved forward into the lamplight, hands still held high in a gesture of surrender.

"I am Remus John Lupin, werewolf, sometimes known as Moony, one of the four creators of the Marauder's Map, master of the Patronus Charm, and the only one to produce a Patronus, Harry, which takes the form of a stag."

"Oh, all right," said Harry, lowering his wand, "but I had to check, didn't I?"

"Speaking as your ex-Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, I quite agree that you had to check. Ron, Hermione, you two stay here. They ran down the stairs toward him. Wrapped in a thick black traveling cloak, he looked exhausted, but pleased to see them.

"No sign of Severus, then?" he asked.

"No," said Harry. "What's going on? Is everyone okay?"

"Yes," said Lupin, "but we're all being watched. There are a couple of Death Eaters in the square outside —"

"We know —"

"I had to Apparate very precisely onto the top step outside the front door to be sure that they would not see me. They're out there; they're staking out everywhere that's got any connection with you, Harry. Let's go downstairs, there's a lot to do in the Burrow."

They descended into the kitchen, where Hermione pointed her wand at the grate. A fire sprang up instantly: It gave them light and warmth.

f the long wooden table. Lupin pulled a few butterbeers from beneath his traveling cloak and they sat down.

"I'd have been here three days ago but I needed to shake off the Death Eater tailing me," said Lupin. "So, you came straight to me?"

"No," said Harry, "only after we ran into a couple of Death Eaters in a café on Tottenham Court Road."

Lupin slopped most of his butterbeer down his front.

"What?"

They explained what had happened; when they had finished, Lupin looked aghast.

"But how did they find you so quickly? It's impossible to track anyone who Apparates, unless you grab hold of them as they Apparate."

"And it doesn't seem likely they were just strolling down Tottenham Court Road at the time, does it?" said Harry.

"We wondered," said Hermione tentatively, "whether Harry could still have the Trace on him?"

"Impossible," said Lupin. Ron looked smug, and Harry felt hugely relieved. "Apart from anything else, they'd know for sure if they had. But I can't see how they could have tracked you to Tottenham Court Road, that's worrying, really worrying."

He looked disturbed, but as far as Harry was concerned, that question could wait.

"Tell us what happened after we left, we haven't heard a thing since Ron's dad told us the family were safe."

"Well, Kingsley saved us," said Lupin. "Thanks to his warning most of the wedding guests were able to Disapparate before the Death Eaters arrived."

"Were they Death Eaters or Ministry people?" interjected Hermione.

"A mixture; but to all intents and purposes they're the same thing now," said Lupin. "There were about a dozen of them who tried to torture your whereabouts out of Scrimgeour before they killed him; if it's true, he didn't give you any information. Harry looked at Ron and Hermione; their expressions reflected the mingled shock and gratitude he felt. He had never imagined that his final act had been to try to protect Harry."

"The Death Eaters searched the Burrow from top to bottom," Lupin went on. "They found the ghoul, but didn't want to take him. They stayed for hours. They were trying to get information on you, Harry, but of course nobody apart from the Order knew where you were."

"At the same time that they were smashing up the wedding, more Death Eaters were forcing their way into every Order meeting, stalling the question, 'but they were rough. They burned down Dedalus Diggle's house, but as you know he wasn't there.' They were trying to find out where you went after you visited them. They're all right — shaken, obviously, but otherwise okay."

"The Death Eaters got through all those protective charms?" Harry asked, remembering how effective these had been in the past.

"What you've got to realize, Harry, is that the Death Eaters have got the full might of the Ministry on their side now," said Lupin. "They're without fear of identification or arrest. They managed to penetrate every defensive spell we'd cast against them, and they're now in control."

"And are they bothering to give an excuse for torturing Harry's whereabouts out of people?" asked Hermione, an edge to her voice.

"Well," said Lupin. He hesitated, then pulled out a folded copy of the Daily Prophet.

"Here," he said, pushing it across the table to Harry, "you'll know sooner or later anyway. That's their pretext for going after you. Harry smoothed out the paper. A huge photograph of his own face filled the front page. He read the headline over it: 'HARRY POTTER WANTED FOR QUESTIONING ABOUT THE DEATH OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE'."

Ron and Hermione gave roars of outrage, but Harry said nothing. He pushed the newspaper away; he did not want to think about the fact that he had been on top of the tower when Dumbledore died, knew who had really killed him and, as Rita Skeeter had already told the world, was the only person who knew what happened after Dumbledore had fallen.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Lupin said.

"So Death Eaters have taken over the Daily Prophet too?" asked Hermione furiously.

Lupin nodded.

"But surely people realize what's going on?"

"The coup has been smooth and virtually silent," said Lupin. "The official version of Scrimgeour's murder is that he rebelled against the Imperius Curse."

"Why didn't Voldemort declare himself Minister of Magic?" asked Ron.

Lupin laughed.

"He doesn't need to, Ron. Effectively he is the Minister, but why should he sit behind a desk at the Ministry? His puppet is Voldemort free to extend his power beyond the Ministry."

"Naturally many people have deduced what has happened: There has been such a dramatic change in Ministry policy, and they're all looking for the reason behind it. However, that is the point: They whisper. They daren't confide in each other, not knowing whom to trust; they're all afraid, and their families are targeted. Yes, Voldemort is playing a very clever game. Declaring himself might have provoked opposition, and fear."

"And this dramatic change in Ministry policy," said Harry, "involves warning the Wizarding world against me instead of Voldemort?"

"That's certainly part of it," said Lupin, "and it is a masterstroke. Now that Dumbledore is dead, you — the Boy Who Lived — are the only person standing in the way of Voldemort. But by suggesting that you had a hand in the old hero's death, Voldemort has not only set a precedent but also made it impossible for you to have defended you."

"Meanwhile, the Ministry has started moving against Muggle-borns."

Lupin pointed at the Daily Prophet.

"Look at page two."

Hermione turned the pages with much the same expression of distaste she had worn when handling Secrets of the Chamber. "Muggle-born Register," she read aloud. "The Ministry of Magic is undertaking a survey of so-called 'Muggle-borns,' and the results will be published in the coming weeks. etc."

"Recent research undertaken by the Department of Mysteries reveals that magic can only be passed from person to person."

ists, therefore, the so-called Muggle-born is likely to have obtained magical power by theft or force.

"The Ministry is determined to root out such usurpers of magical power, and to this end has issued an invitation to e by the newly appointed Muggle-born Registration Commission."

"People won't let this happen," said Ron.

"It is happening, Ron," said Lupin. "Muggle-borns are being rounded up as we speak."

"But how are they supposed to have 'stolen' magic?" said Ron. "It's mental, if you could steal magic there wouldn't be

"I know," said Lupin. "Nevertheless, unless you can prove that you have at least one close Wizarding relative, you are ust suffer the punishment."

Ron glanced at Hermione, then said, "What if purebloods and half-bloods swear a Muggle-born's part of their family?"

Hermione covered Ron's hand with hers and squeezed it.

"Thank you, Ron, but I couldn't let you —"

"You won't have a choice," said Ron fiercely, gripping her hand back. "I'll teach you my family tree so you can answer

Hermione gave a shaky laugh.

"Ron, as we're on the run with Harry Potter, the most wanted person in the country, I don't think it matters. If I was g lanning for Hogwarts?" she asked Lupin.

"Attendance is now compulsory for every young witch and wizard," he replied. "That was announced yesterday. It's a every witch and wizard in Britain has been educated at Hogwarts, but their parents had the right to teach them at ho I have the whole Wizarding population under his eye from a young age. And it's also another way of weeding out Mu at they have proven to the Ministry that they are of Wizard descent — before they are allowed to attend."

Harry felt sickened and angry: At this moment, excited eleven-year-olds would be poring over stacks of newly purcha s never see their families again either.

"It's . . . it's . . ." he muttered, struggling to find words that did justice to the horror of his thoughts, but Lupin said qui "I know."

Lupin hesitated.

"I'll understand if you can't confirm this, Harry, but the Order is under the impression that Dumbledore left you a mis

"He did," Harry replied, "and Ron and Hermione are in on it and they're coming with me."

"Can you confide in me what the mission is?"

Harry looked into the prematurely lined face, framed in thick but graying hair, and wished that he could return a diff

"I can't, Remus, I'm sorry. If Dumbledore didn't tell you I don't think I can."

"I thought you'd say that," said Lupin, looking disappointed. "But I might still be of some use to you. You know what I tion. There would be no need to tell me exactly what you were up to."

Harry hesitated. It was a very tempting offer, though how they would be able to keep their mission secret from Lupin Hermione, however, looked puzzled.

"But what about Tonks?" she asked.

"What about her?" said Lupin.

"Well," said Hermione, frowning, "you're married! How does she feel about you going away with us?"

"Tonks will be perfectly safe," said Lupin. "She'll be at her parents' house."

There was something strange in Lupin's tone; it was almost cold. There was also something odd in the idea of Tonks er of the Order and, as far as Harry knew, was likely to want to be in the thick of the action.

"Remus," said Hermione tentatively, "is everything all right . . . you know . . . between you and —"

"Everything is fine, thank you," said Lupin pointedly.

Hermione turned pink. There was another pause, an awkward and embarrassed one, and then Lupin said, with an a have a baby."

"Oh, how wonderful!" squealed Hermione.

"Excellent!" said Ron enthusiastically.

"Congratulations," said Harry.

Lupin gave an artificial smile that was more like a grimace, then said, "So . . . do you accept my offer? Will three beco oved, he appointed me your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, after all. And I must tell you that I believe that w d."

Ron and Hermione both looked at Harry.

"Just — just to be clear," he said. "You want to leave Tonks at her parents' house and come away with us?"

"She'll be perfectly safe there, they'll look after her," said Lupin. He spoke with a finality bordering on indifference. "H ou."

"Well," said Harry slowly, "I'm not. I'm pretty sure my father would have wanted to know why you aren't sticking with Lupin's face drained of color. The temperature in the kitchen might have dropped ten degrees. Ron stared around th s eyes swiveled backward and forward from Harry to Lupin.

"You don't understand," said Lupin at last.

"Explain, then," said Harry.

Lupin swallowed.

"I — I made a grave mistake in marrying Tonks. I did it against my better judgment and I have regretted it very much

"I see," said Harry, "so you're just going to dump her and the kid and run off with us?"

Lupin sprang to his feet: His chair toppled over backward, and he glared at them so fiercely that Harry saw, for the first time,

"Don't you understand what I've done to my wife and my unborn child? I should never have married her, I've made her miserable."

Lupin kicked aside the chair he had overturned.

"You have only ever seen me amongst the Order, or under Dumbledore's protection at Hogwarts! You don't know how much I suffer from

my affliction, they can barely talk to me! Don't you see what I've done? Even her own family is disgusted by our marriage!"

"And the child — the child —"

Lupin actually seized handfuls of his own hair; he looked quite deranged.

"My kind don't usually breed! It will be like me, I am convinced of it — how can I forgive myself, when I knowingly risked passing on

by some miracle, it is not like me, then it will be better off, a hundred times so, without a father of whom it must always be ashamed."

"Remus!" whispered Hermione, tears in her eyes. "Don't say that — how could any child be ashamed of you?"

"Oh, I don't know, Hermione," said Harry. "I'd be pretty ashamed of him."

Harry did not know where his rage was coming from, but it had propelled him to his feet too. Lupin looked as though he was

"If the new regime thinks Muggle-borns are bad," Harry said, "what will they do to a half-werewolf whose father's in the Ministry?"

"d you reckon he'd tell you to abandon your kid to go on an adventure with us?"

"How — how dare you?" said Lupin. "This is not about a desire for — for danger or personal glory — how dare you suggest I should

"I think you're feeling a bit of a daredevil," Harry said. "You fancy stepping into Sirius's shoes —"

"Harry, no!" Hermione begged him, but he continued to glare into Lupin's livid face.

"I'd never have believed this," Harry said. "The man who taught me to fight dementors — a coward."

Lupin drew his wand so fast that Harry had barely reached for his own; there was a loud bang and he felt himself fly back

and slid to the floor, he glimpsed the tail of Lupin's cloak disappearing around the door.

"Remus, Remus, come back!" Hermione cried, but Lupin did not respond. A moment later they heard the front door slam shut.

"Harry!" wailed Hermione. "How could you?"

"It was easy," said Harry. He stood up; he could feel a lump swelling where his head had hit the wall. He was still so furious that

"Don't look at me like that!" he snapped at Hermione.

"Don't you start on her!" snarled Ron.

"No — no — we mustn't fight!" said Hermione, launching herself between them.

"You shouldn't have said that stuff to Lupin," Ron told Harry.

"He had it coming to him," said Harry. Broken images were racing each other through his mind: Sirius falling through the

green light and his mother's voice, begging for mercy . . .

"Parents," said Harry, "shouldn't leave their kids unless — unless they've got to."

"Harry —" said Hermione, stretching out a consoling hand, but he shrugged it off and walked away, his eyes on the fire

fireplace, seeking reassurance about James, and Lupin had consoled him. Now Lupin's tortured white face seemed to be

Neither Ron nor Hermione spoke, but Harry felt sure that they were looking at each other behind his back, communicating

He turned around and caught them turning hurriedly away from each other.

"I know I shouldn't have called him a coward."

"No, you shouldn't," said Ron at once.

"But he's acting like one."

"All the same . . ." said Hermione.

"I know," said Harry. "But if it makes him go back to Tonks, it'll be worth it, won't it?"

He could not keep the plea out of his voice. Hermione looked sympathetic, Ron uncertain. Harry looked down at his

he had said to Lupin, or would he have been angry at how his son had treated his old friend?

The silent kitchen seemed to hum with the shock of the recent scene and with Ron and Hermione's unspoken reproaches

, Harry's own face staring up at the ceiling from the front page. He walked over to it and sat down, opened the paper

s; his mind was still too full of the encounter with Lupin. He was sure that Ron and Hermione had resumed their silence

age loudly, and Dumbledore's name leapt out at him. It was a moment or two before he took in the meaning of the picture

the words: The Dumbledore family, left to right: Albus; Percival, holding newborn Ariana; Kendra; and Aberforth.

His attention caught, Harry examined the picture more carefully. Dumbledore's father, Percival, was a good-looking man

raph. The baby, Ariana, was little longer than a loaf of bread and no more distinctive-looking. The mother, Kendra, had a

quality about it. Harry thought of photos of Native Americans he'd seen as he studied her dark eyes, high cheekbones

own. Albus and Aberforth wore matching lacy collared jackets and had identical, shoulder-length hairstyles. Albus looked

alike, for this was before Albus's nose had been broken and before he started wearing glasses.

The family looked quite happy and normal, smiling serenely up out of the newspaper. Baby Ariana's arm waved vaguely

line:

EXCLUSIVE EXTRACT FROM THE UPCOMING BIOGRAPHY OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

by Rita Skeeter

Thinking that it could hardly make him feel any worse than he already did, Harry began to read:

Proud and haughty, Kendra Dumbledore could not bear to remain in Mould-on-the-Wold after her husband Percival's

ided to uproot the family and relocate to Godric's Hollow, the village that was later to gain fame as the scene of Harry's

Like Mould-on-the-Wold, Godric's Hollow was home to a number of Wizarding families, but as Kendra knew none of them

had faced in her former village. By repeatedly rebuffing the friendly advances of her new Wizarding neighbors, she s
"Slammed the door in my face when I went around to welcome her with a batch of homemade Cauldron Cakes," say
wo boys. Wouldn't have known there was a daughter if I hadn't been picking Plangentines by moonlight the winter at
garden. Walked her round the lawn once, keeping a firm grip on her, then took her back inside. Didn't know what to
It seems that Kendra thought the move to Godric's Hollow was the perfect opportunity to hide Ariana once and for a
was significant. Ariana was barely seven years old when she vanished from sight, and seven is the age by which mos
obody now alive remembers Ariana ever demonstrating even the slightest sign of magical ability. It seems clear, ther
ce rather than suffer the shame of admitting that she had produced a Squib. Moving away from the friends and neigh
easier. The tiny number of people who henceforth knew of Ariana's existence could be counted upon to keep the se
th the answer their mother had taught them: "My sister is too frail for school."

Next week: Albus Dumbledore at Hogwarts — the Prizes and the Pretense.

Harry had been wrong: What he had read had indeed made him feel worse. He looked back at the photograph of the
to go to Godric's Hollow, even if Bathilda was in no fit state to talk to him; he wanted to visit the place where he and
of lowering the newspaper, to ask Ron's and Hermione's opinions, when a deafening crack echoed around the kitche
For the first time in three days Harry had forgotten all about Kreacher. His immediate thought was that Lupin had bu
n the mass of struggling limbs that had appeared out of thin air right beside his chair. He hurried to his feet as Kreac
Kreacher has returned with the thief Mundungus Fletcher, Master."

Mundungus scrambled up and pulled out his wand; Hermione, however, was too quick for him.

"Expelliarmus!"

Mundungus's wand soared into the air, and Hermione caught it. Wild-eyed, Mundungus dived for the stairs: Ron rug
h.

"What?" he bellowed, writhing in his attempts to free himself from Ron's grip. "Wha've I done? Setting a bleedin' 'ouse
lemme go, or —"

"You're not in much of a position to make threats," said Harry. He threw aside the newspaper, crossed the kitchen in
opped struggling and looked terrified. Ron got up, panting, and watched as Harry pointed his wand deliberately at M
His hair was matted and his robes stained.

"Kreacher apologizes for the delay in bringing the thief, Master," croaked the elf. "Fletcher knows how to avoid captu
r cornered the thief in the end."

"You've done really well, Kreacher," said Harry, and the elf bowed low.

"Right, we've got a few questions for you," Harry told Mundungus, who shouted at once,

"I panicked, okay? I never wanted to come along, no offense, mate, but I never volunteered to die for you, an' that wa
tta there, I said all along I didn't wanna do it —"

"For your information, none of the rest of us Disapparated," said Hermione.

"Well, you're a bunch of bleedin' 'eroes then, aren't you, but I never pretended I was up for killing meself —"

"We're not interested in why you ran out on Mad-Eye," said Harry, moving his wand a little closer to Mundungus's ba
f scum."

"Well then, why the 'ell am I being 'unted down by 'ouse-elves? Or is this about them goblets again? I ain't got none o

"It's not about the goblets either, although you're getting warmer," said Harry. "Shut up and listen."

It felt wonderful to have something to do, someone of whom he could demand some small portion of truth. Harry's
s had gone cross-eyed trying to keep it in view.

"When you cleaned out this house of anything valuable," Harry began, but Mundungus interrupted him again.

"Sirius never cared about any of the junk —"

There was the sound of pattering feet, a blaze of shining copper, an echoing clang, and a shriek of agony: Kreacher h
cepan.

"Call 'im off, call 'im off, 'e should be locked up!" screamed Mundungus, cowering as Kreacher raised the heavy-botto

"Kreacher, no!" shouted Harry.

Kreacher's thin arms trembled with the weight of the pan, still held aloft.

"Perhaps just one more, Master Harry, for luck?"

Ron laughed.

"We need him conscious, Kreacher, but if he needs persuading you can do the honors," said Harry.

"Thank you very much, Master," said Kreacher with a bow, and he retreated a short distance, his great pale eyes still

"When you stripped this house of all the valuables you could find," Harry began again, "you took a bunch of stuff from
was suddenly dry: He could sense Ron and Hermione's tension and excitement too. "What did you do with it?"

"Why?" asked Mundungus. "Is it valuable?"

"You've still got it!" cried Hermione.

"No, he hasn't," said Ron shrewdly. "He's wondering whether he should have asked more money for it."

"More?" said Mundungus. "That wouldn't have been effing difficult . . . bleedin' gave it away, di'n' I? No choice."

"What do you mean?"

"I was selling in Diagon Alley and she come up to me and asks if I've got a license for trading in magical artifacts. Blee
the locket an' told me she'd take it and let me off that time, and to fink meself lucky."

"Who was this woman?" asked Harry.

"I dunno, some Ministry hag."

Mundungus considered for a moment, brow wrinkled.

"Little woman. Bow on top of 'er head."

He frowned and then added, "Looked like a toad."

Harry dropped his wand: It hit Mundungus on the nose and shot red sparks into his eyebrows, which ignited.

"Aguamenti!" screamed Hermione, and a jet of water streamed from her wand, engulfing a spluttering and choking Mundungus.

Harry looked up and saw his own shock reflected in Ron's and Hermione's faces. The scars on the back of his right hand were visible.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MAGIC IS MIGHT

As August wore on, the square of unkempt grass in the middle of Grimmauld Place shriveled in the sun until it was barely visible by anybody in the surrounding houses, and nor was number twelve itself. The Muggles who lived in Grimmauld Place had caused number eleven to sit beside number thirteen.

And yet the square was now attracting a trickle of visitors who seemed to find the anomaly most intriguing. Barely a dozen, with no other purpose, or so it seemed, than to lean against the railings facing numbers eleven and thirteen, watching the same two days running, although they all seemed to share a dislike for normal clothing. Most of the Londoners who passed through occasionally one of them might glance back, wondering why anyone would wear such long cloaks in this heat. The watchers seemed to be gleaning little satisfaction from their vigil. Occasionally one of them started forward excitedly, only to fall back looking disappointed.

On the first day of September there were more people lurking in the square than ever before. Half a dozen men in long robes, eleven and thirteen, but the thing for which they were waiting still appeared elusive. As evening drew in, bringing with it a cool breeze, there occurred one of those inexplicable moments when they appeared to have seen something interesting. The most pallid man, started forward, but a moment later they had relaxed into their previous state of inactivity, looking frustrated. Meanwhile, inside number twelve, Harry had just entered the hall. He had nearly lost his balance as he Apparated on, fearing Death Eaters might have caught a glimpse of his momentarily exposed elbow. Shutting the front door carefully behind him, and hurried along the gloomy hallway toward the door that led to the basement, a stolen copy of the Daily Prophet. The usual low whisper of "Severus Snape?" greeted him, the chill wind swept him, and his tongue rolled up for a moment. "I didn't kill you," he said, once it had unrolled, then held his breath as the dusty jinx-figure exploded. He waited until the smoke cleared, shot of Mrs. Black and clear of the dust cloud, before calling, "I've got news, and you won't like it."

The kitchen was almost unrecognizable. Every surface now shone: Copper pots and pans had been burnished to a red gleam. The table for dinner glinted in the light from a merrily blazing fire, on which a cauldron was simmering. Nothing in the room was out of place. The man who now came hurrying toward Harry, dressed in a snowy-white towel, his ear hair as clean and fluffy as cotton wool. "Shoes off, if you please, Master Harry, and hands washed before dinner," croaked Kreacher, seizing the Invisibility Cloak and handing Harry a number of old-fashioned robes that had been freshly laundered.

"What's happened?" Ron asked apprehensively. He and Hermione had been poring over a sheaf of scribbled notes and now they watched Harry as he strode toward them and threw down the newspaper on top of their scattered parchment. A large picture of a familiar, hook-nosed, black-haired man stared up at them all, beneath a headline that read:

SEVERUS SNAPE CONFIRMED AS HOGWARTS HEADMASTER

"No!" said Ron and Hermione loudly.

Hermione was quickest; she snatched up the newspaper and began to read the accompanying story out loud.

"Severus Snape, long-standing Potions master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was today appointed Headmaster of the ancient school. Following the resignation of the previous Muggle Studies teacher, Alecto Carrow will take over the position of the Dark Arts professor."

"I welcome the opportunity to uphold our finest Wizarding traditions and values — Like committing murder and cutting off heads — Merlin's pants!" she shrieked, making both Harry and Ron jump. She leapt up from the table and hugged him.

"Merlin's pants?" repeated Ron, looking amused. "She must be upset." He pulled the newspaper toward him and perused it.

"The other teachers won't stand for this. McGonagall and Flitwick and Sprout all know the truth, they know how Dumfrey Carrows?"

"Death Eaters," said Harry. "There are pictures of them inside. They were at the top of the tower when Snape killed Dumbledore, drawing up a chair, 'I can't see that the other teachers have got any choice but to stay. If the Ministry and Voldemort want to keep teaching, or a nice few years in Azkaban — and that's if they're lucky. I reckon they'll stay to try and protect the students.' Kreacher came bustling to the table with a large tureen in his hands, and ladled out soup into pristine bowls, whistling. "Thanks, Kreacher," said Harry, flipping over the Prophet so as not to have to look at Snape's face. "Well, at least we know he's not a Death Eater." He began to spoon soup into his mouth. The quality of Kreacher's cooking had improved dramatically ever since he had been freed. Harry had ever tasted.

"There are still a load of Death Eaters watching the house," he told Ron as he ate, "more than usual. It's like they're here for the Hogwarts Express."

Ron glanced at his watch.

"I've been thinking about that all day. It left nearly six hours ago. Weird, not being on it, isn't it?"

In his mind's eye Harry seemed to see the scarlet steam engine as he and Ron had once followed it by air, shimmering. Sure Ginny, Neville, and Luna were sitting together at this moment, perhaps wondering where he, Ron, and Hermione were. "They nearly saw me coming back in just now," Harry said. "I landed badly on the top step, and the Cloak slipped."

"I do that every time. Oh, here she is," Ron added, craning around in his seat to watch Hermione reentering the kitchen at about?"

"I remembered this," Hermione panted.

She was carrying a large, framed picture, which she now lowered to the floor before seizing her small, beaded bag from the painting inside, and despite the fact that it was patently too large to fit inside the tiny bag, within a few seconds it had disappeared.

"Phineas Nigellus," Hermione explained as she threw the bag onto the kitchen table with the usual sonorous, clanking sound.

"Sorry?" said Ron, but Harry understood. The painted image of Phineas Nigellus Black was able to flit between his portrait's office at Hogwarts: the circular tower-top room where Snape was no doubt sitting right now, in triumphant possession of the stone Pensieve, the Sorting Hat and, unless it had been moved elsewhere, the sword of Gryffindor.

"Snape could send Phineas Nigellus to look inside this house for him," Hermione explained to Ron as she resumed her search. "To see is the inside of my handbag."

"Good thinking!" said Ron, looking impressed.

"Thank you," smiled Hermione, pulling her soup toward her. "So, Harry, what else happened today?"

"Nothing," said Harry. "Watched the Ministry entrance for seven hours. No sign of her. Saw your dad, though, Ron. He was always surrounded by other Ministry workers. It was, however, reassuring to catch these glimpses of him, even if they were from a distance."

"Dad always told us most Ministry people use the Floo Network to get to work," Ron said. "That's why we haven't seen him for ages."

"And what about that funny old witch and that little wizard in the navy robes?" Hermione asked.

"Oh yeah, the bloke from Magical Maintenance," said Ron.

"How do you know he works for Magical Maintenance?" Hermione asked, her soup spoon suspended in midair.

"Dad said everyone from Magical Maintenance wears navy blue robes."

"But you never told us that!"

Hermione dropped her spoon and pulled toward her the sheaf of notes and maps that she and Ron had been examining.

"There's nothing in here about navy blue robes, nothing!" she said, flipping feverishly through the pages.

"Well, does it really matter?"

"Ron, it all matters! If we're going to get into the Ministry and not give ourselves away when they're bound to be on top of us, then we need to be over and over this, I mean, what's the point of all these reconnaissance trips if you aren't even bothering to tell us what you find?"

"Blimey, Hermione, I forget one little thing —"

"You do realize, don't you, that there's probably no more dangerous place in the whole world for us to be right now than the Ministry?"

"I think we should do it tomorrow," said Harry.

Hermione stopped dead, her jaw hanging; Ron choked a little over his soup.

"Tomorrow?" repeated Hermione. "You aren't serious, Harry?"

"I am," said Harry. "I don't think we're going to be much better prepared than we are now even if we skulk around the Ministry for the farthest away that locket could be. There's already a good chance Umbridge has chucked it away; the thing doesn't even have a name."

"Unless," said Ron, "she's found a way of opening it and she's now possessed."

"Wouldn't make any difference to her, she was so evil in the first place," Harry shrugged.

Hermione was biting her lip, deep in thought.

"We know everything important," Harry went on, addressing Hermione. "We know they've stopped Apparition in and out of the Ministry, so we're not allowed to connect their homes to the Floo Network now, because Ron heard those two Unspeakables complaining about it. At least, that's what you heard that bearded bloke saying to his mate —"

"I'll be up on level one, Dolores wants to see me," Hermione recited immediately.

"Exactly," said Harry. "And we know you get in using those funny coins, or tokens, or whatever they are, because I saw you do it."

"But we haven't got any!"

"If the plan works, we will have," Harry continued calmly.

"I don't know, Harry, I don't know. . . . There are an awful lot of things that could go wrong, so much relies on chance."

"That'll be true even if we spend another three months preparing," said Harry. "It's time to act."

He could tell from Ron's and Hermione's faces that they were scared; he was not particularly confident himself, and yep, he was nervous.

They had spent the previous four weeks taking it in turns to don the Invisibility Cloak and spy on the official entrances to the Ministry since childhood. They had tailed Ministry workers on their way in, eavesdropped on their conversations, and learned a lot about what was going on, ear, alone, at the same time every day. Occasionally there had been a chance to sneak a Daily Prophet out of someone's pocket, but now it was now stacked in front of Hermione.

"All right," said Ron slowly, "let's say we go for it tomorrow. . . . I think it should just be me and Harry."

"Oh, don't start that again!" sighed Hermione. "I thought we'd settled this."

"It's one thing hanging around the entrances under the Cloak, but this is different, Hermione." Ron jabbed a finger at the

on the list of Muggle-borns who didn't present themselves for interrogation!"

"And you're supposed to be dying of spattergroit at the Burrow! If anyone shouldn't go, it's Harry, he's got a ten-thou-

"Fine, I'll stay here," said Harry. "Let me know if you ever defeat Voldemort, won't you?"

As Ron and Hermione laughed, pain shot through the scar on Harry's forehead. His hand jumped to it: He saw Hermione's hair out of his eyes.

"Well, if all three of us go we'll have to Disapparate separately," Ron was saying. "We can't all fit under the Cloak anymore. Harry's scar was becoming more and more painful. He stood up. At once, Kreacher hurried forward.

"Master has not finished his soup, would Master prefer the savory stew, or else the treacle tart to which Master is so

"Thanks, Kreacher, but I'll be back in a minute — er — bathroom."

Aware that Hermione was watching him suspiciously, Harry hurried up the stairs to the hall and then to the first landing. Grunting with pain, he slumped over the black basin with its taps in the form of open-mouthed serpents and closed his eyes. He was gliding along a twilight street. The buildings on either side of him had high, timbered gables; they looked like giant

He approached one of them, then saw the whiteness of his own long-fingered hand against the door. He knocked. He

The door opened: A laughing woman stood there. Her face fell as she looked into Harry's face: humor gone, terror re-

"Gregorovitch?" said a high, cold voice.

She shook her head: She was trying to close the door. A white hand held it steady, prevented her shutting him out. .

"I want Gregorovitch."

"Er wohnt hier nicht mehr!" she cried, shaking her head. "He no live here! He no live here! I know him not!"

Abandoning the attempt to close the door, she began to back away down the dark hall, and Harry followed, gliding to

"Where is he?"

"Das weiß ich nicht! He move! I know not, I know not!"

He raised the wand. She screamed. Two young children came running into the hall. She tried to shield them with her

"Harry! HARRY!"

He opened his eyes; he had sunk to the floor. Hermione was pounding on the door again.

"Harry, open up!"

He had shouted out, he knew it. He got up and unbolted the door; Hermione toppled inside at once, regained her balance, looking unnerved as he pointed his wand into the corners of the chilly bathroom.

"What were you doing?" asked Hermione sternly.

"What d'you think I was doing?" asked Harry with feeble bravado.

"You were yelling your head off!" said Ron.

"Oh yeah . . . I must've dozed off or —"

"Harry, please don't insult our intelligence," said Hermione, taking deep breaths. "We know your scar hurt downstairs. Harry sat down on the edge of the bath.

"Fine. I've just seen Voldemort murdering a woman. By now he's probably killed her whole family. And he didn't need

"Harry, you aren't supposed to let this happen anymore!" Hermione cried, her voice echoing through the bathroom.

was dangerous — Voldemort can use it, Harry! What good is it to watch him kill and torture, how can it help?"

"Because it means I know what he's doing," said Harry.

"So you're not even going to try to shut him out?"

"Hermione, I can't. You know I'm lousy at Occlumency, I never got the hang of it."

"You never really tried!" she said hotly. "I don't get it, Harry — do you like having this special connection or relationship?"

She faltered under the look he gave her as he stood up.

"Like it?" he said quietly. "Would you like it?"

"I — no — I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't mean —"

"I hate it, I hate the fact that he can get inside me, that I have to watch him when he's most dangerous. But I'm going

"Dumbledore —"

"Forget Dumbledore. This is my choice, nobody else's. I want to know why he's after Gregorovitch."

"Who?"

"He's a foreign wandmaker," said Harry. "He made Krum's wand and Krum reckons he's brilliant."

"But according to you," said Ron, "Voldemort's got Ollivander locked up somewhere. If he's already got a wandmaker

"Maybe he agrees with Krum, maybe he thinks Gregorovitch is better . . . or else he thinks Gregorovitch will be able to do what Ollivander didn't know."

Harry glanced into the cracked, dusty mirror and saw Ron and Hermione exchanging skeptical looks behind his back.

"Harry, you keep talking about what your wand did," said Hermione, "but you made it happen! Why are you so determined?"

"Because I know it wasn't me! And so does Voldemort, Hermione! We both know what really happened!"

They glared at each other: Harry knew that he had not convinced Hermione and that she was marshaling counterarguments. He was not permitting himself to see into Voldemort's mind. To his relief, Ron intervened.

"Drop it," he advised her. "It's up to him. And if we're going to the Ministry tomorrow, don't you reckon we should go

Reluctantly, as the other two could tell, Hermione let the matter rest, though Harry was quite sure she would attack him later. He went to the basement kitchen, where Kreacher served them all stew and treacle tart.

They did not get to bed until late that night, after spending hours going over and over their plan until they could recite

ng in Sirius's room, lay in bed with his wandlight trained on the old photograph of his father, Sirius, Lupin, and Pettigrew. As he extinguished his wand, however, he was thinking not of Polyjuice Potion, Puking Pastilles, or the navy blue robes, and how long he could hope to remain hidden while Voldemort sought him so determinedly. Dawn seemed to follow midnight with indecent haste.

"You look terrible," was Ron's greeting as he entered the room to wake Harry.

"Not for long," said Harry, yawning.

They found Hermione downstairs in the kitchen. She was being served coffee and hot rolls by Kreacher and wearing

"Robes," she said under her breath, acknowledging their presence with a nervous nod and continuing to poke around the Decoy Detonators . . . You should each take a couple just in case. . . . Puking Pastilles, Nosebleed Nougat, Extendable Ears. They gulped down their breakfast, then set off upstairs, Kreacher bowing them out and promising to have a steak-and-kidney dinner. "Bless him," said Ron fondly, "and when you think I used to fantasize about cutting off his head and sticking it on the wall!" They made their way onto the front step with immense caution: They could see a couple of puffy-eyed Death Eaters in the shadows. Hermione Disapparated with Ron first, then came back for Harry.

After the usual brief spell of darkness and near suffocation, Harry found himself in the tiny alleyway where the first portkey had deserted, except for a couple of large bins; the first Ministry workers did not usually appear here until at least eight o'clock. "Right then," said Hermione, checking her watch. "She ought to be here in about five minutes. When I've Stunned her." "Hermione, we know," said Ron sternly. "And I thought we were supposed to open the door before she got here?" Hermione squealed.

"I nearly forgot! Stand back —"

She pointed her wand at the padlocked and heavily graffitied fire door beside them, which burst open with a crash. The door flew into the courtyard, into an empty theater. Hermione pulled the door back toward her, to make it look as though it was still closed.

"And now," she said, turning back to face the other two in the alleyway, "we put on the Cloak again —"

"— and we wait," Ron finished, throwing it over Hermione's head like a blanket over a birdcage and rolling his eyes at her. Little more than a minute later, there was a tiny pop and a little Ministry witch with flyaway gray hair Apparated feet first. She had just come out from behind a cloud. She barely had time to enjoy the unexpected warmth, however, before Hermione apparated.

"Nicely done, Hermione," said Ron, emerging from behind a bin beside the theater door as Harry took off the Invisibility Cloak. They passed through the passageway that led backstage. Hermione plucked a few hairs from the witch's head and added them to a flask of memory powder. Passing through the little witch's handbag.

"She's Mafalda Hopkirk," he said, reading a small card that identified their victim as an assistant in the Improper Use of Magic Office. "These are the tokens."

He passed her several small golden coins, all embossed with the letters M.O.M., which he had taken from the witch's pockets. Hermione drank the Polyjuice Potion, which was now a pleasant heliotrope color, and within seconds stood before them. They took off their robes and put them on, Harry checked his watch.

"We're running late, Mr. Magical Maintenance will be here any second."

They hurried to close the door on the real Mafalda; Harry and Ron threw the Invisibility Cloak over themselves but Hermione forgot. A tiny pop, and a small, ferret-like wizard appeared before them.

"Oh, hello, Mafalda."

"Hello!" said Hermione in a quavery voice. "How are you today?"

"Not so good, actually," replied the little wizard, who looked thoroughly downcast.

As Hermione and the wizard headed for the main road, Harry and Ron crept along behind them.

"I'm sorry to hear you're under the weather," said Hermione, talking firmly over the little wizard as he tried to expound on the state of the street. "Here, have a sweet."

"Eh? Oh, no thanks —"

"I insist!" said Hermione aggressively, shaking the bag of pastilles in his face. Looking rather alarmed, the little wizard took a pastille. The effect was instantaneous. The moment the pastille touched his tongue, the little wizard started vomiting so hard that he fell backward from the top of his head.

"Oh dear!" she said, as he splattered the alley with sick. "Perhaps you'd better take the day off!"

"No — no!" He choked and retched, trying to continue on his way despite being unable to walk straight. "I must — to work!"

"But that's just silly!" said Hermione, alarmed. "You can't go to work in this state — I think you ought to go to St. Mungo's!" The wizard had collapsed, heaving, onto all fours, still trying to crawl toward the main street.

"You simply can't go to work like this!" cried Hermione.

At last he seemed to accept the truth of her words. Using a repulsed Hermione to claw his way back into a standing position, he took the bag Ron had snatched from his hand as he went and some flying chunks of vomit.

"Urgh," said Hermione, holding up the skirts of her robe to avoid the puddles of sick. "It would have made much less of a mess if you'd just vomited into a bucket."

"Yeah," said Ron, emerging from under the cloak holding the wizard's bag, "but I still think a whole pile of unconscious people is a bit of a mess, isn't he? Chuck us the hair and the potion, then."

Within two minutes, Ron stood before them, as small and ferret-like as the sick wizard, and wearing the navy blue robes of the Ministry.

"Weird he wasn't wearing them today, wasn't it, seeing how much he wanted to go? Anyway, I'm Reg Cattermole, according to the list."

"Now wait here," Hermione told Harry, who was still under the Invisibility Cloak, "and we'll be back with some hairs for you. He had to wait ten minutes, but it seemed much longer to Harry, skulking alone in the sick-splattered alleyway beside the entrance. He reappeared.

"We don't know who he is," Hermione said, passing Harry several curly black hairs, "but he's gone home with a dreadlock. . ."

She pulled out a set of the old robes Kreacher had laundered for them, and Harry retired to take the potion and change. Once the painful transformation was complete he was more than six feet tall and, from what he could tell from his wrist, he had the Invisibility Cloak and his glasses inside his new robes, he rejoined the other two.

"Blimey, that's scary," said Ron, looking up at Harry, who now towered over him.

"Take one of Mafalda's tokens," Hermione told Harry, "and let's go, it's nearly nine."

They stepped out of the alleyway together. Fifty yards along the crowded pavement there were spiked black railings and a sign that read DIES.

"See you in a moment, then," said Hermione nervously, and she tottered off down the steps to LADIES. Harry and Ron entered a room that appeared to be an ordinary underground public toilet, tiled in grimy black and white.

"Morning, Reg!" called another wizard in navy blue robes as he let himself into a cubicle by inserting his golden token. "Forcing us all to get to work this way! Who are they expecting to turn up, Harry Potter?"

The wizard roared with laughter at his own wit. Ron gave a forced chuckle.

"Yeah," he said, "stupid, isn't it?"

And he and Harry let themselves into adjoining cubicles.

To Harry's left and right came the sound of flushing. He crouched down and peered through the gap at the bottom of the door to the toilet next door. He looked left and saw Ron blinking at him.

"We have to flush ourselves in?" he whispered.

"Looks like it," Harry whispered back; his voice came out deep and gravelly.

They both stood up. Feeling exceptionally foolish, Harry clambered into the toilet.

He knew at once that he had done the right thing; though he appeared to be standing in water, his shoes, feet, and robes in that moment had zoomed down a short chute, emerging out of a fireplace into the Ministry of Magic.

He got up clumsily; there was a lot more of his body than he was accustomed to. The great Atrium seemed darker than he remembered, the center of the hall, casting shimmering spots of light over the polished wooden floor and walls. Now a gigantic statue of a witch and a wizard sitting on ornately carved thrones, looking down at the Ministry workers toiling at the base of the statue were the words MAGIC IS MIGHT.

Harry received a heavy blow on the back of the legs: Another wizard had just flown out of the fireplace behind him.

"Out of the way, can't you — oh, sorry, Runcorn!"

Clearly frightened, the balding wizard hurried away. Apparently the man whom Harry was impersonating, Runcorn, was not alone.

"Psst!" said a voice, and he looked around to see a wispy little witch and the ferrety wizard from Magical Maintenance waiting to join them.

"You got in all right, then?" Hermione whispered to Harry.

"No, he's still stuck in the bog," said Ron.

"Oh, very funny . . . It's horrible, isn't it?" she said to Harry, who was staring up at the statue. "Have you seen what the statue is made of? Men, women, and children, all with rather stupid, ugly faces, twisted and pressed together to support the weight of the hands of the Muggles," whispered Hermione. "In their rightful place. Come on, let's get going."

They joined the stream of witches and wizards moving toward the golden gates at the end of the hall, looking around for the inactive figure of Dolores Umbridge. They passed through the gates and into a smaller hall, where queues were forming. Harry had barely joined the nearest one when a voice said, "Cattermole!"

They looked around: Harry's stomach turned over. One of the Death Eaters who had witnessed Dumbledore's death was looking at them with their eyes downcast; Harry could feel fear rippling through them. The man's scowling, slightly brutish face was somewhat softened with much gold thread. Someone in the crowd around the lifts called sycophantically, "Morning, Yaxley!" Yaxley looked at Harry.

"I requested somebody from Magical Maintenance to sort out my office, Cattermole. It's still raining in there."

Ron looked around as though hoping somebody else would intervene, but nobody spoke.

"Raining . . . in your office? That's — that's not good, is it?"

Ron gave a nervous laugh. Yaxley's eyes widened.

"You think it's funny, Cattermole, do you?"

A pair of witches broke away from the queue for the lift and bustled off.

"No," said Ron, "no, of course —"

"You realize that I am on my way downstairs to interrogate your wife, Cattermole? In fact, I'm quite surprised you're not taking her up as a bad job, have you? Probably wise. Be sure and marry a pureblood next time."

Hermione had let out a little squeak of horror. Yaxley looked at her. She coughed feebly and turned away.

"I — I —" stammered Ron.

"But if my wife were accused of being a Mudblood," said Yaxley, "— not that any woman I married would ever be misjudged. If my wife's Enforcement needed a job doing, I would make it my priority to do that job, Cattermole. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," whispered Ron.

"Then attend to it, Cattermole, and if my office is not completely dry within an hour, your wife's Blood Status will be i
The golden grille before them clattered open. With a nod and unpleasant smile to Harry, who was evidently expected
rd another lift. Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered theirs, but nobody followed them: It was as if they were infectious
d.

"What am I going to do?" Ron asked the other two at once; he looked stricken. "If I don't turn up, my wife — I mean, C

"We'll come with you, we should stick together —" began Harry, but Ron shook his head feverishly.

"That's mental, we haven't got much time. You two find Umbridge, I'll go and sort out Yaxley's office — but how do I s

"Try Finite Incantatem," said Hermione at once, "that should stop the rain if it's a hex or curse; if it doesn't, something
e difficult to fix, so as an interim measure try Impervius to protect his belongings —"

"Say it again, slowly —" said Ron, searching his pockets desperately for a quill, but at that moment the lift juddered to
tment for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being, and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Li
pen again, admitting a couple of wizards and several pale violet paper airplanes that fluttered around the lamp in th

"Morning, Albert," said a bushily whiskered man, smiling at Harry. He glanced over at Ron and Hermione as the lift cr
ructions to Ron. The wizard leaned toward Harry, leering, and muttered, "Dirk Cresswell, eh? From Goblin Liaison? Ni
He winked. Harry smiled back, hoping that this would suffice. The lift stopped; the grilles opened once more.

"Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters
h's voice.

Harry saw Hermione give Ron a little push and he hurried out of the lift, followed by the other wizards, leaving Harry
ione said, very fast, "Actually, Harry, I think I'd better go after him, I don't think he knows what he's doing and if he ge

"Level one, Minister of Magic and Support Staff."

The golden grilles slid apart again and Hermione gasped. Four people stood before them, two of them deep in conv
gold, and a squat, toadlike witch wearing a velvet bow in her short hair and clutching a clipboard to her chest.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE MUGGLE-BORN REGISTRATION COMMISSION

Ah, Mafalda!" said Umbridge, looking at Hermione. "Travers sent you, did he?"

"Y-yes," squeaked Hermione.

"Good, you'll do perfectly well." Umbridge spoke to the wizard in black and gold. "That's that problem solved, Ministe
to start straightaway." She consulted her clipboard. "Ten people today and one of them the wife of a Ministry emplo
stepped into the lift beside Hermione, as did the two wizards who had been listening to Umbridge's conversation wi
rything you need in the courtroom. Good morning, Albert, aren't you getting out?"

"Yes, of course," said Harry in Runcorn's deep voice.

Harry stepped out of the lift. The golden grilles clanged shut behind him. Glancing over his shoulder, Harry saw Her
either side of her, Umbridge's velvet hair-bow level with her shoulder.

"What brings you up here, Runcorn?" asked the new Minister of Magic. His long black hair and beard were streaked w
eyes, putting Harry in mind of a crab looking out from beneath a rock.

"Needed a quick word with," Harry hesitated for a fraction of a second, "Arthur Weasley. Someone said he was up on

"Ah," said Pius Thicknesse. "Has he been caught having contact with an Undesirable?"

"No," said Harry, his throat dry. "No, nothing like that."

"Ah, well. It's only a matter of time," said Thicknesse. "If you ask me, the blood traitors are as bad as the Mudbloods.

"Good day, Minister."

Harry watched Thicknesse march away along the thickly carpeted corridor. The moment the Minister had passed ou
y black cloak, threw it over himself, and set off along the corridor in the opposite direction. Runcorn was so tall that h
den.

Panic pulsed in the pit of his stomach. As he passed gleaming wooden door after gleaming wooden door, each beari
ight of the Ministry, its complexity, its impenetrability, seemed to force itself upon him so that the plan he had been
weeks seemed laughably childish. They had concentrated all their efforts on getting inside without being detected: T
ey were forced to separate. Now Hermione was stuck in court proceedings, which would undoubtedly last hours; Ro
an's liberty possibly depending on the outcome; and he, Harry, was wandering around on the top floor when he kne
He stopped walking, leaned against a wall, and tried to decide what to do. The silence pressed upon him: There was
orridors were as hushed as though the Muffliato charm had been cast over the place.

Her office must be up here, Harry thought.

It seemed most unlikely that Umbridge would keep her jewelry in her office, but on the other hand it seemed foolish
ridor again, passing nobody but a frowning wizard who was murmuring instructions to a quill that floated in front of
Now paying attention to the names on the doors, Harry turned a corner. Halfway along the next corridor he emerge
ws at small desks not unlike school desks, though much more highly polished and free from graffiti. Harry paused to
aving and twiddling their wands in unison, and squares of colored paper were flying in every direction like little pink
hythm to the proceedings, that the papers all formed the same pattern; and after a few more seconds he realized th
per squares were pages, which, when assembled, folded, and magicked into place, fell into neat stacks beside each v

t of Umbridge while she was sitting in a crowded court. Their priority now had to be to leave the Ministry before they was to find Ron, and then they could work out a way of extracting Hermione from the courtroom. The lift was empty when it arrived. Harry jumped in and pulled off the Invisibility Cloak as it started its descent. To his surprise, he found a soaking-wet and wild-eyed Ron got in.

"M-morning," he stammered to Harry as the lift set off again.

"Ron, it's me, Harry!"

"Harry! Blimey, I forgot what you looked like — why isn't Hermione with you?"

"She had to go down to the courtrooms with Umbridge, she couldn't refuse, and —"

But before Harry could finish the lift had stopped again: The doors opened and Mr. Weasley walked inside, talking to himself. He looked ed an anthill.

". . . I quite understand what you're saying, Wakanda, but I'm afraid I cannot be party to —"

Mr. Weasley broke off; he had noticed Harry. It was very strange to have Mr. Weasley glare at him with that much disapproval once more.

"Oh, hello, Reg," said Mr. Weasley, looking around at the sound of steady dripping from Ron's robes. "Isn't your wife in here with you so wet?"

"Yaxley's office is raining," said Ron. He addressed Mr. Weasley's shoulder, and Harry felt sure he was scared that his father would see other's eyes. "I couldn't stop it, so they've sent me to get Bernie — Pillsworth, I think they said —"

"Yes, a lot of offices have been raining lately," said Mr. Weasley. "Did you try Meteolojinx Recanto? It worked for Bletchley."

"Meteolojinx Recanto?" whispered Ron. "No, I didn't. Thanks, D — I mean, thanks, Arthur."

The lift doors opened; the old witch with the anthill hair left, and Ron darted past her out of sight. Harry made to follow him into the lift, his nose buried in some papers he was reading.

Not until the doors had clanged shut again did Percy realize he was in a lift with his father. He glanced up, saw Mr. Weasley's face, and the doors opened again. For the second time, Harry tried to get out, but this time found his way blocked by Mr. Weasley's arm.

"One moment, Runcorn."

The lift doors closed and as they clanked down another floor, Mr. Weasley said, "I hear you laid information about Dirk Cresswell. Harry had the impression that Mr. Weasley's anger was no less because of the brush with Percy. He decided his best course was to say, 'Sorry?' he said.

"Don't pretend, Runcorn," said Mr. Weasley fiercely. "You tracked down the wizard who faked his family tree, didn't you?"

"I — so what if I did?" said Harry.

"So Dirk Cresswell is ten times the wizard you are," said Mr. Weasley quietly, as the lift sank ever lower. "And if he survives, he'll tell his wife, his sons, and his friends —"

"Arthur," Harry interrupted, "you know you're being tracked, don't you?"

"Is that a threat, Runcorn?" said Mr. Weasley loudly.

"No," said Harry, "it's a fact! They're watching your every move —"

The lift doors opened. They had reached the Atrium. Mr. Weasley gave Harry a scathing look and swept from the lift. Harry followed him by other than Runcorn. . . . The lift doors clanged shut.

Harry pulled out the Invisibility Cloak and put it back on. He would try to extricate Hermione on his own while Ron was being kept trapped out into a torch-lit stone passageway quite different from the wood-paneled and carpeted corridors above. As he moved toward the distant black door that marked the entrance to the Department of Mysteries.

He set off, his destination not the black door, but the doorway he remembered on the left-hand side, which opened into a passage filled with possibilities as he crept down them: He still had a couple of Decoy Detonators, but perhaps it would be better to ask for a quick word with Mafalda? Of course, he did not know whether Runcorn was sufficiently important to get away with it, or he might trigger a search before they were clear of the Ministry. . . .

Lost in thought, he did not immediately register the unnatural chill that was creeping over him, as if he were descending into a cold he took: a cold that reached right down into his throat and tore at his lungs. And then he felt that stealing sense of cold.

. . .

Dementors, he thought.

And as he reached the foot of the stairs and turned to his right he saw a dreadful scene. The dark passage outside the Ministry was completely hidden, their ragged breathing the only sound in the place. The petrified Muggle-borns brought in for questioning most of them were hiding their faces in their hands, perhaps in an instinctive attempt to shield themselves from the dementors. The dementors were gliding up and down in front of them, and the cold, and the hopelessness, and the terror.

Fight it, he told himself, but he knew that he could not conjure a Patronus here without revealing himself instantly. So he fought it. The numbness seemed to steal over his brain, but he forced himself to think of Hermione and of Ron, who needed him. Moving through the towering black figures was terrifying: The eyeless faces hidden beneath their hoods turned as he moved, but they had a human presence that still had some hope, some resilience. . . .

And then, abruptly and shockingly amid the frozen silence, one of the dungeon doors on the left of the corridor was opened.

"No, no, I'm half-blood, I'm half-blood, I tell you! My father was a wizard, he was, look him up, Arkie Alderton, he's a wizard, get your hands off me, get your hands off —"

"This is your final warning," said Umbridge's soft voice, magically magnified so that it sounded clearly over the man's

the Dementor's Kiss."

The man's screams subsided, but dry sobs echoed through the corridor.

"Take him away," said Umbridge.

Two dementors appeared in the doorway of the courtroom, their rotting, scabbed hands clutching the upper arms of the man with him, and the darkness they trailed behind them swallowed him from sight.

"Next — Mary Cattermole," called Umbridge.

A small woman stood up; she was trembling from head to foot. Her dark hair was smoothed back into a bun and she looked at the dementors, Harry saw her shudder.

He did it instinctively, without any sort of plan, because he hated the sight of her walking alone into the dungeon: As if she were behind her.

It was not the same room in which he had once been interrogated for improper use of magic. This one was much smaller, with a sense of being stuck at the bottom of a deep well.

There were more dementors in here, casting their freezing aura over the place; they stood like faceless sentinels in the shadows. Seated on a balustrade, sat Umbridge, with Yaxley on one side of her, and Hermione, quite as white-faced as Mrs. Cattermole. A black-haired cat prowled up and down, up and down, and Harry realized that it was there to protect the prosecutors from the accused, used to feel, not the accusers.

"Sit down," said Umbridge in her soft, silky voice.

Mrs. Cattermole stumbled to the single seat in the middle of the floor beneath the raised platform. The moment she sat down, she knew she was there.

"You are Mary Elizabeth Cattermole?" asked Umbridge.

Mrs. Cattermole gave a single, shaky nod.

"Married to Reginald Cattermole of the Magical Maintenance Department?"

Mrs. Cattermole burst into tears.

"I don't know where he is, he was supposed to meet me here!"

Umbridge ignored her.

"Mother to Maisie, Ellie, and Alfred Cattermole?"

Mrs. Cattermole sobbed harder than ever.

"They're frightened, they think I might not come home —"

"Spare us," spat Yaxley. "The brats of Mudbloods do not stir our sympathies."

Mrs. Cattermole's sobs masked Harry's footsteps as he made his way carefully toward the steps that led up to the raised platform. As the black cat patrolled, he felt the change in temperature: It was warm and comfortable here. The Patronus, he was sure, was with him, in her element, upholding the twisted laws she had helped to write. Slowly and very carefully he edged his way along the balustrade, seat behind the latter. He was worried about making Hermione jump. He thought of casting the Muffliato charm upon her to silence the alarm. Then Umbridge raised her voice to address Mrs. Cattermole, and Harry seized his chance.

"I'm behind you," he whispered into Hermione's ear.

As he had expected, she jumped so violently she nearly overturned the bottle of ink with which she was supposed to be writing, entrating upon Mrs. Cattermole, and this went unnoticed.

"A wand was taken from you upon your arrival at the Ministry today, Mrs. Cattermole," Umbridge was saying. "Eighty-four. Can you describe that description?"

Mrs. Cattermole nodded, mopping her eyes on her sleeve.

"Could you please tell us from which witch or wizard you took that wand?"

"T-took?" sobbed Mrs. Cattermole. "I didn't t-take it from anybody. I b-bought it when I was eleven years old. It — it — it was mine." She cried harder than ever.

Umbridge laughed a soft girlish laugh that made Harry want to attack her. She leaned forward over the barrier, the black cat, and dangled over the void: the locket.

Hermione had seen it; she let out a little squeak, but Umbridge and Yaxley, still intent upon their prey, were deaf to her.

"No," said Umbridge, "no, I don't think so, Mrs. Cattermole. Wands only choose witches or wizards. You are not a witch, you are here — Mafalda, pass them to me."

Umbridge held out a small hand: She looked so toadlike at that moment that Harry was quite surprised not to see warts. She fumbled in a pile of documents balanced on the chair beside her, finally withdrawing a sheaf of parchment.

"That's — that's pretty, Dolores," she said, pointing at the pendant gleaming in the ruffled folds of Umbridge's blouse.

"What?" snapped Umbridge, glancing down. "Oh yes — an old family heirloom," she said, patting the locket lying on her lap. "The Selwyns. . . . Indeed, there are few pure-blood families to whom I am not related. . . . A pity," she continued in a low voice, "that the same cannot be said for you. 'Parents' professions: greengrocers.'"

Yaxley laughed jeeringly. Below, the fluffy silver cat patrolled up and down, and the dementors stood waiting in the darkness.

It was Umbridge's lie that brought the blood surging into Harry's brain and obliterated his sense of caution — that the locket was used to bolster her own pure-blood credentials. He raised his wand, not even troubling to keep it concealed beneath his robes.

There was a flash of red light; Umbridge crumpled and her forehead hit the edge of the balustrade: Mrs. Cattermole's black-haired silver cat vanished. Ice-cold air hit them like an oncoming wind: Yaxley, confused, looked around for the source of the noise, looking at him. He tried to draw his own wand, but too late: "Stupefy!"

Yaxley slid to the ground to lie curled on the floor.

"Harry!"

"Hermione, if you think I was going to sit here and let her pretend —"

"Harry, Mrs. Cattermole!"

Harry whirled around, throwing off the Invisibility Cloak; down below, the dementors had moved out of their corners because the Patronus had vanished or because they sensed that their masters were no longer in control, they seemed to ooze a cream of fear as a slimy, scabbed hand grasped her chin and forced her face back.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The silver stag soared from the tip of Harry's wand and leaped toward the dementors, which fell back and melted into the shadows, warmer than the cat's protection, filled the whole dungeon as it cantered around and around the room.

"Get the Horcrux," Harry told Hermione.

He ran back down the steps, stuffing the Invisibility Cloak back into his bag, and approached Mrs. Cattermole.

"You?" she whispered, gazing into his face. "But — but Reg said you were the one who submitted my name for quest —"

"Did I?" muttered Harry, tugging at the chains binding her arms. "Well, I've had a change of heart. Diffindo!" Nothing happened.

"Wait, I'm trying something up here —"

"Hermione, we're surrounded by dementors!"

"I know that, Harry, but if she wakes up and the locket's gone — I need to duplicate it — Geminio! There . . . That should work." Hermione came running downstairs.

"Let's see. . . . Relashio!"

The chains clinked and withdrew into the arms of the chair. Mrs. Cattermole looked just as frightened as ever before.

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"You're going to leave here with us," said Harry, pulling her to her feet. "Go home, grab your children, and get out, get out, and run. You've seen how it is, you won't get anything like a fair hearing here."

"Harry," said Hermione, "how are we going to get out of here with all those dementors outside the door?"

"Patronuses," said Harry, pointing his wand at his own: The stag slowed and walked, still gleaming brightly, toward the door.

"Expecto — Expecto patronum," said Hermione. Nothing happened.

"It's the only spell she ever has trouble with," Harry told a completely bemused Mrs. Cattermole. "Bit unfortunate, really." "Expecto patronum!"

A silver otter burst from the end of Hermione's wand and swam gracefully through the air to join the stag.

"C'mon," said Harry, and he led Hermione and Mrs. Cattermole to the door.

When the Patronuses glided out of the dungeon there were cries of shock from the people waiting outside. Harry looked back over his shoulder, melding into the darkness, scattering before the silver creatures.

"It's been decided that you should all go home and go into hiding with your families," Harry told the waiting Muggle-borns, cowering slightly. "Go abroad if you can. Just get well away from the Ministry. That's the — er — new official position. No one is to leave from the Atrium."

They managed to get up the stone steps without being intercepted, but as they approached the lifts Harry started to feel a chill, a silver otter soaring alongside it, and twenty or so people, half of them accused Muggle-borns, he could not help feeling that this unwelcome conclusion when the lift clanged to a halt in front of them.

"Reg!" screamed Mrs. Cattermole, and she threw herself into Ron's arms. "Runcorn let me out, he attacked Umbridge, he'd better do it, Reg, I really do, let's hurry home and fetch the children and — why are you so wet?"

"Water," muttered Ron, disengaging himself. "Harry, they know there are intruders inside the Ministry, something about it, it's not a coincidence if that —"

Hermione's Patronus vanished with a pop as she turned a horror-struck face to Harry.

"Harry, if we're trapped here —!"

"We won't be if we move fast," said Harry. He addressed the silent group behind them, who were all gawping at him.

"Who's got wands?"

About half of them raised their hands.

"Okay, all of you who haven't got wands need to attach yourself to somebody who has. We'll need to be fast before they get here."

They managed to cram themselves into two lifts. Harry's Patronus stood sentinel before the golden grilles as they shut.

"Level eight," said the witch's cool voice, "Atrium."

Harry knew at once that they were in trouble. The Atrium was full of people moving from fireplace to fireplace, sealing the exits.

"Harry!" squeaked Hermione. "What are we going to —?"

"STOP!" Harry thundered, and the powerful voice of Runcorn echoed through the Atrium: The wizards sealing the exits, the Muggle-borns, who moved forward in a huddle, shepherded by Ron and Hermione.

"What's up, Albert?" said the same balding wizard who had followed Harry out of the fireplace earlier. He looked nervous.

"This lot need to leave before you seal the exits," said Harry with all the authority he could muster.

The group of wizards in front of him looked at one another.

"We've been told to seal all exits and not let anyone —"

"Are you contradicting me?" Harry blustered. "Would you like me to have your family tree examined, like I had Dirk Cattermole's?"

"Sorry!" gasped the balding wizard, backing away. "I didn't mean nothing, Albert, but I thought . . . I thought they were —"

"Their blood is pure," said Harry, and his deep voice echoed impressively through the hall. "Purer than many of yours." The Ministry wizards hurried forward into the fireplaces and began to vanish in pairs. The Ministry wizards hung back, some looking confused.

"Mary!"
Mrs. Cattermole looked over her shoulder. The real Reg Cattermole, no longer vomiting but pale and wan, had just come in.
"R-Reg?"

She looked from her husband to Ron, who swore loudly.

The balding wizard gaped, his head turning ludicrously from one Reg Cattermole to the other.

"Hey — what's going on? What is this?"

"Seal the exit! SEAL IT!"

Yaxley had burst out of another lift and was running toward the group beside the fireplaces, into which all of the Ministry wizards hurried. The balding wizard lifted his wand, Harry raised an enormous fist and punched him, sending him flying through the air.

"He's been helping Muggle-borns escape, Yaxley!" Harry shouted.

The balding wizard's colleagues set up an uproar, under cover of which Ron grabbed Mrs. Cattermole, pulled her into the lift and fled from Harry to the punched wizard, while the real Reg Cattermole screamed, "My wife! Who was that with my wife?"

Harry saw Yaxley's head turn, saw an inkling of the truth dawn in that brutish face.

"Come on!" Harry shouted at Hermione; he seized her hand and they jumped into the fireplace together as Yaxley's colleagues hooted up out of a toilet into a cubicle. Harry flung open the door; Ron was standing there beside the sinks, still wreathed in flames.

"Reg, I don't understand —"

"Let go, I'm not your husband, you've got to go home!"

There was a noise in the cubicle behind them; Harry looked around; Yaxley had just appeared.

"LET'S GO!" Harry yelled. He seized Hermione by the hand and Ron by the arm and turned on the spot.

Darkness engulfed them, along with the sensation of compressing bands, but something was wrong. . . . Hermione's hand was cold.

He wondered whether he was going to suffocate; he could not breathe or see and the only solid things in the world were the walls of the lift. . . .

And then he saw the door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, with its serpent door knocker, but before he could do anything, his hand was suddenly vicelike upon his and everything went dark again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE THIEF

Harry opened his eyes and was dazzled by gold and green; he had no idea what had happened, he only knew that he was lying on his back, his head on a cushion, his hands and feet bound. He tried to get up, but his head felt flattened, he blinked and realized that the gaudy glare was sunlight streaming through a canopy. He pushed himself onto his hands and knees, ready to face some small, fierce creature, but saw that the only creatures were lying on a forest floor, apparently alone.

Harry's first thought was of the Forbidden Forest, and for a moment, even though he knew how foolish and dangerous it would be to attempt to sneak through the trees to Hagrid's hut. However, in the few moments it took for Ron to wake up, he realized that this was not the Forbidden Forest: The trees looked younger, they were more widely spaced, the ground clear.

He met Hermione, also on her hands and knees, at Ron's head. The moment his eyes fell upon Ron, all other concerns vanished. Ron's face stood out, grayish-white, against the leaf-strewn earth. The Polyjuice Potion was wearing off now: Ron was turning redder and redder as his face drained of the little color it had left.

"What's happened to him?"

"Splinched," said Hermione, her fingers already busy at Ron's sleeve, where the blood was wettest and darkest.

Harry watched, horrified, as she tore open Ron's shirt. He had always thought of Splinching as something comical, but now he saw the damage. Ron's upper arm, where a great chunk of flesh was missing, scooped cleanly away as though by a knife.

"Harry, quickly, in my bag, there's a small bottle labeled 'Essence of Dittany' —"

"Bag — right —"

Harry sped to the place where Hermione had landed, seized the tiny beaded bag, and thrust his hand inside it. At once he felt the leather spines of books, woolly sleeves of jumpers, heels of shoes —

"Quickly!"

He grabbed his wand from the ground and pointed it into the depths of the magical bag.

"Accio Dittany!"

A small brown bottle zoomed out of the bag; he caught it and hastened back to Hermione and Ron, whose eyes were now open.

"He's fainted," said Hermione, who was also rather pale; she no longer looked like Mafalda, though her hair was still long and dark.

Harry wrenched the stopper off the little bottle, Hermione took it and poured three drops of the potion onto the bleeding wound. Instantly, Harry saw that the bleeding had stopped. The wound now looked several days old; new skin stretched over what was left.

"Wow," said Harry.

"It's all I feel safe doing," said Hermione shakily. "There are spells that would put him completely right, but I daren't try them. He's lost so much blood already. . . ."

"How did he get hurt? I mean" — Harry shook his head, trying to clear it, to make sense of whatever had just taken place.

d Place?"

Hermione took a deep breath. She looked close to tears.

"Harry, I don't think we're going to be able to go back there."

"What d'you — ?"

"As we Disapparated, Yaxley caught hold of me and I couldn't get rid of him, he was too strong, and he was still holding on. I think he must have seen the door, and thought we were stopping there, so he slackened his grip and I managed to shake him off."

"But then, where's he? Hang on. . . . You don't mean he's at Grimmauld Place? He can't get in there?"

Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears as she nodded.

"Harry, I think he can. I — I forced him to let go with a Revulsion Jinx, but I'd already taken him inside the Fidelius Charm, so I've given him the secret, haven't I?"

There was no pretending; Harry was sure she was right. It was a serious blow. If Yaxley could now get inside the house, he could be bringing other Death Eaters in there by Apparition. Gloomy and oppressive though the house was, it had been their home. It had been friendlier, a kind of home. With a twinge of regret that had nothing to do with food, Harry imagined the house-elf busily preparing a meal. Hermione would never eat.

"Harry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be stupid, it wasn't your fault! If anything, it was mine. . . ."

Harry put his hand in his pocket and drew out Mad-Eye's eye. Hermione recoiled, looking horrified.

"Umbridge had stuck it to her office door, to spy on people. I couldn't leave it there . . . but that's how they knew they were being watched."

Before Hermione could answer, Ron groaned and opened his eyes. He was still gray and his face glistened with sweat.

"How d'you feel?" Hermione whispered.

"Lousy," croaked Ron, wincing as he felt his injured arm. "Where are we?"

"In the woods where they held the Quidditch World Cup," said Hermione. "I wanted somewhere enclosed, undercover."

"— the first place you thought of," Harry finished for her, glancing around at the apparently deserted glade. He could see no signs of life.

Apparated to the first place Hermione had thought of — how Death Eaters had found them within minutes. Had it been because of the Fidelius Charm? Had Hermione had taken them?

"D'you reckon we should move on?" Ron asked Harry, and Harry could tell by the look on Ron's face that he was thinking of nothing but escape.

"I dunno."

Ron still looked pale and clammy. He had made no attempt to sit up and it looked as though he was too weak to do so.

"Let's stay here for now," Harry said.

Looking relieved, Hermione sprang to her feet.

"Where are you going?" asked Ron.

"If we're staying, we should put some protective enchantments around the place," she replied, and raising her wand, she began to cast a series of incantations as she went. Harry saw little disturbances in the surrounding air: It was as if Hermione had cast a heat-seeking charm.

"Salvio Hexia . . . Protego Totalum . . . Repello Muggletum . . . Muffliato . . . You could get out the tent, Harry. . . ."

"Tent?"

"In the bag!"

"In the . . . of course," said Harry.

He did not bother to grope inside it this time, but used another Summoning Charm. The tent emerged in a lumpy mass, and the smell of cats, as the same tent in which they had slept on the night of the Quidditch World Cup.

"I thought this belonged to that bloke Perkins at the Ministry?" he asked, starting to disentangle the tent pegs.

"Apparently he didn't want it back, his lumbago's so bad," said Hermione, now performing complicated figure-of-eight patterns with her wand. "recto!" she added, pointing her wand at the misshapen canvas, which in one fluid motion rose into the air and settled into its proper shape. Startled hands a tent peg soared, to land with a final thud at the end of a guy rope.

"Cave Inimicum," Hermione finished with a skyward flourish. "That's as much as I can do. At the very least, we should be safe."

"Don't say the name!" Ron cut across her, his voice harsh.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other.

"I'm sorry," Ron said, moaning a little as he raised himself to look at them, "but it feels like a — a jinx or something. Cattermoles."

"Dumbledore said fear of a name —" began Harry.

"In case you hadn't noticed, mate, calling You-Know-Who by his name didn't do Dumbledore much good in the end, did it?"

"Respect?" Harry repeated, but Hermione shot him a warning look; apparently he was not to argue with Ron while the tent was being set up. Harry and Hermione half carried, half dragged Ron through the entrance of the tent. The interior was exactly as Harry remembered it. He shoved aside an old armchair and lowered Ron carefully onto the lower berth of a bunk bed. Even this very slight movement seemed to lead him on the mattress he closed his eyes again and did not speak for a while.

"I'll make some tea," said Hermione breathlessly, pulling kettle and mugs from the depths of her bag and heading toward the kitchen. Harry found the hot drink as welcome as the firewhisky had been on the night that Mad-Eye had died; it seemed to be a relief. He sat up, and, for the first time or two, Ron broke the silence.

"What d'you reckon happened to the Cattermoles?"

"With any luck, they'll have got away," said Hermione, clutching her hot mug for comfort. "As long as Mr. Cattermole is safe, we're safe. They'll Side-Along-Apparition and they'll be fleeing the country right now with their children. That's what Harry told her to do."

"Blimey, I hope they escaped," said Ron, leaning back on his pillows. The tea seemed to be doing him good; a little of it was all that quick-witted, though, the way everyone was talking to me when I was him. God, I hope they made it. . . . Harry looked over at Hermione and the question he had been about to ask — about whether Mrs. Cattermole's lack of food had hurt his throat. Hermione was watching Ron fret over the fate of the Cattermoles, and there was such tenderness in her eyes as she act of kissing him.

"So, have you got it?" Harry asked her, partly to remind her that he was there.

"Got — got what?" she said with a little start.

"What did we just go through all that for? The locket! Where's the locket?"

"You got it?" shouted Ron, raising himself a little higher on his pillows. "No one tells me anything! Blimey, you could have told me!"

"Well, we were running for our lives from the Death Eaters, weren't we?" said Hermione. "Here."

And she pulled the locket out of the pocket of her robes and handed it to Ron.

It was as large as a chicken's egg. An ornate letter S, inlaid with many small green stones, glinted dully in the diffused light.

"There isn't any chance someone's destroyed it since Kreacher had it?" asked Ron hopefully. "I mean, are we sure it's the real one?"

"I think so," said Hermione, taking it back from him and looking at it closely. "There'd be some sign of damage if it had been destroyed."

She passed it to Harry, who turned it over in his fingers. The thing looked perfect, pristine. He remembered the man who had been cracked open when Dumbledore destroyed it.

"I reckon Kreacher's right," said Harry. "We're going to have to work out how to open this thing before we can destroy it."

Sudden awareness of what he was holding, of what lived behind the little golden doors, hit Harry as he spoke. Even as he spoke, he was trying to prise the locket from him. Mastering himself again, he tried to prise the locket apart with his fingers, then attempted the same with his teeth.

Nothing worked. He handed the locket back to Ron and Hermione, each of whom did their best, but were no more successful. "Can you feel it, though?" Ron asked in a hushed voice, as he held it tight in his clenched fist.

"What d'you mean?"

Ron passed the Horcrux to Harry. After a moment or two, Harry thought he knew what Ron meant. Was it his own blood that was beating inside the locket, like a tiny metal heart?

"What are we going to do with it?" Hermione asked.

"Keep it safe till we work out how to destroy it," Harry replied, and, little though he wanted to, he hung the chain around his neck, where it rested against his chest beside the pouch Hagrid had given him.

"I think we should take it in turns to keep watch outside the tent," he added to Hermione, standing up and stretching. "I'll take the first watch."

"I'll take the second," he added sharply, as Ron attempted to sit up and turned a nasty shade of green.

With the Sneakoscope Hermione had given Harry for his birthday set carefully upon the table in the tent, Harry and Hermione waited. However, the Sneakoscope remained silent and still upon its point all day, and whether because of the protective enchantment on the tent, or because people rarely ventured this way, their patch of wood remained deserted, apart from occasional birds that landed on the roof and swapped places with Hermione at ten o'clock, and looked out upon a deserted scene, noting the bats fluttering high above the forest's protected clearing.

He felt hungry now, and a little light-headed. Hermione had not packed any food in her magical bag, as she had assumed that they had had nothing to eat except some wild mushrooms that Hermione had collected from amongst the nearest trees. He had eaten his portion away, looking queasy; Harry had only persevered so as not to hurt Hermione's feelings.

The surrounding silence was broken by odd rustlings and what sounded like crackings of twigs: Harry thought that the forest was alive, held tight at the ready. His insides, already uncomfortable due to their inadequate helping of rubbery mushrooms, felt as if they were being squeezed. He had thought that he would feel elated if they managed to steal back the Horcrux, but somehow he did not; all he felt was a tiny part, was worry about what would happen next. It was as though he had been hurtling toward this point for a long time, and now he had to stop, halt, run out of road.

There were other Horcruxes out there somewhere, but he did not have the faintest idea where they could be. He did not know how to destroy the only one that they had found, the Horcrux that currently lay against the bare flesh of his chest. He felt cold against his skin it might just have emerged from icy water. From time to time Harry thought, or perhaps imagined, of the other Horcruxes beside his own.

Nameless forebodings crept upon him as he sat there in the dark: He tried to resist them, push them away, yet they came back. Ron and Hermione, now talking softly behind him in the tent, could walk away if they wanted to: He could not. And the exhaustion, that the Horcrux against his chest was ticking away the time he had left. . . . Stupid idea, he told himself. His scar was starting to prickle again. He was afraid that he was making it happen by having these thoughts, and tried to push them away. But he could not. He had expected them home and had received Yaxley instead. Would the elf keep silent or would he tell the Death Eaters? He had changed toward him in the past month, that he would be loyal now, but who knew what would happen? What if he changed back? And he tried to push these away too, for there was nothing he could do for Kreacher: He and Hermione had already tried to kill him. What if the Ministry came too? They could not count on elfish Apparition being free from the same flaw that had taken Yaxley to Griphook. Harry's scar was burning now. He thought that there was so much they did not know: Lupin had been right about many things. What had he learned more? Had he thought that there would be time; that he would live for years, for centuries perhaps, like his friends? He had seen to that. . . . Snape, the sleeping snake, who had struck at the top of the tower . . .

And Dumbledore had fallen . . . fallen . . .

"Give it to me, Gregorovitch."

Harry's voice was high, clear, and cold, his wand held in front of him by a long-fingered white hand. The man at whom

re were no ropes holding him; he swung there, invisibly and eerily bound, his limbs wrapped about him, his terrified
ushes to his head. He had pure-white hair and a thick, bushy beard: a trussed-up Father Christmas.
"I have it not, I have it no more! It was, many years ago, stolen from me!"
"Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, Gregorovitch. He knows. . . . He always knows."
The hanging man's pupils were wide, dilated with fear, and they seemed to swell, bigger and bigger until their black
And now Harry was hurrying along a dark corridor in stout little Gregorovitch's wake as he held a lantern aloft: Grego
antern illuminated what looked like a workshop; wood shavings and gold gleamed in the swinging pool of light, and t
an with golden hair. In the split second that the lantern's light illuminated him, Harry saw the delight upon his hands
d and jumped neatly backward out of the window with a crowd of laughter.
And Harry was hurtling back out of those wide, tunnelliike pupils and Gregorovitch's face was stricken with terror.
"Who was the thief, Gregorovitch?" said the high cold voice.
"I do not know, I never knew, a young man — no — please — PLEASE!"
A scream that went on and on and then a burst of green light —
"Harry!"
He opened his eyes, panting, his forehead throbbing. He had passed out against the side of the tent, had slid sidewa
at Hermione, whose bushy hair obscured the tiny patch of sky visible through the dark branches high above them.
"Dream," he said, sitting up quickly and attempting to meet Hermione's glower with a look of innocence. "Must've do
"I know it was your scar! I can tell by the look on your face! You were looking into Vol —"
"Don't say his name!" came Ron's angry voice from the depths of the tent.
"Fine," retorted Hermione. "You-Know-Who's mind, then!"
"I didn't mean it to happen!" Harry said. "It was a dream! Can you control what you dream about, Hermione?"
"If you just learned to apply Occlumency —"
But Harry was not interested in being told off; he wanted to discuss what he had just seen.
"He's found Gregorovitch, Hermione, and I think he's killed him, but before he killed him he read Gregorovitch's mind
"I think I'd better take over the watch if you're so tired you're falling asleep," said Hermione coldly.
"I can finish the watch!"
"No, you're obviously exhausted. Go and lie down."
She dropped down in the mouth of the tent, looking stubborn. Angry, but wishing to avoid a row, Harry ducked back
Ron's still-pale face was poking out from the lower bunk; Harry climbed into the one above him, lay down, and look
in a voice so low that it would not carry to Hermione, huddled in the entrance.
"What's You-Know-Who doing?"
Harry screwed up his eyes in the effort to remember every detail, then whispered into the darkness.
"He found Gregorovitch. He had him tied up, he was torturing him."
"How's Gregorovitch supposed to make him a new wand if he's tied up?"
"I dunno. . . . It's weird, isn't it?"
Harry closed his eyes, thinking of all he had seen and heard. The more he recalled, the less sense it made . . . Voldem
n cores, nothing about Gregorovitch making a new and more powerful wand to beat Harry's. . . .
"He wanted something from Gregorovitch," Harry said, eyes still closed tight. "He asked him to hand it over, but Greg
hen . . ."
He remembered how he, as Voldemort, had seemed to hurtle through Gregorovitch's eyes, into his memories . . .
"He read Gregorovitch's mind, and I saw this young bloke perched on a windowsill, and he fired a curse at Gregorovi
ow-Who's after. And I . . . I think I've seen him somewhere. . . ."
Harry wished he could have another glimpse of the laughing boy's face. The theft had happened many years ago, ac
The noises of the surrounding woods were muffled inside the tent; all Harry could hear was Ron's breathing. After a
g?"
"No . . . it must've been something small."
"Harry?"
The wooden slats of Ron's bunk creaked as he repositioned himself in bed.
"Harry, you don't reckon You-Know-Who's after something else to turn into a Horcrux?"
"I don't know," said Harry slowly. "Maybe. But wouldn't it be dangerous for him to make another one? Didn't Hermion
"Yeah, but maybe he doesn't know that."
"Yeah . . . maybe," said Harry.
He had been sure that Voldemort had been looking for a way around the problem of the twin cores, sure that Voldem
lled him, apparently without asking him a single question about wandlore.
What was Voldemort trying to find? Why, with the Ministry of Magic and the Wizarding world at his feet, was he far a
e owned, and which had been stolen by the unknown thief?
Harry could still see the blond-haired youth's face; it was merry, wild; there was a Fred and George-ish air of triumph
a bird, and Harry had seen him before, but he could not think where. . . .
With Gregorovitch dead, it was the merry-faced thief who was in danger now, and it was on him that Harry's thought
as he himself drifted slowly into sleep once more.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE GOBLIN'S REVENGE

Early next morning, before the other two were awake, Harry left the tent to search the woods around them for the one in its shadow he buried Mad-Eye Moody's eye and marked the spot by gouging a small cross in the bark with his wand. He referred this to being stuck on Dolores Umbridge's door. Then he returned to the tent to wait for the others to wake, and Harry and Hermione felt that it was best not to stay anywhere too long, and Ron agreed, with the sole proviso that they therefore removed the enchantments she had placed around the clearing, while Harry and Ron obliterated all the dementors there. Then they Disapparated to the outskirts of a small market town.

Once they had pitched the tent in the shelter of a small copse of trees and surrounded it with freshly cast defensive charms to find sustenance. This, however, did not go as planned. He had barely entered the town when an unnatural chill, a cold breeze where he stood.

"But you can make a brilliant Patronus!" protested Ron, when Harry arrived back at the tent empty-handed, out of breath. "I couldn't . . . make one," he panted, clutching the stitch in his side. "Wouldn't . . . come."

Their expressions of consternation and disappointment made Harry feel ashamed. It had been a nightmarish experience, realizing, as the paralyzing cold choked his lungs and a distant screaming filled his ears, that he was not going to be able to uproot himself from the spot and run, leaving the eyeless dementors to glide amongst the Muggles who might not notice wherever they went.

"So we still haven't got any food."

"Shut up, Ron," snapped Hermione. "Harry, what happened? Why do you think you couldn't make your Patronus? You're a wizard!"

"I don't know."

He sat low in one of Perkins's old armchairs, feeling more humiliated by the moment. He was afraid that something might happen to him he might have been thirteen years old again, the only one who collapsed on the Hogwarts Express.

Ron kicked a chair leg.

"What?" he snarled at Hermione. "I'm starving! All I've had since I bled half to death is a couple of toadstools!"

"You go and fight your way through the dementors, then," said Harry, stung.

"I would, but my arm's in a sling, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"That's convenient."

"And what's that supposed to — ?"

"Of course!" cried Hermione, clapping a hand to her forehead and startling both of them into silence. "Harry, give me a look at him when he did not react, 'the Horcrux, Harry, you're still wearing it!'"

She held out her hands, and Harry lifted the golden chain over his head. The moment it parted contact with Harry's skin, he felt a cold clammy or that there was a heavy weight pressing on his stomach until both sensations lifted.

"Better?" asked Hermione.

"Yeah, loads better!"

"Harry," she said, crouching down in front of him and using the kind of voice he associated with visiting the very sick, "What? No!" he said defensively. "I remember everything we've done while I've been wearing it. I wouldn't know what I was doing at times when she couldn't remember anything."

"Hmm," said Hermione, looking down at the heavy gold locket. "Well, maybe we ought not to wear it. We can just keep it safe."

"We are not leaving that Horcrux lying around," Harry stated firmly. "If we lose it, if it gets stolen —"

"Oh, all right, all right," said Hermione, and she placed it around her own neck and tucked it out of sight down the front of her robe. "It keeps it on too long."

"Great," said Ron irritably, "and now we've sorted that out, can we please get some food?"

"Fine, but we'll go somewhere else to find it," said Hermione with half a glance at Harry. "There's no point staying where we are. In the end they settled down for the night in a far-flung field belonging to a lonely farm, from which they had managed to steal some food. "It's not stealing, is it?" asked Hermione in a troubled voice, as they devoured scrambled eggs on toast. "Not if I left some for the dementors." Ron rolled his eyes and said, with his cheeks bulging, "'Er-my-nee, 'oo worry 'oo much. 'Elax!'"

And, indeed, it was much easier to relax when they were comfortably well fed: The argument about the dementors was dropped, as he took the first of the three night watches.

This was their first encounter with the fact that a full stomach meant good spirits; an empty one, bickering and gloom. They had suffered periods of near starvation at the Dursleys'. Hermione bore up reasonably well on those nights when they managed to steal a little shorter than usual and her silences rather dour. Ron, however, had always been used to three delicious meals a day, and hunger made him both unreasonable and irascible. Whenever lack of food coincided with Ron's turn to wear the Horcrux, "So where next?" was his constant refrain. He did not seem to have any ideas himself, but expected Harry and Hermione to find supplies. Accordingly Harry and Hermione spent fruitless hours trying to decide where they might find the other Horcruxes, their conversations becoming increasingly repetitive as they had no new information.

As Dumbledore had told Harry that he believed Voldemort had hidden the Horcruxes in places important to him, they began to wonder what Voldemort had lived or visited. The orphanage where he had been born and raised; Hogwarts, where he had been a student; school; then Albania, where he had spent his years of exile: These formed the basis of their speculations.

"Yeah, let's go to Albania. Shouldn't take more than an afternoon to search an entire country," said Ron sarcastically.

"There can't be anything there. He'd already made five of his Horcruxes before he went into exile, and Dumbledore would have found it. It's not in Albania, it's usually with Vol —"

"Didn't I ask you to stop saying that?"

"Fine! The snake is usually with You-Know-Who — happy?"

"Not particularly."

"I can't see him hiding anything at Borgin and Burkes," said Harry, who had made this point many times before, but since they were experts at Dark objects, they would've recognized a Horcrux straightaway."

Ron yawned pointedly. Repressing a strong urge to throw something at him, Harry plowed on, "I still reckon he might have hidden it somewhere else. Hermione sighed.

"But Dumbledore would have found it, Harry!"

Harry repeated the argument he kept bringing out in favor of this theory.

"Dumbledore said in front of me that he never assumed he knew all of Hogwarts's secrets. I'm telling you, if there was a Horcrux, he would have found it."

"Oi!"

"YOU-KNOW-WHO, then!" Harry shouted, goaded past endurance. "If there was one place that was really important to him, it would be his school. Oh, come on," scoffed Ron. "His school?"

"Yeah, his school! It was his first real home, the place that meant he was special; it meant everything to him, and even if he didn't know where he hid it, he would have looked there. This is You-Know-Who we're talking about, right? Not you?" inquired Ron. He was tugging at the chain of the Horcrux, but he didn't want to hrottle him.

"You told us that You-Know-Who asked Dumbledore to give him a job after he left," said Hermione.

"That's right," said Harry.

"And Dumbledore thought he only wanted to come back to try and find something, probably another founder's object. Yeah," said Harry.

"But he didn't get the job, did he?" said Hermione. "So he never got the chance to find a founder's object there and hide it. Okay, then," said Harry, defeated. "Forget Hogwarts."

Without any other leads, they traveled into London and, hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, searched for the orphanage. They found it, but the library and discovered from their records that the place had been demolished many years before. They visited its site, but nothing was left. "We could try digging in the foundations?" Hermione suggested halfheartedly.

"He wouldn't have hidden a Horcrux here," Harry said. He had known it all along: The orphanage had been the place where he had spent a part of his soul there. Dumbledore had shown Harry that Voldemort sought grandeur or mystique in his hiding place. He would imagine from Hogwarts or the Ministry or a building like Gringotts, the Wizarding bank, with its golden doors and vaults. Even without any new ideas, they continued to move through the countryside, pitching the tent in a different place every day. They had removed all clues to their presence, then set off to find another lonely and secluded spot, traveling by Apparition to remote locations, moors, gorse-covered mountainsides, and once a sheltered and pebbly cove. Every twelve hours or so they passed the hour, playing a motion game of pass-the-parcel, where they dreaded the music stopping because the reward was twelve hours of inactivity. Harry's scar kept prickling. It happened most often, he noticed, when he was wearing the Horcrux. Sometimes he could feel a face. "What? What did you see?" demanded Ron, whenever he noticed Harry wince.

"A face," muttered Harry, every time. "The same face. The thief who stole from Gregorovitch."

And Ron would turn away, making no effort to hide his disappointment. Harry knew that Ron was hoping to hear news of the face. But all, he, Harry, was not a television aerial; he could only see what Voldemort was thinking at the time, not tune in to Voldemort's thoughts. He listened endlessly on the unknown youth with the gleeful face, whose name and whereabouts, Harry felt sure, Voldemort knew. He thought of the blond-haired boy swam tantalizingly in his memory, he learned to suppress any sign of pain or discomfort, for the sake of the mission. He could not entirely blame them, when they were so desperate for a lead on the Horcruxes.

As the days stretched into weeks, Harry began to suspect that Ron and Hermione were having conversations without him. One day, when Harry entered the tent, and twice he came accidentally upon them, huddled a little distance away, heads together and talking. He saw them as they approached them and hastened to appear busy collecting wood or water.

Harry could not help wondering whether they had only agreed to come on what now felt like a pointless and rambling journey. He would learn in due course. Ron was making no effort to hide his bad mood, and Harry was starting to fear that Hermione was not interested in thinking of further Horcrux locations, but the only one that continued to occur to him was Hogwarts, and as neither of them could go there, he was stuck.

Autumn rolled over the countryside as they moved through it: They were now pitching the tent on mulches of fallen leaves. The rain added to their troubles. The fact that Hermione was getting better at identifying edible fungi could not altogether make up for the lack of people's company, or their total ignorance of what was going on in the war against Voldemort.

"My mother," said Ron one night, as they sat in the tent on a riverbank in Wales, "can make good food appear out of nothing. He prodded moodily at the lumps of charred gray fish on his plate. Harry glanced automatically at Ron's neck and saw the scar. Here. He managed to fight down the impulse to swear at Ron, whose attitude would, he knew, improve slightly when the scar was visible.

"Your mother can't produce food out of thin air," said Hermione. "No one can. Food is the first of the five Principal Elements. Oh, speak English, can't you?" Ron said, prising a fish bone out from between his teeth.

"It's impossible to make good food out of nothing! You can Summon it if you know where it is, you can transform it, you can create it. Well, don't bother increasing this, it's disgusting," said Ron.

"Harry caught the fish and I did my best with it! I notice I'm always the one who ends up sorting out the food, because"

"No, it's because you're supposed to be the best at magic!" shot back Ron.

Hermione jumped up and bits of roast pike slid off her tin plate onto the floor.

"You can do the cooking tomorrow, Ron, you can find the ingredients and try and charm them into something worth you —"

"Shut up!" said Harry, leaping to his feet and holding up both hands. "Shut up now!"

Hermione looked outraged.

"How can you side with him, he hardly ever does the cook —"

"Hermione, be quiet, I can hear someone!"

He was listening hard, his hands still raised, warning them not to talk. Then, over the rush and gush of the dark river neakoscope. It was not moving.

"You cast the Muffliato charm over us, right?" he whispered to Hermione.

"I did everything," she whispered back, "Muffliato, Muggle-Repelling and Disillusionment Charms, all of it. They should be here. Heavy scuffing and scraping noises, plus the sound of dislodged stones and twigs, told them that several people were on the river bank where they had pitched the tent. They drew their wands, waiting. The enchantments they had cast around the tent shielded them from the notice of Muggles and normal witches and wizards. If these were Death Eaters, then perhaps they would have been able to find them."

The voices became louder but no more intelligible as the group of men reached the bank. Harry estimated that their distance made it impossible to tell for sure. Hermione snatched up the beaded bag and started to rummage; after a moment she stopped, who hastily inserted the ends of the flesh-colored strings into their ears and fed the other ends out of the tent entrance. Within seconds Harry heard a weary male voice.

"There ought to be a few salmon in here, or d'you reckon it's too early in the season? Accio Salmon!"

There were several distinct splashes and then the slapping sounds of fish against flesh. Somebody grunted appreciation. In the murmur of the river he could make out more voices, but they were not speaking English or any human language. A rattling, guttural noises, and there seemed to be two speakers, one with a slightly lower, slower voice than the other. A fire danced into life on the other side of the canvas; large shadows passed between tent and flames. The delicious sizzle. Then came the clinking of cutlery on plates, and the first man spoke again.

"Here, Griphook, Gornuk."

Goblins! Hermione mouthed at Harry, who nodded.

"Thank you," said the goblins together in English.

"So, you three have been on the run how long?" asked a new, mellow, and pleasant voice; it was vaguely familiar to Harry.

"Six weeks . . . seven . . . I forget," said the tired man. "Met up with Griphook in the first couple of days and joined forces with him. He had a pany." There was a pause, while knives scraped plates and tin mugs were picked up and replaced on the ground. "What was his name?"

"Knew they were coming for me," replied mellow-voiced Ted, and Harry suddenly knew who he was: Tonks's father. "I had to run for it. Refused to register as a Muggle-born on principle, see, so I knew it was a matter of time, knew I'd have to leave. I met Dean here, what, a few days ago, son?"

"Yeah," said another voice, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at each other, silent but beside themselves with excitement. It was low Gryffindor.

"Muggle-born, eh?" asked the first man.

"Not sure," said Dean. "My dad left my mum when I was a kid. I've got no proof he was a wizard, though."

There was silence for a while, except for the sounds of munching; then Ted spoke again.

"I've got to say, Dirk, I'm surprised to run into you. Pleased, but surprised. Word was you'd been caught."

"I was," said Dirk. "I was halfway to Azkaban when I made a break for it, Stunned Dawlish, and nicked his broom. It was a close moment. Might be Confunded. If so, I'd like to shake the hand of the witch or wizard who did it, probably saved me. There was another pause in which the fire crackled and the river rushed on. Then Ted said, "And where do you two find yourselves now?"

"You had a false impression," said the higher-voiced of the goblins. "We take no sides. This is a wizards' war."

"How come you're in hiding, then?"

"I deemed it prudent," said the deeper-voiced goblin. "Having refused what I considered an impertinent request, I could not stay."

"What did they ask you to do?" asked Ted.

"Duties ill-befitting the dignity of my race," replied the goblin, his voice rougher and less human as he said it. "I am not a wizard."

"What about you, Griphook?"

"Similar reasons," said the higher-voiced goblin. "Gringotts is no longer under the sole control of my race. I recognize that."

He added something under his breath in Gobbledegook, and Gornuk laughed.

"What's the joke?" asked Dean.

"He said," replied Dirk, "that there are things wizards don't recognize, either."

There was a short pause.

"I don't get it," said Dean.

"I had my small revenge before I left," said Griphook in English.

"Good man — goblin, I should say," amended Ted hastily. "Didn't manage to lock a Death Eater up in one of the old houses."

"If I had, the sword would not have helped him break out," replied Griphook. Gornuk laughed again and even Dirk gaped.

"Dean and I are still missing something here," said Ted.

"So is Severus Snape, though he does not know it," said Griphook, and the two goblins roared with malicious laughter. He and Hermione stared at each other, listening as hard as they could.

"Didn't you hear about that, Ted?" asked Dirk. "About the kids who tried to steal Gryffindor's sword out of Snape's office? An electric current seemed to course through Harry, jangling his every nerve as he stood rooted to the spot.

"Never heard a word," said Ted. "Not in the Prophet, was it?"

"Hardly," chortled Dirk. "Griphook here told me, he heard about it from Bill Weasley who works for the bank. One of the Weasleys. Harry glanced toward Hermione and Ron, both of whom were clutching the Extendable Ears as tightly as lifelines.

"She and a couple of friends got into Snape's office and smashed open the glass case where he was apparently keeping the sword. They even own the staircase."

"Ah, God bless 'em," said Ted. "What did they think, that they'd be able to use the sword on You-Know-Who? Or on Snakes?"

"Well, whatever they thought they were going to do with it, Snape decided the sword wasn't safe where it was," said Dirk. "You-Know-Who, I imagine, he sent it down to London to be kept in Gringotts instead."

The goblins started to laugh again.

"I'm still not seeing the joke," said Ted.

"It's a fake," rasped Griphook.

"The sword of Gryffindor!"

"Oh yes. It is a copy — an excellent copy, it is true — but it was Wizard-made. The original was forged centuries ago by a blacksmith. Whichever the genuine sword of Gryffindor is, it is not in a vault at Gringotts bank."

"I see," said Ted. "And I take it you didn't bother telling the Death Eaters this?"

"I saw no reason to trouble them with the information," said Griphook smugly, and now Ted and Dean joined in Gorm's laughter.

Inside the tent, Harry closed his eyes, willing someone to ask the question he needed answered, and after a minute he heard it. It was from (t) an ex-boyfriend of Ginny's too.

"What happened to Ginny and the others? The ones who tried to steal it?"

"Oh, they were punished, and cruelly," said Griphook indifferently.

"They're okay, though?" asked Ted quickly. "I mean, the Weasleys don't need any more of their kids injured, do they?"

"They suffered no serious injury, as far as I am aware," said Griphook.

"Lucky for them," said Ted. "With Snape's track record I suppose we should just be glad they're still alive."

"You believe that story, then, do you, Ted?" asked Dirk. "You believe Snape killed Dumbledore?"

"Course I do," said Ted. "You're not going to sit there and tell me you think Potter had anything to do with it?"

"Hard to know what to believe these days," muttered Dirk.

"I know Harry Potter," said Dean. "And I reckon he's the real thing — the Chosen One, or whatever you want to call it."

"Yeah, there's a lot would like to believe he's that, son," said Dirk, "me included. But where is he? Run for it, by the look of it, or had anything special going for him, he'd be out there now fighting, rallying resistance, instead of hiding. And you know that."

"The Prophet?" scoffed Ted. "You deserve to be lied to if you're still reading that muck, Dirk. You want the facts, try the Prophet."

There was a sudden explosion of choking and retching, plus a good deal of thumping; by the sound of it, Dirk had swallowed something. It was the natic rag of Xeno Lovegood's?"

"It's not so lunatic these days," said Ted. "You want to give it a look. Xeno is printing all the stuff the Prophet's ignoring. It was in the last issue. How long they'll let him get away with it, mind, I don't know. But Xeno says, front page of every issue, that finding Harry Potter their number-one priority."

"Hard to help a boy who's vanished off the face of the earth," said Dirk.

"Listen, the fact that they haven't caught him yet's one hell of an achievement," said Ted. "I'd take tips from him gladly."

"Yeah, well, you've got a point there," said Dirk heavily. "With the whole of the Ministry and all their informers looking for him, how's it possible that they haven't already caught and killed him without publicizing it?"

"Ah, don't say that, Dirk," murmured Ted.

There was a long pause filled with more clattering of knives and forks. When they spoke again it was to discuss whether to go up the slope. Deciding the trees would give better cover, they extinguished their fire, then clambered back up the incline, then down it. Harry, Ron, and Hermione reeled in the Extendable Ears. Harry, who had found the need to remain silent increasingly, began to say more than, "Ginny — the sword —"

"I know!" said Hermione.

She lunged for the tiny beaded bag, this time sinking her arm in it right up to the armpit.

"Here . . . we . . . are . . ." she said between gritted teeth, and she pulled at something that was evidently in the depths of the bag. It came into sight. Harry hurried to help her. As they lifted the empty portrait of Phineas Nigellus free of Hermione's bag, she had a momentary moment.

"If somebody swapped the real sword for the fake while it was in Dumbledore's office," she panted, as they propped the portrait up, "I would have seen it happen, he hangs right beside the case!"

"Unless he was asleep," said Harry, but he still held his breath as Hermione knelt down in front of the empty canvas, looking at it.

"Er — Phineas? Phineas Nigellus?"

Nothing happened.

"Phineas Nigellus?" said Hermione again. "Professor Black? Please could we talk to you? Please?"

"Please' always helps," said a cold, snide voice, and Phineas Nigellus slid into his portrait. At once, Hermione cried: "Obscuro!"

A black blindfold appeared over Phineas Nigellus's clever, dark eyes, causing him to bump into the frame and shriek "What — how dare — what are you — ?"

"I'm very sorry, Professor Black," said Hermione, "but it's a necessary precaution!"

"Remove this foul addition at once! Remove it, I say! You are ruining a great work of art! Where am I? What is going on?"

"Never mind where we are," said Harry, and Phineas Nigellus froze, abandoning his attempts to peel off the painted

"Can that possibly be the voice of the elusive Mr. Potter?"

"Maybe," said Harry, knowing that this would keep Phineas Nigellus's interest. "We've got a couple of questions to ask."

"Ah," said Phineas Nigellus, now turning his head this way and that in an effort to catch sight of Harry, "yes. That silly

"Shut up about my sister," said Ron roughly. Phineas Nigellus raised supercilious eyebrows.

"Who else is here?" he asked, turning his head from side to side. "Your tone displeases me! The girl and her friends w

"They weren't thieving," said Harry. "That sword isn't Snape's."

"It belongs to Professor Snape's school," said Phineas Nigellus. "Exactly what claim did the Weasley girl have upon it? the Lovegood oddity!"

"Neville is not an idiot and Luna is not an oddity!" said Hermione.

"Where am I?" repeated Phineas Nigellus, starting to wrestle with the blindfold again. "Where have you brought me?"

"Never mind that! How did Snape punish Ginny, Neville, and Luna?" asked Harry urgently.

"Professor Snape sent them into the Forbidden Forest, to do some work for the oaf, Hagrid."

"Hagrid's not an oaf!" said Hermione shrilly.

"And Snape might've thought that was a punishment," said Harry, "but Ginny, Neville, and Luna probably had a good worse than the Forbidden Forest, big deal!"

He felt relieved; he had been imagining horrors, the Cruciatus Curse at the very least.

"What we really wanted to know, Professor Black, is whether anyone else has, um, taken out the sword at all? Maybe

Phineas Nigellus paused again in his struggles to free his eyes and sniggered.

"Muggle-borns," he said. "Goblin-made armor does not require cleaning, simple girl. Goblins' silver repels mundane c

"Don't call Hermione simple," said Harry.

"I grow weary of contradiction," said Phineas Nigellus. "Perhaps it is time for me to return to the headmaster's office?"

Still blindfolded, he began groping the side of his frame, trying to feel his way out of his picture and back into the on

"Dumbledore! Can't you bring us Dumbledore?"

"I beg your pardon?" asked Phineas Nigellus.

"Professor Dumbledore's portrait — couldn't you bring him along, here, into yours?"

Phineas Nigellus turned his face in the direction of Harry's voice.

"Evidently it is not only Muggle-borns who are ignorant, Potter. The portraits of Hogwarts may commune with each o

ainting of themselves hanging elsewhere. Dumbledore cannot come here with me, and after the treatment I have re

turn visit!"

Slightly crestfallen, Harry watched Phineas redouble his attempts to leave his frame.

"Professor Black," said Hermione, "couldn't you just tell us, please, when was the last time the sword was taken out o

Phineas snorted impatiently.

"I believe that the last time I saw the sword of Gryffindor leave its case was when Professor Dumbledore used it to b

Hermione whipped around to look at Harry. Neither of them dared say more in front of Phineas Nigellus, who had a

"Well, good night to you," he said a little waspishly, and he began to move out of sight again. Only the edge of his hat

"Wait! Have you told Snape you saw this?"

Phineas Nigellus stuck his blindfolded head back into the picture.

"Professor Snape has more important things on his mind than the many eccentricities of Albus Dumbledore. Good-b

And with that, he vanished completely, leaving behind him nothing but his murky backdrop.

"Harry!" Hermione cried.

"I know!" Harry shouted. Unable to contain himself, he punched the air; it was more than he had dared to hope for. H

ile; he did not even feel hungry anymore. Hermione was squashing Phineas Nigellus's portrait back into the beaded l

ised a shining face to Harry.

"The sword can destroy Horcruxes! Goblin-made blades imbibe only that which strengthen them — Harry, that swor

"And Dumbledore didn't give it to me because he still needed it, he wanted to use it on the locket —"

"— and he must have realized they wouldn't let you have it if he put it in his will —"

"— so he made a copy —"

"— and put a fake in the glass case —"

"— and he left the real one — where?"

They gazed at each other; Harry felt that the answer was dangling invisibly in the air above them, tantalizingly close.

y, but Harry had not realized it at the time?

"Think!" whispered Hermione. "Think! Where would he have left it?"

"Not at Hogwarts," said Harry, resuming his pacing.

"Somewhere in Hogsmeade?" suggested Hermione.

"The Shrieking Shack?" said Harry. "Nobody ever goes in there."

"But Snape knows how to get in, wouldn't that be a bit risky?"

"Dumbledore trusted Snape," Harry reminded her.

"Not enough to tell him that he had swapped the swords," said Hermione.

"Yeah, you're right!" said Harry, and he felt even more cheered at the thought that Dumbledore had had some reserves. "You must have hidden the sword well away from Hogsmeade, then? What d'you reckon, Ron? Ron?"

Harry looked around. For one bewildered moment he thought that Ron had left the tent, then realized that Ron was still there.

"Oh, remembered me, have you?" he said.

"What?"

Ron snorted as he stared up at the underside of the upper bunk.

"You two carry on. Don't let me spoil your fun."

Perplexed, Harry looked to Hermione for help, but she shook her head, apparently as nonplussed as he was.

"What's the problem?" asked Harry.

"Problem? There's no problem," said Ron, still refusing to look at Harry. "Not according to you, anyway."

There were several plunks on the canvas over their heads. It had started to rain.

"Well, you've obviously got a problem," said Harry. "Spit it out, will you?"

Ron swung his long legs off the bed and sat up. He looked mean, unlike himself.

"All right, I'll spit it out. Don't expect me to skip up and down the tent because there's some other damn thing we've got to do."

"I don't know?" repeated Harry. "I don't know?"

Plunk, plunk, plunk. The rain was falling harder and heavier; it pattered on the leaf-strewn bank all around them and on the tent. There was a note of jubilation: Ron was saying exactly what he had suspected and feared him to be thinking.

"It's not like I'm not having the time of my life here," said Ron, "you know, with my arm mangled and nothing to eat and no money, after we'd been running round a few weeks, we'd have achieved something."

"Ron," Hermione said, but in such a quiet voice that Ron could pretend not to have heard it over the loud tattoo the rain made on the tent.

"I thought you knew what you'd signed up for," said Harry.

"Yeah, I thought I did too."

"So what part of it isn't living up to your expectations?" asked Harry. Anger was coming to his defense now. "Did you think you'd be back to Mummy by Christmas?"

"We thought you knew what you were doing!" shouted Ron, standing up, and his words pierced Harry like scalding knives. "I had a real plan!"

"Ron!" said Hermione, this time clearly audible over the rain thundering on the tent roof, but again, he ignored her.

"Well, sorry to let you down," said Harry, his voice quite calm even though he felt hollow, inadequate. "I've been straight with you. And in case you haven't noticed, we've found one Horcrux —"

"Yeah, and we're about as near getting rid of it as we are to finding the rest of them — nowhere effing near, in other words."

"Take off the locket, Ron," Hermione said, her voice unusually high. "Please take it off. You wouldn't be talking like this if you had it."

"Yeah, he would," said Harry, who did not want excuses made for Ron. "D'you think I haven't noticed the two of you wanking this stuff?"

"Harry, we weren't —"

"Don't lie!" Ron hurled at her. "You said it too, you said you were disappointed, you said you'd thought he had a bit more to offer."

"I didn't say it like that — Harry, I didn't!" she cried.

The rain was pounding the tent, tears were pouring down Hermione's face, and the excitement of a few minutes before had flared and died, leaving everything dark, wet, and cold. The sword of Gryffindor was hidden they knew not where. It was not, yet, to be dead.

"So why are you still here?" Harry asked Ron.

"Search me," said Ron.

"Go home then," said Harry.

"Yeah, maybe I will!" shouted Ron, and he took several steps toward Harry, who did not back away. "Didn't you hear what I said to you, it's only the Forbidden Forest, Harry I've-Faced-Worse Potter doesn't care what happens to her in here — well, she's dead."

"I was only saying — she was with the others, they were with Hagrid —"

"Yeah, I get it, you don't care! And what about the rest of my family, 'the Weasleys don't need another kid injured,' did you hear that?"

"Yeah, I —"

"Not bothered what it meant, though?"

"Ron!" said Hermione, forcing her way between them. "I don't think it means anything new has happened, anything worse. People must have seen that George has lost an ear by now, and you're supposed to be on your deathbed with spattergroit!"

"Oh, you're sure, are you? Right then, well, I won't bother myself about them. It's all right for you two, isn't it, with you two?"

"My parents are dead!" Harry bellowed.

"And mine could be going the same way!" yelled Ron.

"Then GO!" roared Harry. "Go back to them, pretend you've got over your spattergroit and Mummy'll be able to feed you!"

Ron made a sudden movement: Harry reacted, but before either wand was clear of its owner's pocket, Hermione had

"Protego!" she cried, and an invisible shield expanded between her and Harry on the one side and Ron on the other; the spell, and Harry and Ron glared from either side of the transparent barrier as though they were seeing each other. Ron: Something had broken between them.

"Leave the Horcrux," Harry said.

Ron wrenched the chain from over his head and cast the locket into a nearby chair. He turned to Hermione.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you staying, or what?"

"I . . ." She looked anguished. "Yes — yes, I'm staying. Ron, we said we'd go with Harry, we said we'd help —"

"I get it. You choose him."

"Ron, no — please — come back, come back!"

She was impeded by her own Shield Charm; by the time she had removed it he had already stormed into the night. Hearing Ron's name amongst the trees.

After a few minutes she returned, her sopping hair plastered to her face.

"He's g-g-gone! Disappeared!"

She threw herself into a chair, curled up, and started to cry.

Harry felt dazed. He stooped, picked up the Horcrux, and placed it around his own neck. He dragged blankets off Ron's bed and stared up at the dark canvas roof, listening to the pounding of the rain.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GODRIC'S HOLLOW

When Harry woke the following day it was several seconds before he remembered what had happened. Then he hoped he had never left. Yet by turning his head on his pillow he could see Ron's deserted bunk. It was like a dead body in the ward, keeping his eyes averted from Ron's. Hermione, who was already busy in the kitchen, did not wish Harry good morning. He's gone, Harry told himself. He's gone. He had to keep thinking it as he washed and dressed, as though repetition would make it true. And that was the simple truth of it, Harry knew, because their protective enchantments meant that it would be impossible for him to see Ron. He and Hermione ate breakfast in silence. Hermione's eyes were puffy and red; she looked as if she had not slept. They wanted to spin out their time on the riverbank; several times he saw her look up eagerly, and he was sure she had dreamed of a heavy rain, but no red-haired figure appeared between the trees. Every time Harry imitated her, looked around (for he knew the in-swept woods, another little parcel of fury exploded inside him. He could hear Ron saying, "We thought you knew what we were in the pit of his stomach.

The muddy river beside them was rising rapidly and would soon spill over onto their bank. They had lingered a good while, having entirely repacked the beaded bag three times, Hermione seemed unable to find any more reasons to delay. They wept heather-covered hillside.

The instant they arrived, Hermione dropped Harry's hand and walked away from him, finally sitting down on a large rock. He watched her, supposing that he ought to go and comfort her, but something kept him rooted to the spot. Everything seemed to have changed in the expression on Ron's face. Harry strode off through the heather, walking in a large circle with the distraught Hermione at his side, under their protection.

They did not discuss Ron at all over the next few days. Harry was determined never to mention his name again, and Hermione, though sometimes at night when she thought he was sleeping, he would hear her crying. Meanwhile Harry had started to wait for the moment when Ron's labeled dot would reappear in the corridors of Hogwarts, proving that he had returned. However, Ron did not appear on the map, and after a while Harry found himself taking it out simply to stare at Godric's Hollow. The intensity with which he gazed at it might break into her sleep, that she would somehow know he was thinking about her, he thought. By day, they devoted themselves to trying to determine the possible locations of Gryffindor's sword, but the more they tried, the more desperate and far-fetched their speculation became. Cudgel his brains though he might, Harry could not find anything. There were moments when he did not know whether he was angrier with Ron or with Dumbledore. What could he do? What did you do? . . . We thought you had a real plan!

He could not hide it from himself: Ron had been right. Dumbledore had left him with virtually nothing. They had discovered that the others were as unattainable as they had ever been. Hopelessness threatened to engulf him. He was staggered now to find himself alone, to find no one to accompany him on this meandering, pointless journey. He knew nothing, he had no ideas, and he was constantly, painfully aware of the fact that she had had enough, that she was leaving.

They were spending many evenings in near silence, and Hermione took to bringing out Phineas Nigellus's portrait around the empty space left by Ron's departure. Despite his previous assertion that he would never visit them again, Phineas Nigellus came to what Harry was up to, and consented to reappear, blindfolded, every few days or so. Harry was even glad to see him. They relished any news about what was happening at Hogwarts, though Phineas Nigellus was not an ideal informer. He controlled the school, and they had to be careful not to criticize or ask impertinent questions about Snape, or Phineas. However, he did let drop certain snippets. Snape seemed to be facing a constant, low level of mutiny from a hard core of students. Snape had reinstated Umbridge's old decree forbidding gatherings of three or more students or any unofficial student meetings. From all of these things, Harry deduced that Ginny, and probably Neville and Luna along with her, had been doing the same. He wanted to see Ginny so badly it felt like a stomachache; but it also made him think of Ron again, and of Dumbledore, and

girlfriend. Indeed, as Phineas Nigellus talked about Snape's crackdown, Harry experienced a split second of madness. The isolation of Snape's regime: Being fed, and having a soft bed, and other people being in charge, seemed the most wonderful thing that he was Undesirable Number One, that there was a ten-thousand-Galleon price on his head, and that to walk into the Ministry of Magic. Indeed, Phineas Nigellus inadvertently emphasized this fact by slipping in leading questions about Harry and the beaded bag every time he did this, and Phineas Nigellus invariably refused to reappear for several days after the fact. The weather grew colder and colder. They did not dare remain in any one area too long, so rather than staying in the mountains, their worries, they continued to meander up and down the country, braving a mountainside, where sleet pounded the tent, and a tiny island in the middle of a Scottish loch, where snow half buried the tent in the night. They had already spotted Christmas trees twinkling from several sitting room windows before there came an evening when there was no unexplored avenue left to them. They had just eaten an unusually good meal: Hermione had been to a supermarket (which was open till as she left), and Harry thought that she might be more persuadable than usual on a stomach full of spaghetti. He suggested that they take a few hours' break from wearing the Horcrux, which was hanging over the end of the bunk bed.

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?" She was curled up in one of the sagging armchairs with *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. He could not imagine her being so long, very long; but evidently she was still deciphering something in it, because Spellman's Syllabary lay open on the armchair. Harry cleared his throat. He felt exactly as he had done on the occasion, several years previously, when he had asked her to explain the fact that he had not persuaded the Dursleys to sign his permission slip.

"Hermione, I've been thinking, and —"

"Harry, could you help me with something?"

Apparently she had not been listening to him. She leaned forward and held out *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*.

"Look at that symbol," she said, pointing to the top of a page. Above what Harry assumed was the title of the story (but he did not know) was a picture of what looked like a triangular eye, its pupil crossed with a vertical line.

"I never took Ancient Runes, Hermione."

"I know that, but it isn't a rune and it's not in the syllabary, either. All along I thought it was a picture of an eye, but I don't know how it was drawn it there, it isn't really part of the book. Think, have you ever seen it before?"

"No . . . No, wait a moment." Harry looked closer. "Isn't it the same symbol Luna's dad was wearing round his neck?"

"Well, that's what I thought too!"

"Then it's Grindelwald's mark."

She stared at him, openmouthed.

"What?"

"Krum told me . . ."

He recounted the story that Viktor Krum had told him at the wedding. Hermione looked astonished.

"Grindelwald's mark?"

She looked from Harry to the weird symbol and back again. "I've never heard that Grindelwald had a mark. There's no mention of it in the book."

"Well, like I say, Krum reckoned that symbol was carved on a wall at Durmstrang, and Grindelwald put it there."

She fell back into the old armchair, frowning.

"That's very odd. If it's a symbol of Dark Magic, what's it doing in a book of children's stories?"

"Yeah, it is weird," said Harry. "And you'd think Scrimgeour would have recognized it. He was Minister, he ought to have known."

"I know. . . . Perhaps he thought it was an eye, just like I did. All the other stories have little pictures over the titles."

She did not speak, but continued to pore over the strange mark. Harry tried again.

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?"

"I've been thinking. I — I want to go to Godric's Hollow."

She looked up at him, but her eyes were unfocused, and he was sure she was still thinking about the mysterious mark.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I've been wondering that too. I really think we'll have to."

"Did you hear me right?" he asked.

"Of course I did. You want to go to Godric's Hollow. I agree, I think we should. I mean, I can't think of anywhere else it might be, about it, the more likely it seems it's there."

"Er — what's there?" asked Harry.

At that, she looked just as bewildered as he felt.

"Well, the sword, Harry! Dumbledore must have known you'd want to go back there, and I mean, Godric's Hollow is Gryffindor's home."

"Really? Gryffindor came from Godric's Hollow?"

"Harry, did you ever even open *A History of Magic*?"

"Erm," he said, smiling for what felt like the first time in months: The muscles in his face felt oddly stiff. "I might've opened it."

"Well, as the village is named after him I'd have thought you might have made the connection," said Hermione. She suddenly half expected her to announce that she was off to the library. "There's a bit about the village in *A History of Magic*, you know." She opened the beaded bag and rummaged for a while, finally extracting her copy of their old school textbook, *A History of Magic*. She found the page she wanted.

"Upon the signature of the International Statute of Secrecy in 1689, wizards went into hiding for good. It was natural

a community. Many small villages and hamlets attracted several magical families, who banded together for mutual support. Flagley in Yorkshire, and Ottery St. Catchpole on the south coast of England were notable homes to knots of Wizarding families. Most celebrated of these half-magical dwelling places is, perhaps, Godric's Hollow, the West Country village where the wizard Albus Dumbledore was born. It was here that the blacksmith, the wizarding smith, forged the first Golden Snitch. The graveyard is full of the names of ancient magical families that have dogged the little church beside it for many centuries.'

"You and your parents aren't mentioned," Hermione said, closing the book, "because Professor Bagshot doesn't cover the history of Godric's Hollow, Godric Gryffindor, Gryffindor's sword; don't you think Dumbledore would have expected you to mention them?"

"Oh yeah . . ."

Harry did not want to admit that he had not been thinking about the sword at all when he suggested they go to Godric's Hollow, the house where he had narrowly escaped death, and in the person of Bathilda Bagshot.

"Remember what Muriel said?" he asked eventually.

"Who?"

"You know," he hesitated: He did not want to say Ron's name. "Ginny's great-aunt. At the wedding. The one who said 'I'll do it'."

"Oh," said Hermione. It was a sticky moment: Harry knew that she had sensed Ron's name in the offing. He rushed on.

"She said Bathilda Bagshot still lives in Godric's Hollow."

"Bathilda Bagshot," murmured Hermione, running her index finger over Bathilda's embossed name on the front cover of the book. She gasped so dramatically that Harry's insides turned over; he drew his wand, looking around at the entrance, half expecting to see her, but there was nothing there.

"What?" he said, half angry, half relieved. "What did you do that for? I thought you'd seen a Death Eater unzipping the book!"

"Harry, what if Bathilda's got the sword? What if Dumbledore entrusted it to her?"

Harry considered this possibility. Bathilda would be an extremely old woman by now, and according to Muriel, she was the last of Gryffindor with her? If so, Harry felt that Dumbledore had left a great deal to chance: Dumbledore had never revealed much as mentioned a friendship with Bathilda. Now, however, was not the moment to cast doubt on Hermione's earliest wish.

"Yeah, he might have done! So, are we going to go to Godric's Hollow?"

"Yes, but we'll have to think it through carefully, Harry." She was sitting up now, and Harry could tell that the prospect of Godric's Hollow was exciting her.

"We'll need to practice Disapparating together under the Invisibility Cloak for a start, and perhaps Disillusionment Charm. We'll need to use Polyjuice Potion? In that case we'll need to collect hair from somebody. I actually think we'd better go to the Ministry and get some. Harry let her talk, nodding and agreeing whenever there was a pause, but his mind had left the conversation. For the first time as a fake, he felt excited.

He was about to go home, about to return to the place where he had had a family. It was in Godric's Hollow that, but for the day. He could have invited friends to his house . . . He might even have had brothers and sisters . . . It would have been the life he had lost had hardly ever seemed so real to him as at this moment, when he knew he was about to see the place that night, Harry quietly extracted his rucksack from Hermione's beaded bag, and from inside it, the photograph album. He perused the old pictures of his parents, smiling and waving up at him from the images, which were all he had left. Harry would gladly have set out for Godric's Hollow the following day, but Hermione had other ideas. Convinced as she was of her parents' deaths, she was determined that they would set off only after they had ensured that they had the best chance of success. She had surreptitiously obtained hairs from innocent Muggles who were Christmas shopping, and had practiced Apparating — that Hermione agreed to make the journey.

They were to Apparate to the village under cover of darkness, so it was late afternoon when they finally swallowed Professor McGonagall, the Muggle man, Hermione into his small and rather mousy wife. The beaded bag containing all of their possessions (apart from the book) was tucked into an inside pocket of Hermione's buttoned-up coat. Harry lowered the Invisibility Cloak over them, then they stepped out. Harry's heart beating in his throat, Harry opened his eyes. They were standing hand in hand in a snowy lane under a dark blue sky. The cottages stood on either side of the narrow road, Christmas decorations twinkling in their windows. A short way down the lane, the center of the village.

"All this snow!" Hermione whispered beneath the cloak. "Why didn't we think of snow? After all our precautions, we'll be out in the open, I'll do it —"

Harry did not want to enter the village like a pantomime horse, trying to keep themselves concealed while magically disappearing. "Let's take off the Cloak," said Harry, and when she looked frightened, "Oh, come on, we don't look like us and there's nothing to be afraid of." He stowed the Cloak under his jacket and they made their way forward unhampered, the icy air stinging their faces as they walked. He knew in which James and Lily had once lived or where Bathilda lived now. Harry gazed at the front doors, their snow-buried, but he knew any of them, knowing deep inside that it was impossible, that he had been little more than a year old when he was born. He would be able to see the cottage at all; he did not know what happened when the subjects of a Fidelius Charm died. Then, as they walked, the heart of the village, a small square, was revealed to them.

Strung all around with colored lights, there was what looked like a war memorial in the middle, partly obscured by a fountain, a pub, and a little church whose stained-glass windows were glowing jewel-bright across the square.

The snow here had become impacted: It was hard and slippery where people had trodden on it all day. Villagers were walking by streetlamps. They heard a snatch of laughter and pop music as the pub door opened and closed; then they heard a door slam.

"Harry, I think it's Christmas Eve!" said Hermione.

"Is it?"

He had lost track of the date; they had not seen a newspaper for weeks.

"I'm sure it is," said Hermione, her eyes upon the church. "They . . . they'll be in there, won't they? Your mum and dad." Harry felt a thrill of something that was beyond excitement, more like fear. Now that he was so near, he wondered what she was feeling, because she reached for his hand and took the lead for the first time, pulling him forward. Halfway across the square, Harry looked back.
"Harry, look!"

She was pointing at the war memorial. As they had passed it, it had transformed. Instead of an obelisk covered in names and glasses, a woman with long hair and a kind, pretty face, and a baby boy sitting in his mother's arms. Snow lay upon the ground. Harry drew closer, gazing up into his parents' faces. He had never imagined that there would be a statue. . . . How strange, without a scar on his forehead. . . .

"C'mon," said Harry, when he had looked his fill, and they turned again toward the church. As they crossed the road, they saw the war memorial.

The singing grew louder as they approached the church. It made Harry's throat constrict, it reminded him so forcefully of the inside suits of armor, of the Great Hall's twelve Christmas trees, of Dumbledore wearing a bonnet he had won in a chess match. There was a kissing gate at the entrance to the graveyard. Hermione pushed it open as quietly as possible and they entered. Behind the doors, the snow lay deep and untouched. They moved off through the snow, carving deep trenches behind them and avoiding the brilliant windows.

Behind the church, row upon row of snowy tombstones protruded from a blanket of pale blue that was flecked with white. The dark glass hit the snow. Keeping his hand closed tightly on the wand in his jacket pocket, Harry moved toward the nearest stone.
"Look at this, it's an Abbott, could be some long-lost relation of Hannah's!"

"Keep your voice down," Hermione begged him.

They waded deeper and deeper into the graveyard, gouging dark tracks into the snow behind them, stooping to peer into the surrounding darkness to make absolutely sure that they were unaccompanied.

"Harry, here!"

Hermione was two rows of tombstones away; he had to wade back to her, his heart positively banging in his chest.

"Is it — ?"

"No, but look!"

She pointed to the dark stone. Harry stooped down and saw, upon the frozen, lichen-spotted granite, the words KENNEDY AND HER DAUGHTER ARIANA. There was also a quotation:

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

So Rita Skeeter and Muriel had got some of their facts right. The Dumbledore family had indeed lived here, and part of the reason for seeing the grave was worse than hearing about it. Harry could not help thinking that he and Dumbledore both had chosen this place, yet he had never thought to share the connection. They could have visited the place together; for a moment he would have been, of how much it would have meant to him. But it seemed that to Dumbledore, the fact that their families had chosen the same place was a coincidence, irrelevant, perhaps, to the job he wanted Harry to do.

Hermione was looking at Harry, and he was glad that his face was hidden in shadow. He read the words on the tombstone, but he did not understand what these words meant. Surely Dumbledore had chosen them, as the eldest member of the family.

"Are you sure he never mentioned — ?" Hermione began.

"No," said Harry curtly, then, "let's keep looking," and he turned away, wishing he had not seen the stone: He did not want to go back.

"Here!" cried Hermione again a few moments later from out of the darkness. "Oh no, sorry! I thought it said Potter."

She was rubbing at a crumbling, mossy stone, gazing down at it, a little frown on her face.

"Harry, come back a moment."

He did not want to be sidetracked again, and only grudgingly made his way back through the snow toward her.

"What?"

"Look at this!"

The grave was extremely old, weathered so that Harry could hardly make out the name. Hermione showed him the stone.

"Harry, that's the mark in the book!"

He peered at the place she indicated: The stone was so worn that it was hard to make out what was engraved there, but he saw a name, a legible name.

"Yeah . . . it could be. . . ."

Hermione lit her wand and pointed it at the name on the headstone.

"It says Ig — Ignotus, I think. . . ."

"I'm going to keep looking for my parents, all right?" Harry told her, a slight edge to his voice, and he set off again, leaving Hermione behind. Every now and then he recognized a surname that, like Abbott, he had met at Hogwarts. Sometimes there were several stones to a family: Harry could tell from the dates that it had either died out, or the current members had moved away from Godric's Hollow. Each time he reached a new headstone he felt a little lurch of apprehension and anticipation.

The darkness and the silence seemed to become, all of a sudden, much deeper. Harry looked around, worried, thinking that the chatter and flurry of churchgoers were fading away as they made their way back into the square. Somebody inside the church was singing. Then Hermione's voice came out of the blackness for the third time, sharp and clear from a few yards away.

"Harry, they're here . . . right here."

And he knew by her tone that it was his mother and father this time: He moved toward her, feeling as if something had been waiting for him.

ht after Dumbledore had died, a grief that had actually weighed on his heart and lungs.

The headstone was only two rows behind Kendra and Ariana's. It was made of white marble, just like Dumbledore's tomb. Harry did not need to kneel or even approach very close to it to make out the words engraved upon it.

JAMES POTTER

LILY POTTER

BORN 27 MARCH 1960

DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981

BORN 30 JANUARY 1960

DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981

The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

Harry read the words slowly, as though he would have only one chance to take in their meaning, and he read the last

"The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death' . . ." A horrible thought came to him, and with it a kind of panic. "Isn't it?"

"It doesn't mean defeating death in the way the Death Eaters mean it, Harry," said Hermione, her voice gentle. "It means . . ."

But they were not living, thought Harry: They were gone. The empty words could not disguise the fact that his parents were now gone. And tears came before he could stop them, boiling hot then instantly freezing on his face, and what was the point of pressing hard together, looking down at the thick snow hiding from his eyes the place where the last of Lily and James and their living son stood so near, his heart still beating, alive because of their sacrifice and close to wishing, at this moment, that Hermione had taken his hand again and was gripping it tightly. He could not look at her, but returned the pressure, not to himself, trying to regain control. He should have brought something to give them, and he had not thought of it, and even if he raised her wand, moved it in a circle through the air, and a wreath of Christmas roses blossomed before them. Harry thought: As soon as he stood up he wanted to leave: He did not think he could stand another moment there. He put his arm around her, and they turned in silence and walked away through the snow, past Dumbledore's mother and sister, back toward the darkness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BATHILDA'S SECRET

Harry, stop."

"What's wrong?"

They had only just reached the grave of the unknown Abbott.

"There's someone there. Someone watching us. I can tell. There, over by the bushes."

They stood quite still, holding on to each other, gazing at the dense black boundary of the graveyard. Harry could not see anything.

"Are you sure?"

"I saw something move, I could have sworn I did. . . ."

She broke from him to free her wand arm.

"We look like Muggles," Harry pointed out.

"Muggles who've just been laying flowers on your parents' grave! Harry, I'm sure there's someone over there!"

Harry thought of A History of Magic; the graveyard was supposed to be haunted: what if — ? But then he heard a rustle in the snow. Hermione had pointed. Ghosts could not move snow.

"It's a cat," said Harry, after a second or two, "or a bird. If it was a Death Eater we'd be dead by now. But let's get out of here."

They glanced back repeatedly as they made their way out of the graveyard. Harry, who did not feel as sanguine as he had felt before, slipped on the slippery pavement. They pulled the Invisibility Cloak back over themselves. The pub was fuller than before, and the church was dark. They heard as they approached the church. For a moment Harry considered suggesting they take refuge inside it, but before he could do so, he had pulled him down the dark street leading out of the village in the opposite direction from which they had entered. Harry and Hermione turned into open country again. They walked as quickly as they dared, past more windows sparkling with multicolored lights.

"How are we going to find Bathilda's house?" asked Hermione, who was shivering a little and kept glancing back over her shoulder.

She tugged at his arm, but Harry was not paying attention. He was looking toward the dark mass that stood at the very end of the village.

Hermione along with him; she slipped a little on the ice.

"Harry —"

"Look. . . . Look at it, Hermione. . . ."

"I don't . . . oh!"

He could see it; the Fidelius Charm must have died with James and Lily. The hedge had grown wild in the sixteen years since it was put up, amongst the waist-high grass. Most of the cottage was still standing, though entirely covered in dark ivy and snow, but the gate, Harry was sure, was where the curse had backfired. He and Hermione stood at the gate, gazing up at the wreck of what had once been a fine house.

"I wonder why nobody's ever rebuilt it?" whispered Hermione.

"Maybe you can't rebuild it?" Harry replied. "Maybe it's like the injuries from Dark Magic and you can't repair the damage."

He slipped a hand from beneath the Cloak and grasped the snowy and thickly rusted gate, not wishing to open it, but knowing he had to.

"You're not going to go inside? It looks unsafe, it might — oh, Harry, look!"

His touch on the gate seemed to have done it. A sign had risen out of the ground in front of them, up through the tall grass, and in golden letters upon the wood it said:

Bathilda was standing in the middle of the room watching Hermione light the fire for her.

"Miss Bagshot?" Harry repeated, and he advanced with the picture in his hands as the flames burst into life in the fireplace, casting a glimmer upon his chest.

"Who is this person?" Harry asked her, pushing the picture forward.

She peered at it solemnly, then up at Harry.

"Do you know who this is?" he repeated in a much slower and louder voice than usual. "This man? Do you know him?"

Bathilda merely looked vague. Harry felt an awful frustration. How had Rita Skeeter unlocked Bathilda's memories?

"Who is this man?" he repeated loudly.

"Harry, what are you doing?" asked Hermione.

"This picture, Hermione, it's the thief, the thief who stole from Gregorovitch! Please!" he said to Bathilda. "Who is this?"

But she only stared at him.

"Why did you ask us to come with you, Mrs. — Miss — Bagshot?" asked Hermione, raising her own voice. "Was there something?"

Giving no sign that she had heard Hermione, Bathilda now shuffled a few steps closer to Harry. With a little jerk of her head, she indicated the door.

"You want us to leave?" he asked.

She repeated the gesture, this time pointing firstly at him, then at herself, then at the ceiling.

"Oh, right . . . Hermione, I think she wants me to go upstairs with her."

"All right," said Hermione, "let's go."

But when Hermione moved, Bathilda shook her head with surprising vigor, once more pointing first at Harry, then to the door.

"She wants me to go with her, alone."

"Why?" asked Hermione, and her voice rang out sharp and clear in the candlelit room; the old lady shook her head again.

"Maybe Dumbledore told her to give the sword to me, and only to me?"

"Do you really think she knows who you are?"

"Yes," said Harry, looking down into the milky eyes fixed upon his own, "I think she does."

"Well, okay then, but be quick, Harry."

"Lead the way," Harry told Bathilda.

She seemed to understand, because she shuffled around him toward the door. Harry glanced back at Hermione with a look of surprise, then followed her, glancing herself in the midst of the candlelit squalor, looking toward the bookcase. As Harry walked out of the room, unscrewing the photograph of the unknown thief inside his jacket.

The stairs were steep and narrow: Harry was half tempted to place his hands on stout Bathilda's backside to ensure she didn't fall, but he knew it was only too likely. Slowly, wheezing a little, she climbed to the upper landing, turned immediately right, and led him into a dark passage.

It was pitch-black and smelled horrible: Harry had just made out a chamber pot protruding from under the bed before Bathilda stopped.

"Lumos," said Harry, and his wand ignited. He gave a start: Bathilda had moved close to him in those few seconds of darkness.

"You are Potter?" she whispered.

"Yes, I am."

She nodded slowly, solemnly. Harry felt the Horcrux beating fast, faster than his own heart: It was an unpleasant, agonizing sensation.

"Have you got anything for me?" Harry asked, but she seemed distracted by his lit wand-tip.

"Have you got anything for me?" he repeated.

Then she closed her eyes and several things happened at once: Harry's scar prickled painfully; the Horcrux twitched; the room dissolved momentarily. He felt a leap of joy and spoke in a high, cold voice: Hold him!

Harry swayed where he stood: The dark, foul-smelling room seemed to close around him again; he did not know where he was.

"Have you got anything for me?" he asked for a third time, much louder.

"Over here," she whispered, pointing to the corner. Harry raised his wand and saw the outline of a cluttered dressing room.

This time she did not lead him. Harry edged between her and the unmade bed, his wand raised. He did not want to lead her.

"What is it?" he asked as he reached the dressing table, which was heaped high with what looked and smelled like dirt.

"There," she said, pointing at the shapeless mass.

And in the instant that he looked away, his eyes raking the tangled mess for a sword hilt, a ruby, she moved weirdly: she seemed to melt into the mess.

The horror paralyzed him as he saw the old body collapsing and the great snake pouring from the place where her neck had been.

The snake struck as he raised his wand: The force of the bite to his forearm sent the wand spinning up toward the ceiling.

He fished: Then a powerful blow from the tail to his midriff knocked the breath out of him: He fell backward onto the dressing table.

He rolled sideways, narrowly avoiding the snake's tail, which thrashed down upon the table where he had been a second before.

It hit the floor. From below he heard Hermione call, "Harry?"

He could not get enough breath into his lungs to call back: Then a heavy smooth mass smashed him to the floor and he lay motionless.

"No!" he gasped, pinned to the floor.

"Yes," whispered the voice. "Yesss . . . hold you . . . hold you . . ."

"Accio . . . Accio Wand . . ."

But nothing happened and he needed his hands to try to force the snake from him as it coiled itself around his torso, his head, his chest, a circle of ice that throbbed with life, inches from his own frantic heart, and his brain was flooding with cold, with pain.

He heard, distant footsteps, everything going. . . .

A metal heart was banging outside his chest, and now he was flying, flying with triumph in his heart, without need of wings.

He was abruptly awake in the sour-smelling darkness; Nagini had released him. He scrambled up and saw the snake de with a shriek; her deflected curse hit the curtained window, which shattered. Frozen air filled the room as Harry d

ped on a pencil-like something — his wand —
He bent and snatched it up, but now the room was full of the snake, its tail thrashing; Hermione was nowhere to be a loud bang and a flash of red light, and the snake flew into the air, smacking Harry hard in the face as it went, coil at and, but as he did so, his scar seared more painfully, more powerfully than it had done in years.

"He's coming! Hermione, he's coming!"

As he yelled the snake fell, hissing wildly. Everything was chaos: It smashed shelves from the wall, and splintered chi dark shape he knew to be Hermione —

She shrieked with pain as he pulled her back across the bed: The snake reared again, but Harry knew that worse tha as going to split open with the pain from his scar —

The snake lunged as he took a running leap, dragging Hermione with him; as it struck, Hermione screamed, "Confrin or and ricocheting back at them, bouncing from floor to ceiling; Harry felt the heat of it sear the back of his hand. Gla m bed to broken dressing table and then straight out of the smashed window into nothingness, her scream reverber And then his scar burst open and he was Voldemort and he was running across the fetid bedroom, his long white ha ittle woman twist and vanish, and he screamed with rage, a scream that mingled with the girl's, that echoed across th

...
And his scream was Harry's scream, his pain was Harry's pain . . . that it could happen here, where it had happened b o close to knowing what it was to die . . . to die . . . The pain was so terrible . . . ripped from his body. . . . But if he ha dead, how could he feel so unbearably, didn't pain cease with death, didn't it go . . .

The night wet and windy, two children dressed as pumpkins waddling across the square, and the shop windows cov ich they did not believe . . . And he was gliding along, that sense of purpose and power and rightness in him that he a for weaker souls than he . . . but triumph, yes. . . . He had waited for this, he had hoped for it. . . .

"Nice costume, mister!"

He saw the small boy's smile falter as he ran near enough to see beneath the hood of the cloak, saw the fear cloud h the robe he fingered the handle of his wand . . . One simple movement and the child would never reach his mother And along a new and darker street he moved, and now his destination was in sight at last, the Fidelius Charm broken an the dead leaves slithering along the pavement as he drew level with the dark hedge, and stared over it. . . .

They had not drawn the curtains; he saw them quite clearly in their little sitting room, the tall black-haired man in his for the amusement of the small black-haired boy in his blue pajamas. The child was laughing and trying to catch the A door opened and the mother entered, saying words he could not hear, her long dark-red hair falling over her face. e threw his wand down upon the sofa and stretched, yawning. . . .

The gate creaked a little as he pushed it open, but James Potter did not hear. His white hand pulled out the wand be He was over the threshold as James came sprinting into the hall. It was easy, too easy, he had not even picked up his

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off!"

Hold him off, without a wand in his hand! . . . He laughed before casting the curse. . . .

"Avada Kedavra!"

The green light filled the cramped hallway, it lit the pram pushed against the wall, it made the banisters glare like ligh trings were cut. . . .

He could hear her screaming from the upper floor, trapped, but as long as she was sensible, she, at least, had nothin ment to her attempts to barricade herself in. . . . She had no wand upon her either. . . . How stupid they were, and ho apons could be discarded even for moments. . . .

He forced the door open, cast aside the chair and boxes hastily piled against it with one lazy wave of his wand . . . an , she dropped her son into the crib behind her and threw her arms wide, as if this would help, as if in shielding him f

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl . . . stand aside, now."

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead —"

"This is my last warning —"

"Not Harry! Please . . . have mercy . . . have mercy. . . . Not Harry! Not Harry! Please — I'll do anything —"

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

He could have forced her away from the crib, but it seemed more prudent to finish them all. . . .

The green light flashed around the room and she dropped like her husband. The child had not cried all this time: He o the intruder's face with a kind of bright interest, perhaps thinking that it was his father who hid beneath the cloak, oment, laughing —

He pointed the wand very carefully into the boy's face: He wanted to see it happen, the destruction of this one, inexp not James. He did not like it crying, he had never been able to stomach the small ones whining in the orphanage —

"Avada Kedavra!"

And then he broke: He was nothing, nothing but pain and terror, and he must hide himself, not here in the rubble of far away . . . far away. . . .

"No," he moaned.

The snake rustled on the filthy, cluttered floor, and he had killed the boy, and yet he was the boy. . . .

"No . . ."

And now he stood at the broken window of Bathilda's house, immersed in memories of his greatest loss, and at his feet he looked down and saw something . . . something incredible. . . .

"No . . ."

"Harry, it's all right, you're all right!"

He stooped down and picked up the smashed photograph. There he was, the unknown thief, the thief he was seeking.

"No . . . I dropped it. . . . I dropped it. . . ."

"Harry, it's okay, wake up, wake up!"

He was Harry. . . . Harry, not Voldemort . . . and the thing that was rustling was not a snake. . . . He opened his eyes.

"Harry," Hermione whispered. "Do you feel all — all right?"

"Yes," he lied.

He was in the tent, lying on one of the lower bunks beneath a heap of blankets. He could tell that it was almost dawn from the light through the canvas ceiling. He was drenched in sweat; he could feel it on the sheets and blankets.

"We got away."

"Yes," said Hermione. "I had to use a Hover Charm to get you into your bunk, I couldn't lift you. You've been . . . Well, there were purple shadows under her brown eyes and he noticed a small sponge in her hand: She had been wiping his face."

"You've been ill," she finished. "Quite ill."

"How long ago did we leave?"

"Hours ago. It's nearly morning."

"And I've been . . . what, unconscious?"

"Not exactly," said Hermione uncomfortably. "You've been shouting and moaning and . . . things," she added in a tone that made him think of Voldemort, cried like the baby in the crib?

"I couldn't get the Horcrux off you," Hermione said, and he knew she wanted to change the subject. "It was stuck, stuck. I used a Levitating Charm to get it away. The snake bit you too, but I've cleaned the wound and put some dittany on it. . . ."

He pulled the sweaty T-shirt he was wearing away from himself and looked down. There was a scarlet oval over his heart, and two small, faded puncture marks to his forearm.

"Where've you put the Horcrux?"

"In my bag. I think we should keep it off for a while."

He lay back on his pillows and looked into her pinched gray face.

"We shouldn't have gone to Godric's Hollow. It's my fault, it's all my fault, Hermione, I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. I wanted to go too; I really thought Dumbledore might have left the sword there for you."

"Yeah, well . . . we got that wrong, didn't we?"

"What happened, Harry? What happened when she took you upstairs? Was the snake hiding somewhere? Did it just appear?"

"No," he said. "She was the snake . . . or the snake was her . . . all along."

"W-what?"

He closed his eyes. He could still smell Bathilda's house on him: It made the whole thing horribly vivid.

"Bathilda must've been dead a while. The snake was . . . was inside her. You-Know-Who put it there in Godric's Hollow."

"The snake was inside her?"

He opened his eyes again: Hermione looked revolted, nauseated.

"Lupin said there would be magic we'd never imagined," Harry said. "She didn't want to talk in front of you, because it was too much for her. Of course I could understand her. Once we were up in the room, the snake sent a message to You-Know-Who, I heard it. It said, 'He's here' . . . and then . . ."

He remembered the snake coming out of Bathilda's neck: Hermione did not need to know the details.

". . . she changed, changed into the snake, and attacked."

He looked down at the puncture marks.

"It wasn't supposed to kill me, just keep me there till You-Know-Who came."

If he had only managed to kill the snake, it would have been worth it, all of it . . . Sick at heart, he sat up and threw back his head.

"Harry, no, I'm sure you ought to rest!"

"You're the one who needs sleep. No offense, but you look terrible. I'm fine. I'll keep watch for a while. Where's my wand?"

She did not answer, she merely looked at him.

"Where's my wand, Hermione?"

She was biting her lip, and tears swam in her eyes.

"Harry . . ."

"Where's my wand?"

She reached down beside the bed and held it out to him.

The holly and phoenix wand was nearly severed in two. One fragile strand of phoenix feather kept both pieces hanging together. He took it into his hands as though it was a living thing that had suffered a terrible injury. He could not think properly: Everything felt so unreal. He handed it to Hermione.

"Mend it. Please."

"Harry, I don't think, when it's broken like this —"

"Please, Hermione, try!"

"R-Reparo."

The dangling half of the wand resealed itself. Harry held it up.

"Lumos!"

The wand sparked feebly, then went out. Harry pointed it at Hermione.

"Expelliarmus!"

Hermione's wand gave a little jerk, but did not leave her hand. The feeble attempt at magic was too much for Harry's e to take in what he was seeing . . . the wand that had survived so much . . .

"Harry," Hermione whispered so quietly he could hardly hear her. "I'm so, so sorry. I think it was me. As we were leaving the Killing Curse, and it rebounded everywhere, and it must have — must have hit —"

"It was an accident," said Harry mechanically. He felt empty, stunned. "We'll — we'll find a way to repair it."

"Harry, I don't think we're going to be able to," said Hermione, the tears trickling down her face. "Remember . . . remember the same again, he had to get a new one."

Harry thought of Ollivander, kidnapped and held hostage by Voldemort; of Gregorovitch, who was dead. How was he

"Well," he said, in a falsely matter-of-fact voice, "well, I'll just borrow yours for now, then. While I keep watch."

Her face glazed with tears, Hermione handed over her wand, and he left her sitting beside his bed, desiring nothing

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE LIFE AND LIES OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

The sun was coming up: The pure, colorless vastness of the sky stretched over him, indifferent to him and his suffering in the clean air. Simply to be alive to watch the sun rise over the sparkling snowy hillside ought to have been the greatest joy he had been spiked by the calamity of losing his wand. He looked out over a valley blanketed in snow, distant church bells. Without realizing it, he was digging his fingers into his arms as if he were trying to resist physical pain. He had spilled blood, all the bones in his right arm once; this journey had already given him scars to his chest and forearm to join those on his face. He felt himself to be fatally weakened, vulnerable, and naked, as though the best part of his magical power had been torn away. He resented any of this: The wand is only as good as the wizard. But she was wrong, his case was different. She had not felt the loss of his wand as he felt it. He had lost the protection of the twin cores, and only now that it was gone did he realize how much he had relied on it. He pulled the pieces of the broken wand out of his pocket and, without looking at them, tucked them away in Hagrid's bag with the useless objects to take any more. Harry's hand brushed the old Snitch through the mokeskin and for a moment he had felt it was alive, able, unhelpful, useless, like everything else Dumbledore had left behind —

And his fury at Dumbledore broke over him now like lava, scorching him inside, wiping out every other feeling. Out of the tattered Godric's Hollow held answers, convinced themselves that they were supposed to go back, that it was all part of some grand plan, no plan. Dumbledore had left them to grope in the darkness, to wrestle with unknown and undreamed-of terrors. They had no sword, and now, Harry had no wand. And he had dropped the photograph of the thief, and it would surely be found. He had all the information now. . . .

"Harry?"

Hermione looked frightened that he might curse her with her own wand. Her face streaked with tears, she crouched behind the large bulky under her arm.

"Thanks," he said, taking one of the cups.

"Do you mind if I talk to you?"

"No," he said because he did not want to hurt her feelings.

"Harry, you wanted to know who that man in the picture was. Well . . . I've got the book."

Timidly she pushed it onto his lap, a pristine copy of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*.

"Where — how — ?"

"It was in Bathilda's sitting room, just lying there. . . . This note was sticking out of the top of it."

Hermione read the few lines of spiky, acid-green writing aloud.

"Dear Batty, Thanks for your help. Here's a copy of the book, hope you like it. You said everything, even if you don't remember. Bathilda was alive, but perhaps she wasn't in any fit state to read it?"

"No, she probably wasn't."

Harry looked down upon Dumbledore's face and experienced a surge of savage pleasure: Now he would know all that Dumbledore wanted him to or not.

"You're still really angry at me, aren't you?" said Hermione; he looked up to see fresh tears leaking out of her eyes, and

"No," he said quietly. "No, Hermione, I know it was an accident. You were trying to get us out of there alive, and you were trying to save me."

He tried to return her watery smile, then turned his attention to the book. Its spine was stiff; it had clearly never been handled. He came across the one he sought almost at once, the young Dumbledore and his handsome companion on the night of the capture to the captives.

Albus Dumbledore, shortly after his mother's death, with his friend Gellert Grindelwald.

Harry gaped at the last word for several long moments. Grindelwald. His friend Grindelwald. He looked sideways at Hermione

not believe her eyes. Slowly she looked up at Harry.

"Grindelwald?"

Ignoring the remainder of the photographs, Harry searched the pages around them for a recurrence of that fatal name necessary to go further back to make sense of it all, and eventually he found himself at the start of a chapter entitled *ad*:

Now approaching his eighteenth birthday, Dumbledore left Hogwarts in a blaze of glory — Head Boy, Prefect, Winner of the Youth Representative to the Wizengamot, Gold Medal-Winner for Ground-Breaking Contribution to the International Wizarding Grand Tour with Elphias "Dogbreath" Doge, the dim-witted but devoted sidekick he had picked up at school.

The two young men were staying at the Leaky Cauldron in London, preparing to depart for Greece the following month. "Dogbreath" Doge, who refused to be interviewed for this book, has given the public his own sentimental version of the war, and Dumbledore's decision to give up his expedition as an act of noble self-sacrifice.

Certainly Dumbledore returned to Godric's Hollow at once, supposedly to "care" for his younger brother and sister. Enid Smeek, whose family lived on the outskirts of Godric's Hollow at the time, felt sorry for him, only he kept chucking goat dung at my head. I don't think Albus was fussed about him, I never saw him. So what was Albus doing, if not comforting his wild young brother? The answer, it seems, is ensuring the continued existence of the family, there was no change in the pitiful condition of Ariana Dumbledore. Her very existence continued to be known only to those upon whom to believe in the story of her "ill health."

Another such easily satisfied friend of the family was Bathilda Bagshot, the celebrated magical historian who has lived in Godric's Hollow since she was a child. Bathilda was the only person in Godric's Hollow who was on speaking terms with Dumbledore's mother. Several years later, however, the author was informed by his paper on trans-species transformation in *Transfiguration Today*. This initial contact led to acquaintance with Bathilda was the only person in Godric's Hollow who was on speaking terms with Dumbledore's mother.

Unfortunately, the brilliance that Bathilda exhibited earlier in her life has now dimmed. "The fire's lit, but the cauldron is empty," says Bathilda's slightly earthier phrase, "She's nutty as squirrel poo." Nevertheless, a combination of tried-and-tested reporting and a willingness to string together the whole scandalous story.

Like the rest of the Wizarding world, Bathilda puts Kendra's premature death down to a backfiring charm, a story repeated in the family line on Ariana, calling her "frail" and "delicate." On one subject, however, Bathilda is well worth the effort. She knows the full story of the best-kept secret of Albus Dumbledore's life. Now revealed for the first time, it calls into question his supposed hatred of the Dark Arts, his opposition to the oppression of Muggles, even his devotion to his own family. The very same summer that Dumbledore went home to Godric's Hollow, now an orphan and head of the family, Bathilda was in Godric's Hollow.

The name of Grindelwald is justly famous: In a list of Most Dangerous Dark Wizards of All Time, he would miss out on the honor, to steal his crown. As Grindelwald never extended his campaign of terror to Britain, however, the details of his rise to power are less well known. Educated at Durmstrang, a school famous even then for its unfortunate tolerance of the Dark Arts, Grindelwald showed an ability to channel his abilities into the attainment of awards and prizes, however, Gellert Grindelwald devoted himself to other pursuits. He no longer turned a blind eye to the twisted experiments of Gellert Grindelwald, and he was expelled.

Hitherto, all that has been known of Grindelwald's next movements is that he "traveled abroad for some months." It was in Godric's Hollow, and that there, intensely shocking though it will be for many to hear it, he struck up a close friendship with Bathilda. "He seemed a charming boy to me," babbles Bathilda, "whatever he became later. Naturally I introduced him to poor Ariana. They got on well enough to each other at once."

They certainly did. Bathilda shows me a letter, kept by her, that Albus Dumbledore sent Gellert Grindelwald in the days after the war. "Yes, even after they'd spent all day in discussion — both such brilliant young boys, they got on like a cauldron on fire. I was in the window, delivering a letter from Albus! An idea would have struck him, and he had to let Gellert know immediately!" And what ideas they were. Profoundly shocking though Albus Dumbledore's fans will find it, here are the thoughts of the letter. (A copy of the original letter may be seen on page 463.)

Gellert —

Your point about Wizard dominance being FOR THE MUGGLES' OWN GOOD — this, I think, is the crucial point. Yes, we must stress this point, it will be the foundation stone upon which we must build, but it also gives us responsibilities over the ruled. We must stress this point, it will be the foundation stone upon which we must build, his must be the basis of all our counterarguments. We seize control FOR THE GREATER GOOD. And from this it follows that we must do what is necessary and no more. (This was your mistake at Durmstrang! But I do not complain, because if you had not been expelled, you would have been a great help to Albus.)

Astonished and appalled though his many admirers will be, this letter constitutes proof that Albus Dumbledore once believed in wizard rule over Muggles. What a blow for those who have always portrayed Dumbledore as the Muggle-borns' greatest friend! The light of this damning new evidence! How despicable does Albus Dumbledore appear, busy plotting his rise to power while his sister!

No doubt those determined to keep Dumbledore on his crumbling pedestal will bleat that he did not, after all, put his sister to rest, that he came to his senses. However, the truth seems altogether more shocking.

Barely two months into their great new friendship, Dumbledore and Grindelwald parted, never to see each other again. (What caused this abrupt rupture? Had Dumbledore come to his senses? Had he told Grindelwald he wanted no more of the life of a wizard?) "It was poor little Ariana dying, I think, that did it," says Bathilda. "It came as an awful shock. Gellert was there in the house of a dither, told me he wanted to go home the next day. Terribly distressed, you know. So I arranged a Portkey and took him home."

"Albus was beside himself at Ariana's death. It was so dreadful for those two brothers. They had lost everybody excepted Albus, you know, as people will under these dreadful circumstances. But Aberforth always talked a little madly, not decent. It would have destroyed Kendra to see her sons fighting like that, across her daughter's body. A shame. It has been a comfort to Albus, at least. . . ."

This dreadful coffin-side brawl, known only to those few who attended Ariana Dumbledore's funeral, raises several questions about her death? Was it, as "Batty" pretends, a mere effusion of grief? Or could there have been some more concrete reasons for the fatal attacks upon fellow students, fled the country hours after the girl's death, and Albus (out of shame or fear?) remained in the Wizarding world.

Neither Dumbledore nor Grindelwald ever seems to have referred to this brief boyhood friendship in later life. How could he, after years of turmoil, fatalities, and disappearances, his attack upon Gellert Grindelwald. Was it lingering affection for the man who had made Dumbledore to hesitate? Was it only reluctantly that Dumbledore set out to capture the man he was once so delighted to know? And how did the mysterious Ariana die? Was she the inadvertent victim of some Dark rite? Did she stumble across some forbidden magic for their attempt at glory and domination? Is it possible that Ariana Dumbledore was the first person to die "for the Greater Good"? The chapter ended here and Harry looked up. Hermione had reached the bottom of the page before him. She tugged at the cover, and closed it without looking at it, as though hiding something indecent.

"Harry —"

But he shook his head. Some inner certainty had crashed down inside him; it was exactly as he had felt after Ron left. Loss, grief, sadness, and wisdom. All was ashes: How much more could he lose? Ron, Dumbledore, the phoenix wand . . .

"Harry." She seemed to have heard his thoughts. "Listen to me. It — it doesn't make very nice reading —"

"Yeah, you could say that —"

"— but don't forget, Harry, this is Rita Skeeter writing."

"You did read that letter to Grindelwald, didn't you?"

"Yes, I — I did." She hesitated, looking upset, cradling her tea in her cold hands. "I think that's the worst bit. I know Barty Crouch Jr. became Grindelwald's slogan, his justification for all the atrocities he committed later. And . . . from that . . . it's clear that the Greater Good' was even carved over the entrance to Nurmengard."

"What's Nurmengard?"

"The prison Grindelwald had built to hold his opponents. He ended up in there himself, once Dumbledore had caught him. It helped Grindelwald rise to power. But on the other hand, even Rita can't pretend that they knew each other for more than a few years —"

"I thought you'd say that," said Harry. He did not want to let his anger spill out at her, but it was hard to keep his voice down. He was the same age as we are now. And here we are, risking our lives to fight the Dark Arts, and there he was, in a huddle with the Muggles."

His temper would not remain in check much longer: He stood up and walked around, trying to work some of it off.

"I'm not trying to defend what Dumbledore wrote," said Hermione. "All that 'right to rule' rubbish, it's 'Magic Is Might' that's stuck alone in the house —"

"Alone? He wasn't alone! He had his brother and sister for company, his Squib sister he was keeping locked up —"

"I don't believe it," said Hermione. She stood up too. "Whatever was wrong with that girl, I don't think she was a Squib."

"The Dumbledore we thought we knew didn't want to conquer Muggles by force!" Harry shouted, his voice echoing against the awning and spiraling against the pearly sky.

"He changed, Harry, he changed! It's as simple as that! Maybe he did believe these things when he was seventeen, but not now. Dark Arts! Dumbledore was the one who stopped Grindelwald, the one who always voted for Muggle protection and Muggle rights, trying to bring him down!"

Rita's book lay on the ground between them, so that the face of Albus Dumbledore smiled dolefully at both.

"Harry, I'm sorry, but I think the real reason you're so angry is that Dumbledore never told you any of this himself."

"Maybe I am!" Harry bellowed, and he flung his arms over his head, hardly knowing whether he was trying to hold himself in or let himself go. "Look what he asked from me, Hermione! Risk your life, Harry! And again! And again! And don't expect me to do what you're doing, trust me even though I don't trust you! Never the whole truth! Never!"

His voice cracked with the strain, and they stood looking at each other in the whiteness and the emptiness, and Harry felt a little better.

"He loved you," Hermione whispered. "I know he loved you."

Harry dropped his arms.

"I don't know who he loved, Hermione, but it was never me. This isn't love, the mess he's left me in. He shared a damn good life with Grindelwald than he ever shared with me."

Harry picked up Hermione's wand, which he had dropped in the snow, and sat back down in the entrance of the tent.

"Thanks for the tea. I'll finish the watch. You get back in the warm."

She hesitated, but recognized the dismissal. She picked up the book and then walked back past him into the tent, but not without a look at him. He closed his eyes at her touch, and hated himself for wishing that what she said was true: that Dumbledore had loved her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN THE SILVER DOE

It was snowing by the time Hermione took over the watch at midnight. Harry's dreams were confused and disturbing, then through a wreath of Christmas roses. He woke repeatedly, panicky, convinced that somebody had called out. The tent was footsteps or voices.

Finally he got up in the darkness and joined Hermione, who was huddled in the entrance to the tent reading A History of Magic, and she greeted with relief his suggestion of packing up early and moving on.

"We'll go somewhere more sheltered," she agreed, shivering as she pulled on a sweatshirt over her pajamas. "I kept thinking somebody once or twice."

Harry paused in the act of pulling on a jumper and glanced at the silent, motionless Sneakoscope on the table.

"I'm sure I imagined it," said Hermione, looking nervous. "The snow in the dark, it plays tricks on your eyes. . . . But perhaps not, just in case?"

Half an hour later, with the tent packed, Harry wearing the Horcrux, and Hermione clutching the beaded bag, they disappeared into the company with the snowy ground, then slammed hard onto what felt like frozen earth covered with leaves.

"Where are we?" he asked, peering around at a fresh mass of trees as Hermione opened the beaded bag and began to unpack.

"The Forest of Dean," she said. "I came camping here once with my mum and dad."

Here too snow lay on the trees all around and it was bitterly cold, but they were at least protected from the wind. They lit the useful bright blue flames that Hermione was so adept at producing, and which could be scooped up and carried. It was, after some brief but severe illness, an impression reinforced by Hermione's solicitousness. That afternoon fresh flakes drifted down a fresh dusting of powdery snow.

After two nights of little sleep, Harry's senses seemed more alert than usual. Their escape from Godric's Hollow had been more threatening. As darkness drew in again Harry refused Hermione's offer to keep watch and told her to go to bed. Harry moved an old cushion into the tent mouth and sat down, wearing all the sweaters he owned but even so, still feeling the tent virtually impenetrable. He was on the point of taking out the Marauder's Map, so as to watch Ginny's dot for a while, but when she would be back at the Burrow.

Every tiny movement seemed magnified in the vastness of the forest. Harry knew that it must be full of living creatures, but he could separate their innocent scurryings and prowlings from noises that might proclaim other, sinister movements. Many years ago, and at once thought he heard it again before mentally shaking himself. Their protective enchantment did not throw off the feeling that something was different tonight.

Several times he jerked upright, his neck aching because he had fallen asleep, slumped at an awkward angle against the tent wall, in a darkness that he might have been suspended in limbo between Disapparition and Apparition. He had just held up a hand when it happened.

A bright silver light appeared right ahead of him, moving through the trees. Whatever the source, it was moving soundlessly. He jumped to his feet, his voice frozen in his throat, and raised Hermione's wand. He screwed up his eyes as the light came closer, and still the thing came closer. . . .

And then the source of the light stepped out from behind an oak. It was a silver-white doe, moon-bright and dazzling. Footprints in the fine powdering of snow. She stepped toward him, her beautiful head with its wide, long-lashed eyes. Harry stared at the creature, filled with wonder, not at her strangeness, but at her inexplicable familiarity. He felt that he had known her, often, until this moment, that they had arranged to meet. His impulse to shout for Hermione, which had been so strong, faded on it, that she had come for him, and him alone.

They gazed at each other for several long moments and then she turned and walked away.

"No," he said, and his voice was cracked with lack of use. "Come back!"

She continued to step deliberately through the trees, and soon her brightness was striped by their thick black trunks. It could be a trick, a lure, a trap. But instinct, overwhelming instinct, told him that this was not Dark Magic. He set off in pursuit. Snow crunched beneath his feet, but the doe made no noise as she passed through the trees, for she was nothing but light. He walked quickly, sure that when she stopped, she would allow him to approach her properly. And then she would speak. At last, she came to a halt. She turned her beautiful head toward him once more, and he broke into a run, a question in his mind.

Though the darkness had swallowed her whole, her burnished image was still imprinted on his retinas; it obscured his vision. Now fear came: Her presence had meant safety.

"Lumos!" he whispered, and the wand-tip ignited.

The imprint of the doe faded away with every blink of his eyes as he stood there, listening to the sounds of the forest. Was he about to be attacked? Had she enticed him into an ambush? Was he imagining that somebody stood beyond the reach of his wand? He held the wand higher. Nobody ran out at him, no flash of green light burst from behind a tree. Why, then, had she stopped? Something gleamed in the light of the wand, and Harry spun about, but all that was there was a small, frozen pool, its surface reflecting the light to examine it.

He moved forward rather cautiously and looked down. The ice reflected his distorted shadow and the beam of wand light. A great silver cross . . .

His heart skipped into his mouth: He dropped to his knees at the pool's edge and angled the wand so as to flood the pool with light. . . . It was a sword with glittering rubies in its hilt. . . . The sword of Gryffindor was lying at the bottom of the frozen pool. Barely breathing, he stared down at it. How was this possible? How could it have come to be lying in a forest pool, the sword of magic drawn Hermione to this spot, or was the doe, which he had taken to be a Patronus, some kind of guardian of the sword?

rived, precisely because they were here? In which case, where was the person who had wanted to pass it to Harry? Aching for a human outline, for the glint of an eye, but he could not see anyone there. All the same, a little more fear for the sword reposing upon the bottom of the frozen pool.

He pointed the wand at the silvery shape and murmured, "Accio Sword."

It did not stir. He had not expected it to. If it had been that easy, the sword would have lain on the ground for him to find and the circle of ice, thinking hard about the last time the sword had delivered itself to him. He had been in terrible danger. "Help," he murmured, but the sword remained upon the pool bottom, indifferent, motionless.

What was it, Harry asked himself (walking again), that Dumbledore had told him the last time he had retrieved the sword. And what were the qualities that defined a Gryffindor? A small voice inside Harry's head answered him: Their daring. Harry stopped walking and let out a long sigh, his smoky breath dispersing rapidly upon the frozen air. He knew what might come to this from the moment he had spotted the sword through the ice.

He glanced around at the surrounding trees again, but was convinced now that nobody was going to attack him. There was plenty of opportunity as he examined the pool. The only reason to delay at this point was because the immediate pressure. With fumbling fingers Harry started to remove his many layers of clothing. Where "chivalry" entered into this, he thought, was irrelevant that he was not calling for Hermione to do it in his stead.

An owl hooted somewhere as he stripped off, and he thought with a pang of Hedwig. He was shivering now, his teeth chattering. He stood there in his underwear, barefooted in the snow. He placed the pouch containing his wand, his mother's letter, his clothes, then he pointed Hermione's wand at the ice.

"Diffindo."

It cracked with a sound like a bullet in the silence: The surface of the pool broke and chunks of dark ice rocked on the snow. But to retrieve the sword he would have to submerge himself completely.

Contemplating the task ahead would not make it easier or the water warmer. He stepped to the pool's edge and plunged in. Realizing how much colder he was about to become or how violently he would soon be shivering, he jumped.

Every pore of his body screamed in protest: The very air in his lungs seemed to freeze solid as he was submerged to his chest. Lapping so violently the water lapped over the edges of the pool, he felt for the blade with his numb feet. He only wanted the sword. Harry put off the moment of total submersion from second to second, gasping and shaking, until he told himself that he was not dying. The cold was agony: It attacked him like fire. His brain itself seemed to have frozen as he pushed through the dark water. His fingers closed around the hilt; he pulled it upward.

Then something closed tight around his neck. He thought of water weeds, though nothing had brushed him as he dived. The chain of the Horcrux had tightened and was slowly constricting his windpipe.

Harry kicked out wildly, trying to push himself back to the surface, but merely propelled himself into the rocky side of the pool. Lying on his back, his frozen fingers unable to loosen it, and now little lights were popping inside his head, and he was going to die. The arms that closed around his chest were surely Death's. . . .

Choking and retching, soaking and colder than he had ever been in his life, he came to facedown in the snow. Someone was moving around. Hermione had come again, as she had come when the snake attacked. . . . Yet it did not sound like her, not like Hermione. . . .

Harry had no strength to lift his head and see his savior's identity. All he could do was raise a shaking hand to his throat, feeling his flesh. It was gone: Someone had cut him free. Then a panting voice spoke from over his head.

"Are — you — mental?"

Nothing but the shock of hearing that voice could have given Harry the strength to get up. Shivering violently, he staggered out, dripping to the skin, his hair plastered to his face, the sword of Gryffindor in one hand and the Horcrux dangling from the other. "Why the hell," panted Ron, holding up the Horcrux, which swung backward and forward on its shortened chain in surprise. "Saved?"

Harry could not answer. The silver doe was nothing, nothing compared with Ron's reappearance; he could not believe it. He lay on his back at the water's edge and began to pull them on. As he dragged sweater after sweater over his head, Harry stared at Ron's sight of him, and yet he had to be real: He had just dived into the pool, he had saved Harry's life.

"It was y-you?" Harry said at last, his teeth chattering, his voice weaker than usual due to his near-strangulation.

"Well, yeah," said Ron, looking slightly confused.

"Y-you cast that doe?"

"What? No, of course not! I thought it was you doing it!"

"My Patronus is a stag."

"Oh yeah. I thought it looked different. No antlers."

Harry put Hagrid's pouch back around his neck, pulled on a final sweater, stooped to pick up Hermione's wand, and looked at Ron.

"How come you're here?"

Apparently Ron had hoped that this point would come up later, if at all.

"Well, I've — you know — I've come back. If —" He cleared his throat. "You know. You still want me."

There was a pause, in which the subject of Ron's departure seemed to rise like a wall between them. Yet he was here. Ron looked down at his hands. He seemed momentarily surprised to see the things he was holding.

"Oh yeah, I got it out," he said, rather unnecessarily, holding up the sword for Harry's inspection. "That's why you jumped."

"Yeah," said Harry. "But I don't understand. How did you get here? How did you find us?"

"Long story," said Ron. "I've been looking for you for hours, it's a big forest, isn't it? And I was just thinking I'd have to see a deer coming and you following."

"You didn't see anyone else?"

"No," said Ron. "I —"

But he hesitated, glancing at two trees growing close together some yards away.

"I did think I saw something move over there, but I was running to the pool at the time, because you'd gone in and you were gone. Harry was already hurrying to the place Ron had indicated. The two oaks grew close together; there was a gap of only a few feet to see but not be seen. The ground around the roots, however, was free of snow, and Harry could see no sign of footprints. The sword and the Horcrux.

"Anything there?" Ron asked.

"No," said Harry.

"So how did the sword get in that pool?"

"Whoever cast the Patronus must have put it there."

They both looked at the ornate silver sword, its rubied hilt glinting a little in the light from Hermione's wand.

"You reckon this is the real one?" asked Ron.

"One way to find out, isn't there?" said Harry.

The Horcrux was still swinging from Ron's hand. The locket was twitching slightly. Harry knew that the thing inside it had tried to kill Harry rather than let him possess it. Now was not the time for long discussions; now was the moment. Holding Hermione's wand high, and saw the place: a flattish rock lying in the shadow of a sycamore tree.

"Come here," he said, and he led the way, brushed snow from the rock's surface, and held out his hand for the Horcrux.

"No, you should do it."

"Me?" said Ron, looking shocked. "Why?"

"Because you got the sword out of the pool. I think it's supposed to be you."

He was not being kind or generous. As certainly as he had known that the doe was benign, he knew that Ron had to do something about certain kinds of magic, of the incalculable power of certain acts.

"I'm going to open it," said Harry, "and you stab it. Straightaway, okay? Because whatever's in there will put up a fight."

"How are you going to open it?" asked Ron. He looked terrified.

"I'm going to ask it to open, using Parseltongue," said Harry. The answer came so readily to his lips that he thought of his recent encounter with Nagini to make him realize it. He looked at the serpentine S, inlaid with glittering green stone, on the cold rock.

"No!" said Ron. "No, don't open it! I'm serious!"

"Why not?" asked Harry. "Let's get rid of the damn thing, it's been months —"

"I can't, Harry, I'm serious — you do it —"

"But why?"

"Because that thing's bad for me!" said Ron, backing away from the locket on the rock. "I can't handle it! I'm not making it worse than it affected you and Hermione, it made me think stuff — stuff I was thinking anyway, but it made everything worse. My head on straight again, and then I'd have to put the effing thing back on — I can't do it, Harry!"

He had backed away, the sword dragging at his side, shaking his head.

"You can do it," said Harry, "you can! You've just got the sword, I know it's supposed to be you who uses it. Please, just try."

The sound of his name seemed to act like a stimulant. Ron swallowed, then, still breathing hard through his long nose.

"Tell me when," he croaked.

"On three," said Harry, looking back down at the locket and narrowing his eyes, concentrating on the letter S, imagining it as a trapped cockroach. It would have been easy to pity it, except that the cut around Harry's neck still burned.

"One . . . two . . . three . . . open."

The last word came as a hiss and a snarl and the golden doors of the locket swung wide with a little click.

Behind both of the glass windows within blinked a living eye, dark and handsome as Tom Riddle's eyes had been before.

"Stab," said Harry, holding the locket steady on the rock.

Ron raised the sword in his shaking hands: The point dangled over the frantically swiveling eyes, and Harry gripped the hilt from the empty windows.

Then a voice hissed from out of the Horcrux.

"I have seen your heart, and it is mine."

"Don't listen to it!" Harry said harshly. "Stab it!"

"I have seen your dreams, Ronald Weasley, and I have seen your fears. All you desire is possible, but all that you dream of is death."

"Stab!" shouted Harry; his voice echoed off the surrounding trees, the sword point trembled, and Ron gazed down in horror.

"Least loved, always, by the mother who craved a daughter . . . Least loved, now, by the girl who prefers your friend."

"Ron, stab it now!" Harry bellowed: He could feel the locket quivering in his grip and was scared of what was coming. The sword's point gleamed scarlet.

Out of the locket's two windows, out of the eyes, there bloomed, like two grotesque bubbles, the heads of Harry and Ron. Ron yelled in shock and backed away as the figures blossomed out of the locket, first chests, then waists, then legs, until they were one common root, swaying over Ron and the real Harry, who had snatched his fingers away from the locket as it burned.

"Hermione, will you please —"

"Don't you tell me what to do, Harry Potter!" she screeched. "Don't you dare! Give it back now! And YOU!"

She was pointing at Ron in dire accusation: It was like a malediction, and Harry could not blame Ron for retreating so

"I came running after you! I called you! I begged you to come back!"

"I know," Ron said, "Hermione, I'm sorry, I'm really —"

"Oh, you're sorry!"

She laughed, a high-pitched, out-of-control sound; Ron looked at Harry for help, but Harry merely grimaced his help

"You come back after weeks — weeks — and you think it's all going to be all right if you just say sorry?"

"Well, what else can I say?" Ron shouted, and Harry was glad that Ron was fighting back.

"Oh, I don't know!" yelled Hermione with awful sarcasm. "Rack your brains, Ron, that should only take a couple of seconds."

"Hermione," interjected Harry, who considered this a low blow, "he just saved my —"

"I don't care!" she screamed. "I don't care what he's done! Weeks and weeks, we could have been dead for all he knew!"

"I knew you weren't dead!" bellowed Ron, drowning her voice for the first time, and approaching as close as he could

t, all over the radio, they're looking for you everywhere, all these rumors and mental stories, I knew I'd hear straight

"What it's been like for you?"

Her voice was now so shrill only bats would be able to hear it soon, but she had reached a level of indignation that re

ity.

"I wanted to come back the minute I'd Disapparated, but I walked straight into a gang of Snatchers, Hermione, and I

"A gang of what?" asked Harry, as Hermione threw herself down into a chair with her arms and legs crossed so tightl

"Snatchers," said Ron. "They're everywhere — gangs trying to earn gold by rounding up Muggle-borns and blood traito

s on my own and I look like I might be school age; they got really excited, thought I was a Muggle-born in hiding. I ha

"What did you say to them?"

"Told them I was Stan Shunpike. First person I could think of."

"And they believed that?"

"They weren't the brightest. One of them was definitely part troll, the smell off him. . . ."

Ron glanced at Hermione, clearly hopeful she might soften at this small instance of humor, but her expression rema

"Anyway, they had a row about whether I was Stan or not. It was a bit pathetic to be honest, but there were still five o

of them got into a fight and while the others were distracted I managed to hit the one holding me in the stomach, gr

. I didn't do it so well, Splinched myself again" — Ron held up his right hand to show two missing fingernails; Hermio

e you were. By the time I got back to that bit of riverbank where we'd been . . . you'd gone."

"Gosh, what a gripping story," Hermione said in the lofty voice she adopted when wishing to wound. "You must have

t's think, what happened there, Harry? Oh yes, You-Know-Who's snake turned up, it nearly killed both of us, and then

"What?" Ron said, gaping from her to Harry, but Hermione ignored him.

"Imagine losing fingernails, Harry! That really puts our sufferings into perspective, doesn't it?"

"Hermione," said Harry quietly, "Ron just saved my life."

She appeared not to have heard him.

"One thing I would like to know, though," she said, fixing her eyes on a spot a foot over Ron's head. "How exactly did

able to make sure we're not visited by anyone else we don't want to see."

Ron glared at her, then pulled a small silver object from his jeans pocket.

"This."

She had to look at Ron to see what he was showing them.

"The Deluminator?" she asked, so surprised she forgot to look cold and fierce.

"It doesn't just turn the lights on and off," said Ron. "I don't know how it works or why it happened then and not any

I left. But I was listening to the radio really early on Christmas morning and I heard . . . I heard you."

He was looking at Hermione.

"You heard me on the radio?" she asked incredulously.

"No, I heard you coming out of my pocket. Your voice," he held up the Deluminator again, "came out of this."

"And what exactly did I say?" asked Hermione, her tone somewhere between skepticism and curiosity.

"My name. 'Ron.' And you said . . . something about a wand. . . ."

Hermione turned a fiery shade of scarlet. Harry remembered: It had been the first time Ron's name had been said al

oned it when talking about repairing Harry's wand.

"So I took it out," Ron went on, looking at the Deluminator, "and it didn't seem different or anything, but I was sure I'd

oom, but another light appeared right outside the window."

Ron raised his empty hand and pointed in front of him, his eyes focused on something neither Harry nor Hermione c

"It was a ball of light, kind of pulsing, and bluish, like that light you get around a Portkey, you know?"

"Yeah," said Harry and Hermione together automatically.

"I knew this was it," said Ron. "I grabbed my stuff and packed it, then I put on my rucksack and went out into the garo

"The little ball of light was hovering there, waiting for me, and when I came out it bobbed along a bit and I followed it

"Sorry?" said Harry, sure he had not heard correctly.

"It sort of floated toward me," said Ron, illustrating the movement with his free index finger, "right to my chest, and then it disappeared and came out on the side of a hill. There was snow everywhere. . . ."

"We were there," said Harry. "We spent two nights there, and the second night I kept thinking I could hear someone moving about."

"Yeah, well, that would've been me," said Ron. "Your protective spells work, anyway, because I couldn't see you and I was scared. At the end I got in my sleeping bag and waited for one of you to appear. I thought you'd have to show yourselves when you came."

"No, actually," said Hermione. "We've been Disapparating under the Invisibility Cloak as an extra precaution. And we were just wandering around."

"Well, I stayed on that hill all day," said Ron. "I kept hoping you'd appear. But when it started to get dark I knew I mustn't wait. A bright blue light came out and went inside me, and I Disapparated and arrived here in these woods. I still couldn't see you, but I knew you were there — and Harry did. Well, I saw the doe first, obviously."

"You saw the what?" said Hermione sharply.

They explained what had happened, and as the story of the silver doe and the sword in the pool unfolded, Hermione began to wriggle to keep her limbs locked together.

"But it must have been a Patronus!" she said. "Couldn't you see who was casting it? Didn't you see anyone? And it led you to the sword?"

Ron explained how he had watched Harry jump into the pool and had waited for him to resurface; how he had realized that the sword was in the pool; how he had opened the locket, then hesitated, and Harry cut in.

"— and Ron stabbed it with the sword."

"And . . . and it went? Just like that?" she whispered.

"Well, it — it screamed," said Harry with half a glance at Ron. "Here."

He threw the locket into her lap; gingerly she picked it up and examined its punctured windows.

Deciding that it was at last safe to do so, Harry removed the Shield Charm with a wave of Hermione's wand and turned to her.

"Did you just say you got away from the Snatchers with a spare wand?"

"What?" said Ron, who had been watching Hermione examining the locket. "Oh — oh yeah."

He tugged open a buckle on his rucksack and pulled a short, dark wand out of its pocket. "Here. I figured it's always better to have it."

"You were right," said Harry, holding out his hand. "Mine's broken."

"You're kidding?" Ron said, but at that moment Hermione got to her feet, and he looked apprehensive again.

Hermione put the vanquished Horcrux into the beaded bag, then climbed back into her bed and settled down without a word. Ron passed Harry the new wand.

"About the best you could hope for, I think," murmured Harry.

"Yeah," said Ron. "Could've been worse. Remember those birds she set on me?"

"I still haven't ruled it out," came Hermione's muffled voice from beneath her blankets, but Harry saw Ron smiling slightly.

CHAPTER TWENTY

XENOPHIUS LOVEGOOD

Harry had not expected Hermione's anger to abate overnight, and was therefore unsurprised that she communicated by maintaining an unnaturally somber demeanor in her presence as an outward sign of continuing remorse. He was a non-mourner at a poorly attended funeral. During those few moments he spent alone with Harry, however (collecting his thoughts), he was cheerless.

"Someone helped us," he kept saying. "Someone sent that doe. Someone's on our side. One Horcrux down, mate!"

Bolstered by the destruction of the locket, they set to debating the possible locations of the other Horcruxes, and eventually felt optimistic, certain that more breakthroughs would succeed the first. Hermione's sulkiness could not mar his buoyant mood.

The recovery of the mysterious doe, the recovery of Gryffindor's sword, and above all, Ron's return, made Harry so happy that it was almost unbearable.

Late in the afternoon he and Ron escaped Hermione's baleful presence again, and under the pretense of scouring the grounds for the exchange of news. Harry had finally managed to tell Ron the whole story of his and Hermione's various wanderings.

"How did you find out about the Taboo?" he asked Harry after explaining the many desperate attempts of Mundungus to find out where they were.

"The what?"

"You and Hermione have stopped saying You-Know-Who's name!"

"Oh, yeah. Well, it's just a bad habit we've slipped into," said Harry. "But I haven't got a problem calling him V —"

"NO!" roared Ron, causing Harry to jump into the hedge and Hermione (nose buried in a book at the tent entrance) to follow him. "The name's been jinxed, Harry, that's how they track people! Using his name breaks protective spells. That's how they found us in Tottenham Court Road!"

"Because we used his name?"

"Exactly! You've got to give them credit, it makes sense. It was only people who were serious about standing up to him who were on it, anyone who says it is trackable — quick-and-easy way to find Order members! They nearly got Kingsley —"

"You're kidding?"

"Yeah, a bunch of Death Eaters cornered him, Bill said, but he fought his way out. He's on the run now, just like us." Ron looked at Harry.

"You don't reckon Kingsley could have sent that doe?"

"His Patronus is a lynx, we saw it at the wedding, remember?"

"Oh yeah . . ."

They moved farther along the hedge, away from the tent and Hermione.

"Harry . . . you don't reckon it could've been Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore what?"

Ron looked a little embarrassed, but said in a low voice, "Dumbledore . . . the doe? I mean," Ron was watching Harry not he?"

Harry did not laugh at Ron, because he understood too well the longing behind the question. The idea that Dumbledore, would have been inexpressibly comforting. He shook his head.

"Dumbledore's dead," he said. "I saw it happen, I saw the body. He's definitely gone. Anyway, his Patronus was a phoenix."

"Patronuses can change, though, can't they?" said Ron. "Tonks's changed, didn't it?"

"Yeah, but if Dumbledore was alive, why wouldn't he show himself? Why wouldn't he just hand us the sword?"

"Search me," said Ron. "Same reason he didn't give it to you while he was alive? Same reason he left you an old Snitch?"

"Which is what?" asked Harry, turning to look Ron full in the face, desperate for the answer.

"I dunno," said Ron. "Sometimes I've thought, when I've been a bit hacked off, he was having a laugh or — or he just wanted to see me. He knew what he was doing when he gave me the Deluminator, didn't he? He — well," Ron's ears turned bright red. He prodded with his toe, "he must've known I'd run out on you."

"No," Harry corrected him. "He must've known you'd always want to come back."

Ron looked grateful, but still awkward. Partly to change the subject, Harry said, "Speaking of Dumbledore, have you heard anything?"

"Oh yeah," said Ron at once, "people are talking about it quite a lot. 'Course, if things were different, it'd be huge news. But it's just something to laugh about for people who didn't like Dumbledore, and a bit of a slap in the face for everyone who thought he was a good deal, though. He was really young when they —"

"Our age," said Harry, just as he had retorted to Hermione, and something in his face seemed to decide Ron against continuing.

A large spider sat in the middle of a frosted web in the brambles. Harry took aim at it with the wand Ron had given him. He examined it, and had decided it was made of blackthorn.

"Engorgio."

The spider gave a little shiver, bouncing slightly in the web. Harry tried again. This time the spider grew slightly larger.

"Stop that," said Ron sharply. "I'm sorry I said Dumbledore was young, okay?"

Harry had forgotten Ron's hatred of spiders.

"Sorry — Reducio."

The spider did not shrink. Harry looked down at the blackthorn wand. Every minor spell he had cast with it so far that year had been with the phoenix wand. The new one felt intrusively unfamiliar, like having somebody else's hand sewn to the end of his arm.

"You just need to practice," said Hermione, who had approached them noiselessly from behind and had stood watching. "It's all a matter of confidence, Harry."

He knew why she wanted it to be all right: She still felt guilty about breaking his wand. He bit back the retort that sprang to his mind, but she thought it made no difference, and he would have hers instead. Keen for them all to be friends again, however, he tapped the wand off and vanished behind her book once more.

All three of them returned to the tent when darkness fell, and Harry took first watch. Sitting in the entrance, he tried to sleep, but his magic still seemed clumsier and less powerful than it had done before. Hermione was lying on her bunk reading, and he took a small wooden wireless out of his rucksack and started to try and tune it.

"There's this one program," he told Harry in a low voice, "that tells the news like it really is. All the others are on You-Know-Who. This one . . . you wait till you hear it, it's great. Only they can't do it every night, they have to keep changing locations in case they get in. . . . Trouble is, I missed the last one. . . ."

He drummed lightly on the top of the radio with his wand, muttering random words under his breath. He threw Hermione a glance, but she gave him all the notice she took of him he might not have been there. For ten minutes or so Ron tapped and muttered, and Hermione continued to read with the blackthorn wand.

Finally Hermione climbed down from her bunk. Ron ceased his tapping at once.

"If it's annoying you, I'll stop!" he told Hermione nervously.

Hermione did not deign to respond, but approached Harry.

"We need to talk," she said.

He looked at the book still clutched in her hand. It was *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*.

"What?" he said apprehensively. It flew through his mind that there was a chapter on him in there; he was not sure he had read it. Hermione's answer, however, was completely unexpected.

"I want to go and see Xenophilius Lovegood."

He stared at her.

"Sorry?"

"Xenophilius Lovegood. Luna's father. I want to go and talk to him!"

"Er — why?"

She took a deep breath, as though bracing herself, and said, "It's that mark, the mark in *Beedle the Bard*. Look at this. I found it. She thrust *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* under Harry's unwilling eyes and he saw a photograph of the original. It was his familiar thin, slanting handwriting. He hated seeing absolute proof that Dumbledore really had written those words."

"The signature," said Hermione. "Look at the signature, Harry!"

He obeyed. For a moment he had no idea what she was talking about, but, looking more closely with the aid of his lightning bolt, he saw a tiny version of the same triangular mark inscribed upon *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*.

"Er — what are you — ?" said Ron tentatively, but Hermione quelled him with a look and turned back to Harry.

"It keeps cropping up, doesn't it?" she said. "I know Viktor said it was Grindelwald's mark, but it was definitely on that night when we were long before Grindelwald came along! And now this! Well, we can't ask Dumbledore or Grindelwald what it means, but we can ask Mr. Lovegood. He was wearing the symbol at the wedding. I'm sure this is important, Harry!"

Harry did not answer immediately. He looked into her intense, eager face and then out into the surrounding darkness. "Another Godric's Hollow. We talked ourselves into going there, and —"

"But it keeps appearing, Harry! Dumbledore left me *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, how do you know we're not supposed to read it?"

"Here we go again!" Harry felt slightly exasperated. "We keep trying to convince ourselves Dumbledore left us secrets."

"The Deluminator turned out to be pretty useful," piped up Ron. "I think Hermione's right, I think we ought to go and look at it."

Harry threw him a dark look. He was quite sure that Ron's support of Hermione had little to do with a desire to know the truth.

"It won't be like Godric's Hollow," Ron added, "Lovegood's on your side, Harry, The Quibbler's been for you all along, hasn't it?"

"I'm sure this is important!" said Hermione earnestly.

"But don't you think if it was, Dumbledore would have told me about it before he died?"

"Maybe . . . maybe it's something you need to find out for yourself," said Hermione with a faint air of clutching at straws.

"Yeah," said Ron sycophantically, "that makes sense."

"No, it doesn't," snapped Hermione, "but I still think we ought to talk to Mr. Lovegood. A symbol that links Dumbledore to Godric's Hollow — how do you know about this!"

"I think we should vote on it," said Ron. "Those in favor of going to see Lovegood —"

His hand flew into the air before Hermione's. Her lips quivered suspiciously as she raised her own.

"Outvoted, Harry, sorry," said Ron, clapping him on the back.

"Fine," said Harry, half amused, half irritated. "Only, once we've seen Lovegood, let's try and look for some more Horcruxes. What do you think?"

"Yeah, they're not far from my place," said Ron. "I dunno exactly where, but Mum and Dad always point toward the hill when they're out at night."

When Hermione had returned to her bunk, Harry lowered his voice.

"You only agreed to try and get back in her good books."

"All's fair in love and war," said Ron brightly, "and this is a bit of both. Cheer up, it's the Christmas holidays, Luna'll be back soon."

They had an excellent view of the village of Ottery St. Catchpole from the breezy hillside to which they had Disapparated. The houses looked like a collection of toy houses in the great slanting shafts of sunlight stretching to earth in the breaks between clouds. Harry and Ron saw their hands shadowing their eyes, but all they could make out were the high hedges and trees of the orchard, which were lit up by the moon.

"It's weird, being this near, but not going to visit," said Ron.

"Well, it's not like you haven't just seen them. You were there for Christmas," said Hermione coldly.

"I wasn't at the Burrow!" said Ron with an incredulous laugh. "Do you think I was going to go back there and tell them I was? They'd be great about it. And Ginny, she'd have been really understanding."

"But where have you been, then?" asked Hermione, surprised.

"Bill and Fleur's new place. Shell Cottage. Bill's always been decent to me. He — he wasn't impressed when he heard I was there. Sorry. None of the rest of the family know I was there. Bill told Mum he and Fleur weren't going home for Christmas this year. After they were married. I don't think Fleur minded. You know how much she hates Celestina Warbeck."

Ron turned his back on the Burrow.

"Let's try up here," he said, leading the way over the top of the hill.

They walked for a few hours, Harry, at Hermione's insistence, hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak. The cluster of low hills was, which seemed deserted.

"Do you think it's theirs, and they've gone away for Christmas?" said Hermione, peering through the window at a nearby house.

"Listen, I've got a feeling you'd be able to tell who lived there if you looked through the Lovegoods' window. Let's try to see if we can't."

So they Disapparated a few miles farther north.

"Aha!" shouted Ron, as the wind whipped their hair and clothes. Ron was pointing upward, toward the top of the hill. There, set vertically against the sky, a great black cylinder with a ghostly moon hanging behind it in the afternoon sky. "That's it! That's it! That's that? It looks like a giant rook!"

"It's nothing like a bird," said Hermione, frowning at the tower.

"I was talking about a chess rook," said Ron. "A castle to you."

Ron's legs were the longest and he reached the top of the hill first. When Harry and Hermione caught up with him, they were both out of breath.

"It's theirs," said Ron. "Look."

Three hand-painted signs had been tacked to a broken-down gate. The first read,

THE QUIBBLER. EDITOR: X. LOVEGOOD

the second,

PICK YOUR OWN MISTLETOE

the third,

KEEP OFF THE DIRIGIBLE PLUMS

The gate creaked as they opened it. The zigzagging path leading to the front door was overgrown with a variety of odd plants. Luna sometimes wore them as earrings. Harry thought he recognized a Snargaluff and gave the wizened stump a wide berth, but still heavy with berry-sized red fruits and bushy crowns of white-beaded mistletoe, stood sentinel on either side. A snake-like head peered down at them from one of the branches.

"You'd better take off the Invisibility Cloak, Harry," said Hermione. "It's you Mr. Lovegood wants to help, not us."

He did as she suggested, handing her the Cloak to stow in the beaded bag. She then rapped three times on the thick door. The door opened, revealing a room that shaped like an eagle.

Barely ten seconds passed, then the door was flung open and there stood Xenophilius Lovegood, barefoot and wearing a long, dark, shaggy hair. His hair was dirty and unkempt. Xenophilius had been positively dapper at Bill and Fleur's wedding by comparison.

"What? What is it? Who are you? What do you want?" he cried in a high-pitched, querulous voice, looking first at Hermione and then at Harry. The door opened in a perfect, comical O.

"Hello, Mr. Lovegood," said Harry, holding out his hand. "I'm Harry, Harry Potter."

Xenophilius did not take Harry's hand, although the eye that was not pointing inward at his nose slid straight to the side.

"Would it be okay if we came in?" asked Harry. "There's something we'd like to ask you."

"I . . . I'm not sure that's advisable," whispered Xenophilius. He swallowed and cast a quick look around the garden. "I really think I ought to —"

"It won't take long," said Harry, slightly disappointed by this less-than-warm welcome.

"I — oh, all right then. Come in, quickly. Quickly!"

They were barely over the threshold when Xenophilius slammed the door shut behind them. They were standing in a circular room, so that it felt like being inside a giant pepper pot. Everything was curved to fit the walls — the stove, the sink, the flowers, insects, and birds in bright primary colors. Harry thought he recognized Luna's style: The effect, in such an environment, was like a child's drawing. In the middle of the floor, a wrought-iron spiral staircase led to the upper levels. There was a great deal of clattering and banging, as if something could be doing.

"You'd better come up," said Xenophilius, still looking extremely uncomfortable, and he led the way.

The room above seemed to be a combination of living room and workplace, and as such, was even more cluttered than the one below. It had that resemblance to the Room of Requirement on the unforgettable occasion that it had transformed itself into a gigantic library. The walls were covered with books upon piles of books and papers on every surface. Delicately made models of creatures Harry did not recognize, all of which were made of wood. Luna was not there: The thing that was making such a racket was a wooden object covered in magically turning cogs and gears. It looked like a set of old shelves, but after a moment Harry deduced that it was an old-fashioned printing press, due to the fact that it was making a great deal of noise.

"Excuse me," said Xenophilius, and he strode over to the machine, seized a grubby tablecloth from beneath an immense pile of books, and threw it over the press, somewhat muffling the loud bangs and clatters. He then faced Harry.

"Why have you come here?"

Before Harry could speak, however, Hermione let out a small cry of shock.

"Mr. Lovegood — what's that?"

She was pointing at an enormous, gray spiral horn, not unlike that of a unicorn, which had been mounted on the wall.

"It is the horn of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack," said Xenophilius.

"No it isn't!" said Hermione.

"Hermione," muttered Harry, embarrassed, "now's not the moment —"

"But Harry, it's an Erumpent horn! It's a Class B Tradeable Material and it's an extraordinarily dangerous thing to have!"

"How d'you know it's an Erumpent horn?" asked Ron, edging away from the horn as fast as he could, given the extreme danger.

"There's a description in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*! Mr. Lovegood, you need to get rid of it straightaway!"

"The Crumple-Horned Snorkack," said Xenophilius very clearly, a mulish look upon his face, "is a shy and highly magical creature."

"Mr. Lovegood, I recognize the grooved markings around the base, that's an Erumpent horn and it's incredibly dangerous!"

"I bought it," said Xenophilius dogmatically, "two weeks ago, from a delightful young wizard who knew of my interest in the subject," he said, turning to Harry, "why exactly have you come here, Mr. Potter?"

"We need some help," said Harry, before Hermione could start again.

"Ah," said Xenophilius. "Help. Hmm."

His good eye moved again to Harry's scar. He seemed simultaneously terrified and mesmerized.

"Yes. The thing is . . . helping Harry Potter . . . rather dangerous . . ."

"Aren't you the one who keeps telling everyone it's their first duty to help Harry?" said Ron. "In that magazine of yours, you said that!" Xenophilius glanced behind him at the concealed printing press, still banging and clattering beneath the tablecloth.

"Er — yes, I have expressed that view. However —"

"That's for everyone else to do, not you personally?" said Ron.

Xenophilius did not answer. He kept swallowing, his eyes darting between the three of them. Harry had the impression that he was trying to decide whether or not to tell them the truth.

"Where's Luna?" asked Hermione. "Let's see what she thinks."

Xenophilius gulped. He seemed to be steeling himself. Finally he said in a shaky voice difficult to hear over the noise of the printing press or Freshwater Plimpies. She . . . she will like to see you. I'll go and call her and then — yes, very well. I shall try to help you. He disappeared down the spiral staircase and they heard the front door open and close. They looked at each other.

"Cowardly old wart," said Ron. "Luna's got ten times his guts."

"He's probably worried about what'll happen to them if the Death Eaters find out I was here," said Harry.

"Well, I agree with Ron," said Hermione. "Awful old hypocrite, telling everyone else to help you and trying to worm out of it."

Harry crossed to the window on the far side of the room. He could see a stream, a thin, glittering ribbon lying far below, and a bird fluttered past the window as he stared in the direction of the Burrow, now invisible beyond another line of hills. Given today than they had been since Bill and Fleur's wedding, but she could have no idea he was gazing toward her now, that he had come into contact with was in danger, Xenophilius's attitude proved that.

He turned away from the window and his gaze fell upon another peculiar object standing upon the cluttered, curved tray bearing a most bizarre-looking headdress. Two objects that resembled golden ear trumpets curved out from the sides. One had run over the top of her head, while one of the orange radishes had been stuck to a second strap around her forehead.

"Look at this," said Harry.

"Fetching," said Ron. "Surprised he didn't wear that to the wedding."

They heard the front door close, and a moment later Xenophilius had climbed back up the spiral staircase into the room full of ill-assorted teacups and a steaming teapot.

"Ah, you have spotted my pet invention," he said, shoving the tray into Hermione's arms and joining Harry at the statue of Rowena Ravenclaw. "Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure!"

He indicated the objects like ear trumpets.

"These are the Wrackspurt siphons — to remove all sources of distraction from the thinker's immediate area. Here, on this elevated frame of mind. Finally," he pointed to the orange radish, "the Dirigible Plum, so as to enhance the ability to think." Xenophilius strode back to the tea tray, which Hermione had managed to balance precariously on one of the cluttered objects.

"May I offer you all an infusion of Gurdyroots?" said Xenophilius. "We make it ourselves." As he started to pour out the infusion, he said, "Luna is down beyond Bottom Bridge, she is most excited that you are here. She ought not to be too long, she has come down and help yourselves to sugar."

"Now," he removed a tottering pile of papers from an armchair and sat down, his Wellingtoned legs crossed, "how may I be of service?"

"Well," said Harry, glancing at Hermione, who nodded encouragingly, "it's about that symbol you were wearing around your neck. What does it mean?"

Xenophilius raised his eyebrows.

"Are you referring to the sign of the Deathly Hallows?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE TALE OF THE THREE BROTHERS

Harry turned to look at Ron and Hermione. Neither of them seemed to have understood what Xenophilius had said about "The Deathly Hallows?"

"That's right," said Xenophilius. "You haven't heard of them? I'm not surprised. Very, very few wizards believe. Witness my friend here," he nodded at Ron, "who attacked me for sporting the symbol of a well-known Dark wizard! Such ignorance. There is no need to be afraid. I simply uses the symbol to reveal oneself to other believers, in the hope that they might help one with the Quest."

He stirred several lumps of sugar into his Gurdyroot infusion and drank some.

"I'm sorry," said Harry. "I still don't really understand."

To be polite, he took a sip from his cup too, and almost gagged: The stuff was quite disgusting, as though someone had poured sugar into a bucket of mud.

"Well, you see, believers seek the Deathly Hallows," said Xenophilius, smacking his lips in apparent appreciation of the taste.

"But what are the Deathly Hallows?" asked Hermione.

Xenophilius set aside his empty teacup.

"I assume that you are all familiar with 'The Tale of the Three Brothers'?"

Harry said, "No," but Ron and Hermione both said, "Yes." Xenophilius nodded gravely.

"Well, well, Mr. Potter, the whole thing starts with 'The Tale of the Three Brothers' . . . I have a copy somewhere. . . ."

He glanced vaguely around the room, at the piles of parchment and books, but Hermione said, "I've got a copy, Mr. Lestrange." And she pulled out The Tales of Beedle the Bard from the small, beaded bag.

"The original?" inquired Xenophilius sharply, and when she nodded, he said, "Well then, why don't you read it aloud?"

"Er . . . all right," said Hermione nervously. She opened the book, and Harry saw that the symbol they were investigating was the same as the one on the book cover. He began to read.

"There were once three brothers who were traveling along a lonely, winding road at twilight —"

"Midnight, our mum always told us," said Ron, who had stretched out, arms behind his head, to listen. Hermione shook her head.

"Sorry, I just think it's a bit spookier if it's midnight!" said Ron.

"Yeah, because we really need a bit more fear in our lives," said Harry before he could stop himself. Xenophilius did not seem to mind. He looked out the window at the sky. "Go on, Hermione."

"In time, the brothers reached a river too deep to wade through and too dangerous to swim across. However, these three brothers were not deterred. They took out their wands and made a bridge appear across the treacherous water. They were halfway across it when they found a boatman waiting for them."

"And Death spoke to them —"

"Sorry," interjected Harry, "but Death spoke to them?"

"It's a fairy tale, Harry!"

"Right, sorry. Go on."

"And Death spoke to them. He was angry that he had been cheated out of three new victims, for travelers usually dr

ulate the three brothers upon their magic, and said that each had earned a prize for having been clever enough to e

"So the oldest brother, who was a combative man, asked for a wand more powerful than any in existence: a wand th

o had conquered Death! So Death crossed to an elder tree on the banks of the river, fashioned a wand from a branc

"Then the second brother, who was an arrogant man, decided that he wanted to humiliate Death still further, and as

a stone from the riverbank and gave it to the second brother, and told him that the stone would have the power to b

"And then Death asked the third and youngest brother what he would like. The youngest brother was the humblest.

e asked for something that would enable him to go forth from that place without being followed by Death. And Deat

"Death's got an Invisibility Cloak?" Harry interrupted again.

"So he can sneak up on people," said Ron. "Sometimes he gets bored of running at them, flapping his arms and shri

"Then Death stood aside and allowed the three brothers to continue on their way, and they did so, talking with won

"In due course the brothers separated, each for his own destination.

"The first brother traveled on for a week or more, and reaching a distant village, sought out a fellow wizard with who

on, he could not fail to win the duel that followed. Leaving his enemy dead upon the floor, the oldest brother procee

ad snatched from Death himself, and of how it made him invincible.

"That very night, another wizard crept upon the oldest brother as he lay, wine-sodden, upon his bed. The thief took

.
"And so Death took the first brother for his own.

"Meanwhile, the second brother journeyed to his own home, where he lived alone. Here he took out the stone that l

To his amazement and his delight, the figure of the girl he had once hoped to marry, before her untimely death, app

"Yet she was sad and cold, separated from him as by a veil. Though she had returned to the mortal world, she did n

iven mad with hopeless longing, killed himself so as truly to join her.

"And so Death took the second brother for his own.

"But though Death searched for the third brother for many years, he was never able to find him. It was only when he

off the Cloak of Invisibility and gave it to his son. And then he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him glac

Hermione closed the book. It was a moment or two before Xenophilius seemed to realize that she had stopped read

you are."

"Sorry?" said Hermione, sounding confused.

"Those are the Deathly Hallows," said Xenophilius.

He picked up a quill from a packed table at his elbow, and pulled a torn piece of parchment from between more boo

"The Elder Wand," he said, and he drew a straight vertical line upon the parchment. "The Resurrection Stone," he said

bility," he finished, enclosing both line and circle in a triangle, to make the symbol that so intrigued Hermione. "Toget

"But there's no mention of the words 'Deathly Hallows' in the story," said Hermione.

"Well, of course not," said Xenophilius, maddeningly smug. "That is a children's tale, told to amuse rather than to inst

gnize that the ancient story refers to three objects, or Hallows, which, if united, will make the possessor master of De

There was a short silence in which Xenophilius glanced out of the window. Already the sun was low in the sky.

"Luna ought to have enough Plimpies soon," he said quietly.

"When you say 'master of Death' —" said Ron.

"Master," said Xenophilius, waving an airy hand. "Conqueror. Vanquisher. Whichever term you prefer."

"But then . . . do you mean . . ." said Hermione slowly, and Harry could tell that she was trying to keep any trace of sk

these Hallows — actually exist?"

Xenophilius raised his eyebrows again.

"Well, of course."

"But," said Hermione, and Harry could hear her restraint starting to crack, "Mr. Lovegood, how can you possibly belie

"Luna has told me all about you, young lady," said Xenophilius. "You are, I gather, not unintelligent, but painfully limit

"Perhaps you ought to try on the hat, Hermione," said Ron, nodding toward the ludicrous headdress. His voice shook

"Mr. Lovegood," Hermione began again. "We all know that there are such things as Invisibility Cloaks. They are rare, b

"Ah, but the Third Hallow is a true Cloak of Invisibility, Miss Granger! I mean to say, it is not a traveling cloak imbued v

, or else woven from Demiguise hair, which will hide one initially but fade with the years until it turns opaque. We are

er completely invisible, and endures eternally, giving constant and impenetrable concealment, no matter what spells

s Granger?"

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, then closed it again, looking more confused than ever. She, Harry, and Ron

e same thing. It so happened that a cloak exactly like the one Xenophilius had just described was in the room with th

"Exactly," said Xenophilius, as if he had defeated them all in reasoned argument. "None of you have ever seen such a

He glanced out of the window again. The sky was now tinged with the faintest trace of pink.

"All right," said Hermione, disconcerted. "Say the Cloak existed . . . what about the stone, Mr. Lovegood? The thing yo

"What of it?"

"Well, how can that be real?"

"Prove that it is not," said Xenophilius.

Hermione looked outraged.

"But that's — I'm sorry, but that's completely ridiculous! How can I possibly prove it doesn't exist? Do you expect me to? I mean, you could claim that anything's real if the only basis for believing in it is that nobody's proved it doesn't exist."

"Yes, you could," said Xenophilius. "I am glad to see that you are opening your mind a little."

"So the Elder Wand," said Harry quickly, before Hermione could retort, "you think that exists too?"

"Oh, well, in that case there is endless evidence," said Xenophilius. "The Elder Wand is the Hallow that is most easily traced."

"Which is what?" asked Harry.

"Which is that the possessor of the wand must capture it from its previous owner, if he is to be truly master of it," said Xenophilius. "It was the wand that took me to Egbert the Egregious, after his slaughter of Emeric the Evil? Of how Godelot died in his own cellar after his son took the wand from Barnabas Deverill, whom he had killed? The bloody trail of the Elder Wand is splattered across the centuries." Harry glanced at Hermione. She was frowning at Xenophilius, but she did not contradict him.

"So where do you think the Elder Wand is now?" asked Ron.

"Alas, who knows?" said Xenophilius, as he gazed out of the window. "Who knows where the Elder Wand lies hidden? Who really defeated Loxias, and which took the wand? And who can say who may have defeated them? History, alas, does not tell us. There was a pause. Finally Hermione asked stiffly, "Mr. Lovegood, does the Peverell family have anything to do with this?" Xenophilius looked taken aback as something shifted in Harry's memory, but he could not locate it. Peverell . . . he had heard the name before.

"But you have been misleading me, young woman!" said Xenophilius, now sitting up much straighter in his chair and looking at her with a stern expression.

"Many of us Questers believe that the Peverells have everything — everything! — to do with the Hallows!"

"Who are the Peverells?" asked Ron.

"That was the name on the grave with the mark on it, in Godric's Hollow," said Hermione, still watching Xenophilius.

"Exactly!" said Xenophilius, his forefinger raised pedantically. "The sign of the Deathly Hallows on Ignotus's grave is carved in the shape of a Y." Xenophilius looked at her with a stern expression.

"Of what?" asked Ron.

"Why, that the three brothers in the story were actually the three Peverell brothers, Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignotus! The story says that Antioch was killed by a dragon, Cadmus by a giant, and Ignotus by a troll. With another glance at the window he got to his feet, picked up the tray, and headed for the spiral staircase.

"You will stay for dinner?" he called, as he vanished downstairs again. "Everybody always requests our recipe for Fresh-Fruit Fool." Xenophilius looked at her with a stern expression.

"Probably to show the Poisoning Department at St. Mungo's," said Ron under his breath.

Harry waited until they could hear Xenophilius moving about in the kitchen downstairs before speaking.

"What do you think?" he asked Hermione.

"Oh, Harry," she said wearily, "it's a pile of utter rubbish. This can't be what the sign really means. This must just be his way of saying that the Peverells are the ones who really have the Hallows."

"I s'pose this is the man who brought us Crumple-Horned Snorkacks," said Ron.

"You don't believe it either?" Harry asked him.

"Nah, that story's just one of those things you tell kids to teach them lessons, isn't it? 'Don't go looking for trouble, do as you're told, and you'll be okay.' Come to think of it," Ron admitted, "I've heard that story a lot. It's the best left alone! Just keep your head down, mind your own business, and you'll be okay." Xenophilius looked at her with a stern expression.

"What are you talking about?"

"One of those superstitions, isn't it? 'May-born witches will marry Muggles.' 'Jinx by twilight, undone by midnight.' 'Witches are full of them.'"

"Harry and I were raised by Muggles," Hermione reminded him. "We were taught different superstitions." She sighed. "The one good thing about her exasperation with Xenophilius was that it seemed to have made her forget that she was another victim of the same old tale, it's obvious which gift is best, which one you'd choose —"

The three of them spoke at the same time; Hermione said, "the Cloak," Ron said, "the wand," and Harry said, "the stone." They looked at each other, half surprised, half amused.

"You're supposed to say the Cloak," Ron told Hermione, "but you wouldn't need to be invisible if you had the wand. A wand can do anything."

"We've already got an Invisibility Cloak," said Harry.

"And it's helped us rather a lot, in case you hadn't noticed!" said Hermione. "Whereas the wand would be bound to do anything."

"Only if you shouted about it," argued Ron. "Only if you were prat enough to go dancing around, waving it over your head. It's not like the stone, which you can use if you think you're hard enough." As long as you kept your trap shut —

"Yes, but could you keep your trap shut?" said Hermione, looking skeptical. "You know, the only true thing he said to me was that the Peverells have everything — everything! — to do with the Hallows." Xenophilius looked at her with a stern expression.

"There have?" asked Harry.

Hermione looked exasperated: The expression was so endearingly familiar that Harry and Ron grinned at each other. "The Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny, they crop up under different names through the centuries, usually in the possession of the same family. The Peverells mentioned some of them, but — oh, it's all nonsense. Wands are only as powerful as the wizards who use them. The stone is a completely different matter, it's a completely different thing, it's a completely different power, it's a completely different people's."

"But how do you know," said Harry, "that those wands — the Deathstick and the Wand of Destiny — aren't the same thing?"

"What, and they're all really the Elder Wand, made by Death?" said Ron.

Harry laughed: The strange idea that had occurred to him was, after all, ridiculous. His wand, he reminded himself, had done nothing that night Voldemort had pursued him across the skies. And if it had been unbeatable, how could it have been destroyed? Xenophilius looked at her with a stern expression.

"So why would you take the stone?" Ron asked him.

"Well, if you could bring people back, we could have Sirius . . . Mad-Eye . . . Dumbledore . . . my parents. . . ."

Neither Ron nor Hermione smiled.

"But according to Beedle the Bard, they wouldn't want to come back, would they?" said Harry, thinking about the tales of the other stories about a stone that can raise the dead, have there?" he asked Hermione.

"No," she replied sadly. "I don't think anyone except Mr. Lovegood could kid themselves that's possible. Beedle probably had a stone to make you immortal, a stone to reverse death."

The smell from the kitchen was getting stronger: It was something like burning underpants. Harry wondered whether he should go to spare his feelings.

"What about the Cloak, though?" said Ron slowly. "Don't you realize, he's right? I've got so used to Harry's Cloak and his invisibility like Harry's. It's infallible. We've never been spotted under it —"

"Of course not — we're invisible when we're under it, Ron!"

"But all the stuff he said about other cloaks, and they're not exactly ten a Knut, you know, is true! It's never occurred to me that cloaks when they get old, or them being ripped apart by spells so they've got holes in. Harry's was owned by his dad."

"Yes, all right, but Ron, the stone . . ."

As they argued in whispers, Harry moved around the room, only half listening. Reaching the spiral stair, he raised his head. His own face was looking back at him from the ceiling of the room above.

After a moment's bewilderment, he realized that it was not a mirror, but a painting. Curious, he began to climb the stairs.

"Harry, what are you doing? I don't think you should look around when he's not here!"

But Harry had already reached the next level.

Luna had decorated her bedroom ceiling with five beautifully painted faces: Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville. They all looked like they were there was a certain magic about them all the same: Harry thought they breathed. What appeared to be fine golden chains hanging them for a minute or so, Harry realized that the chains were actually one word, repeated a thousand times in gold. Harry felt a great rush of affection for Luna. He looked around the room. There was a large photograph beside the bed of her hugging. Luna looked rather better-groomed in this picture than Harry had ever seen her in life. The picture was dusty. Something was wrong. The pale blue carpet was also thick with dust. There were no clothes in the wardrobe, whose door had not been slept in for weeks. A single cobweb stretched over the nearest window, across a bloodred sky.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked as Harry descended the staircase, but before he could respond, Xenophilius Lovegood reached them with bowls.

"Mr. Lovegood," said Harry. "Where's Luna?"

"Excuse me?"

"Where's Luna?"

Xenophilius halted on the top step.

"I — I've already told you. She is down at Bottom Bridge, fishing for Plimpies."

"So why have you only laid that tray for four?"

Xenophilius tried to speak, but no sound came out. The only noise was the continued chugging of the printing press.

"I don't think Luna's been here for weeks," said Harry. "Her clothes are gone, her bed hasn't been slept in. Where is she?"

Xenophilius dropped the tray: The bowls bounced and smashed. Harry, Ron, and Hermione drew their wands: Xenophilius's printing press gave a huge bang and numerous Quibblers came streaming across the floor from underneath the table. Hermione stooped down and picked up one of the magazines, her wand still pointing at Mr. Lovegood.

"Harry, look at this."

He strode over to her as quickly as he could through all the clutter. The front of The Quibbler carried his own picture, and it was paid with the reward money.

"The Quibbler's going for a new angle, then?" Harry asked coldly, his mind working very fast. "Is that what you were doing when you took me to the Ministry?"

Xenophilius licked his lips.

"They took my Luna," he whispered. "Because of what I've been writing. They took my Luna and I don't know where she is. If I — if I —"

"Hand over Harry?" Hermione finished for him.

"No deal," said Ron flatly. "Get out of the way, we're leaving."

Xenophilius looked ghastly, a century old, his lips drawn back into a dreadful leer.

"They will be here at any moment. I must save Luna. I cannot lose Luna. You must not leave."

He spread his arms in front of the staircase, and Harry had a sudden vision of his mother doing the same thing in front of the Ministry.

"Don't make us hurt you," Harry said. "Get out of the way, Mr. Lovegood."

"HARRY!" Hermione screamed.

Figures on broomsticks were flying past the windows. As the three of them looked away from him, Xenophilius drew his wand, turned himself sideways, shoving Ron and Hermione out of harm's way as Xenophilius's Stunning Spell soared across the room. There was a colossal explosion. The sound of it seemed to blow the room apart: Fragments of wood and paper and ink and black white dust. Harry flew through the air, then crashed to the floor, unable to see as debris rained upon him, his arms and legs hitting a series of sickening metallic thuds, which told him that Xenophilius had been blasted off his feet and fallen backward. Half buried in rubble, Harry tried to raise himself: He could barely breathe or see for dust. Half of the ceiling had fallen.

le. The bust of Rowena Ravenclaw lay beside him with half its face missing, fragments of torn parchment were floating in the air, blocking the top of the staircase to the kitchen. Then another white shape moved close by, and Hermione, coated in white powder, The door downstairs crashed open.

"Didn't I tell you there was no need to hurry, Travers?" said a rough voice. "Didn't I tell you this nutter was just raving? There was a bang and a scream of pain from Xenophilius.

"No . . . no . . . upstairs . . . Potter!"

"I told you last week, Lovegood, we weren't coming back for anything less than some solid information! Remember last week's address? And the week before" — another bang, another squeal — "when you thought we'd give her back if you could. What's the matter, no racks?"

"No — no — I beg you!" sobbed Xenophilius. "It really is Potter! Really!"

"And now it turns out you only called us here to try and blow us up!" roared the Death Eater, and there was a volley of curses.

"The place looks like it's about to fall in, Selwyn," said a cool second voice, echoing up the mangled staircase. "The stairs are falling the place down."

"You lying piece of filth," shouted the wizard named Selwyn. "You've never seen Potter in your life, have you? Though you tried to get your girl back like this?"

"I swear . . . I swear . . . Potter's upstairs!"

"Homenum revelio," said the voice at the foot of the stairs.

Harry heard Hermione gasp, and he had the odd sensation that something was swooping low over him, immersing him in a cold light.

"There's someone up there all right, Selwyn," said the second man sharply.

"It's Potter, I tell you, it's Potter!" sobbed Xenophilius. "Please . . . please . . . give me Luna, just let me have Luna. . . ."

"You can have your little girl, Lovegood," said Selwyn, "if you get up those stairs and bring me down Harry Potter. But if you're waiting up there to ambush us, we'll see if we can spare a bit of your daughter for you to bury."

Xenophilius gave a wail of fear and despair. There were scurryings and scrapings: Xenophilius was trying to get through the door.

"Come on," Harry whispered, "we've got to get out of here."

He started to dig himself out under cover of all the noise Xenophilius was making on the staircase. Ron was buried deep under all the wreckage to where he lay, trying to prise a heavy chest of drawers off his legs. While Xenophilius's banging and shouting continued, Ron with the use of a Hover Charm.

"All right," breathed Hermione, as the broken printing press blocking the top of the stairs began to tremble; Xenophilius was shouting, "you trust me, Harry?"

Harry nodded.

"Okay then," Hermione whispered, "give me the Invisibility Cloak. Ron, you're going to put it on."

"Me? But Harry —"

"Please, Ron! Harry, hold on tight to my hand, Ron, grab my shoulder."

Harry held out his left hand. Ron vanished beneath the Cloak. The printing press blocking the stairs was vibrating; Xenophilius was shouting, "I don't know what Hermione was waiting for."

"Hold tight," she whispered. "Hold tight . . . any second . . ."

Xenophilius's paper-white face appeared over the top of the sideboard.

"Obliviate!" cried Hermione, pointing her wand first into his face, then at the floor beneath them. "Deprimo!"

She had blasted a hole in the sitting room floor. They fell like boulders, Harry still holding onto her hand for dear life. They were trying to get out of the way as vast quantities of rubble and broken furniture rained all around them from the shattered ceiling. The collapsing house rang in Harry's ears as she dragged him once more into darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE DEATHLY HALLOWS

Harry fell, panting, onto grass and scrambled up at once. They seemed to have landed in the corner of a field at dusk. He picked up his wand.

"Protego Totalum . . . Salvio Hexia . . ."

"That treacherous old bleeder!" Ron panted, emerging from beneath the Invisibility Cloak and throwing it to Harry. "He's out of that!"

"Cave Inimicum . . . Didn't I say it was an Erumpent horn, didn't I tell him? And now his house has been blown apart!"

"Serves him right," said Ron, examining his torn jeans and the cuts to his legs. "What d'you reckon they'll do to him?"

"Oh, I hope they don't kill him!" groaned Hermione. "That's why I wanted the Death Eaters to get a glimpse of Harry before they killed him."

"Why hide me, though?" asked Ron.

"You're supposed to be in bed with spattergroit, Ron! They've kidnapped Luna because her father supported Harry! Voldermort!"

"But what about your mum and dad?"

"They're in Australia," said Hermione. "They should be all right. They don't know anything."

"You're a genius," Ron repeated, looking awed.

"Yeah, you are, Hermione," agreed Harry fervently. "I don't know what we'd do without you."

She beamed, but became solemn at once.

"What about Luna?"

"Well, if they're telling the truth and she's still alive —" began Ron.

"Don't say that, don't say it!" squealed Hermione. "She must be alive, she must!"

"Then she'll be in Azkaban, I expect," said Ron. "Whether she survives the place, though . . . Loads don't. . ."

"She will," said Harry. He could not bear to contemplate the alternative. "She's tough, Luna, much tougher than you'd think, and Nargles."

"I hope you're right," said Hermione. She passed a hand over her eyes. "I'd feel so sorry for Xenophilius if —"

"— if he hadn't just tried to sell us to the Death Eaters, yeah," said Ron.

They put up the tent and retreated inside it, where Ron made them tea. After their narrow escape, the chilly, musty darkness of the tent was a relief.

"Oh, why did we go there?" groaned Hermione after a few minutes' silence. "Harry, you were right, it was Godric's Hollow. . . such rubbish . . . although actually," a sudden thought seemed to have struck her, "he might have made it all up to get us out of the castle. . . He was just trying to keep us talking until the Death Eaters arrived!"

"I don't think so," said Ron. "It's a damn sight harder making stuff up when you're under stress than you'd think. I found it easier to pretend to be Stan, because I knew a bit about him, than inventing a whole new person. Old Lovegood was under a lot of pressure. . . He might have been telling us the truth, or what he thinks is the truth, just to keep us talking."

"Well, I don't suppose it matters," sighed Hermione. "Even if he was being honest, I never heard such a lot of nonsense."

"Hang on, though," said Ron. "The Chamber of Secrets was supposed to be a myth, wasn't it?"

"But the Deathly Hallows can't exist, Ron!"

"You keep saying that, but one of them can," said Ron. "Harry's Invisibility Cloak —"

"The Tale of the Three Brothers' is a story," said Hermione firmly. "A story about how humans are frightened of death. . . The Cloak, we'd have everything we need already!"

"I don't know. We could do with an unbeatable wand," said Harry, turning the blackthorn wand he so disliked over in his hand.

"There's no such thing, Harry!"

"You said there have been loads of wands — the Deathstick and whatever they were called —"

"All right, even if you want to kid yourself the Elder Wand's real, what about the Resurrection Stone?" Her fingers sketched a circle in the air. "No magic can raise the dead, and that's that!"

"When my wand connected with You-Know-Who's, it made my mum and dad appear . . . and Cedric . . ."

"But they weren't really back from the dead, were they?" said Hermione. "Those kinds of — of pale imitations aren't the same."

"But she, the girl in the tale, didn't really come back, did she? The story says that once people are dead, they belong to the dead. . . He even lived with her for a while. . ."

He saw concern and something less easily definable in Hermione's expression. Then, as she glanced at Ron, Harry remembered the look on her face when she talked about the dead.

"So that Peverell bloke who's buried in Godric's Hollow," he said hastily, trying to sound robustly sane, "you don't know who he is, do you?"

"No," she replied, looking relieved at the change of subject. "I looked him up after I saw the mark on his grave; if he'd been in one of our books. The only place I've managed to find the name 'Peverell' is Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy. . . He said his eyebrows. 'It lists the pure-blood families that are now extinct in the male line. Apparently the Peverells were extinct in the male line' —"

"Extinct in the male line?" repeated Ron.

"It means the name's died out," said Hermione, "centuries ago, in the case of the Peverells. They could still have descended from him. . . And then it came to Harry in one shining piece, the memory that had stirred at the sound of the name 'Peverell': a family name, official, and he cried aloud, 'Marvolo Gaunt!'"

"Sorry?" said Ron and Hermione together.

"Marvolo Gaunt! You-Know-Who's grandfather! In the Pensieve! With Dumbledore! Marvolo Gaunt said he was descended from him. . . Ron and Hermione looked bewildered."

"The ring, the ring that became the Horcrux, Marvolo Gaunt said it had the Peverell coat of arms on it! I saw him wave it up his nose!"

"The Peverell coat of arms?" said Hermione sharply. "Could you see what it looked like?"

"Not really," said Harry, trying to remember. "There was nothing fancy on there, as far as I could see; maybe a few scratches. . . It was cracked open."

Harry saw Hermione's comprehension in the sudden widening of her eyes. Ron was looking from one to the other, as if he didn't know what to say. "Blimey . . . You reckon it was this sign again? The sign of the Hallows?"

"Why not?" said Harry excitedly. "Marvolo Gaunt was an ignorant old git who lived like a pig, all he cared about was his own family. . . He might not have known what it really was. There were no books in that house, and trust me, he wasn't the type to read. . . The scratches on the stone were a coat of arms, because as far as he was concerned, having pure blood made you practical. . ."

"Yes . . . and that's all very interesting," said Hermione cautiously, "but Harry, if you're thinking what I think you're thinking, it's not the Hallows. . ."

"Well, why not? Why not?" said Harry, abandoning caution. "It was a stone, wasn't it?" He looked at Ron for support. "It was a stone, wasn't it?"

Ron's mouth fell open. "Blimey — but would it still work if Dumbledore broke — ?"

"Work? Work? Ron, it never worked! There's no such thing as a Resurrection Stone!"

Hermione had leapt to her feet, looking exasperated and angry. "Harry, you're trying to fit everything into the Hallows. . ."

"Fit everything in?" he repeated. "Hermione, it fits of its own accord! I know the sign of the Deathly Hallows was on the stone. . ."

"A minute ago you told us you never saw the mark on the stone properly!"

"Where d'you reckon the ring is now?" Ron asked Harry. "What did Dumbledore do with it after he broke it open?" But Harry's imagination was racing ahead, far beyond Ron and Hermione's. . . . Three objects, or Hallows, which, if united, will make the possessor master of Death . . . Master . . . Conqueror . . . Vanquisher. . . .

And he saw himself, possessor of the Hallows, facing Voldemort, whose Horcruxes were no match . . . Neither can live without the other? Was there a way, after all, to ensure that he was the one who triumphed? If he were the master of the Hallows, would he be able to defeat Voldemort? "Harry?"

But he scarcely heard Hermione: He had pulled out his Invisibility Cloak and was running it through his fingers, the cloth so soft and warm. He had found it to equal it in his nearly seven years in the Wizarding world. The Cloak was exactly what Xenophilius had described: A magic that could not be detected, impenetrable concealment, no matter what spells are cast at it. . . . And then, with a gasp, he remembered —

"Dumbledore had my Cloak the night my parents died!"

His voice shook and he could feel the color in his face, but he did not care.

"My mum told Sirius that Dumbledore borrowed the Cloak! This is why! He wanted to examine it, because he thought it was a powerful magic. . . ." Harry was walking blindly around the tent, feeling as though great new vistas of truth were opening all around him. "It all makes sense!"

He felt armed in certainty, in his belief in the Hallows, as if the mere idea of possessing them was giving him protection. "Harry," said Hermione again, but he was busy undoing the pouch around his neck, his fingers shaking hard.

"Read it," he told her, pushing his mother's letter into her hand. "Read it! Dumbledore had the Cloak, Hermione! Why didn't he tell us? He had a Disillusionment Charm so powerful that he made himself completely invisible without one!"

Something fell to the floor and rolled, glittering, under a chair: He had dislodged the Snitch when he pulled out the letter. The discovery threw him another gift, and shock and wonder erupted inside him so that he shouted out. "IT'S IN HERE! He left me the ring — it's in the Snitch!"

"You — you reckon?"

He could not understand why Ron looked taken aback. It was so obvious, so clear to Harry: Everything fit, everything made sense. To open the Snitch he would have the second, and then all he needed to do was find the first Hallow, the Elder Wand. But it was as though a curtain fell on a lit stage: All his excitement, all his hope and happiness were extinguished at a stroke. His spell was broken.

"That's what he's after."

The change in his voice made Ron and Hermione look even more scared.

"You-Know-Who's after the Elder Wand."

He turned his back on their strained, incredulous faces. He knew it was the truth. It all made sense. Voldemort was not a Muggle. He was a wizard. And indeed. Harry walked to the entrance of the tent, forgetting about Ron and Hermione as he looked out into the night. Voldemort had been raised in a Muggle orphanage. Nobody could have told him The Tales of Beedle the Bard when he was a child. He believed in the Deathly Hallows. Was it likely that Voldemort knew about them?

Harry gazed into the darkness. . . . If Voldemort had known about the Deathly Hallows, surely he would have sought them. He would have been the possessor master of Death? If he had known about the Deathly Hallows, he might not have needed Horcruxes in the first place. He might have turned it into a Horcrux, demonstrate that he did not know this last great Wizarding secret?

Which meant that Voldemort sought the Elder Wand without realizing its full power, without understanding that it was the most powerful wand ever hidden, whose existence was best known. . . . The bloody trail of the Elder Wand is splattered across the pages of Wands: The Elder Wand, the most powerful wand in the world. Harry watched the cloudy sky, curves of smoke-gray and silver sliding over the face of the white moon. He felt lighter, freer. He turned back into the tent. It was a shock to see Ron and Hermione standing exactly where he had left them, Hermione looking at him anxiously. Didn't they realize how far they had traveled in the last few minutes?

"This is it," Harry said, trying to bring them inside the glow of his own astonished certainty. "This explains everything. The Hallows. The Elder Wand. The Deathly Hallows. It all fits. —"

He held up the Snitch. "— and You-Know-Who's chasing the third, but he doesn't realize . . . he just thinks it's a powerful wand —"

"Harry," said Hermione, moving across to him and handing him back Lily's letter, "I'm sorry, but I think you've got this wrong. —"

"But don't you see? It all fits —"

"No, it doesn't," she said. "It doesn't, Harry, you're just getting carried away. Please," she said as he started to speak, "stop. The Hallows existed, and Dumbledore knew about them, knew that the person who possessed all three of them would be master of them. He had his answer ready."

"But you said it, Hermione! You've got to find out about them for yourself! It's a Quest!"

"But I only said that to try and persuade you to come to the Lovegoods!" cried Hermione in exasperation. "I didn't realize you were so determined. Harry took no notice."

"Dumbledore usually let me find out stuff for myself. He let me try my strength, take risks. This feels like the kind of thing I need. —"

"Harry, this isn't a game, this isn't practice! This is the real thing, and Dumbledore left you very clear instructions: Find the Hallows, forget the Deathly Hallows, we can't afford to get sidetracked —"

Harry was barely listening to her. He was turning the Snitch over and over in his hands, half expecting it to break open and reveal the truth. He was right, that the Deathly Hallows were real.

She appealed to Ron.

"You don't believe in this, do you?"

Harry looked up. Ron hesitated.

"I dunno . . . I mean . . . bits of it sort of fit together," said Ron awkwardly. "But when you look at the whole thing . . ." rid of Horcruxes, Harry. That's what Dumbledore told us to do. Maybe . . . maybe we should forget about this Halloween. "Thank you, Ron," said Hermione. "I'll take first watch."

And she strode past Harry and sat down in the tent entrance, bringing the action to a fierce full stop.

But Harry hardly slept that night. The idea of the Deathly Hallows had taken possession of him, and he could not resist the stone, and the Cloak, if he could just possess them all. . . .

He opened at the close. . . . But what was 'the close'? Why couldn't he have the stone now? If only he had the stone, he could have murmured words to the Snitch in the darkness, trying everything, even Parseltongue, but the golden ball would not come. And the wand, the Elder Wand, where was that hidden? Where was Voldemort searching now? Harry wished his scar would ache ever, he and Voldemort were united in wanting the very same thing. . . . Hermione would not like that idea, of course. Even right, in a way . . . Limited. Narrow. Close-minded. The truth was that she was scared of the idea of the Deathly Hallows. He pressed his mouth again to the Snitch, kissing it, nearly swallowing it, but the cold metal did not yield. . . .

It was nearly dawn when he remembered Luna, alone in a cell in Azkaban, surrounded by dementors, and he suddenly had a morbid contemplation of the Hallows. If only they could rescue her; but dementors in those numbers would be virtually unstoppable. He was casting a Patronus with the blackthorn wand. . . . He must try that in the morning. . . .

If only there was a way of getting a better wand . . .

And desire for the Elder Wand, the Deathstick, unbeatable, invincible, swallowed him once more. . . .

They packed up the tent next morning and moved on through a dreary shower of rain. The downpour pursued them through the whole week, through sodden landscapes that Harry found bleak and depressing. He could think only of the future, of nothing, not Hermione's flat disbelief nor Ron's persistent doubts, could extinguish. And yet the fiercer the longing, the more determined he was. He blamed Ron and Hermione: Their determined indifference was as bad as the relentless rain for dampening his hope. Harry's belief in and longing for the Hallows consumed him so much that he felt quite isolated from the other two. "Obsession?" said Hermione in a low fierce voice, when Harry was careless enough to use the word one evening, after they had found the three Horcruxes. "We're not the ones with an obsession, Harry! We're the ones trying to do what Dumbledore wanted us to do. But he was impervious to the veiled criticism. Dumbledore had left the sign of the Hallows for Hermione to decipher. The resurrection stone hidden in the golden Snitch. Neither can live while the other survives . . . master of Death . . . Why didn't you try?" "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death," Harry quoted calmly.

"I thought it was You-Know-Who we were supposed to be fighting?" Hermione retorted, and Harry gave up on her. Even the mystery of the silver doe, which the other two insisted on discussing, seemed less important to Harry now, and to him was that his scar had begun to prickle again, although he did all he could to hide this fact from the other two. He was troubled by what he saw. The visions he and Voldemort were sharing had changed in quality; they had become blurred, so that he was unable to make out the indistinct features of an object that looked like a skull, and something like a mountain that was not a mountain. Harry was disconcerted by the change. He was worried that the connection between himself and Voldemort had become weaker, and Hermione, prized. Somehow Harry connected these unsatisfying, vague images with the destruction of his wand, as if it were Voldemort's mind as well as before.

As the weeks crept on, Harry could not help but notice, even through his new self-absorption, that Ron seemed to be losing interest in the quest, having walked out on them, perhaps because Harry's descent into listlessness galvanized his dormant leadership qualities into action.

"Three Horcruxes left," he kept saying. "We need a plan of action, come on! Where haven't we looked? Let's go through Diagon Alley, Hogwarts, the Riddle House, Borgin and Burkes, Albania, every place that they knew Tom Riddle had ever been. But when they found them again, Harry joining in only to stop Hermione pestering him. He would have been happy to sit alone in silence. He wanted the Elder Wand, but Ron insisted on journeying to ever more unlikely places simply, Harry was aware, to keep them moving. "You never know," was Ron's constant refrain. "Upper Flagley is a Wizarding village, he might've wanted to live there. These frequent forays into Wizarding territory brought them within occasional sight of Snatchers.

"Some of them are supposed to be as bad as Death Eaters," said Ron. "The lot that got me were a bit pathetic, but Bill was a bit of a watch —"

"On what?" said Harry.

"Potterwatch, didn't I tell you that's what it was called? The program I keep trying to get on the radio, the only one that the Ministry is following You-Know-Who's line, all except Potterwatch. I really want you to hear it, but it's tricky tuning in. Ron spent evening after evening using his wand to beat out various rhythms on top of the wireless while the dials whirled. He treated dragon pox, and once a few bars of "A Cauldron Full of Hot Strong Love." While he tapped, Ron continued to try to get the dials under his breath.

"They're normally something to do with the Order," he told them. "Bill had a real knack for guessing them. I'm bound to be wrong. But not until March did luck favor Ron at last. Harry was sitting in the tent entrance, on guard duty, staring idly at a clock on the chilly ground, when Ron shouted excitedly from inside the tent.

"I've got it, I've got it! Password was 'Albus!' Get in here, Harry!"

Roused for the first time in days from his contemplation of the Deathly Hallows, Harry hurried back inside the tent to

radio. Hermione, who had been polishing the sword of Gryffindor just for something to do, was sitting open-mouthed, not even issuing.

"... apologize for our temporary absence from the airwaves, which was due to a number of house calls in our area but we're back now."

"But that's Lee Jordan!" said Hermione.

"I know!" beamed Ron. "Cool, eh?"

"... now found ourselves another secure location," Lee was saying, "and I'm pleased to tell you that two of our regular contributors are back on the air!"

"Hi."

"Evening, River."

"River," that's Lee," Ron explained. "They've all got code names, but you can usually tell —"

"Shh!" said Hermione.

"But before we hear from Royal and Romulus," Lee went on, "let's take a moment to report those deaths that the Wizarding World has not had time enough to mention. It is with great regret that we inform our listeners of the murders of Ted Tonks and Dirk Cresswell. Harry felt a sick, swooping in his belly. He, Ron, and Hermione gazed at one another in horror.

"A goblin by the name of Gornuk was also killed. It is believed that Muggle-born Dean Thomas and a second goblin, known as Gornuk, may have escaped. If Dean is listening, or if anyone has any knowledge of his whereabouts, his parents and sisters would be most grateful to hear from him. He is a very brave and loyal person."

"Meanwhile, in Gaddley, a Muggle family of five has been found dead in their home. Muggle authorities are attributing the deaths to a mysterious illness. We can only hope that the Ministry of Magic will soon be able to inform us that it was the Killing Curse — more evidence, as if it were needed, of the fact that Muggle slaughter is a necessary part of the new regime."

"Finally, we regret to inform our listeners that the remains of Bathilda Bagshot have been discovered in Godric's Hollow. The Phoenix informs us that her body showed unmistakable signs of injuries inflicted by Dark Magic."

"Listeners, I'd like to invite you now to join us in a minute's silence in memory of Ted Tonks, Dirk Cresswell, Bathilda Bagshot, and the other innocent people murdered by the Death Eaters."

Silence fell, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione did not speak. Half of Harry yearned to hear more, half of him was afraid to hear more. He was disconnected to the outside world for a long time.

"Thank you," said Lee's voice. "And now we turn to regular contributor Royal, for an update on how the new Wizarding World is doing."

"Thanks, River," said an unmistakable voice, deep, measured, reassuring.

"Kingsley!" burst out Ron.

"We know!" said Hermione, hushing him.

"Muggles remain ignorant of the source of their suffering as they continue to sustain heavy casualties," said Kingsley. "We urge all wizards and witches risking their own safety to protect Muggle friends and neighbors, often without the Muggles' knowledge. For example, perhaps by casting a protective charm over any Muggle dwellings in your street. Many lives could be saved."

"And what would you say, Royal, to those listeners who reply that in these dangerous times, it should be 'Wizards first'?"

"I'd say that it's one short step from 'Wizards first' to 'Purebloods first,' and then to 'Death Eaters,'" replied Kingsley. "We must remember that the same goes for the Muggles. They are the same, and worth saving."

"Excellently put, Royal, and you've got my vote for Minister of Magic if ever we get out of this mess," said Lee. "And now back to the news."

"Thanks, River," said another very familiar voice; Ron started to speak, but Hermione forestalled him in a whisper.

"We know it's Lupin!"

"Romulus, do you maintain, as you have every time you've appeared on our program, that Harry Potter is still alive?"

"I do," said Lupin firmly. "There is no doubt at all in my mind that his death would be proclaimed as widely as possible. It would be like a deadly blow at the morale of those resisting the new regime. 'The Boy Who Lived' remains a symbol of everything that the new regime stands for: innocence, the need to keep resisting."

A mixture of gratitude and shame welled up in Harry. Had Lupin forgiven him, then, for the terrible things he had said and done?

"And what would you say to Harry if you knew he was listening, Romulus?"

"I'd tell him we're all with him in spirit," said Lupin, then hesitated slightly. "And I'd tell him to follow his instincts, which are always right. Harry looked at Hermione, whose eyes were full of tears.

"Nearly always right," she repeated.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" said Ron in surprise. "Bill told me Lupin's living with Tonks again! And apparently she's getting pregnant!"

"... and our usual update on those friends of Harry Potter's who are suffering for their allegiance?" Lee was saying.

"Well, as regular listeners will know, several of the more outspoken supporters of Harry Potter have now been imprisoned. It's a sad state of affairs, but it's the way of the world. I'm a broadcaster," said Lupin.

"At least he's still alive!" muttered Ron.

"We have also heard within the last few hours that Rubeus Hagrid" — all three of them gasped, and so nearly missed the next part of the news. "Hagrid, it is rumored, has narrowly escaped arrest within the grounds of Hogwarts, where he is rumored to have hosted a 'Support Harry Potter' party. He is a stolid, and is, we believe, on the run."

"I suppose it helps, when escaping from Death Eaters, if you've got a sixteen-foot-high half brother?" asked Lee.

"It would tend to give you an edge," agreed Lupin gravely. "May I just add that while we here at Potterwatch applaud the bravery of our supporters against following Hagrid's lead, 'Support Harry Potter' parties are unwise in the present climate."

"Indeed they are, Romulus," said Lee, "so we suggest that you continue to show your devotion to the man with the lightning bolt scar."

ws concerning the wizard who is proving just as elusive as Harry Potter. We like to refer to him as the Chief Death Eater. As for the rumors circulating about him, I'd like to introduce a new correspondent: Rodent."

"Rodent?" said yet another familiar voice, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione cried out together:

"Fred!"

"No — is it George?"

"It's Fred, I think," said Ron, leaning in closer, as whichever twin it was said,

"I'm not being 'Rodent,' no way, I told you I wanted to be 'Rapier!'"

"Oh, all right then. 'Rapier,' could you please give us your take on the various stories we've been hearing about the Chief Death Eater?"

"Yes, River, I can," said Fred. "As our listeners will know, unless they've taken refuge at the bottom of a garden pond or in the shadows is creating a nice little climate of panic. Mind you, if all the alleged sightings of him are genuine, we must be careful."

"Which suits him, of course," said Kingsley. "The air of mystery is creating more terror than actually showing himself."

"Agreed," said Fred. "So, people, let's try and calm down a bit. Things are bad enough without inventing stuff as well. Just a single glance from his eyes. That's a basilisk, listeners. One simple test: Check whether the thing that's glaring at you is real, although if it really is You-Know-Who, that's still likely to be the last thing you ever do."

For the first time in weeks and weeks, Harry was laughing: He could feel the weight of tension leaving him.

"And the rumors that he keeps being sighted abroad?" asked Lee.

"Well, who wouldn't want a nice little holiday after all the hard work he's been putting in?" asked Fred. "Point is, people, he's out of the country. Maybe he is, maybe he isn't, but the fact remains he can move faster than Severus Snape could. It's a long way away if you're planning on taking any risks. I never thought I'd hear myself say it, but safety first!"

"Thank you very much for those wise words, Rapier," said Lee. "Listeners, that brings us to the end of another Potter broadcast. We'll be back, but you can be sure we shall be back. Keep twiddling those dials: The next password will be 'Mad-Eye.' Keep each other safe. The radio's dial twirled and the lights behind the tuning panel went out. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were still beaming.

Harry had become so used to their isolation he had nearly forgotten that other people were resisting Voldemort. It was a relief.

"Good, eh?" said Ron happily.

"Brilliant," said Harry.

"It's so brave of them," sighed Hermione admiringly. "If they were found . . ."

"Well, they keep on the move, don't they?" said Ron. "Like us."

"But did you hear what Fred said?" asked Harry excitedly; now the broadcast was over, his thoughts turned again to the search for the Wand, I knew it!"

"Harry —"

"Come on, Hermione, why are you so determined not to admit it? Vol —"

"HARRY, NO!"

"— demort's after the Elder Wand!"

"The name's Taboo!" Ron bellowed, leaping to his feet as a loud crack sounded outside the tent. "I told you, Harry, I told you! The name's Taboo! — quickly — it's how they find —"

But Ron stopped talking, and Harry knew why. The Sneakoscope on the table had lit up and begun to spin; they could hear the Deluminator out of his pocket and clicked it: Their lamps went out.

"Come out of there with your hands up!" came a rasping voice through the darkness. "We know you're in there! You've been hiding!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MALFOY MANOR

Harry looked around at the other two, now mere outlines in the darkness. He saw Hermione point her wand, not to illuminate the light, and he buckled in agony, unable to see. He could feel his face swelling rapidly under his hands as heavy footsteps came.

"Get up, vermin."

Unknown hands dragged Harry roughly off the ground. Before he could stop them, someone had rummaged through his pockets, leaving a painfully painful face, which felt unrecognizable beneath his fingers, tight, swollen, and puffy as though he had suffered from a severe allergic reaction. He could barely see; his glasses fell off as he was bundled out of the tent; all he could make out was the darkness and Hermione outside too.

"Get — off — her!" Ron shouted. There was the unmistakable sound of knuckles hitting flesh: Ron grunted in pain and anger. "Your boyfriend's going to have worse than that done to him if he's on my list," said the horribly familiar, rasping voice. "The texture of the skin. . . ."

Harry's stomach turned over. He knew who this was: Fenrir Greyback, the werewolf who was permitted to wear Death Eater robes.

"Search the tent!" said another voice.

Harry was thrown facedown onto the ground. A thud told him that Ron had been cast down beside him. They could hear the tent as they searched.

"Now, let's see who we've got," said Greyback's gloating voice from overhead, and Harry was rolled over onto his back.

"I'll be needing butterbeer to wash this one down. What happened to you, ugly?"

Harry did not answer immediately.

"I said," repeated Greyback, and Harry received a blow to the diaphragm that made him double over in pain, "what h

"Stung," Harry muttered. "Been stung."

"Yeah, looks like it," said a second voice.

"What's your name?" snarled Greyback.

"Dudley," said Harry.

"And your first name?"

"I — Vernon. Vernon Dudley."

"Check the list, Scabior," said Greyback, and Harry heard him move sideways to look down at Ron, instead. "And wha

"Stan Shunpike," said Ron.

"Like 'ell you are," said the man called Scabior. "We know Stan Shunpike, 'e's put a bit of work our way."

There was another thud.

"I'b Bardy," said Ron, and Harry could tell that his mouth was full of blood. "Bardy Weadley."

"A Weasley?" rasped Greyback. "So you're related to blood traitors even if you're not a Mudblood. And lastly, your pre

lesh crawl.

"Easy, Greyback," said Scabior over the jeering of the others.

"Oh, I'm not going to bite just yet. We'll see if she's a bit quicker at remembering her name than Barny. Who are you,

"Penelope Clearwater," said Hermione. She sounded terrified, but convincing.

"What's your blood status?"

"Half-blood," said Hermione.

"Easy enough to check," said Scabior. "But the 'ole lot of 'em look like they could still be 'ogwarts age —"

"We'b lebt," said Ron.

"Left, 'ave you, ginger?" said Scabior. "And you decided to go camping? And you thought, just for a laugh, you'd use th

"Nod a laugh," said Ron. "Aggidien."

"Accident?" There was more jeering laughter.

"You know who used to like using the Dark Lord's name, Weasley?" growled Greyback. "The Order of the Phoenix. Me

"Doh."

"Well, they don't show the Dark Lord proper respect, so the name's been Tabooed. A few Order members have been

!"

Someone yanked Harry up by the hair, dragged him a short way, pushed him down into a sitting position, then starte

blind, barely able to see anything through his puffed-up eyes. When at last the man tying them had walked away, Ha

"Anyone still got a wand?"

"No," said Ron and Hermione from either side of him.

"This is all my fault. I said the name, I'm sorry —"

"Harry?"

It was a new, but familiar, voice, and it came from directly behind Harry, from the person tied to Hermione's left.

"Dean?"

"It is you! If they find out who they've got — ! They're Snatchers, they're only looking for truants to sell for gold —"

"Not a bad little haul for one night," Greyback was saying, as a pair of hobnailed boots marched close by Harry and th

way goblin, and three truants. You checked their names on the list yet, Scabior?" he roared.

"Yeah. There's no Vernon Dudley on 'ere, Greyback."

"Interesting," said Greyback. "That's interesting."

He crouched down beside Harry, who saw, through the infinitesimal gap left between his swollen eyelids, a face cover

sores at the corners of his mouth. Greyback smelled as he had done at the top of the tower where Dumbledore had

"So you aren't wanted, then, Vernon? Or are you on that list under a different name? What House were you in at Hog

"Slytherin," said Harry automatically.

"Funny 'ow they all thinks we wants to 'ear that," jeered Scabior out of the shadows. "But none of 'em can tell us whe

"It's in the dungeons," said Harry clearly. "You enter through the wall. It's full of skulls and stuff and it's under the lake

There was a short pause.

"Well, well, looks like we really 'ave caught a little Slytherin," said Scabior. "Good for you, Vernon, 'cause there ain't a l

"He works at the Ministry," Harry lied. He knew that his whole story would collapse with the smallest investigation, bu

sual appearance before the game was up in any case. "Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes."

"You know what, Greyback," said Scabior. "I think there is a Dudley in there."

Harry could barely breathe: Could luck, sheer luck, get them safely out of this?

"Well, well," said Greyback, and Harry could hear the tiniest note of trepidation in that callous voice, and knew that G

bound the son of a Ministry official. Harry's heart was pounding against the ropes around his ribs; he would not hav

telling the truth, ugly, you've got nothing to fear from a trip to the Ministry. I expect your father'll reward us just for p

"But," said Harry, his mouth bone dry, "if you just let us —"

"Hey!" came a shout from inside the tent. "Look at this, Greyback!"

A dark figure came bustling toward them, and Harry saw a glint of silver in the light of their wands. They had found C

"Ve-e-ry nice," said Greyback appreciatively, taking it from his companion. "Oh, very nice indeed. Looks goblin-made,

"It's my father's," Harry lied, hoping against hope that it was too dark for Greyback to see the name etched just below
 "ang on a minute, Greyback! Look at this, in the Prophet!"

As Scabior said it, Harry's scar, which was stretched tight across his distended forehead, burned savagely. More clear
 g building, a grim fortress, jet-black and forbidding; Voldemort's thoughts had suddenly become razor-sharp again; h
 euphoric purpose. . . .

So close . . . So close . . .

With a huge effort of will Harry closed his mind to Voldemort's thoughts, pulling himself back to where he sat, tied to
 to Greyback and Scabior.

"ermione Granger," Scabior was saying, "the Mudblood who is known to be traveling with 'arry Potter."

Harry's scar burned in the silence, but he made a supreme effort to keep himself present, not to slip into Voldemort's
 wn in front of Hermione.

"You know what, little girly? This picture looks a hell of a lot like you."

"It isn't! It isn't me!"

Hermione's terrified squeak was as good as a confession.

" . . . known to be traveling with Harry Potter," repeated Greyback quietly.

A stillness had settled over the scene. Harry's scar was exquisitely painful, but he struggled with all his strength again
 mportant to remain in his own right mind.

"Well, this changes things, doesn't it?" whispered Greyback. Nobody spoke: Harry sensed the gang of Snatchers watc
 ck got up and took a couple of steps to where Harry sat, crouching down again to stare closely at his misshapen feat

"What's that on your forehead, Vernon?" he asked softly, his breath foul in Harry's nostrils as he pressed a filthy finger

"Don't touch it!" Harry yelled; he could not stop himself; he thought he might be sick from the pain of it.

"I thought you wore glasses, Potter?" breathed Greyback.

"I found glasses!" yelped one of the Snatchers skulking in the background. "There was glasses in the tent, Greyback, v

And seconds later Harry's glasses had been rammed back onto his face. The Snatchers were closing in now, peering

"It is!" rasped Greyback. "We've caught Potter!"

They all took several steps backward, stunned by what they had done. Harry, still fighting to remain present inside h
 visions were breaking across the surface of his mind —

— He was gliding around the high walls of the black fortress —

No, he was Harry, tied up and wandless, in grave danger —

— looking up, up to the topmost window, the highest tower —

He was Harry, and they were discussing his fate in low voices —

— Time to fly . . .

". . . to the Ministry?"

"To hell with the Ministry," growled Greyback. "They'll take the credit, and we won't get a look in. I say we take him str

"Will you summon 'im? 'ere?" said Scabior, sounding awed, terrified.

"No," snarled Greyback, "I haven't got — they say he's using the Malfoys' place as a base. We'll take the boy there."

Harry thought he knew why Greyback was not calling Voldemort. The werewolf might be allowed to wear Death Eate
 were branded with the Dark Mark: Greyback had not been granted this highest honor.

Harry's scar seared again —

— and he rose into the night, flying straight up to the window at the very top of the tower —

". . . completely sure it's him? 'Cause if it ain't, Greyback, we're dead."

"Who's in charge here?" roared Greyback, covering his moment of inadequacy. "I say that's Potter, and him plus his w
 're too gutless to come along, any of you, it's all for me, and with any luck, I'll get the girl thrown in!"

— The window was the merest slit in the black rock, not big enough for a man to enter. . . . A skeletal figure was just
 sleeping . . . ?

"All right!" said Scabior. "All right, we're in! And what about the rest of 'em, Greyback, what'll we do with 'em?"

"Might as well take the lot. We've got two Mudbloods, that's another ten Galleons. Give me the sword as well. If they'

The prisoners were dragged to their feet. Harry could hear Hermione's breathing, fast and terrified.

"Grab hold and make it tight. I'll do Potter!" said Greyback, seizing a fistful of Harry's hair; Harry could feel his long ye
 three —"

They Disapparated, pulling the prisoners with them. Harry struggled, trying to throw off Greyback's hand, but it was
 either side, he could not separate from the group, and as the breath was squeezed out of him his scar seared more
 — as he forced himself through the slit of a window like a snake and landed, lightly as vapor, inside the cell-like room

The prisoners lurched into one another as they landed in a country lane. Harry's eyes, still puffy, took a moment to a
 t of what looked like a long drive. He experienced the tiniest trickle of relief. The worst had not happened yet: Volder

resist the vision, in some strange, fortresslike place, at the top of a tower. How long it would take Voldemort to get to
 atter. . . .

One of the Snatchers strode to the gates and shook them.

"How do we get in? They're locked, Greyback, I can't — blimey!"

He whipped his hands away in fright. The iron was contorting, twisting itself out of the abstract furls and coils into a

"State your purpose!"

"We've got Potter!" Greyback roared triumphantly. "We've captured Harry Potter!"

The gates swung open.

"Come on!" said Greyback to his men, and the prisoners were shunted through the gates and up the drive, between hape above him, and realized it was an albino peacock. He stumbled and was dragged onto his feet by Greyback; no er prisoners. Closing his puffy eyes, he allowed the pain in his scar to overcome him for a moment, wanting to know ht. . . .

The emaciated figure stirred beneath its thin blanket and rolled over toward him, eyes opening in a skull of a face. . . on Voldemort, and then he smiled. Most of his teeth were gone. . . .

"So, you have come. I thought you would . . . one day. But your journey was pointless. I never had it."

"You lie!"

As Voldemort's anger throbbed inside him, Harry's scar threatened to burst with pain, and he wrenched his mind back pushed over gravel.

Light spilled out over all of them.

"What is this?" said a woman's cold voice.

"We're here to see He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" rasped Greyback.

"Who are you?"

"You know me!" There was resentment in the werewolf's voice. "Fenrir Greyback! We've caught Harry Potter!"

Greyback seized Harry and dragged him around to face the light, forcing the other prisoners to shuffle around too.

"I know 'e's swollen, ma'am, but it's 'im!" piped up Scabior. "If you look a bit closer, you'll see 'is scar. And this 'ere, see ith 'im, ma'am. There's no doubt it's 'im, and we've got 'is wand as well! 'Ere, ma'am —"

Through his puffy eyelids Harry saw Narcissa Malfoy scrutinizing his swollen face. Scabior thrust the blackthorn wand "Bring them in," she said.

Harry and the others were shoved and kicked up broad stone steps into a hallway lined with portraits.

"Follow me," said Narcissa, leading the way across the hall. "My son, Draco, is home for his Easter holidays. If that is H

The drawing room dazzled after the darkness outside; even with his eyes almost closed Harry could make out the wi ng, more portraits against the dark purple walls. Two figures rose from chairs in front of an ornate marble fireplace a

"What is this?"

The dreadfully familiar, drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy fell on Harry's ears. He was panicking now: He could see no v Idemort's thoughts, though his scar was still burning.

"They say they've got Potter," said Narcissa's cold voice. "Draco, come here."

Harry did not dare look directly at Draco, but saw him obliquely: a figure slightly taller than he was, rising from an ar hair.

Greyback forced the prisoners to turn again so as to place Harry directly beneath the chandelier.

"Well, boy?" rasped the werewolf.

Harry was facing a mirror over the fireplace, a great gilded thing in an intricately scrolled frame. Through the slits of leaving Grimmauld Place.

His face was huge, shiny, and pink, every feature distorted by Hermione's jinx. His black hair reached his shoulders a t it was he who stood there, he would have wondered who was wearing his glasses. He resolved not to speak, for his with Draco as the latter approached.

"Well, Draco?" said Lucius Malfoy. He sounded avid. "Is it? Is it Harry Potter?"

"I can't — I can't be sure," said Draco. He was keeping his distance from Greyback, and seemed as scared of looking a

"But look at him carefully, look! Come closer!"

Harry had never heard Lucius Malfoy so excited.

"Draco, if we are the ones who hand Potter over to the Dark Lord, everything will be forgiv —"

"Now, we won't be forgetting who actually caught him, I hope, Mr. Malfoy?" said Greyback menacingly.

"Of course not, of course not!" said Lucius impatiently. He approached Harry himself, came so close that Harry could his swollen eyes. With his face a puffy mask, Harry felt as though he was peering out from between the bars of a cag

"What did you do to him?" Lucius asked Greyback. "How did he get into this state?"

"That wasn't us."

"Looks more like a Stinging Jinx to me," said Lucius.

His gray eyes raked Harry's forehead.

"There's something there," he whispered, "it could be the scar, stretched tight. . . . Draco, come here, look properly! V Harry saw Draco's face up close now, right beside his father's. They were extraordinarily alike, except that while his f on was full of reluctance, even fear.

"I don't know," he said, and he walked away toward the fireplace where his mother stood watching.

"We had better be certain, Lucius," Narcissa called to her husband in her cold, clear voice. "Completely sure that it is s his" — she was looking closely at the blackthorn wand — "but it does not resemble Ollivander's description. . . . If w . Remember what he did to Rowle and Dolohov?"

"What about the Mudblood, then?" growled Greyback. Harry was nearly thrown off his feet as the Snatchers forced th

one instead.

"Wait," said Narcissa sharply. "Yes — yes, she was in Madam Malkin's with Potter! I saw her picture in the Prophet! Lo
"I . . . maybe . . . yeah."

"But then, that's the Weasley boy!" shouted Lucius, striding around the bound prisoners to face Ron. "It's them, Potte
, what's his name — ?"

"Yeah," said Draco again, his back to the prisoners. "It could be."

The drawing room door opened behind Harry. A woman spoke, and the sound of the voice wound Harry's fear to an

"What is this? What's happened, Cissy?"

Bellatrix Lestrange walked slowly around the prisoners, and stopped on Harry's right, staring at Hermione through h

"But surely," she said quietly, "this is the Mudblood girl? This is Granger?"

"Yes, yes, it's Granger!" cried Lucius. "And beside her, we think, Potter! Potter and his friends, caught at last!"

"Potter?" shrieked Bellatrix, and she backed away, the better to take in Harry. "Are you sure? Well then, the Dark Lord

She dragged back her left sleeve: Harry saw the Dark Mark burned into the flesh of her arm, and knew that she was

"I was about to call him!" said Lucius, and his hand actually closed upon Bellatrix's wrist, preventing her from touchin
ht to my house, and it is therefore upon my authority —"

"Your authority!" she sneered, attempting to wrench her hand from his grasp. "You lost your authority when you lost

"This is nothing to do with you, you did not capture the boy —"

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Malfoy," interjected Greyback, "but it's us that caught Potter, and it's us that'll be claiming

"Gold!" laughed Bellatrix, still attempting to throw off her brother-in-law, her free hand groping in her pocket for her
gold? I seek only the honor of his — of —"

She stopped struggling, her dark eyes fixed upon something Harry could not see. Jubilant at her capitulation, Lucius

"STOP!" shrieked Bellatrix. "Do not touch it, we shall all perish if the Dark Lord comes now!"

Lucius froze, his index finger hovering over his own Mark. Bellatrix strode out of Harry's limited line of vision.

"What is that?" he heard her say.

"Sword," grunted an out-of-sight Snatcher.

"Give it to me."

"It's not yorn, missus, it's mine, I reckon I found it."

There was a bang and a flash of red light: Harry knew that the Snatcher had been Stunned. There was a roar of ange

"What d'you think you're playing at, woman?"

"Stupefy!" she screamed. "Stupefy!"

They were no match for her, even though there were four of them against one of her: She was a witch, as Harry knew
od, all except Greyback, who had been forced into a kneeling position, his arms outstretched. Out of the corners of h
sword of Gryffindor gripped tightly in her hand, her face waxen.

"Where did you get this sword?" she whispered to Greyback as she pulled his wand out of his unresisting grip.

"How dare you?" he snarled, his mouth the only thing that could move as he was forced to gaze up at her. He bared l

"Where did you find this sword?" she repeated, brandishing it in his face. "Snape sent it to my vault in Gringotts!"

"It was in their tent," rasped Greyback. "Release me, I say!"

She waved her wand, and the werewolf sprang to his feet, but appeared too wary to approach her. He prowled behi

"Draco, move this scum outside," said Bellatrix, indicating the unconscious men. "If you haven't got the guts to finish

"Don't you dare speak to Draco like —" said Narcissa furiously, but Bellatrix screamed,

"Be quiet! The situation is graver than you can possibly imagine, Cissy! We have a very serious problem!"

She stood, panting slightly, looking down at the sword, examining its hilt. Then she turned to look at the silent prison

"If it is indeed Potter, he must not be harmed," she muttered, more to herself than to the others. "The Dark Lord wis
. I must . . . I must know. . . ."

She turned back to her sister again.

"The prisoners must be placed in the cellar, while I think what to do!"

"This is my house, Bella, you don't give orders in my —"

"Do it! You have no idea of the danger we are in!" shrieked Bellatrix. She looked frightening, mad; a thin stream of fir
Narcissa hesitated for a moment, then addressed the werewolf.

"Take these prisoners down to the cellar, Greyback."

"Wait," said Bellatrix sharply. "All except . . . except for the Mudblood."

Greyback gave a grunt of pleasure.

"No!" shouted Ron. "You can have me, keep me!"

Bellatrix hit him across the face; the blow echoed around the room.

"If she dies under questioning, I'll take you next," she said. "Blood traitor is next to Mudblood in my book. Take them
othing more to them — yet."

She threw Greyback's wand back to him, then took a short silver knife from under her robes. She cut Hermione free
dle of the room, while Greyback forced the rest of them to shuffle across to another door, into a dark passageway, h
esistible force.

"Reckon she'll let me have a bit of the girl when she's finished with her?" Greyback crooned as he forced them along

ger?"

Harry could feel Ron shaking. They were forced down a steep flight of stairs, still tied back-to-back and in danger of suffocation. There was a heavy door. Greyback unlocked it with a tap of his wand, then forced them into a dank and musty room and the door had not died away before there was a terrible, drawn-out scream from directly above them.

"HERMIONE!" Ron bellowed, and he started to writhe and struggle against the ropes tying them together, so that Harry

"Be quiet!" Harry said. "Shut up, Ron, we need to work out a way —"

"HERMIONE! HERMIONE!"

"We need a plan, stop yelling — we need to get these ropes off —"

"Harry?" came a whisper through the darkness. "Ron? Is that you?"

Ron stopped shouting. There was a sound of movement close by them, then Harry saw a shadow moving closer.

"Harry? Ron?"

"Luna?"

"Yes, it's me! Oh no, I didn't want you to be caught!"

"Luna, can you help us get these ropes off?" said Harry.

"Oh yes, I expect so. . . . There's an old nail we use if we need to break anything. . . . Just a moment . . ."

Hermione screamed again from overhead, and they could hear Bellatrix screaming too, but her words were inaudible.

"Mr. Ollivander?" Harry could hear Luna saying. "Mr. Ollivander, have you got the nail? If you just move over a little bit."

She was back within seconds.

"You'll need to stay still," she said.

Harry could feel her digging at the rope's tough fibers to work the knots free. From upstairs they heard Bellatrix's voice.

"I'm going to ask you again! Where did you get this sword? Where?"

"We found it — we found it — PLEASE!" Hermione screamed again; Ron struggled harder than ever, and the rusty nail

"Ron, please stay still!" Luna whispered. "I can't see what I'm doing —"

"My pocket!" said Ron. "In my pocket, there's a Deluminator, and it's full of light!"

A few seconds later, there was a click, and the luminescent spheres the Deluminator had sucked from the lamps in the corridor simply hung there, like tiny suns, flooding the underground room with light. Harry saw Luna, all eyes in her white face, crouched up on the floor in the corner. Craning around, he caught sight of their fellow prisoners: Dean and Griphook the goblin, who had bound him to the humans.

"Oh, that's much easier, thanks, Ron," said Luna, and she began hacking at their bindings again. "Hello, Dean!"

From above came Bellatrix's voice.

"You are lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it! You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth, tell the truth!"

Another terrible scream —

"HERMIONE!"

"What else did you take? What else have you got? Tell me the truth or, I swear, I shall run you through with this knife!"

"There!"

Harry felt the ropes fall away and turned, rubbing his wrists, to see Ron running around the cellar, looking up at the ceiling and bloody, said "Thanks" to Luna and stood there, shivering, but Griphook sank onto the cellar floor, looking groggy. Ron was now trying to Disapparate without a wand.

"There's no way out, Ron," said Luna, watching his fruitless efforts. "The cellar is completely escape-proof. I tried, at first, but I tried everything."

Hermione was screaming again: The sound went through Harry like physical pain. Barely conscious of the fierce pressure of the walls for he hardly knew what, knowing in his heart that it was useless.

"What else did you take, what else? ANSWER ME! CRUCIO!"

Hermione's screams echoed off the walls upstairs, Ron was half sobbing as he pounded the walls with his fists, and Harry checked and groped inside it: He pulled out Dumbledore's Snitch and shook it, hoping for he did not know what — nothing. The eyes were lifeless — the mirror fragment fell sparkling to the floor, and he saw a gleam of brightest blue — Dumbledore's eye was gazing at him out of the mirror.

"Help us!" he yelled at it in mad desperation. "We're in the cellar of Malfoy Manor, help us!"

The eye blinked and was gone.

Harry was not even sure that it had really been there. He tilted the shard of mirror this way and that, and saw nothing. Upstairs Hermione was screaming worse than ever, and next to him Ron was bellowing, "HERMIONE! HERMIONE!"

"How did you get into my vault?" they heard Bellatrix scream. "Did that dirty little goblin in the cellar help you?"

"We only met him tonight!" Hermione sobbed. "We've never been inside your vault. . . . It isn't the real sword! It's a copy!"

"A copy?" screeched Bellatrix. "Oh, a likely story!"

"But we can find out easily!" came Lucius's voice. "Draco, fetch the goblin, he can tell us whether the sword is real or not." Harry dashed across the cellar to where Griphook was huddled on the floor.

"Griphook," he whispered into the goblin's pointed ear, "you must tell them that sword's a fake, they mustn't know it!" He could hear someone scuttling down the cellar steps; next moment, Draco's shaking voice spoke from behind the door.

"Stand back. Line up against the back wall. Don't try anything, or I'll kill you!"

They did as they were bidden; as the lock turned, Ron clicked the Deluminator and the lights whisked back into his pocket.

y marched inside, wand held out in front of him, pale and determined. He seized the little goblin by the arm and back and at the same moment a loud crack echoed inside the cellar.

Ron clicked the Deluminator. Three balls of light flew back into the air from his pocket, revealing Dobby the house-elf.

"DOB — !"

Harry hit Ron on the arm to stop him shouting, and Ron looked terrified at his mistake. Footsteps crossed the ceiling.

Dobby's enormous, tennis-ball-shaped eyes were wide; he was trembling from his feet to the tips of his ears. He was petrified.

"Harry Potter," he squeaked in the tiniest quiver of a voice, "Dobby has come to rescue you."

"But how did you — ?"

An awful scream drowned Harry's words: Hermione was being tortured again. He cut to the essentials.

"You can Disapparate out of this cellar?" he asked Dobby, who nodded, his ears flapping.

"And you can take humans with you?"

Dobby nodded again.

"Right. Dobby, I want you to grab Luna, Dean, and Mr. Ollivander, and take them — take them to —"

"Bill and Fleur's," said Ron. "Shell Cottage on the outskirts of Tinworth!"

The elf nodded for a third time.

"And then come back," said Harry. "Can you do that, Dobby?"

"Of course, Harry Potter," whispered the little elf. He hurried over to Mr. Ollivander, who appeared to be barely conscious.

He led the other two to Luna and Dean, neither of whom moved.

"Harry, we want to help you!" Luna whispered.

"We can't leave you here," said Dean.

"Go, both of you! We'll see you at Bill and Fleur's."

As Harry spoke, his scar burned worse than ever, and for a few seconds he looked down, not upon the wandmaker, but at his feet.

"Kill me, then, Voldemort, I welcome death! But my death will not bring you what you seek. . . . There is so much you don't know about me!"

He felt Voldemort's fury, but as Hermione screamed again he shut it out, returning to the cellar and the horror of his situation.

"Go!" Harry beseeched Luna and Dean. "Go! We'll follow, just go!"

They caught hold of the elf's outstretched fingers. There was another loud crack, and Dobby, Luna, Dean, and Ollivander disappeared.

"What was that?" shouted Lucius Malfoy from over their heads. "Did you hear that? What was that noise in the cellar?"

Harry and Ron stared at each other.

"Draco — no, call Wormtail! Make him go and check!"

Footsteps crossed the room overhead, then there was silence. Harry knew that the people in the drawing room were waiting.

"We're going to have to try and tackle him," he whispered to Ron. They had no choice: The moment anyone entered the room, they would have to face him.

"Ve the lights on," Harry added, and as they heard someone descending the steps outside the door, they backed again.

"Stand back," came Wormtail's voice. "Stand away from the door. I am coming in."

The door flew open. For a split second Wormtail gazed into the apparently empty cellar, ablaze with light from the three wands.

He threw himself upon him. Ron seized Wormtail's wand arm and forced it upward; Harry slapped a hand to his mouth to stifle a cry.

sparks; his silver hand closed around Harry's throat.

"What is it, Wormtail?" called Lucius Malfoy from above.

"Nothing!" Ron called back, in a passable imitation of Wormtail's wheezy voice. "All fine!"

Harry could barely breathe.

"You're going to kill me?" Harry choked, attempting to prise off the metal fingers. "After I saved your life? You owe me!"

The silver fingers slackened. Harry had not expected it: He wrenched himself free, astonished, keeping his hand over his eyes.

He was open with fear and surprise: He seemed just as shocked as Harry at what his hand had done, at the tiny, merciful impulse that had made him stop.

as though to undo that moment of weakness.

"And we'll have that," whispered Ron, tugging Wormtail's wand from his other hand.

Wandless, helpless, Pettigrew's pupils dilated in terror. His eyes had slid from Harry's face to something else. His own hands.

"No —"

Without pausing to think, Harry tried to drag back the hand, but there was no stopping it. The silver tool that Voldemort had used to kill his unarmed and useless owner; Pettigrew was reaping his reward for his hesitation, his moment of pity; he was being strangled.

"No!"

Ron had released Wormtail too, and together he and Harry tried to pull the crushing metal fingers from around Wormtail's throat.

"Relashio!" said Ron, pointing the wand at the silver hand, but nothing happened; Pettigrew dropped to his knees, and the fingers remained.

ad. Wormtail's eyes rolled upward in his purple face; he gave a last twitch, and was still.

Harry and Ron looked at each other, then leaving Wormtail's body on the floor behind them, ran up the stairs and back down.

usly they crept along it until they reached the drawing room door, which was ajar. Now they had a clear view of Bellatrix.

She was crouched in his long-fingered hands. Hermione was lying at Bellatrix's feet. She was barely stirring.

"Well?" Bellatrix said to Griphook. "Is it the true sword?"

Harry waited, holding his breath, fighting against the prickling of his scar.

"No," said Griphook. "It is a fake."

"Are you sure?" panted Bellatrix. "Quite sure?"

"Yes," said the goblin.

Relief broke across her face, all tension drained from it.

"Good," she said, and with a casual flick of her wand she slashed another deep cut into the goblin's face, and he dropped. He said in a voice that burst with triumph, "we call the Dark Lord!"

And she pushed back her sleeve and touched her forefinger to the Dark Mark.

At once, Harry's scar felt as though it had split open again. His true surroundings vanished: He was Voldemort, and the world was enraged at the summons he felt — he had warned them, he had told them to summon him for nothing less than death.

"Kill me, then!" demanded the old man. "You will not win, you cannot win! That wand will never, ever be yours —"

And Voldemort's fury broke: A burst of green light filled the prison room and the frail old body was lifted from its harness and hurled through the window, his wrath barely controllable . . . They would suffer his retribution if they had no good reason for calling him.

"And I think," said Bellatrix's voice, "we can dispose of the Mudblood. Greyback, take her if you want her."

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Ron had burst into the drawing room; Bellatrix looked around, shocked; she turned her wand to face Ron instead —

"Expelliarmus!" he roared, pointing Wormtail's wand at Bellatrix, and hers flew into the air and was caught by Harry, who ducked and wheeled about; Harry yelled, "Stupefy!" and Lucius Malfoy collapsed onto the hearth. Jets of light flew from Draco's wand, rolling behind a sofa to avoid them.

"STOP OR SHE DIES!"

Panting, Harry peered around the edge of the sofa. Bellatrix was supporting Hermione, who seemed to be unconscious.

"Drop your wands," she whispered. "Drop them, or we'll see exactly how filthy her blood is!"

Ron stood rigid, clutching Wormtail's wand. Harry straightened up, still holding Bellatrix's.

"I said, drop them!" she screeched, pressing the blade into Hermione's throat: Harry saw beads of blood appear there.

"All right!" he shouted, and he dropped Bellatrix's wand onto the floor at his feet. Ron did the same with Wormtail's.

"Good!" she leered. "Draco, pick them up! The Dark Lord is coming, Harry Potter! Your death approaches!"

Harry knew it; his scar was bursting with the pain of it, and he could feel Voldemort flying through the sky from far away. He was close enough to Apparate to them, and Harry could see no way out.

"Now," said Bellatrix softly, as Draco hurried back to her with the wands, "Cissy, I think we ought to tie these little hero's hands. I am sure the Dark Lord will not begrudge you the girl, Greyback, after what you have done tonight."

At the last word there was a peculiar grinding noise from above. All of them looked upward in time to see the chandelier begin to fall. Bellatrix was directly beneath it; dropping Hermione, she threw herself aside with a scream. The chandelier fell, chains falling on top of Hermione and the goblin, who still clutched the sword of Gryffindor. Glittering shards of crystal fell all around, hitting his bloody face.

As Ron ran to pull Hermione out of the wreckage, Harry took his chance: He leapt over an armchair and wrested the sword from the goblin. He yelled, "Stupefy!" The werewolf was lifted off his feet by the triple spell, flew up to the ceiling, and then smashed to the floor.

As Narcissa dragged Draco out of the way of further harm, Bellatrix sprang to her feet, her hair flying as she brandished her wand toward the doorway.

"Dobby!" she screamed, and even Bellatrix froze. "You! You dropped the chandelier — ?"

The tiny elf trotted into the room, his shaking finger pointing at his old mistress.

"You must not hurt Harry Potter," he squeaked.

"Kill him, Cissy!" shrieked Bellatrix, but there was another loud crack, and Narcissa's wand too flew into the air and landed on the floor.

"You dirty little monkey!" bawled Bellatrix. "How dare you take a witch's wand, how dare you defy your masters?"

"Dobby has no master!" squealed the elf. "Dobby is a free elf, and Dobby has come to save Harry Potter and his friends."

Harry's scar was blinding him with pain. Dimly he knew that they had moments, seconds before Voldemort was with them.

"Ron, catch — and GO!" he yelled, throwing one of the wands to him; then he bent down to tug Griphook out from under the wreckage. The sword, over one shoulder, Harry seized Dobby's hand and spun on the spot to Disapparate.

As he turned into darkness he caught one last view of the drawing room: of the pale, frozen figures of Narcissa and Draco, of the gleaming silver, as Bellatrix's knife flew across the room at the place where he was vanishing —

Bill and Fleur's . . . Shell Cottage . . . Bill and Fleur's . . .

He had disappeared into the unknown; all he could do was repeat the name of the destination and hope that it would be there. The weight of the goblin bore down upon him; he could feel the blade of Gryffindor's sword bumping against his leg.

Trying to take charge, to pull them in the right direction, and tried, by squeezing the fingers, to indicate that that was forward. And then they hit solid earth and smelled salty air. Harry fell to his knees, relinquished Dobby's hand, and attempted to crawl.

"Are you all right?" he said as the goblin stirred, but Griphook merely whimpered.

Harry squinted around through the darkness. There seemed to be a cottage a short way away under the wide starry sky.

"Dobby, is this Shell Cottage?" he whispered, clutching the two wands he had brought from the Malfoys', ready to fight.

He looked around. The little elf stood feet from him.

"DOBBY!"

The elf swayed slightly, stars reflected in his wide, shining eyes. Together, he and Harry looked down at the silver hilt of the sword.

"Dobby — no — HELP!" Harry bellowed toward the cottage, toward the people moving there. "HELP!"

He did not know or care whether they were wizards or Muggles, friends or foes; all he cared about was that a dark storm was coming.

out his thin arms to Harry with a look of supplication. Harry caught him and laid him sideways on the cool grass.
"Dobby, no, don't die, don't die —"
The elf's eyes found him, and his lips trembled with the effort to form words.
"Harry . . . Potter . . ."
And then with a little shudder the elf became quite still, and his eyes were nothing more than great glassy orbs, springing from sockets.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR THE WANDMAKER

It was like sinking into an old nightmare; for an instant Harry knelt again beside Dumbledore's body at the foot of the tiny body curled upon the grass, pierced by Bellatrix's silver knife. Harry's voice was still saying, "Dobby . . . Dobby . . ."
He could not call him back.

After a minute or so he realized that they had, after all, come to the right place, for here were Bill and Fleur, Dean and Hermione.
"Hermione?" he said suddenly. "Where is she?"

"Ron's taken her inside," said Bill. "She'll be all right."

Harry looked back down at Dobby. He stretched out a hand and pulled the sharp blade from the elf's body, then drew it away. The sea was rushing against rock somewhere nearby; Harry listened to it while the others talked, discussing matters of the injured Griphook into the house, Fleur hurrying with them; now Bill was making suggestions about burying the elf. When he did so, he gazed down at the tiny body, and his scar prickled and burned, and in one part of his mind, viewed as if from a distance, he saw those they had left behind at Malfoy Manor. His rage was dreadful and yet Harry's grief for Dobby seemed to dim it, as he looked across a vast, silent ocean.

"I want to do it properly," were the first words of which Harry was fully conscious of speaking. "Not by magic. Have you ever done that? And shortly afterward he had set to work, alone, digging the grave in the place that Bill had shown him at the end of the garden. He was doing the manual work, glorying in the non-magic of it, for every drop of his sweat and every blister felt like a gift to the earth. His scar burned, but he was master of the pain; he felt it, yet was apart from it. He had learned control at last, learned to resist what he had wanted him to learn from Snape. Just as Voldemort had not been able to possess Harry while Harry was consumed by grief, while he mourned Dobby. Grief, it seemed, drove Voldemort out . . . though Dumbledore, of course, would have said otherwise. On Harry dug, deeper and deeper into the hard, cold earth, subsuming his grief in sweat, denying the pain in his scar, and the rushing sea to keep him company, the things that had happened at the Malfoys' returned to him, the things that had happened in the darkness. . . .

The steady rhythm of his arms beat time with his thoughts. Hallows . . . Horcruxes . . . Hallows . . . Horcruxes . . . Yet he knew that the fear and the loss and fear had snuffed it out: He felt as though he had been slapped awake again.

Deeper and deeper Harry sank into the grave, and he knew where Voldemort had been tonight, and whom he had killed. And he thought of Wormtail, dead because of one small unconscious impulse of mercy . . . Dumbledore had foreseen it. Harry lost track of time. He knew only that the darkness had lightened a few degrees when he was rejoined by Ron and Hermione.
"How's Hermione?"

"Better," said Ron. "Fleur's looking after her."

Harry had his retort ready for when they asked him why he had not simply created a perfect grave with his wand, but he said nothing. With spades of their own, and together they worked in silence until the hole seemed deep enough.

Harry wrapped the elf more snugly in his jacket. Ron sat on the edge of the grave and stripped off his shoes and socks, and took out his len hat, which Harry placed carefully upon Dobby's head, muffling his batlike ears.

"We should close his eyes."

Harry had not heard the others coming through the darkness. Bill was wearing a traveling cloak, Fleur a large white and blue dress, and he recognized to be Skele-Gro. Hermione was wrapped in a borrowed dressing gown, pale and unsteady on her feet; Ron was holding one of Fleur's coats, crouched down and placed her fingers tenderly upon each of the elf's eyelids, sliding them over them.

"There," she said softly. "Now he could be sleeping."

Harry placed the elf into the grave, arranged his tiny limbs so that he might have been resting, then climbed out and stood up. He did not break down as he remembered Dumbledore's funeral, and the rows and rows of golden chairs, and the Ministers, and the stateliness of the white marble tomb. He felt that Dobby deserved just as grand a funeral, and yet here they were, in the darkness.

"I think we ought to say something," piped up Luna. "I'll go first, shall I?"

And as everybody looked at her, she addressed the dead elf at the bottom of the grave.

"Thank you so much, Dobby, for rescuing me from that cellar. It's so unfair that you had to die, when you were so good. I hope you're happy now."

She turned and looked expectantly at Ron, who cleared his throat and said in a thick voice, "Yeah . . . thanks, Dobby."

"Thanks," muttered Dean.

Harry swallowed.

"Good-bye, Dobby," he said. It was all he could manage, but Luna had said it all for him. Bill raised his wand, and the earth settled neatly upon it, a small, reddish mound.

"D'you mind if I stay here a moment?" he asked the others.

They murmured words he did not catch; he felt gentle pats upon his back, and then they all traipsed back toward the entrance. He looked around: There were a number of large white stones, smoothed by the sea, marking the edge of the flower bed.

the place where Dobby's head now rested. He then felt in his pocket for a wand.

There were two in there. He had forgotten, lost track; he could not now remember whose wands these were; he seen shorter of the two, which felt friendlier in his hand, and pointed it at the rock.

Slowly, under his murmured instruction, deep cuts appeared upon the rock's surface. He knew that Hermione could mark the spot as he had wanted to dig the grave. When Harry stood up again, the stone read:

HERE LIES DOBBY, A FREE ELF.

He looked down at his handiwork for a few more seconds, then walked away, his scar still prickling a little, and his mind as that had taken shape in the darkness, ideas both fascinating and terrible.

They were all sitting in the living room when he entered the little hall, their attention focused upon Bill, who was talking of driftwood burning brightly in the fireplace. Harry did not want to drop mud upon the carpet, so he stood in the doorway. ". . . lucky that Ginny's on holiday. If she'd been at Hogwarts, they could have taken her before we reached her. Now . . ."

He looked around and saw Harry standing there.

"I've been getting them all out of the Burrow," he explained. "Moved them to Muriel's. The Death Eaters know Ron's whereabouts," he added at the sight of Harry's expression. "It was always a matter of time, Dad's been saying so for months. We're . . ."

"How are they protected?" asked Harry.

"Fidelius Charm. Dad's Secret-Keeper. And we've done it on this cottage too; I'm Secret-Keeper here. None of us can get in. Ollivander and Griphook are well enough, we'll move them to Muriel's too. There isn't much room here, but she's got a garden. . . . Gro; we could probably move them in an hour or —"

"No," Harry said, and Bill looked startled. "I need both of them here. I need to talk to them. It's important."

He heard the authority in his own voice, the conviction, the sense of purpose that had come to him as he dug Dobby's grave.

"I'm going to wash," Harry told Bill, looking down at his hands, still covered in mud and Dobby's blood. "Then I'll need to talk to them."

He walked into the little kitchen, to the basin beneath a window overlooking the sea. Dawn was breaking over the horizon, and the train of thought that had come to him in the dark garden. . . .

Dobby would never be able to tell them who had sent him to the cellar, but Harry knew what he had seen. A piercing pain would come. Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it.

Harry dried his hands, impervious to the beauty of the scene outside the window and to the murmuring of the other people in the house. This dawn, than ever before, closer to the heart of it all.

And still his scar prickled, and he knew that Voldemort was getting there too. Harry understood and yet did not understand. The Dumbledore in Harry's head smiled, surveying Harry over the tips of his fingers, pressed together as if in prayer.

You gave Ron the Deluminator. You understood him . . . You gave him a way back. . . .

And you understood Wormtail too . . . You knew there was a bit of regret there, somewhere. . . .

And if you knew them . . . What did you know about me, Dumbledore?

Am I meant to know, but not to seek? Did you know how hard I'd find that? Is that why you made it this difficult? So I'd never find out? . . .

Harry stood quite still, eyes glazed, watching the place where a bright gold rim of dazzling sun was rising over the horizon. He was suddenly surprised to see the cloth he was holding in his hand. He set it down and returned to the hall, and as he did so, he felt a sharp pain as swift as the reflection of a dragonfly over water, the outline of a building he knew extremely well.

Bill and Fleur were standing at the foot of the stairs.

"I need to speak to Griphook and Ollivander," Harry said.

"No," said Fleur. "You will have to wait, 'Arry. Zey are both ill, tired —"

"I'm sorry," he said without heat, "but it can't wait. I need to talk to them now. Privately — and separately. It's urgent."

"Harry, what the hell's going on?" asked Bill. "You turn up here with a dead house-elf and a half-conscious goblin, and you expect us to tell you anything —"

"We can't tell you what we're doing," said Harry flatly. "You're in the Order, Bill, you know Dumbledore left us a mission. . . . Fleur made an impatient noise, but Bill did not look at her; he was staring at Harry. His deeply scarred face was hard as stone. . . ."

Harry hesitated. He knew what hung on his decision. There was hardly any time left; now was the moment to decide. "Griphook," Harry said. "I'll speak to Griphook first."

His heart was racing as if he had been sprinting and had just cleared an enormous obstacle.

"Up here, then," said Bill, leading the way.

Harry had walked up several steps before stopping and looking back.

"I need you two as well!" he called to Ron and Hermione, who had been skulking, half concealed, in the doorway of the living room. They both moved into the light, looking oddly relieved.

"How are you?" Harry asked Hermione. "You were amazing — coming up with that story when she was hurting you like that." Hermione gave a weak smile as Ron gave her a one-armed squeeze.

"What are we doing now, Harry?" he asked.

"You'll see. Come on."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed Bill up the steep stairs onto a small landing. Three doors led off it.

"In here," said Bill, opening the door into his and Fleur's room. It too had a view of the sea, now flecked with gold in the sunlight. He waited, his arms folded, his scar prickling. Hermione took the chair beside the dressing table.

Bill reappeared, carrying the little goblin, whom he set down carefully upon the bed. Griphook grunted thanks, and Bill said, "I'm sorry to take you out of bed," said Harry. "How are your legs?"

"Painful," replied the goblin. "But mending."

He was still clutching the sword of Gryffindor, and wore a strange look: half truculent, half intrigued. Harry noted the Fleur had removed his shoes: His long feet were dirty. He was larger than a house-elf, but not by much. His domed head was balding.

"You probably don't remember —" Harry began.

"— that I was the goblin who showed you to your vault, the first time you ever visited Gringotts?" said Griphook. "I remember."

Harry and the goblin looked at each other, sizing each other up. Harry's scar was still prickling. He wanted to get through this, but he was afraid of making a false move. While he tried to decide on the best way to approach his request, the goblin brooded.

"You buried the elf," he said, sounding unexpectedly rancorous. "I watched you from the window of the bedroom next door."

"Yes," said Harry.

Griphook looked at him out of the corners of his slanting black eyes.

"You are an unusual wizard, Harry Potter."

"In what way?" asked Harry, rubbing his scar absently.

"You dug the grave."

"So?"

Griphook did not answer. Harry rather thought he was being sneered at for acting like a Muggle, but it did not much matter. He gathered himself for the attack.

"Griphook, I need to ask —"

"You also rescued a goblin."

"What?"

"You brought me here. Saved me."

"Well, I take it you're not sorry?" said Harry a little impatiently.

"No, Harry Potter," said Griphook, and with one finger he twisted the thin black beard upon his chin, "but you are a very brave wizard."

"Right," said Harry. "Well, I need some help, Griphook, and you can give it to me."

The goblin made no sign of encouragement, but continued to frown at Harry as though he had never seen anything like him.

"I need to break into a Gringotts vault."

Harry had not meant to say it so baldly; the words were forced from him as pain shot through his lightning scar and his head. He needed to deal with Griphook first. Ron and Hermione were staring at Harry as though he had gone mad.

"Harry —" said Hermione, but she was cut off by Griphook.

"Break into a Gringotts vault?" repeated the goblin, wincing a little as he shifted his position upon the bed. "It is impossible."

"No, it isn't," Ron contradicted him. "It's been done."

"Yeah," said Harry. "The same day I first met you, Griphook. My birthday, seven years ago."

"The vault in question was empty at the time," snapped the goblin, and Harry understood that even though Griphook had been there, he had not breached. "Its protection was minimal."

"Well, the vault we need to get into isn't empty, and I'm guessing its protection will be pretty powerful," said Harry. "It's not just the vault, it's the protection. We need to get into the vault, and we need to get into the vault."

He saw Hermione and Ron look at each other, astonished, but there would be time enough to explain after Griphook had agreed.

"You have no chance," said Griphook flatly. "No chance at all. If you seek beneath our floors, a treasure that was never there, you are a thief."

"Thief, you have been warned, beware — yeah, I know, I remember," said Harry. "But I'm not trying to get myself anywhere. I'm trying to get into the vault. Do you believe that?"

The goblin looked slantwise at Harry, and the lightning scar on Harry's forehead prickled, but he ignored it, refusing to be intimidated.

"If there was a wizard of whom I would believe that they did not seek personal gain," said Griphook finally, "it would be you. You have the protection or the respect that you have shown this night. Not from wand-carriers."

"Wand-carriers," repeated Harry: The phrase fell oddly upon his ears as his scar prickled, as Voldemort turned his head toward the door.

"The right to carry a wand," said the goblin quietly, "has long been contested between wizards and goblins."

"Well, goblins can do magic without wands," said Ron.

"That is immaterial! Wizards refuse to share the secrets of wandlore with other magical beings, they deny us the possibility of magic without wands."

"Well, goblins won't share any of their magic either," said Ron. "You won't tell us how to make swords and armor the way you do."

"It doesn't matter," said Harry, noting Griphook's rising color. "This isn't about wizards versus goblins or any other sort of magic. It's about the vault. Do you believe that?"

Griphook gave a nasty laugh.

"But it is, it is about precisely that! As the Dark Lord becomes ever more powerful, your race is set still more firmly against them. They are slaughtered, and who amongst the wand-carriers protests?"

"We do!" said Hermione. She had sat up straight, her eyes bright. "We protest! And I'm hunted quite as much as any goblin."

"Don't call yourself —" Ron muttered.

"Why shouldn't I?" said Hermione. "Mudblood, and proud of it! I've got no higher position under this new order than you Malfoys!"

As she spoke, she pulled aside the neck of the dressing gown to reveal the thin cut Bellatrix had made, scarlet against her pale skin.

"Did you know that it was Harry who set Dobby free?" she asked. "Did you know that we've wanted elves to be freed air.) "You can't want You-Know-Who defeated more than we do, Griphook!"

The goblin gazed at Hermione with the same curiosity he had shown Harry.

"What do you seek within the Lestranges' vault?" he asked abruptly. "The sword that lies inside it is a fake. This is the k that you already know this. You asked me to lie for you back there."

"But the fake sword isn't the only thing in that vault, is it?" asked Harry. "Perhaps you've seen the other things in there. His heart was pounding harder than ever. He redoubled his efforts to ignore the pulsing of his scar.

The goblin twisted his beard around his finger again.

"It is against our code to speak of the secrets of Gringotts. We are the guardians of fabulous treasures. We have a duty ught by our fingers."

The goblin stroked the sword, and his black eyes roved from Harry to Hermione to Ron and then back again.

"So young," he said finally, "to be fighting so many."

"Will you help us?" said Harry. "We haven't got a hope of breaking in without a goblin's help. You're our one chance."

"I shall . . . think about it," said Griphook maddeningly.

"But —" Ron started angrily; Hermione nudged him in the ribs.

"Thank you," said Harry.

The goblin bowed his great domed head in acknowledgement, then flexed his short legs.

"I think," he said, settling himself ostentatiously upon Bill and Fleur's bed, "that the Skele-Gro has finished its work. I h

"Yeah, of course," said Harry, but before leaving the room he leaned forward and took the sword of Gryffindor from saw resentment in the goblin's eyes as he closed the door upon him.

"Little git," whispered Ron. "He's enjoying keeping us hanging."

"Harry," whispered Hermione, pulling them both away from the door, into the middle of the still-dark landing, "are yo rcrux in the Lestranges' vault?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Bellatrix was terrified when she thought we'd been in there, she was beside herself. Why? What di en? Something she was petrified You-Know-Who would find out about."

"But I thought we were looking for places You-Know-Who's been, places he's done something important?" said Ron, I

"I don't know whether he was ever inside Gringotts," said Harry. "He never had gold there when he was younger, bec outside, though, the first time he ever went to Diagon Alley."

Harry's scar throbbed, but he ignored it; he wanted Ron and Hermione to understand about Gringotts before they sp

"I think he would have envied anyone who had a key to a Gringotts vault. I think he'd have seen it as a real symbol of Bellatrix and her husband. They were his most devoted servants before he fell, and they went looking for him after l

Harry rubbed his scar.

"I don't think he'd have told Bellatrix it was a Horcrux, though. He never told Lucius Malfoy the truth about the diary. her to place it in her vault. The safest place in the world for anything you want to hide, Hagrid told me . . . except for

When Harry had finished speaking, Ron shook his head.

"You really understand him."

"Bits of him," said Harry. "Bits . . . I just wish I'd understood Dumbledore as much. But we'll see. Come on — Ollivander

Ron and Hermione looked bewildered but impressed as they followed him across the little landing and knocked upo

The wandmaker was lying on the twin bed farthest from the window. He had been held in the cellar for more than a ciated, the bones of his face sticking out sharply against the yellowish skin. His great silver eyes seemed vast in their ave belonged to a skeleton. Harry sat down on the empty bed, beside Ron and Hermione. The rising sun was not visi ave.

"Mr. Ollivander, I'm sorry to disturb you," Harry said.

"My dear boy," Ollivander's voice was feeble. "You rescued us. I thought we would die in that place. I can never thank

"We were glad to do it."

Harry's scar throbbed. He knew, he was certain, that there was hardly any time left in which to beat Voldemort to his nic . . . yet he had made his decision when he chose to speak to Griphook first. Feigning a calm he did not feel, he gro of his broken wand.

"Mr. Ollivander, I need some help."

"Anything. Anything," said the wandmaker weakly.

"Can you mend this? Is it possible?"

Ollivander held out a trembling hand, and Harry placed the two barely connected halves into his palm.

"Holly and phoenix feather," said Ollivander in a tremulous voice. "Eleven inches. Nice and supple."

"Yes," said Harry. "Can you —?"

"No," whispered Ollivander. "I am sorry, very sorry, but a wand that has suffered this degree of damage cannot be re

Harry had been braced to hear it, but it was a blow nevertheless. He took the wand halves back and replaced them in he shattered wand had vanished, and did not look away until Harry had taken from his pocket the two wands he had

"Can you identify these?" Harry asked.

The wandmaker took the first of the wands and held it close to his faded eyes, rolling it between his knobble-knuckle

"Walnut and dragon heartstring," he said. "Twelve-and-three-quarter inches. Unyielding. This wand belonged to Bella

"And this one?"

Ollivander performed the same examination.

"Hawthorn and unicorn hair. Ten inches precisely. Reasonably springy. This was the wand of Draco Malfoy."

"Was?" repeated Harry. "Isn't it still his?"

"Perhaps not. If you took it —"

"— I did —"

"— then it may be yours. Of course, the manner of taking matters. Much also depends upon the wand itself. In general,

There was silence in the room, except for the distant rushing of the sea.

"You talk about wands like they've got feelings," said Harry, "like they can think for themselves."

"The wand chooses the wizard," said Ollivander. "That much has always been clear to those of us who have studied wandlore."

"A person can still use a wand that hasn't chosen them, though?" asked Harry.

"Oh yes, if you are any wizard at all you will be able to channel your magic through almost any instrument. The best is the affinity between wizard and wand. These connections are complex. An initial attraction, and then a mutual quest for the perfect wand."

The sea gushed forward and backward; it was a mournful sound.

"I took this wand from Draco Malfoy by force," said Harry. "Can I use it safely?"

"I think so. Subtle laws govern wand ownership, but the conquered wand will usually bend its will to its new master."

"So I should use this one?" said Ron, pulling Wormtail's wand out of his pocket and handing it to Ollivander.

"Chestnut and dragon heartstring. Nine-and-a-quarter inches. Brittle. I was forced to make this shortly after my kidnapping. It will do your bidding, and do it well, than another wand."

"And this holds true for all wands, does it?" asked Harry.

"I think so," replied Ollivander, his protuberant eyes upon Harry's face. "You ask deep questions, Mr. Potter. Wandlore is not simple."

"So, it isn't necessary to kill the previous owner to take true possession of a wand?" asked Harry.

Ollivander swallowed.

"Necessary? No, I should not say that it is necessary to kill."

"There are legends, though," said Harry, and as his heart rate quickened, the pain in his scar became more intense; he felt a sharp pain. "Legends about a wand — or wands — that have passed from hand to hand by murder."

Ollivander turned pale. Against the snowy pillow he was light gray, and his eyes were enormous, bloodshot, and bulging.

"Only one wand, I think," he whispered.

"And You-Know-Who is interested in it, isn't he?" asked Harry.

"I — how?" croaked Ollivander, and he looked appealingly at Ron and Hermione for help. "How do you know this?"

"He wanted you to tell him how to overcome the connection between our wands," said Harry.

Ollivander looked terrified.

"He tortured me, you must understand that! The Cruciatus Curse, I — I had no choice but to tell him what I knew, what I could tell him."

"I understand," said Harry. "You told him about the twin cores? You said he just had to borrow another wizard's wand?"

Ollivander looked horrified, transfixed, by the amount that Harry knew. He nodded slowly.

"But it didn't work," Harry went on. "Mine still beat the borrowed wand. Do you know why that is?"

Ollivander shook his head as slowly as he had just nodded.

"I had . . . never heard of such a thing. Your wand performed something unique that night. The connection of the twin cores, the borrowed wand, I do not know. . . ."

"We were talking about the other wand, the wand that changes hands by murder. When You-Know-Who realized my wand was broken, didn't he?"

"How do you know this?"

Harry did not answer.

"Yes, he asked," whispered Ollivander. "He wanted to know everything I could tell him about the wand variously known as the Elder Wand. . . ."

Harry glanced sideways at Hermione. She looked flabbergasted.

"The Dark Lord," said Ollivander in hushed and frightened tones, "had always been happy with the wand I made him. He never sought another. Now he seeks another, more powerful wand, as the only way to conquer you."

"But he'll know soon, if he doesn't already, that mine's broken beyond repair," said Harry quietly.

"No!" said Hermione, sounding frightened. "He can't know that, Harry, how could he — ?"

"Priori Incantatem," said Harry. "We left your wand and the blackthorn wand at the Malfoys', Hermione. If they examine them, they'll see that yours broke mine, they'll see that you tried and failed to mend it, and they'll realize that I've been lying. The little color she had regained since their arrival had drained from her face. Ron gave Harry a reproachful look, and Hermione looked away. But Mr. Ollivander intervened."

"The Dark Lord no longer seeks the Elder Wand only for your destruction, Mr. Potter. He is determined to possess it. He will use it to destroy you."

"And will it?"

"The owner of the Elder Wand must always fear attack," said Ollivander, "but the idea of the Dark Lord in possession of it is terrifying. Harry was suddenly reminded of how he had been unsure, when they first met, of how much he liked Ollivander. Even now, the Dark wizard in possession of this wand seemed to enthrall him as much as it repulsed him."

"You — you really think this wand exists, then, Mr. Ollivander?" asked Hermione.

"Oh yes," said Ollivander. "Yes, it is perfectly possible to trace the wand's course through history. There are gaps, of course, wand being easily lost or hidden; but always it resurfaces. It has certain identifying characteristics that those who are learned in wandlore are able to recognize. It is true, the wand's history is often obscure, that I and other wandmakers have made it our business to study. They have the ring of authenticity."

"So you — you don't think it can be a fairy tale or a myth?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"No," said Ollivander. "Whether it needs to pass by murder, I do not know. Its history is bloody, but that may be simple for such passions in wizards. Immensely powerful, dangerous in the wrong hands, and an object of incredible fascination."

"Mr. Ollivander," said Harry, "you told You-Know-Who that Gregorovitch had the Elder Wand, didn't you?"

Ollivander turned, if possible, even paler. He looked ghostly as he gulped.

"But how — how do you — ?"

"Never mind how I know it," said Harry, closing his eyes momentarily as his scar burned and he saw, for mere seconds, that it was so much farther north. "You told You-Know-Who that Gregorovitch had the wand?"

"It was a rumor," whispered Ollivander. "A rumor, years and years ago, long before you were born! I believe Gregorovitch was right: that he was studying and duplicating the qualities of the Elder Wand!"

"Yes, I can see that," said Harry. He stood up. "Mr. Ollivander, one last thing, and then we'll let you get some rest. Wh

"The — the what?" asked the wandmaker, looking utterly bewildered.

"The Deathly Hallows."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about. Is this still something to do with wands?"

Harry looked into the sunken face and believed that Ollivander was not acting. He did not know about the Hallows.

"Thank you," said Harry. "Thank you very much. We'll leave you to get some rest now."

Ollivander looked stricken.

"He was torturing me!" he gasped. "The Cruciatus Curse . . . you have no idea. . . ."

"I do," said Harry. "I really do. Please get some rest. Thank you for telling me all of this."

He led Ron and Hermione down the staircase. Harry caught a glimpse of Bill, Fleur, Luna, and Dean sitting at the table up at Harry as he appeared in the doorway, but he merely nodded to them and continued into the garden, Ron and Hermione ahead, and Harry walked back to it, as the pain in his head built more and more powerfully. It was a huge effort now, but he knew that he would have to resist only a little longer. He would yield very soon, because he needed to know the truth, so that he could explain to Ron and Hermione.

"Gregorovitch had the Elder Wand a long time ago," he said. "I saw You-Know-Who trying to find him. When he tracked it as stolen from him by Grindelwald. How Grindelwald found out that Gregorovitch had it, I don't know — but if Gregorovitch had it, that was difficult."

Voldemort was at the gates of Hogwarts; Harry could see him standing there, and see too the lamp bobbing in the p

"And Grindelwald used the Elder Wand to become powerful. And at the height of his power, when Dumbledore knew him, and he took the Elder Wand."

"Dumbledore had the Elder Wand?" said Ron. "But then — where is it now?"

"At Hogwarts," said Harry, fighting to remain with them in the cliff-top garden.

"But then, let's go!" said Ron urgently. "Harry, let's go and get it before he does!"

"It's too late for that," said Harry. He could not help himself, but clutched his head, trying to help it resist. "He knows

"Harry!" Ron said furiously. "How long have you known this — why have we been wasting time? Why did you talk to G

"No," said Harry, and he sank to his knees in the grass. "Hermione's right. Dumbledore didn't want me to have it. He

"The unbeatable wand, Harry!" moaned Ron.

"I'm not supposed to . . . I'm supposed to get the Horcruxes. . . ."

And now everything was cool and dark: The sun was barely visible over the horizon as he glided alongside Snape, up

"I shall join you in the castle shortly," he said in his high, cold voice. "Leave me now."

Snape bowed and set off back up the path, his black cloak billowing behind him. Harry walked slowly, waiting for Snape or anyone else, to see where he was going. But there were no lights in the castle windows, and he could conceal himself from harm that hid him even from his own eyes.

And he walked on, around the edge of the lake, taking in the outlines of the beloved castle, his first kingdom, his birthplace.

And here it was, beside the lake, reflected in the dark waters. The white marble tomb, an unnecessary blot on the far

that heady sense of purpose in destruction. He raised the old yew wand: How fitting that this would be its last great

The tomb split open from head to foot. The shrouded figure was as long and thin as it had been in life. He raised the

The wrappings fell open. The face was translucent, pale, sunken, yet almost perfectly preserved. They had left his spine open. His hands were folded upon his chest, and there it lay, clutched beneath them, buried with him.

Had the old fool imagined that marble or death would protect the wand? Had he thought that the Dark Lord would b

the wand from Dumbledore's grasp, and as he took it, a shower of sparks flew from its tip, sparkling over the corpse

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SHELL COTTAGE

Bill and Fleur's cottage stood alone on a cliff overlooking the sea, its walls embedded with shells and whitewashed. It was not the tiny cottage or its garden, he could hear the constant ebb and flow of the sea, like the breathing of some great, s

excuses to escape the crowded cottage, craving the cliff-top view of open sky and wide, empty sea, and the feel of cold air. The enormity of his decision not to race Voldemort to the wand still scared Harry. He could not remember, ever before, when he would not help voicing whenever they were together.

"What if Dumbledore wanted us to work out the symbol in time to get the wand?" "What if working out what the symbol is the Elder Wand, how the hell are we supposed to finish off You-Know-Who?"

Harry had no answers: There were moments when he wondered whether it had been outright madness not to try to find out satisfactorily why he had decided against it: Every time he tried to reconstruct the internal arguments that had led to his decision. The odd thing was that Hermione's support made him feel just as confused as Ron's doubts. Now forced to accept that the wand was his, and that the way Voldemort had taken possession of it was repellent, not to be considered.

"You could never have done that, Harry," she said again and again. "You couldn't have broken into Dumbledore's grave. But the idea of Dumbledore's corpse frightened Harry much less than the possibility that he might have misunderstood the signs, hoping in the dark; he had chosen his path but kept looking back, wondering whether he had misread the signs, whether the wand had crashed over him again, powerful as the waves slamming themselves against the cliff beneath the cottage.

"But is he dead?" said Ron, three days after they had arrived at the cottage. Harry had been staring out over the wall of the cottage when Hermione had found him; he wished they had not, having no wish to join in with their argument.

"Yes, he is, Ron, please don't start that again!"

"Look at the facts, Hermione," said Ron, speaking across Harry, who continued to gaze at the horizon. "The silver doe was seen."

"Harry admits he could have imagined the eye! Don't you, Harry?"

"I could have," said Harry without looking at her.

"But you don't think you did, do you?" asked Ron.

"No, I don't," said Harry.

"There you go!" said Ron quickly, before Hermione could carry on. "If it wasn't Dumbledore, explain how Dobby knew about the wand."

"I can't — but can you explain how Dumbledore sent him to us if he's lying in a tomb at Hogwarts?"

"I dunno, it could've been his ghost!"

"Dumbledore wouldn't come back as a ghost," said Harry. There was little about Dumbledore he was sure of now, but he was sure of this.

"What d'you mean, 'gone on?'" asked Ron, but before Harry could say any more, a voice behind them said, "Arry?"

Fleur had come out of the cottage, her long silver hair flying in the breeze.

"Arry, Griphook would like to speak to you. 'E eez in ze smallest bedroom, 'e says 'e does not want to be over'eard."

Her dislike of the goblin sending her to deliver messages was clear; she looked irritable as she walked back around the cottage.

Griphook was waiting for them, as Fleur had said, in the tiniest of the cottage's three bedrooms, in which Hermione and Harry sat, looking at the bright, cloudy sky, which gave the room a fiery glow at odds with the rest of the airy, light cottage.

"I have reached my decision, Harry Potter," said the goblin, who was sitting cross-legged in a low chair, drumming his fingers on his knees. "I will consider it base treachery, I have decided to help you —"

"That's great!" said Harry, relief surging through him. "Griphook, thank you, we're really —"

"— in return," said the goblin firmly, "for payment."

Slightly taken aback, Harry hesitated.

"How much do you want? I've got gold."

"Not gold," said Griphook. "I have gold."

His black eyes glittered; there were no whites to his eyes.

"I want the sword. The sword of Godric Gryffindor."

Harry's spirits plummeted.

"You can't have that," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Then," said the goblin softly, "we have a problem."

"We can give you something else," said Ron eagerly. "I'll bet the Lestranges have got loads of stuff, you can take your pick."

He had said the wrong thing. Griphook flushed angrily.

"I am not a thief, boy! I am not trying to procure treasures to which I have no right!"

"The sword's ours —"

"It is not," said the goblin.

"We're Gryffindors, and it was Godric Gryffindor's —"

"And before it was Gryffindor's, whose was it?" demanded the goblin, sitting up straight.

"No one's," said Ron. "It was made for him, wasn't it?"

"No!" cried the goblin, bristling with anger as he pointed a long finger at Ron. "Wizarding arrogance again! That sword was a lost treasure, a masterpiece of goblinwork! It belongs with the goblins! The sword is the price of my hire, take it!"

Griphook glared at them. Harry glanced at the other two, then said, "We need to discuss this, Griphook, if that's all right."

The goblin nodded, looking sour.

Downstairs in the empty sitting room, Harry walked to the fireplace, brow furrowed, trying to think what to do. Behind him, Hermione and Ron waited. "The sword?"

"It is true?" Harry asked Hermione. "Was the sword stolen by Gryffindor?"

"I don't know," she said hopelessly. "Wizarding history often skates over what the wizards have done to other magical creatures, or stole the sword."

"It'll be one of those goblin stories," said Ron, "about how the wizards are always trying to get one over on them. I suppose that's true, but it's not of our wands."

"Goblins have got good reason to dislike wizards, Ron," said Hermione. "They've been treated brutally in the past."

"Goblins aren't exactly fluffy little bunnies, though, are they?" said Ron. "They've killed plenty of us. They've fought dirty."

"But arguing with Griphook about whose race is most underhanded and violent isn't going to make him more likely to help us," said Hermione. "There was a pause while they tried to think of a way around the problem. Harry looked out of the window at Dobby's footstone."

"Okay," said Ron, and Harry turned back to face him, "how's this? We tell Griphook we need the sword until we get into the vault — isn't there? We switch them, and give him the fake."

"Ron, he'd know the difference better than we would!" said Hermione. "He's the only one who realized there had been a switch."

"Yeah, but we could scarper before he realizes —"

He quailed beneath the look Hermione was giving him.

"That," she said quietly, "is despicable. Ask for his help, then double-cross him? And you wonder why goblins don't like wizards?"

Ron's ears had turned red.

"All right, all right! It was the only thing I could think of! What's your solution, then?"

"We need to offer him something else, something just as valuable."

"Brilliant. I'll go and get one of our other ancient goblin-made swords and you can gift wrap it."

Silence fell between them again. Harry was sure that the goblin would accept nothing but the sword, even if they had to offer him an indispensable weapon against the Horcruxes.

He closed his eyes for a moment or two and listened to the rush of the sea. The idea that Gryffindor might have stolen the sword was a Gryffindor; Gryffindor had been the champion of Muggle-borns, the wizard who had clashed with the purebloods.

"Maybe he's lying," Harry said, opening his eyes again. "Griphook. Maybe Gryffindor didn't take the sword. How do we know?"

"Does it make a difference?" asked Hermione.

"Changes how I feel about it," said Harry.

He took a deep breath.

"We'll tell him he can have the sword after he's helped us get into that vault — but we'll be careful to avoid telling him anything about the Horcruxes. A grin spread slowly across Ron's face. Hermione, however, looked alarmed."

"Harry, we can't —"

"He can have it," Harry went on, "after we've used it on all of the Horcruxes. I'll make sure he gets it then. I'll keep my word."

"But that could be years!" said Hermione.

"I know that, but he needn't. I won't be lying . . . really."

Harry met her eyes with a mixture of defiance and shame. He remembered the words that had been engraved over the entrance to the Lestranges' vault. What choice did they have?

"I don't like it," said Hermione.

"Nor do I, much," Harry admitted.

"Well, I think it's genius," said Ron, standing up again. "Let's go and tell him."

Back in the smallest bedroom, Harry made the offer, careful to phrase it so as not to give any definite time for the goblin to answer; he felt irritated at her, afraid that she might give the game away. However, Griphook had eyes for nobody but himself.

"I have your word, Harry Potter, that you will give me the sword of Gryffindor if I help you?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Then shake," said the goblin, holding out his hand.

Harry took it and shook. He wondered whether those black eyes saw any misgivings in his own. Then Griphook relined the sword in its scabbard. It was like planning to break into the Ministry all over again. They settled to work in the smallest bedroom, which was the only room in the cottage that had a fireplace.

"I have visited the Lestranges' vault only once," Griphook told them, "on the occasion I was told to place inside it the treasure of the most powerful wizarding families store their treasures at the deepest level, where the vaults are largest and best protected. . . ."

They remained shut in the cupboardlike room for hours at a time. Slowly the days stretched into weeks. There was no more Polyjuice Potion; the store of Polyjuice Potion was greatly depleted.

"There's really only enough left for one of us," said Hermione, tilting the thick mudlike potion against the lamplight.

"That'll be enough," said Harry, who was examining Griphook's hand-drawn map of the deepest passageways.

The other inhabitants of Shell Cottage could hardly fail to notice that something was going on now that Harry, Ron, and Hermione were there, although Harry often felt Bill's eyes on the three of them at the table, thoughtful, concerned.

The longer they spent together, the more Harry realized that he did not much like the goblin. Griphook was unexpected, and seemed to relish the possibility that they might have to hurt other wizards to reach the Lestranges' vault. Harry and Hermione did not discuss it: They needed Griphook.

The goblin ate only grudgingly with the rest of them. Even after his legs had mended, he continued to request trays of food from the kitchen (following an angry outburst from Fleur) went upstairs to tell him that the arrangement could not continue. Thereafter, he used to eat the same food, insisting, instead, on lumps of raw meat, roots, and various fungi.

Harry felt responsible: It was, after all, he who had insisted that the goblin remain at Shell Cottage so that he could do his job. He had driven into hiding, that Bill, Fred, George, and Mr. Weasley could no longer work.

"I'm sorry," he told Fleur, one blustery April evening as he helped her prepare dinner. "I never meant you to have to do this."

She had just set some knives to work, chopping up steaks for Griphook and Bill, who had preferred his meat bloody and away behind her, her somewhat irritable expression softened.

"Arry, you saved my sister's life, I do not forget."

This was not, strictly speaking, true, but Harry decided against reminding her that Gabrielle had never been in real danger. "Anyway," Fleur went on, pointing her wand at a pot of sauce on the stove, which began to bubble at once, "Mr. Ollivander. Ze goblin," she scowled a little at the mention of him, "can move downstairs, and you, Ron, and Dean can take zat room. We don't mind sleeping in the living room," said Harry, who knew that Griphook would think poorly of having to sleep there. "Don't worry about us." And when she tried to protest he went on, "We'll be off your hands soon too, Ron, Hermione." "But what do you mean?" she said, frowning at him, her wand pointing at the casserole dish now suspended in midair. She looked rather like Mrs. Weasley as she said it, and he was glad that the back door opened at that moment. Luna's arms full of driftwood.

". . . and tiny little ears," Luna was saying, "a bit like a hippo's, Daddy says, only purple and hairy. And if you want to come too fast. . . ."

Looking uncomfortable, Dean shrugged at Harry as he passed, following Luna into the combined dining and sitting room. In the chance to escape Fleur's questions, Harry grabbed two jugs of pumpkin juice and followed them.

". . . and if you ever come to our house I'll be able to show you the horn, Daddy wrote to me about it but I haven't seen it on the Express and I never got home for Christmas," Luna was saying, as she and Dean relaid the fire.

"Luna, we told you," Hermione called over to her. "That horn exploded. It came from an Erumpent, not a Crumple-Horned Snorkack."

"No, it was definitely a Snorkack horn," said Luna serenely. "Daddy told me. It will probably have re-formed by now, though." Hermione shook her head and continued laying down forks as Bill appeared, leading Mr. Ollivander down the stairs. He supported his arm as the latter supported him, carrying a large suitcase.

"I'm going to miss you, Mr. Ollivander," said Luna, approaching the old man.

"And I you, my dear," said Ollivander, patting her on the shoulder. "You were an inexpressible comfort to me in that time."

"So, au revoir, Mr. Ollivander," said Fleur, kissing him on both cheeks. "And I wonder wheizzer you could oblige me by giving me my tiara."

"It will be an honor," said Ollivander with a little bow, "the very least I can do in return for your generous hospitality."

Fleur drew out a worn velvet case, which she opened to show the wandmaker. The tiara sat glittering and twinkling in the light.

"Moonstones and diamonds," said Griphook, who had sidled into the room without Harry noticing. "Made by goblins."

"And paid for by wizards," said Bill quietly, and the goblin shot him a look that was both furtive and challenging.

A strong wind gusted against the cottage windows as Bill and Ollivander set off into the night. The rest of them squeezed into the room to move, they started to eat. The fire crackled and popped in the grate beside them. Fleur, Harry noticed, was in a hurry; however, Bill returned before they had finished their first course, his long hair tangled by the wind.

"Everything's fine," he told Fleur. "Ollivander settled in, Mum and Dad say hello. Ginny sends you all her love. Fred and George are running an Owl-Order business out of her back room. It cheered her up to have her tiara back, though. She said she thought it was lovely."

"Ah, she eez charmante, your aunt," said Fleur crossly, waving her wand and causing the dirty plates to rise and form a pile.

"Daddy's made a tiara," piped up Luna. "Well, more of a crown, really."

Ron caught Harry's eye and grinned; Harry knew that he was remembering the ludicrous headdress they had seen on the television.

"Yes, he's trying to re-create the lost diadem of Ravenclaw. He thinks he's identified most of the main elements now."

There was a bang on the front door. Everyone's head turned toward it. Fleur came running out of the kitchen, looking worried; Harry, Ron, and Hermione did the same. Silently Griphook slipped beneath the table, out of sight.

"Who is it?" Bill called.

"It is I, Remus John Lupin!" called a voice over the howling wind. Harry experienced a thrill of fear; what had happened? The Secret-Keeper of Shell Cottage, told me the address and bade me come in an emergency!"

"Lupin," muttered Bill, and he ran to the door and wrenched it open.

Lupin fell over the threshold. He was white-faced, wrapped in a traveling cloak, his graying hair windswept. He straightened up, then cried aloud, "It's a boy! We've named him Ted, after Dora's father!"

Hermione shrieked.

"Wha — ? Tonks — Tonks has had the baby?"

"Yes, yes, she's had the baby!" shouted Lupin. All around the table came cries of delight, sighs of relief: Hermione and Dean, a baby!" as if he had never heard of such a thing before.

"Yes — yes — a boy," said Lupin again, who seemed dazed by his own happiness. He strode around the table and hugged everyone who had happened.

"You'll be godfather?" he said as he released Harry.

"M-me?" stammered Harry.

"You, yes, of course — Dora quite agrees, no one better —"

"I — yeah — blimey —"

Harry felt overwhelmed, astonished, delighted; now Bill was hurrying to fetch wine, and Fleur was persuading Lupin to stay.

"I can't stay long, I must get back," said Lupin, beaming around at them all: He looked years younger than Harry had seen him. Bill had soon filled all of their goblets, they stood and raised them high in a toast.

"To Teddy Remus Lupin," said Lupin, "a great wizard in the making!"

"Oo does 'e look like?" Fleur inquired.

"I think he looks like Dora, but she thinks he is like me. Not much hair. It looked black when he was born, but I swear the time I get back. Andromeda says Tonks's hair started changing color the day that she was born." He drained his goblet and made to fill it again.

The wind buffeted the little cottage and the fire leapt and crackled, and Bill was soon opening another bottle of wine and moved them for a while from their state of siege: Tidings of new life were exhilarating. Only the goblin seemed untouched. He went back to the bedroom he now occupied alone. Harry thought he was the only one who had noticed this, until he said, "No . . . no . . . I really must get back," said Lupin at last, declining yet another goblet of wine. He got to his feet and put on his cloak. "Good-bye, good-bye — I'll try and bring some pictures in a few days' time — they'll all be so glad to know that I've seen you." He fastened his cloak and made his farewells, hugging the women and grasping hands with the men, then, still beaming, he said, "Godfather, Harry!" said Bill as they walked into the kitchen together, helping clear the table. "A real honor! Congratulations!" As Harry set down the empty goblets he was carrying, Bill pulled the door behind him closed, shutting out the still-voice of the goblin in Lupin's absence.

"I wanted a private word, actually, Harry. It hasn't been easy to get an opportunity with the cottage this full of people." Bill hesitated.

"Harry, you're planning something with Griphook."

It was a statement, not a question, and Harry did not bother to deny it. He merely looked at Bill, waiting.

"I know goblins," said Bill. "I've worked for Gringotts ever since I left Hogwarts. As far as there can be friendship between wizards and goblins I know well, and like." Again, Bill hesitated.

"Harry, what do you want from Griphook, and what have you promised him in return?"

"I can't tell you that," said Harry. "Sorry, Bill."

The kitchen door opened behind them; Fleur was trying to bring through more empty goblets.

"Wait," Bill told her. "Just a moment."

She backed out and he closed the door again.

"Then I have to say this," Bill went on. "If you have struck any kind of bargain with Griphook, and most particularly if it involves gold, then I must be very careful. Goblin notions of ownership, payment, and repayment are not the same as human ones."

Harry felt a slight squirm of discomfort, as though a small snake had stirred inside him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"We are talking about a different breed of being," said Bill. "Dealings between wizards and goblins have been fraught with difficulty. There has been fault on both sides, I would never claim that wizards have been innocent. However, there is a belief among wizards, and I believe it is a just belief, that wizards cannot be trusted in matters of gold and treasure, that they have no respect for goblin ownership."

"I respect —" Harry began, but Bill shook his head.

"You don't understand, Harry, nobody could understand unless they have lived with goblins. To a goblin, the rightful owner of a goblin-made object is the goblin who made it. All goblin-made objects are, in goblin eyes, rightfully theirs."

"But if it was bought —"

"— then they would consider it rented by the one who had paid the money. They have, however, great difficulty with the idea of ownership. I saw Griphook's face when the tiara passed under his eyes. He disapproves. I believe he thinks, as do the fiercest of them, that the original purchaser died. They consider our habit of keeping goblin-made objects, passing them from wizard to wizard, as a kind of theft. Harry had an ominous feeling now; he wondered whether Bill guessed more than he was letting on.

"All I am saying," said Bill, setting his hand on the door back into the sitting room, "is to be very careful what you promise to Gringotts than to renege on a promise to a goblin."

"Right," said Harry as Bill opened the door, "yeah. Thanks. I'll bear that in mind."

As he followed Bill back to the others a wry thought came to him, born no doubt of the wine he had drunk. He seemed to have been in as Sirius Black had been to him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

GRINGOTTS

Their plans were made, their preparations complete; in the smallest bedroom a single long, coarse black hair (plucked from Hermione's head) curled in a small glass phial on the mantelpiece.

"And you'll be using her actual wand," said Harry, nodding toward the walnut wand, "so I reckon you'll be pretty convinced that it will work." Hermione looked frightened that the wand might sting or bite her as she picked it up.

"I hate this thing," she said in a low voice. "I really hate it. It feels all wrong, it doesn't work properly for me. . . . It's like a blackthorn wand. Harry could not help but remember how Hermione had dismissed his loathing of the blackthorn wand, insisting that she was simply using it to practice. He chose not to repeat her own advice back to her, however; the eve of their attempted attack on the Ministry of Magic.

"It'll probably help you get in character, though," said Ron. "Think what that wand's done!"

"But that's my point!" said Hermione. "This is the wand that tortured Neville's mum and dad, and who knows how many others? Harry had not thought of that: He looked down at the wand and was visited by a brutal urge to snap it, to slice it in half. He stood up and went to the door, leaving Hermione beside him.

"I miss my wand," Hermione said miserably. "I wish Mr. Ollivander could have made me another one too."

Mr. Ollivander had sent Luna a new wand that morning. She was out on the back lawn at that moment, testing its ca the Snatchers, was watching rather gloomily.

Harry looked down at the hawthorn wand that had once belonged to Draco Malfoy. He had been surprised, but pleased to have done. Remembering what Ollivander had told them of the secret workings of wands, Harry thought he knew what he was doing by taking it personally from Bellatrix.

The door of the bedroom opened and Griphook entered. Harry reached instinctively for the hilt of the sword and drew it, knowing that the goblin had noticed. Seeking to gloss over the sticky moment, he said, "We've just been checking the last-minute details for tomorrow, and we've told them not to get up to see us off."

They had been firm on this point, because Hermione would need to transform into Bellatrix before they left, and the more she had to do, the better. They had also explained that they would not be returning. As they had lost Perkins's old tent cover, they had bought another one. It was now packed inside the beaded bag, which, Harry was impressed to learn, Hermione had protected with a magic sock.

Though he would miss Bill, Fleur, Luna, and Dean, not to mention the home comforts they had enjoyed over the last few weeks at Shell Cottage. He was tired of trying to make sure that they were not overheard, tired of being shut in the tiny, dark room, not knowing precisely how and when they were to part from the goblin without handing over Gryffindor's sword remained a question. He knew how they were going to do it, because the goblin rarely left Harry, Ron, and Hermione alone together for more than a few minutes. He had told Ron, as the goblin's long fingers kept appearing around the edges of doors. With Bill's warning in mind, Harry could not help the skulduggery. Hermione disapproved so heartily of the planned double-cross that Harry had given up attempting to explain it. What they had been able to snatch a few Griphook-free moments, had come up with nothing better than "We'll just have to be quick." Harry slept badly that night. Lying awake in the early hours, he thought back to the way he had felt the night before the attack, a sense of anticipation, almost an excitement. Now he was experiencing jolts of anxiety, nagging doubts: He could not shake off the thought that their plan was good, that Griphook knew what they were facing, that they were well-prepared for all the difficulties ahead. Once or twice he heard Ron stir and was sure that he too was awake, but they were sharing the sitting room with Dean. It was a relief when six o'clock arrived and they could slip out of their sleeping bags, dress in the semidarkness, then leave the inn and Griphook. The dawn was chilly, but there was little wind now that it was May. Harry looked up at the stars still glimmering in the sky, looking backward and forward against the cliff: He was going to miss the sound.

Small green shoots were forcing their way up through the red earth of Dobby's grave now; in a year's time the mound would be a name had already acquired a weathered look. He realized now that they could hardly have laid Dobby to rest in a more fitting place. He was going to miss him behind. Looking down on the grave, he wondered yet again how the elf had known where to come to rescue them. He was going to miss the sound around his neck, through which he could feel the jagged mirror fragment in which he had been sure he had seen Dumbledore.

Bellatrix Lestrange was striding across the lawn toward them, accompanied by Griphook. As she walked, she was tugging at the old robes they had taken from Grimmauld Place. Though Harry knew perfectly well that it was really Hermione, he could not help but notice, as, her long black hair rippling down her back, her heavily lidded eyes disdainful as they rested upon him; but then she turned to him. "She tasted disgusting, worse than Gurdyroots! Okay, Ron, come here so I can do you. . . ."

"Right, but remember, I don't like the beard too long —"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, this isn't about looking handsome —"

"It's not that, it gets in the way! But I liked my nose a bit shorter, try and do it the way you did last time."

Hermione sighed and set to work, muttering under her breath as she transformed various aspects of Ron's appearance to match the malevolent aura cast by Bellatrix to protect him. Meanwhile Harry and Griphook were to be concealed under the Cloak of Invisibility.

"There," said Hermione, "how does he look, Harry?"

It was just possible to discern Ron under his disguise, but only, Harry thought, because he knew him so well. Ron's hair was black, he had no freckles, a short, broad nose, and heavy eyebrows.

"Well, he's not my type, but he'll do," said Harry. "Shall we go, then?"

All three of them glanced back at Shell Cottage, lying dark and silent under the fading stars, then turned and began to walk. The Fidelius Charm stopped working and they would be able to Disapparate. Once past the gate, Griphook spoke.

"I should climb up now, Harry Potter, I think?"

Harry bent down and the goblin clambered onto his back, his hands linked in front of Harry's throat. He was not heavy, but he had a great strength with which he clung on. Hermione pulled the Invisibility Cloak out of the beaded bag and threw it over the three of them.

"Perfect," she said, bending down to check Harry's feet. "I can't see a thing. Let's go."

Harry turned on the spot, with Griphook on his shoulders, concentrating with all his might on the Leaky Cauldron, then he stepped through the inn tighter as they moved into the compressing darkness, and seconds later Harry's feet found pavement and he opened his eyes to the angdog expressions of early morning, quite unconscious of the little inn's existence.

The bar of the Leaky Cauldron was nearly deserted. Tom, the stooped and toothless landlord, was polishing glasses. A man in a dark suit and a woman in a dark dress, engaged in conversation in the far corner glanced at Hermione and drew back into the shadows.

"Madam Lestrange," murmured Tom, and as Hermione passed he inclined his head subserviently.

"Good morning," said Hermione, and as Harry crept past, still carrying Griphook piggyback under the Cloak, he saw Tom's eyes follow them.

"Too polite," Harry whispered in Hermione's ear as they passed out of the inn into the tiny backyard. "You need to tell them to go."

"Okay, okay!"

Hermione drew out Bellatrix's wand and tapped a brick in the nondescript wall in front of them. At once the bricks began to move.

ich grew wider and wider, finally forming an archway onto the narrow cobbled street that was Diagon Alley. It was quiet, barely time for the shops to open, and there were hardly any shoppers abroad. The crooked, cobbled street had before his first term at Hogwarts so many years before. More shops than ever were boarded up, though several new ones had been opened since his last visit. Harry's own face glared down at him from posters plastered over many windows, always captioned with "Beware of the Dark Lord". A number of ragged people sat huddled in doorways. He heard them moaning to the few passersby, pleading for food and shelter.

As they set off along the street, the beggars glimpsed Hermione. They seemed to melt away before her, drawing hooded robes over their faces and edging away after them curiously, until the man with the bloodied bandage came staggering right across her path.

"My children!" he bellowed, pointing at her. His voice was cracked, high-pitched; he sounded distraught. "Where are my children?" "I — I really —" stammered Hermione.

The man lunged at her, reaching for her throat: Then, with a bang and a burst of red light he was thrown backward onto the pavement, gasping and retched and a look of shock visible behind his beard. Faces appeared at the windows on either side of the street, where people in robes about them and broke into gentle trots, keen to vacate the scene.

Their entrance into Diagon Alley could hardly have been more conspicuous; for a moment Harry wondered whether they had been noticed. Before they could move or consult one another, however, they heard a cry from behind them.

"Why, Madam Lestrangle!"

Harry whirled around and Griphook tightened his hold around Harry's neck: A tall, thin wizard with a crown of bushy eyebrows and a long, thin nose. "It's Travers," hissed the goblin into Harry's ear, but at that moment Harry could not think who Travers was. Hermione looked at him with such contempt as she could muster:

"And what do you want?"

Travers stopped in his tracks, clearly affronted.

"He's another Death Eater!" breathed Griphook, and Harry sidled sideways to repeat the information into Hermione's ear.

"I merely sought to greet you," said Travers coolly, "but if my presence is not welcome . . ."

Harry recognized his voice now; Travers was one of the Death Eaters who had been summoned to Xenophilius's house.

"No, no, not at all, Travers," said Hermione quickly, trying to cover up her mistake. "How are you?"

"Well, I confess I am surprised to see you out and about, Bellatrix."

"Really? Why?" asked Hermione.

"Well," Travers coughed, "I heard that the inhabitants of Malfoy Manor were confined to the house, after the . . . ah . . ."

Harry willed Hermione to keep her head. If this was true, and Bellatrix was not supposed to be out in public —

"The Dark Lord forgives those who have served him most faithfully in the past," said Hermione in a magnificent imitation of her mother's voice. "It is not as good with him as mine is, Travers."

Though the Death Eater looked offended, he also seemed less suspicious. He glanced down at the man Ron had just rescued.

"How did it offend you?"

"It does not matter, it will not do so again," said Hermione coolly.

"Some of these wandless can be troublesome," said Travers. "While they do nothing but beg I have no objection, but some are more than that. Last week. 'I'm a witch, sir, I'm a witch, let me prove it to you!'" he said in a squeaky impersonation. "As if I was going to let a witch prove it to me. Well, 'are you using at the moment, Bellatrix? I heard that your own was —'"

"I have my wand here," said Hermione coldly, holding up Bellatrix's wand. "I don't know what rumors you have been spreading, but I have my wand here." Travers seemed a little taken aback at that, and he turned instead to Ron.

"Who is your friend? I do not recognize him."

"This is Dragomir Despard," said Hermione; they had decided that a fictional foreigner was the safest cover for Ron to use with the Dark Lord's aims. He has traveled here from Transylvania to see our new regime."

"Indeed? How do you do, Dragomir?"

"Ow you?" said Ron, holding out his hand.

Travers extended two fingers and shook Ron's hand as though frightened of dirtying himself.

"So what brings you and your — ah — sympathetic friend to Diagon Alley this early?" asked Travers.

"I need to visit Gringotts," said Hermione.

"Alas, I also," said Travers. "Gold, filthy gold! We cannot live without it, yet I confess I deplore the necessity of consort with the Dark Lord." Harry felt Griphook's clasped hands tighten momentarily around his neck.

"Shall we?" said Travers, gesturing Hermione forward.

Hermione had no choice but to fall into step beside him and head along the crooked, cobbled street toward the place where the small shops. Ron sloped along beside them, and Harry and Griphook followed.

A watchful Death Eater was the very last thing they needed, and the worst of it was, with Travers marching at what he considered a respectable pace, it was impossible for Harry to communicate with Hermione or Ron. All too soon they arrived at the foot of the marble steps leading up to the grand entrance of Gringotts. The goblins who usually flanked the entrance had been replaced by two wizards, both of whom were clutching long thin rods.

"Ah, Probity Probes," sighed Travers theatrically, "so crude — but effective!"

And he set off up the steps, nodding left and right to the wizards, who raised the golden rods and passed them up and down the steps, as if they were searching for hidden magical objects. Knowing that he had only seconds, Harry pointed Draco's wand at each of the guards. The guards, who were looking through the bronze doors at the inner hall, each of the guards gave a little start as the spells hit them. Hermione's long black hair rippled behind her as she climbed the steps.

"One moment, madam," said the guard, raising his Probe.

"But you've just done that!" said Hermione in Bellatrix's commanding, arrogant voice. Travers looked around, eyebrow arched at the Probe and then at his companion, who said in a slightly dazed voice,

"Yeah, you've just checked them, Marius."

Hermione swept forward, Ron by her side, Harry and Griphook trotting invisibly behind them. Harry glanced back at the guards' heads.

Two goblins stood before the inner doors, which were made of silver and which carried the poem warning of dire retribution. Suddenly a knife-sharp memory came to him: standing on this very spot on the day that he had turned eleven, the memory of the day when, "Like I said, yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it." Gringotts had seemed a place of wonder that day, the enchanted repository of gold and silver that he had never for an instant could he have dreamed that he would return to steal. . . . But within seconds they were standing in the middle of the long counter. The long counter was manned by goblins sitting on high stools, serving the first customers of the day. Hermione, Ron, and Harry each took a gold coin through an eyeglass. Hermione allowed Travers to step ahead of her on the pretext of explaining features of the counter. The goblin tossed the coin he was holding aside, said to nobody in particular, "Leprechaun," and then greeted Travers with a nod back to him.

Hermione stepped forward.

"Madam Lestrangle!" said the goblin, evidently startled. "Dear me! How — how may I help you today?"

"I wish to enter my vault," said Hermione.

The old goblin seemed to recoil a little. Harry glanced around. Not only was Travers hanging back, watching, but several other goblins were looking on.

"You have . . . identification?" asked the goblin.

"Identification? I — I have never been asked for identification before!" said Hermione.

"They know!" whispered Griphook in Harry's ear. "They must have been warned there might be an impostor!"

"Your wand will do, madam," said the goblin. He held out a slightly trembling hand, and in a dreadful blast of realization, Hermione saw that Bellatrix's wand had been stolen.

"Act now, act now," whispered Griphook in Harry's ear, "the Imperius Curse!"

Harry raised the hawthorn wand beneath the cloak, pointed it at the old goblin, and whispered, for the first time in his life, the Imperius Curse. A curious sensation shot down Harry's arm, a feeling of tingling warmth that seemed to flow from his mind, down through his fingers, and into the wand just cast. The goblin took Bellatrix's wand, examined it closely, and then said, "Ah, you have had a new wand made, Madam Lestrangle."

"What?" said Hermione. "No, no, that's mine —"

"A new wand?" said Travers, approaching the counter again; still the goblins all around were watching. "But how could you have a new wand? Harry acted without thinking: Pointing his wand at Travers, he muttered, "Imperio!" once more.

"Oh yes, I see," said Travers, looking down at Bellatrix's wand, "yes, very handsome. And is it working well? I always thought it was a bit old." Hermione looked utterly bewildered, but to Harry's enormous relief she accepted the bizarre turn of events without protest. The old goblin behind the counter clapped his hands and a younger goblin approached.

"I shall need the Clankers," he told the goblin, who dashed away and returned a moment later with a leather bag that he handed to Travers. "Good, good! So, if you will follow me, Madam Lestrangle," said the old goblin, hopping down off his stool and vanishing. He appeared around the end of the counter, jogging happily toward them, the contents of the leather bag still jingling. The door to the vaults was open. Ron was drawing attention to this odd phenomenon by regarding Travers with confusion.

"Wait — Bogrod!"

Another goblin came scurrying around the counter.

"We have instructions," he said with a bow to Hermione. "Forgive me, Madam, but there have been special orders regarding visitors. He whispered urgently in Bogrod's ear, but the Imperiused goblin shook him off.

"I am aware of the instructions. Madam Lestrangle wishes to visit her vault . . . Very old family . . . old clients . . . This vault is reserved for her. And, still clanking, he hurried toward one of the many doors leading off the hall. Harry looked back at Travers, who was looking at his decision: With a flick of his wand he made Travers come with them, walking meekly in their wake as they reached the vault. The vault was lit with flaming torches.

"We're in trouble; they suspect," said Harry as the door slammed behind them and he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak. Bogrod showed the slightest surprise at the sudden appearance of Harry Potter in their midst. "They're Imperiused," he said. Travers and Bogrod, who were both now standing there looking blank. "I don't think I did it strongly enough, I don't think I did it at all." And another memory darted through his mind, of the real Bellatrix Lestrangle shrieking at him when he had first tried to use the Imperius Curse. "What do we do?" asked Ron. "Shall we get out now, while we can?"

"If we can," said Hermione, looking back toward the door into the main hall, beyond which who knew what was happening. "We've got this far, I say we go on," said Harry.

"Good!" said Griphook. "So, we need Bogrod to control the cart; I no longer have the authority. But there will not be room for all of us. Harry pointed his wand at Travers.

"Imperio!"

The wizard turned and set off along the dark track at a smart pace.

"What are you making him do?"

"Hide," said Harry as he pointed his wand at Bogrod, who whistled to summon a little cart that came trundling along. Harry could hear shouting behind them in the main hall as they all clambered into it, Bogrod in front with Griphook, Harry, Ron,

With a jerk the cart moved off, gathering speed: They hurtled past Travers, who was wriggling into a crack in the wall, through narrow passages, sloping downward all the time. Harry could not hear anything over the rattling of the cart on the tracks, flying ever deeper into the earth, but he kept glancing back. They might as well have left enormous footprints behind them, for they had to have disguised Hermione as Bellatrix, to have brought along Bellatrix's wand, when the Death Eaters knew who she was. They were deeper than Harry had ever penetrated within Gringotts; they took a hairpin bend at speed and saw ahead of them a waterfall. Harry heard Griphook shout, "No!" but there was no braking: They zoomed through it. Water filled Harry's eyes and the cart flipped over and they were all thrown out of it. Harry heard the cart smash into pieces against the passage wall, and he lay toward the ground as though weightless, landing painlessly on the rocky passage floor.

"C-Cushioning Charm," Hermione spluttered, as Ron pulled her to her feet, but to Harry's horror he saw that she was sopping wet and completely herself; Ron was red-haired and beardless again. They were realizing it as they looked at the wall. "The Thief's Downfall!" said Griphook, clambering to his feet and looking back at the deluge onto the tracks, which, Harry thought, was a charmment, all magical concealment! They know there are impostors in Gringotts, they have set off defenses against them. Harry saw Hermione checking that she still had the beaded bag, and hurriedly thrust his own hand under his jacket to see Bogrod shaking his head in bewilderment: The Thief's Downfall seemed to have lifted the Imperius Curse.

"We need him," said Griphook, "we cannot enter the vault without a Gringotts goblin. And we need the Clankers!" "Imperio!" Harry said again; his voice echoed through the stone passage as he felt again the sense of heady control that he had, his will, his befuddled expression changing to one of polite indifference, as Ron hurried to pick up the leather bag of money. "Harry, I think I can hear people coming!" said Hermione, and she pointed Bellatrix's wand at the waterfall and cried, "Freeze!" Water as it flew up the passageway.

"Good thinking," said Harry. "Lead the way, Griphook!"

"How are we going to get out again?" Ron asked as they hurried on foot into the darkness after the goblin, Bogrod padding behind them.

"Let's worry about that when we have to," said Harry. He was trying to listen: He thought he could hear something clanking.

"Not far, Harry Potter, not far . . ."

And they turned a corner and saw the thing for which Harry had been prepared, but which still brought all of them to a halt. A gigantic dragon was tethered to the ground in front of them, barring access to four or five of the deepest vaults in the bank. Its long incarceration under the ground; its eyes were milky pink; both rear legs bore heavy cuffs from which chains hung. Its spiky, bat-like wings, folded close to its body, would have filled the chamber if it spread them, and when it turned its ugly head, it trembled, opened its mouth, and spat a jet of fire that sent them running back up the passageway.

"It is partially blind," panted Griphook, "but even more savage for that. However, we have the means to control it. It has no sense of smell."

Ron passed the bag to Griphook, and the goblin pulled out a number of small metal instruments that when shaken made a clanking noise. He handed them out: Bogrod accepted his meekly.

"You know what to do," Griphook told Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "It will expect pain when it hears the noise: It will retreat. It will not attack."

They advanced around the corner again, shaking the Clankers, and the noise echoed off the rocky walls, grossly magnifying the din. The dragon let out another hoarse roar, then retreated. Harry could see it trembling, and as they drew nearer, he guessed that it had been taught to fear hot swords when it heard the sound of the Clankers.

"Make him press his hand to the door!" Griphook urged Harry, who turned his wand again upon Bogrod. The old goblin melted away to reveal a cave-like opening crammed from floor to ceiling with golden coins and goblets, silver armor, thousands of jeweled wings — potions in jeweled flasks, and a skull still wearing a crown.

"Search, fast!" said Harry as they all hurried inside the vault.

He had described Hufflepuff's cup to Ron and Hermione, but if it was the other, unknown Horcrux that resided in this vault, he would not know. He glanced around, however, before there was a muffled clunk from behind them: The door had reappeared, sealing them in.

"No matter, Bogrod will be able to release us!" said Griphook as Ron gave a shout of surprise. "Light your wands, can't you?"

"Lumos!" Harry shone his lit wand around the vault: Its beam fell upon glittering jewels; he saw the fake sword of Gryffindor lying on the floor. Ron and Hermione had lit their wands too, and were now examining the piles of objects surrounding them.

"Harry, could this be — ? Aargh!"

Hermione screamed in pain, and Harry turned his wand on her in time to see a jeweled goblet tumbling from her grasp. A second later, with a great clatter, the floor was covered in identical cups rolling in every direction, the original impossible.

"It burned me!" moaned Hermione, sucking her blistered fingers.

"They have added Gemino and Flagrante Curses!" said Griphook. "Everything you touch will burn and multiply, but the gold will not, you will eventually be crushed to death by the weight of expanding gold!"

"Okay, don't touch anything!" said Harry desperately, but even as he said it, Ron accidentally nudged one of the fallen cups. He felt a sharp pain as the cup rolled under his foot. He saw a small flame as the cup rolled under his foot. He felt a sharp pain as the cup rolled under his foot.

"Stand still, don't move!" said Hermione, clutching at Ron.

"Just look around!" said Harry. "Remember, the cup's small and gold, it's got a badger engraved on it, two handles — a small handle —"

They directed their wands into every nook and crevice, turning cautiously on the spot. It was impossible not to brush the wands onto the ground where they joined the goblets, and now there was scarcely room to place their feet, and the glowing

Harry's wandlight passed over shields and goblin-made helmets set on shelves rising to the ceiling; higher and higher his heart skip and his hand tremble.

"It's there, it's up there!"

Ron and Hermione pointed their wands at it too, so that the little golden cup sparkled in a three-way spotlight: the cup of the possession of Hepzibah Smith, from whom it had been stolen by Tom Riddle.

"And how the hell are we going to get up there without touching anything?" asked Ron.

"Accio Cup!" cried Hermione, who had evidently forgotten in her desperation what Griphook had told them during the attack.

"No use, no use!" snarled the goblin.

"Then what do we do?" said Harry, glaring at the goblin. "If you want the sword, Griphook, then you'll have to help us get it here!"

Hermione fumbled inside her robes, drew out the beaded bag, rummaged for a few seconds, then removed the shimmering blade to a silver flagon nearby, which did not multiply.

"If I can just poke the sword through a handle — but how am I going to get up there?"

The shelf on which the cup reposed was out of reach for any of them, even Ron, who was tallest. The heat from the fire made him sweat and back as he struggled to think of a way up to the cup; and then he heard the dragon roar on the other side of the vault. They were truly trapped now: There was no way out except through the door, and a horde of goblins seemed to be advancing with terror in their faces.

"Hermione," said Harry as the clanking grew louder, "I've got to get up there, we've got to get rid of it —"

She raised her wand, pointed it at Harry, and whispered, "Levicorpus."

Hoisted into the air by his ankle, Harry hit a suit of armor and replicas burst out of it like white-hot bodies, filling the vault. The two goblins were knocked aside into other objects, which also began to replicate. Half buried in a rising tide of replicas, Harry thrust the sword through the handle of Hufflepuff's cup, hooking it onto the blade.

"Impervius!" screeched Hermione in an attempt to protect herself, Ron, and the goblins from the burning metal.

Then the worst scream yet made Harry look down: Ron and Hermione were waist-deep in treasure, struggling to keep their heads out of sight and nothing but the tips of a few long fingers were left in view.

Harry seized Griphook's fingers and pulled. The blistered goblin emerged by degrees, howling.

"Liberacorpus!" yelled Harry, and with a crash he and Griphook landed on the surface of the swelling treasure, and the goblin roared.

"Get it!" Harry yelled, fighting the pain of the hot metal on his skin, as Griphook clambered onto his shoulders again, hissing. "Where's the sword? It had the cup on it!"

The clanking on the other side of the door was growing deafening — it was too late —

"There!"

It was Griphook who had seen it and Griphook who lunged, and in that instant Harry knew that the goblin had never been so grateful of Harry's hair, to make sure he did not fall into the heaving sea of burning gold, Griphook seized the hilt of the sword. The tiny golden cup, skewered by the handle on the sword's blade, was flung into the air. The goblin still astride him, hissing his flesh he did not relinquish it, even while countless Hufflepuff cups burst from his fist, raining down upon him. Griphook himself sliding uncontrollably on an expanding avalanche of fiery gold and silver that bore him, Ron, and Hermione into the vault. Hardly aware of the pain from the burns covering his body, and still borne along on the swell of replicating treasure, Harry held the sword, but Griphook was gone. Sliding from Harry's shoulders the moment he could, he had sprinted for cover. "Thieves! Thieves! Help! Thieves!" He vanished into the midst of the advancing crowd, all of whom were holding daggers aloft. Slipping on the hot metal, Harry struggled to his feet and knew that the only way out was through.

"Stupefy!" he bellowed, and Ron and Hermione joined in: Jets of red light flew into the crowd of goblins, and some toppled. Others ran around the corner.

The tethered dragon let out a roar, and a gush of flame flew over the goblins: The wizards fled, doubled-up, back the way they came. Pointing his wand at the thick cuffs chaining the beast to the floor, he yelled, "Relashio!"

The cuffs broke open with loud bangs.

"This way!" Harry yelled, and still shooting Stunning Spells at the advancing goblins, he sprinted toward the blind dragon.

"Harry — Harry — what are you doing?" cried Hermione.

"Get up, climb up, come on —"

The dragon had not realized that it was free: Harry's foot found the crook of its hind leg and he pulled himself up onto its back. He felt its m to feel him. He stretched out an arm; Hermione hoisted herself up; Ron climbed on behind them, and a second later the dragon was on its hind legs. With a roar it reared: Harry dug in his knees, clutching as tightly as he could to the jagged scales as the wings opened and it soared into the air. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, flat on its back, scraped against the ceiling as it dived toward the passage. The dragon lanced off its flanks.

"We'll never get out, it's too big!" Hermione screamed, but the dragon opened its mouth and belched flame again, blazing the way. By sheer force the dragon clawed and fought its way through. Harry's eyes were shut tight against the heat and dust. He clung only to its back, expecting to be shaken off at any moment; then he heard Hermione yelling, "Defodio!"

She was helping the dragon enlarge the passageway, carving out the ceiling as it struggled upward toward the fresh air. Harry copied her, blasting the ceiling apart with more gouging spells. They passed the underground lake, and the great crackling fire behind them, and behind them the passage was full of the dragon's thrashing, spiked tail, of great lumps of rock, gigantic fractures, and the fire growing more muffled, while ahead, the dragon's fire kept their progress clear —

And then at last, by the combined force of their spells and the dragon's brute strength, they had blasted their way out. They shrieked and ran for cover, and finally the dragon had room to stretch its wings: Turning its horned head toward the castle and with Harry, Ron, and Hermione still clinging to its back, it forced its way through the metal doors, leaving them behind in Dragon Alley and launched itself into the sky.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN THE FINAL HIDING PLACE

There was no means of steering; the dragon could not see where it was going, and Harry knew that if it turned sharply, it would lose its broad back. Nevertheless, as they climbed higher and higher, London unfurling below them like a gray-and-green map that had seemed impossible. Crouching low over the beast's neck, he clung tight to the metallic scales, and the cool breeze of the dragon's wings beating the air like the sails of a windmill. Behind him, whether from delight or fear he could not tell, Ron kept sobbing.

After five minutes or so, Harry lost some of his immediate dread that the dragon was going to throw them off, for it seemed to fly round prison as possible; but the question of how and when they were to dismount remained rather frightening. He knew the particular dragon, which could barely see, would locate a good place to put down. He glanced around constantly, imagining how long would it be before Voldemort knew that they had broken into the Lestranges' vault? How soon would the guards know what had been taken? And then, when they discovered that the golden cup was missing? Voldemort would know, at that point. The dragon seemed to crave cooler and fresher air: It climbed steadily until they were flying through wisps of chilly clouds that were cars pouring in and out of the capital. On and on they flew, over countryside parceled out in patches of fields and escape like strips of matte and glossy ribbon.

"What do you reckon it's looking for?" Ron yelled as they flew farther and farther north.

"No idea," Harry bellowed back. His hands were numb with cold but he did not dare attempt to shift his grip. He had to hope the coast sail beneath them, if the dragon headed for open sea; he was cold and numb, not to mention desperately hungry. Surely it would need sustenance before long? And what if, at that point, it realized it had three highly edible humans sitting on its back? The sun slipped lower in the sky, which was turning indigo; and still the dragon flew, cities and towns gliding out of sight like a great dark cloud. Every part of Harry ached with the effort of holding on to the dragon's back.

"Is it my imagination," shouted Ron after a considerable stretch of silence, "or are we losing height?"

Harry looked down and saw deep green mountains and lakes, coppery in the sunset. The landscape seemed to grow more and more verdant as he wondered whether it had divined the presence of fresh water by the flashes of reflected sunlight.

Lower and lower the dragon flew, in great spiraling circles, honing in, it seemed, upon one of the smaller lakes.

"I say we jump when it gets low enough!" Harry called back to the others. "Straight into the water before it realizes we're here." They agreed, Hermione a little faintly, and now Harry could see the dragon's wide yellow underbelly rippling in the sun. "NOW!"

He slithered over the side of the dragon and plummeted feetfirst toward the surface of the lake; the drop was greater than he had imagined, a stone into a freezing, green, reed-filled world. He kicked toward the surface and emerged, panting, to see enormous, dark green eyes staring at him. Hermione had fallen. The dragon did not seem to have noticed anything: It was already fifty feet away, swooping low over the water. As Hermione emerged, spluttering and gasping, from the depths of the lake, the dragon flew on, its wings beating hard, and left Harry, Ron, and Hermione struck out for the opposite shore. The lake did not seem to be deep: Soon it was more a cold, flat expanse, and at last they flopped, sodden, panting, and exhausted, onto slippery grass.

Hermione collapsed, coughing and shuddering. Though Harry could have happily lain down and slept, he staggered to his feet and cast a few spells around them.

When he had finished, he joined the others. It was the first time that he had seen them properly since escaping from the castle, and their clothing was singed away in places. They were wincing as they dabbed essence of dittany onto their mangled skin. Hermione produced the bottles of pumpkin juice she had brought from Shell Cottage and clean, dry robes for all of them. They changed and dried themselves.

"Well, on the upside," said Ron finally, who was sitting watching the skin on his hands regrow, "we got the Horcrux. Or at least we think we did."

"— no sword," said Harry through gritted teeth, as he dripped dittany through the singed hole in his jeans onto the grass.

"No sword," repeated Ron. "That double-crossing little scab . . ."

Harry pulled the Horcrux from the pocket of the wet jacket he had just taken off and set it down on the grass in front of them. He wiped their bottles of juice.

"At least we can't wear it this time, that'd look a bit weird hanging round our necks," said Ron, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. Hermione looked across the lake to the far bank, where the dragon was still drinking.

"What'll happen to it, do you think?" she asked. "Will it be all right?"

"You sound like Hagrid," said Ron. "It's a dragon, Hermione, it can look after itself. It's us we need to worry about."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know how to break this to you," said Ron, "but I think they might have noticed we broke into Gringotts."

All three of them started to laugh, and once started, it was difficult to stop. Harry's ribs ached, he felt lightheaded with the effort of holding his breath, and he laughed until his throat was raw.

"What are we going to do, though?" said Hermione finally, hiccuping herself back to seriousness. "He'll know, won't he?"

"Maybe they'll be too scared to tell him?" said Ron hopefully. "Maybe they'll cover up —"

The sky, the smell of lake water, the sound of Ron's voice were extinguished: Pain cleaved Harry's head like a sword and he

wizards faced him, and on the floor at his feet knelt a small, quaking figure.

"What did you say to me?" His voice was high and cold, but fury and fear burned inside him. The one thing he had done was to make the goblin tremble, unable to meet the red eyes high above his.

"Say it again!" murmured Voldemort. "Say it again!"

"M-my Lord," stammered the goblin, its black eyes wide with terror, "m-my Lord . . . we t-ried t-to st-stop them. . . I know the Lestranges' v-vault. . ."

"Impostors? What impostors? I thought Gringotts had ways of revealing impostors? Who were they?"

"It was . . . it was . . . the P-Potter b-boy and t-two accomplices. . ."

"And they took?" he said, his voice rising, a terrible fear gripping him. "Tell me! What did they take?"

"A . . . a s-small golden c-cup, m-my Lord . . ."

The scream of rage, of denial left him as if it were a stranger's: He was crazed, frenzied, it could not be true, it was impossible that the boy could have discovered his secret?

The Elder Wand slashed through the air and green light erupted through the room; the kneeling goblin rolled over, dead. Sirius and Lucius Malfoy threw others behind them in their race for the door, and again and again his wand fell, and those who fell were the few, for hearing about the golden cup —

Alone amongst the dead he stormed up and down, and they passed before him in vision: his treasures, his safeguards, his secrets were stolen: What if, what if, the boy knew about the others? Could he know, had he already acted, had he traced more secrets? He always suspected him; Dumbledore, dead on his orders; Dumbledore, whose wand was his now, yet who reached out to him. But surely if the boy had destroyed any of his Horcruxes, he, Lord Voldemort, would have known, would have felt it? He was the killer of Dumbledore and of how many other worthless, nameless men: How could Lord Voldemort not have known that he had acted?

True, he had not felt it when the diary had been destroyed, but he had thought that was because he had no body to feel. . . The other Horcruxes must be intact. . .

But he must know, he must be sure . . . He paced the room, kicking aside the goblin's corpse as he passed, and the pain of it, back, and Hogwarts —

A modicum of calm cooled his rage now: How could the boy know that he had hidden the ring in the Gaunt shack? No, the connection, the killings had never been traced to him: The ring, surely, was safe.

And how could the boy, or anybody else, know about the cave or penetrate its protection? The idea of the locket being found was impossible. As for the school: He alone knew where in Hogwarts he had stowed the Horcrux, because he alone had plumbed the castle. And there was still Nagini, who must remain close now, no longer sent to do his bidding, under his protection. . .

But to be sure, to be utterly sure, he must return to each of his hiding places, he must redouble protection around each, the Elder Wand, that he must undertake alone . . .

Which should he visit first, which was in most danger? An old unease flickered inside him. Dumbledore had known he was hiding the Gaunts . . . Their abandoned home was, perhaps, the least secure of his hiding places, it was there that he would find the lake, surely impossible . . . though was there a slight possibility that Dumbledore might have known some of his secrets? And Hogwarts . . . but he knew that his Horcrux there was safe; it would be impossible for Potter to enter Hogsmeade without being prudent to alert Snape to the fact that the boy might try to reenter the castle . . . To tell Snape why the boy might be so desperate to take to trust Bellatrix and Malfoy: Didn't their stupidity and carelessness prove how unwise it was ever to trust?

He would visit the Gaunt shack first, then, and take Nagini with him: He would not be parted from the snake anymore. He would go to the dark garden where the fountain played; he called the snake in Parseltongue and it slithered out to join him like a friend. Harry's eyes flew open as he wrenched himself back to the present: He was lying on the bank of the lake in the setting sun, surrounded by their worried looks, and by the continued pounding of his scar, his sudden excursion into Voldemort's mind had not been a dream. That he was still wet to his skin, and saw the cup lying innocently in the grass before him, and the lake, deep blue shore.

"He knows." His own voice sounded strange and low after Voldemort's high screams. "He knows, and he's going to check the others, first, then, he's going to check the others are safe, the ring first. He thinks the Hogwarts one is safest, because Snape's there, because he can check that one last, but he could still be there within hours —"

"Did you see where in Hogwarts it is?" asked Ron, now scrambling to his feet too.

"No, he was concentrating on warning Snape, he didn't think about exactly where it is —"

"Wait, wait!" cried Hermione as Ron caught up the Horcrux and Harry pulled out the Invisibility Cloak again. "We can't leave like this. We need to get going," said Harry firmly. He had been hoping to sleep, looking forward to getting into the new tent, but now he realized the ring and the locket are gone? What if he moves the Hogwarts Horcrux, decides it isn't safe to leave it there? But how are we going to get in?"

"We'll go to Hogsmeade," said Harry, "and try to work something out once we see what the protection around the school is like this time."

"But we don't really fit —"

"It'll be dark, no one's going to notice our feet."

The flapping of enormous wings echoed across the black water: The dragon had drunk its fill and risen into the air. The gher, now black against the rapidly darkening sky, until it vanished over a nearby mountain. Then Hermione walked the Cloak down as far as it would go, and together they turned on the spot into the crushing darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE MISSING MIRROR

Harry's feet touched road. He saw the achingly familiar Hogsmeade High Street: dark shop fronts, and the outline of the road that led off toward Hogwarts, and light spilling from the windows of the Three Broomsticks, and with a lurch of the here nearly a year before, supporting a desperately weak Dumbledore; all this in a second, upon landing — and then it happened.

The air was rent by a scream that sounded like Voldemort's when he had realized the cup had been stolen: It tore at the appearance had caused it. Even as he looked at the other two beneath the Cloak, the door of the Three Broomsticks burst open, he street, their wands aloft.

Harry seized Ron's wrist as he raised his wand; there were too many of them to Stun: Even attempting it would give a scream stopped, still echoing around the distant mountains.

"Accio Cloak!" roared one of the Death Eaters.

Harry seized its folds, but it made no attempt to escape: The Summoning Charm had not worked on it.

"Not under your wrapper, then, Potter?" yelled the Death Eater who had tried the charm, and then to his fellows, "Spot him! Six of the Death Eaters ran toward them: Harry, Ron, and Hermione backed as quickly as possible down the nearest alleyway in the darkness, listening to the footsteps running up and down, beams of light flying along the street from the Death Eaters.

"Let's just leave!" Hermione whispered. "Disapparate now!"

"Great idea," said Ron, but before Harry could reply a Death Eater shouted,

"We know you're here, Potter, and there's no getting away! We'll find you!"

"They were ready for us," whispered Harry. "They set up that spell to tell them we'd come. I reckon they've done something."

"What about dementors?" called another Death Eater. "Let 'em have free rein, they'd find him quick enough!"

"The Dark Lord wants Potter dead by no hand but his —"

"— an' dementors won't kill him! The Dark Lord wants Potter's life, not his soul. He'll be easier to kill if he's been Kissed."

There were noises of agreement. Dread filled Harry: To repel dementors they would have to produce Patronuses, which they didn't have.

"We're going to have to try to Disapparate, Harry!" Hermione whispered.

Even as she said it, he felt the unnatural cold begin to steal over the street. Light was sucked from the environment around them; he felt Hermione take hold of his arm and together, they turned on the spot.

The air through which they needed to move seemed to have become solid: They could not Disapparate; the Death Eaters were closing in on them. The silver stag burst from his wand and charged: The dementors scattered and there was a triumphant yell from some of them. Harry, Ron, and Hermione retreated down the side street, groping their way along the wall, trying not to be seen. Then, came dementors, ten or more of them, visible because they were of a denser darkness than their surroundings, with a sense of fear in the vicinity? Harry was sure of it: They seemed to be coming more quickly now, taking those dragging steps. He raised his wand —

He raised his wand: He could not, would not, suffer the Dementor's Kiss, whatever happened afterward. It was of Ron's wand. The silver stag burst from his wand and charged: The dementors scattered and there was a triumphant yell from some of them.

"It's him, down there, down there, I saw his Patronus, it was a stag!"

The dementors had retreated, the stars were popping out again, and the footsteps of the Death Eaters were becoming faint. There was a grinding of bolts nearby, a door opened on the left-hand side of the narrow street, and a rough voice said, "Come in."

He obeyed without hesitation: The three of them hurtled through the open doorway.

"Upstairs, keep the Cloak on, keep quiet!" muttered a tall figure, passing them on his way into the street and slamming the door.

Harry had had no idea where they were, but now he saw, by the stuttering light of a single candle, the grubby, sawdust-covered floor and through a second doorway, which led to a rickety wooden staircase that they climbed as fast as they could. The small fireplace, above which hung a single large oil painting of a blonde girl who gazed out at the room with a kind of haunting expression. Shouts reached them from the street below. Still wearing the Invisibility Cloak, they crept toward the grimy window above McGonagall's Head's barman, was the only person not wearing a hood.

"So what?" he was bellowing into one of the hooded faces. "So what? You send dementors down my street, I'll send a Patronus up at you, I'm not having it!"

"That wasn't your Patronus!" said a Death Eater. "That was a stag, it was Potter's!"

"Stag!" roared the barman, and he pulled out a wand. "Stag! You idiot — Expecto Patronum!"

Something huge and horned erupted from the wand: Head down, it charged toward the High Street and out of sight.

"That's not what I saw —" said the Death Eater, though with less certainty.

"Curfew's been broken, you heard the noise," one of his companions told the barman. "Someone was out in the street."

"If I want to put my cat out, I will, and be damned to your curfew!"

"You set off the Caterwauling Charm?"

"What if I did? Going to cart me off to Azkaban? Kill me for sticking my nose out my own front door? Do it, then, if you want. I'll be a little Dark Mark and summoned him. He's not going to like being called here for me and my old cat, is he, now?"

"Don't you worry about us," said one of the Death Eaters, "worry about yourself, breaking curfew!"

"And where will you lot traffick potions and poisons when my pub's closed down? What'll happen to your little sidelin

"Are you threatening — ?"

"I keep my mouth shut, it's why you come here, isn't it?"

"I still say I saw a stag Patronus!" shouted the first Death Eater.

"Stag?" roared the barman. "It's a goat, idiot!"

"All right, we made a mistake," said the second Death Eater. "Break curfew again and we won't be so lenient!"

The Death Eaters strode back toward the High Street. Hermione moaned with relief, wove out from under the Cloak,

shut, then pulled the Cloak off himself and Ron. They could hear the barman down below, rebolting the door of the

Harry's attention was caught by something on the mantelpiece: a small, rectangular mirror propped on top of it, right

The barman entered the room.

"You bloody fools," he said gruffly, looking from one to the other of them. "What were you thinking, coming here?"

"Thank you," said Harry. "We can't thank you enough. You saved our lives."

The barman grunted. Harry approached him, looking up into the face, trying to see past the long, stringy, wire-gray h

eyes were a piercing, brilliant blue.

"It's your eye I've been seeing in the mirror."

There was silence in the room. Harry and the barman looked at each other.

"You sent Dobby."

The barman nodded and looked around for the elf.

"Thought he'd be with you. Where've you left him?"

"He's dead," said Harry. "Bellatrix Lestrange killed him."

The barman's face was impassive. After a few moments he said, "I'm sorry to hear it. I liked that elf."

He turned away, lighting lamps with prods of his wand, not looking at any of them.

"You're Aberforth," said Harry to the man's back.

He neither confirmed nor denied it, but bent to light the fire.

"How did you get this?" Harry asked, walking across to Sirius's mirror, the twin of the one he had broken nearly two y

"Bought it from Dung 'bout a year ago," said Aberforth. "Albus told me what it was. Been trying to keep an eye out fo

Ron gasped.

"The silver doe!" he said excitedly. "Was that you too?"

"What are you talking about?" said Aberforth.

"Someone sent a doe Patronus to us!"

"Brains like that, you could be a Death Eater, son. Haven't I just proved my Patronus is a goat?"

"Oh," said Ron. "Yeah . . . well, I'm hungry!" he added defensively as his stomach gave an enormous rumble.

"I got food," said Aberforth, and he sloped out of the room, reappearing moments later with a large loaf of bread, so

able in front of the fire. Ravenous, they ate and drank, and for a while there was silence but for the crackle of the fire

"Right then," said Aberforth when they had eaten their fill, and Harry and Ron sat slumped dozily in their chairs. "We

done by night, you heard what happens if anyone moves outdoors during darkness: Caterwauling Charm's set off, th

be able to pass off a stag as a goat a second time. Wait for daybreak when curfew lifts, then you can put your Cloak

o the mountains, and you'll be able to Disapparate there. Might see Hagrid. He's been hiding in a cave up there with

"We're not leaving," said Harry. "We need to get into Hogwarts."

"Don't be stupid, boy," said Aberforth.

"We've got to," said Harry.

"What you've got to do," said Aberforth, leaning forward, "is to get as far from here as you can."

"You don't understand. There isn't much time. We've got to get into the castle. Dumbledore — I mean, your brother —

The firelight made the grimy lenses of Aberforth's glasses momentarily opaque, a bright flat white, and Harry remem

"My brother Albus wanted a lot of things," said Aberforth, "and people had a habit of getting hurt while he was carryi

and out of the country if you can. Forget my brother and his clever schemes. He's gone where none of this can hurt h

"You don't understand," said Harry again.

"Oh, don't I?" said Aberforth quietly. "You don't think I understood my own brother? Think you knew Albus better tha

"I didn't mean that," said Harry, whose brain felt sluggish with exhaustion and from the surfeit of food and wine. "It's

"Did he now?" said Aberforth. "Nice job, I hope? Pleasant? Easy? Sort of thing you'd expect an unqualified wizard kid t

Ron gave a rather grim laugh. Hermione was looking strained.

"I-it's not easy, no," said Harry. "But I've got to —"

"Got to? Why 'got to'? He's dead, isn't he?" said Aberforth roughly. "Let it go, boy, before you follow him! Save yourse

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I —" Harry felt overwhelmed; he could not explain, so he took the offensive instead. "But you're fighting too, you're i

"I was," said Aberforth. "The Order of the Phoenix is finished. You-Know-Who's won, it's over, and anyone who's prete

u here, Potter, he wants you too badly. So go abroad, go into hiding, save yourself. Best take these two with you." He

as they live now everyone knows they've been working with you."

him, and then all three of us were dueling, and the flashing lights and the bangs set her off, she couldn't stand it —" The color was draining from Aberforth's face as though he had suffered a mortal wound.

"— and I think she wanted to help, but she didn't really know what she was doing, and I don't know which of us did it. His voice broke on the last word and he dropped down into the nearest chair. Hermione's face was wet with tears, and his expression: He wished he had not heard it, wished he could wash his mind clean of it.

"I'm so . . . I'm so sorry," Hermione whispered.

"Gone," croaked Aberforth. "Gone forever."

He wiped his nose on his cuff and cleared his throat.

"Course, Grindelwald scarpered. He had a bit of a track record already, back in his own country, and he didn't want Arianne free of the burden of his sister, free to become the greatest wizard of the —"

"He was never free," said Harry.

"I beg your pardon?" said Aberforth.

"Never," said Harry. "The night that your brother died, he drank a potion that drove him out of his mind. He started screaming at them, please . . . hurt me instead."

Ron and Hermione were staring at Harry. He had never gone into details about what had happened on the island once he returned to Hogwarts had eclipsed it so thoroughly.

"He thought he was back there with you and Grindelwald, I know he did," said Harry, remembering Dumbledore whispering to him and Ariana. . . . It was torture to him, if you'd seen him then, you wouldn't say he was free."

Aberforth seemed lost in contemplation of his own knotted and veined hands. After a long pause he said, "How can you be greater good than in you? How can you be sure you aren't dispensable, just like my little sister?"

A shard of ice seemed to pierce Harry's heart.

"I don't believe it. Dumbledore loved Harry," said Hermione.

"Why didn't he tell him to hide, then?" shot back Aberforth. "Why didn't he say to him, 'Take care of yourself, here's how?'"

"Because," said Harry before Hermione could answer, "sometimes you've got to think about more than your own safety!"

"You're seventeen, boy!"

"I'm of age, and I'm going to keep fighting even if you've given up!"

"Who says I've given up?"

"The Order of the Phoenix is finished," Harry repeated. "You-Know-Who's won, it's over, and anyone who's pretending otherwise is a fool."

"I don't say I like it, but it's the truth!"

"No, it isn't," said Harry. "Your brother knew how to finish You-Know-Who and he passed the knowledge on to me. I'm not 't know how this might end. I've known it for years."

He waited for Aberforth to jeer or to argue, but he did not. He merely scowled.

"We need to get into Hogwarts," said Harry again. "If you can't help us, we'll wait till daybreak, leave you in peace, and then now would be a great time to mention it."

Aberforth remained fixed in his chair, gazing at Harry with the eyes that were so extraordinarily like his brother's. At last he moved, he little table, and approached the portrait of Ariana.

"You know what to do," he said.

She smiled, turned, and walked away, not as people in portraits usually did, out of the sides of their frames, but along the wall, and she watched her slight figure retreating until finally she was swallowed by the darkness.

"Er — what — ?" began Ron.

"There's only one way in now," said Aberforth. "You must know they've got all the old secret passageways covered at the moment. It's inside the school from what my sources tell me. The place has never been so heavily guarded. How you expect to get in? It's a matter of time as his deputies . . . well, that's your lookout, isn't it? You say you're prepared to die."

"But what . . . ?" said Hermione, frowning at Ariana's picture.

A tiny white dot had reappeared at the end of the painted tunnel, and now Ariana was walking back toward them, grinning at her now, someone taller than she was, who was limping along, looking excited. His hair was longer than Harry had seen him, and his clothes were ripped and torn. Larger and larger the two figures grew, until only their heads and shoulders were visible through the wall like a little door, and the entrance to a real tunnel was revealed. And out of it, his hair overgrown, his face cut, his eyes wild, he gave a roar of delight, leapt down from the mantelpiece, and yelled, "I knew you'd come! I knew it, Harry!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE LOST DIADEM

Neville — what the — how — ?"

But Neville had spotted Ron and Hermione, and with yells of delight was hugging them too. The longer Harry looked at him, the more he saw. Red and purple, there were gouge marks on his face, and his general air of unkemptness suggested that he had been through a lot. As he let go of Hermione and said again, "I knew you'd come! Kept telling Seamus it was a matter of time!"

"Neville, what's happened to you?"

"What? This?" Neville dismissed his injuries with a shake of the head. "This is nothing. Seamus is worse. You'll see. She might be a couple more people on the way."

"Couple more?" repeated Aberforth ominously. "What d'you mean, a couple more, Longbottom? There's a curfew and—" "I know, that's why they'll be Apparating directly into the bar," said Neville. "Just send them down the passage when they come." Neville held out his hand to Hermione and helped her to climb up onto the mantelpiece and into the tunnel; Ron followed. "I don't know how to thank you. You've saved our lives twice."

"Look after 'em, then," said Aberforth gruffly. "I might not be able to save 'em a third time."

Harry clambered up onto the mantelpiece and through the hole behind Ariana's portrait. There were smooth stone steps here for years. Brass lamps hung from the walls and the earthy floor was worn and smooth; as they walked, their shoes made no sound. "How long's this been here?" Ron asked as they set off. "It isn't on the Marauder's Map, is it, Harry? I thought there were no secret passages here." "They sealed off all of those before the start of the year," said Neville. "There's no chance of getting through any of them. And dementors waiting at the exits." He started walking backward, beaming, drinking them in. "Never mind that stuff about a dragon? It's everywhere, everyone's talking about it, Terry Boot got beaten up by Carrow for yelling about it in the Great Hall." "Yeah, it's true," said Harry.

Neville laughed gleefully. "What did you do with the dragon?" "Released it into the wild," said Ron. "Hermione was all for keeping it as a pet —"

"Don't exaggerate, Ron —"

"But what have you been doing? People have been saying you've just been on the run, Harry, but I don't think so. I think you're right," said Harry, "but tell us about Hogwarts, Neville, we haven't heard anything." "It's been . . . well, it's not really like Hogwarts anymore," said Neville, the smile fading from his face as he spoke. "Do you know those two Death Eaters who teach here?" "They do more than teach," said Neville. "They're in charge of all discipline. They like punishment, the Carrows." "Like Umbridge?" "Nah, they make her look tame. The other teachers are all supposed to refer us to the Carrows if we do anything wrong. I hate them as much as we do." "Amycus, the bloke, he teaches what used to be Defense Against the Dark Arts, except now it's just the Dark Arts. We've had a lot of detention there —"

"What?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione's united voices echoed up and down the passage. "Yeah," said Neville. "That's how I got this one," he pointed at a particularly deep gash in his cheek, "I refused to do it. First time they've ever been top in anything, I expect." "Aleto, Amycus's sister, teaches Muggle Studies, which is compulsory for everyone. We've all got to listen to her explanations of how they drove wizards into hiding by being vicious toward them, and how the natural order is being reestablished. I got tired of how much Muggle blood she and her brother have got." "Blimey, Neville," said Ron, "there's a time and a place for getting a smart mouth." "You didn't hear her," said Neville. "You wouldn't have stood it either. The thing is, it helps when people stand up to them. I did it, Harry."

"But they've used you as a knife sharpener," said Ron, wincing slightly as they passed a lamp and Neville's injuries were visible. Neville shrugged. "Doesn't matter. They don't want to spill too much pure blood, so they'll torture us a bit if we're mouthy but they won't kill us. Harry did not know what was worse, the things that Neville was saying or the matter-of-fact tone in which he said them." "The only people in real danger are the ones whose friends and relatives on the outside are giving trouble. They get them out of the Quibbler, so they dragged Luna off the train on the way back for Christmas."

"Neville, she's all right, we've seen her —"

"Yeah, I know, she managed to get a message to me."

From his pocket he pulled a golden coin, and Harry recognized it as one of the fake Galleons that Dumbledore's Army had made. "These have been great," said Neville, beaming at Hermione. "The Carrows never rumbled how we were communicating in the walls: Dumbledore's Army, Still Recruiting, stuff like that. Snape hated it."

"You used to?" said Harry, who had noticed the past tense.

"Well, it got more difficult as time went on," said Neville. "We lost Luna at Christmas, and Ginny never came back after that. The Carrows seemed to know I was behind a lot of it, so they started coming down on me hard, and then Michael Corner was tortured pretty badly. That scared people off."

"No kidding," muttered Ron, as the passage began to slope upward.

"Yeah, well, I couldn't ask people to go through what Michael did, so we dropped those kinds of stunts. But we were still in it for weeks ago. That's when they decided there was only one way to stop me, I suppose, and they went for Gran."

"They what?" said Harry, Ron, and Hermione together.

"Yeah," said Neville, panting a little now, because the passage was climbing so steeply, "well, you can see their thinking. They wanted their relatives to behave, I s'pose it was only a matter of time before they did it the other way around. Thing was," he faced them, "they bit off a bit more than they could chew with Gran. Little old witch living alone, they probably thought they didn't have to. She laughed, 'Dawlish is still in St. Mungo's and Gran's on the run. She sent me a letter,' he clapped a hand to the breast. I'm my parents' son, and to keep it up."

"Cool," said Ron.

"Yeah," said Neville happily. "Only thing was, once they realized they had no hold over me, they decided Hogwarts couldn't kill me or send me to Azkaban; either way, I knew it was time to disappear."

"But," said Ron, looking thoroughly confused, "aren't — aren't we heading straight back into Hogwarts?"

"Course," said Neville. "You'll see. We're here."

They turned a corner and there ahead of them was the end of the passage. Another short flight of steps led to a door. Harry pushed it open and climbed through. As Harry followed, he heard Neville call out to unseen people:

"Look who it is! Didn't I tell you?"

As Harry emerged into the room beyond the passage, there were several screams and yells: "HARRY!" "It's Potter, it's Potter!" "It's Harry!" He had a confused impression of colored hangings, of lamps and many faces. The next moment, he, Ron, and Hermione were being pulled in all directions, their hands shaken, by what seemed to be more than twenty people: They might just have won a Quidditch final.

"Okay, okay, calm down!" Neville called, and as the crowd backed away, Harry was able to take in their surroundings.

He did not recognize the room at all. It was enormous, and looked rather like the interior of a particularly sumptuous barracks. Ammunition was strung from the ceiling and from a balcony that ran around the dark wood-paneled and windowless room. On the wall was a large tapestry depicting the four houses of Hogwarts: the red and white Gryffindor lion, emblazoned on scarlet; the black badger of Hufflepuff, set against yellow; and the bronze eagle of Ravenclaw. The room was empty, the tapestry absent. There were bulging bookcases, a few broomsticks propped against the walls, and in the corner, a large wooden table.

"Where are we?"

"Room of Requirement, of course!" said Neville. "Surpassed itself, hasn't it? The Carrows were chasing me, and I knew the door and this is what I found! Well, it wasn't exactly like this when I arrived, it was a load smaller, there was only one room, as more and more of the D.A. have arrived."

"And the Carrows can't get in?" asked Harry, looking around for the door.

"No," said Seamus Finnigan, whom Harry had not recognized until he spoke: Seamus's face was bruised and puffy. "It's all down to Neville. He really gets this room. You've got to ask it for exactly what you want — and it'll do it for you! You've just got to make sure you close the loopholes! Neville's the man!"

"It's quite straightforward, really," said Neville modestly. "I'd been in here about a day and a half, and getting really hungry when the passage to the Hog's Head opened up. I went through it and met Aberforth. He's been providing us with food. I really do."

"Yeah, well, food's one of the five exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration," said Ron to general astonishment.

"So we've been hiding out here for nearly two weeks," said Seamus, "and it just makes more hammocks every time we started turning up —"

“— and thought they'd quite like to wash, yes,” supplied Lavender Brown, whom Harry had not noticed until that point. Both Patil twins were there, as were Terry Boot, Ernie Macmillan, Anthony Goldstein, and Michael Corner.

"Tell us what you've been up to, though," said Ernie. "There've been so many rumors, we've been trying to keep up w
reak into Gringotts?"

"They did!" said Neville. "And the dragon's true too!"

There was a smattering of applause and a few whoops; Ron took a bow.

"What were you after?" asked Seamus eagerly.

Before any of them could parry the question with one of their own, Harry felt a terrible, scorching pain in the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead. As the pain spread, the faces of the other children, the frightened faces, the Room of Requirement vanished, and he was standing inside a ruined stone shack, and the rotting floorboards creaked under his feet. The door was ajar, and the light from the hallway shone in a sliver of yellow on the floor, and the air was cold and empty beside the hole, and Voldemort's scream of fury vibrated inside his head.

With an enormous effort he pulled out of Voldemort's mind again, back to where he stood, swaying, in the Room of Requirement. "Are you all right, Harry?" Neville was saying. "Want to sit down? I expect you're tired, aren't — ?"

"No," said Harry. He looked at Ron and Hermione, trying to tell them without words that Voldem

st: If Voldemort chose to visit Hogwarts next, they would miss their chance.
 "We need to get going," he said, and their expressions told him that they understood.

"What are we going to do, then, Harry?" asked Seamus. "What's the plan?"

"Plan?" repeated Harry. He was exercising all his willpower to prevent him

Nobody was laughing or whooping anymore. Neville looked confused.

"What d'you mean, 'get out of here'?"

"We haven't come back to stay," said

"What is it?"
"I — I can't tell you."

There was a ripple of muttering at this: Neville's brows contracted.

"Why can't you tell us? It's something to do with fighting You-Know-Who, right?"

“Well, yeah —”

"Then we'll help you."

The other members of Dumbledore's Army were nodding, some enthusiastically, others solemnly. A couple of them

"You don't understand." Harry seemed to have said that a lot in the last few hours. "We — we can't tell you. We've got to keep this secret."

"Why?" asked Neville.

"Because . . ." In his desperation to start looking for the missing Horcrux, or at least to have a private discussion with the others, Harry found it difficult to gather his thoughts. His scar was still searing. "Dumbledore left the three of us a job," he said. "He wanted us to do it, just the three of us."

"We're his army," said Neville. "Dumbledore's Army. We were all in it together, we've been keeping it going while you were away." "It hasn't exactly been a picnic, mate," said Ron.

"I never said it had, but I don't see why you can't trust us. Everyone in this room's been fighting and they've been driving the point home. One in here's proven they're loyal to Dumbledore — loyal to you."

"Look," Harry began, without knowing what he was going to say, but it did not matter: The tunnel door had just opened.

"We got your message, Neville! Hello you three, I thought you must be here!"

It was Luna and Dean. Seamus gave a great roar of delight and ran to hug his best friend.

"Hi, everyone!" said Luna happily. "Oh, it's great to be back!"

"Luna," said Harry distractedly, "what are you doing here? How did you —?"

"I sent for her," said Neville, holding up the fake Galleon. "I promised her and Ginny that if you turned up I'd let them know about the plan." "That's the plan," said Harry. "The plan to overthrow Snape and the Carrows."

"Of course that's what it means," said Luna brightly. "Isn't it, Harry? We're going to fight them out of Hogwarts?"

"Listen," said Harry with a rising sense of panic, "I'm sorry, but that's not what we came back for. There's something wrong."

"You're going to leave us in this mess?" demanded Michael Corner.

"No!" said Ron. "What we're doing will benefit everyone in the end, it's all about trying to get rid of You-Know-Who —"

"Then let us help!" said Neville angrily. "We want to be a part of it!"

There was another noise behind them, and Harry turned. His heart seemed to fail: Ginny was now climbing through the tunnel. Ginny gave Harry a radiant smile: He had forgotten, or had never fully appreciated, how beautiful she was, but he knew she was. "Aberforth's getting a bit annoyed," said Fred, raising his hand in answer to several cries of greeting. "He wants a kip, but he'll wait."

Harry's mouth fell open. Right behind Lee Jordan came Harry's old girlfriend, Cho Chang. She smiled at him.

"I got the message," she said, holding up her own fake Galleon, and she walked over to sit beside Michael Corner.

"So what's the plan, Harry?" said George.

"There isn't one," said Harry, still disoriented by the sudden appearance of all these people, unable to take everything in. "Just going to make it up as we go along, are we? My favorite kind," said Fred.

"You've got to stop this!" Harry told Neville. "What did you call them all back for? This is insane —"

"We're fighting, aren't we?" said Dean, taking out his fake Galleon. "The message said Harry was back, and we were going to help him."

"You haven't got a wand —?" began Seamus.

Ron turned suddenly to Harry.

"Why can't they help?"

"What?"

"They can help." He dropped his voice and said, so that none of them could hear but Hermione, who stood between them. "We have to tell them it's a Horcrux."

Harry looked from Ron to Hermione, who murmured, "I think Ron's right. We don't even know what we're looking for. We can't do everything alone, Harry."

Harry thought fast, his scar still prickling, his head threatening to split again. Dumbledore had warned him against trusting Snape and lies, that's how we grew up, and Albus . . . he was a natural. . . . Was he turning into Dumbledore, keeping his secrets? He had trusted Snape, and where had that led? To murder at the top of the highest tower . . .

"All right," he said quietly to the other two. "Okay," he called to the room at large, and all noise ceased: Fred and George were silent, and all of them looked alert, excited.

"There's something we need to find," Harry said. "Something — something that'll help us overthrow You-Know-Who. We need to find it. Has anyone heard of an object like that? Has anyone ever come across something with her eagle on it? He looked hopefully toward the little group of Ravenclaws, to Padma, Michael, Terry, and Cho, but it was Luna who answered.

"Well, there's her lost diadem. I told you about it, remember, Harry? The lost diadem of Ravenclaw? Daddy's trying to find it."

"Yeah, but the lost diadem," said Michael Corner, rolling his eyes, "is lost, Luna. That's sort of the point."

"When was it lost?" asked Harry.

"Centuries ago, they say," said Cho, and Harry's heart sank. "Professor Flitwick says the diadem vanished with Ravenclaw. Nobody's ever found a trace of it, have they?"

They all shook their heads.

"Sorry, but what is a diadem?" asked Ron.

"It's a kind of crown," said Terry Boot. "Ravenclaw's was supposed to have magical properties, enhance the wisdom of the wearer."

"Yes, Daddy's Wrackspurt siphons —"

But Harry cut across Luna.

"And none of you have ever seen anything that looks like it?"

They all shook their heads again. Harry looked at Ron and Hermione and his own disappointment was mirrored back at them. He had no trace, did not seem like a good candidate for the Horcrux hidden in the castle. . . . Before he could formulate a new plan, the tunnel door opened.

"If you'd like to see what the diadem's supposed to look like, I could take you up to our common room and show you."

Harry's scar scorched again: For a moment the Room of Requirement swam before him, and he saw instead the dark shoulders. Voldemort was flying again, whether to the underground lake or here, to the castle, he did not know: Either way, "He's on the move," he said quietly to Ron and Hermione. He glanced at Cho and then back at them. "Listen, I know it's a long shot, but at least find out what the diadem looks like. Wait for me here and keep you know — the other one — safe." Cho had got to her feet, but Ginny said rather fiercely, "No, Luna will take Harry, won't you, Luna?" "Oooh, yes, I'd like to," said Luna happily, and Cho sat down again, looking disappointed. "How do we get out?" Harry asked Neville. "Over here."

He led Harry and Luna to a corner, where a small cupboard opened onto a steep staircase. "It comes out somewhere different every day, so they've never been able to find it," he said. "Only trouble is, we never know where. Be careful, Harry, they're always patrolling the corridors at night."

"No problem," said Harry. "See you in a bit."

He and Luna hurried up the staircase, which was long, lit by torches, and turned corners in unexpected places. At last, "Get under here," Harry told Luna, pulling out the Invisibility Cloak and throwing it over both of them. He gave the wall a shove. It melted away at his touch and they slipped outside: Harry glanced back and saw that it had resealed itself at once. They ran into the shadows, fumbled in the pouch around his neck, and took out the Marauder's Map. Holding it close to his nose, "We're up on the fifth floor," he whispered, watching Filch moving away from them, a corridor ahead. "Come on, this way." They crept off.

Harry had prowled the castle at night many times before, but never had his heart hammered this fast, never had so much moonlight upon the floor, past suits of armor whose helmets creaked at the sound of their soft footsteps, around the corridors, checking the Marauder's Map whenever light permitted, twice pausing to allow a ghost to pass without drawing attention; his worst fear was Peeves, and he strained his ears with every step to hear the first, telltale signs of the poltergeist. "This way, Harry," breathed Luna, plucking his sleeve and pulling him toward a spiral staircase. They climbed in tight, dizzying circles; Harry had never been up here before. At last they reached a door. There was no handle, and a bronze knocker in the shape of an eagle. Luna reached out a pale hand, which looked eerie floating in midair, unconnected to arm or body. She knocked once. The beak of the eagle opened, but instead of a bird's call, a soft, musical voice said, "Which came first, the phoenix or the stone?" "Hmm . . . What do you think, Harry?" said Luna, looking thoughtful. "What? Isn't there just a password?" "Oh no, you've got to answer a question," said Luna. "What if you get it wrong?" "Well, you have to wait for somebody who gets it right," said Luna. "That way you learn, you see?" "Yeah . . . Trouble is, we can't really afford to wait for anyone else, Luna." "No, I see what you mean," said Luna seriously. "Well then, I think the answer is that a circle has no beginning." "Well reasoned," said the voice, and the door swung open.

The deserted Ravenclaw common room was a wide, circular room, airier than any Harry had ever seen at Hogwarts. The walls were e-and-bronze silks: By day, the Ravenclaws would have a spectacular view of the surrounding mountains. The ceiling was a deep t-blue carpet. There were tables, chairs, and bookcases, and in a niche opposite the door stood a tall statue of white marble. Harry recognized Rowena Ravenclaw from the bust he had seen at Luna's house. The statue stood beside a door that opened into a small room. A beautiful woman, and she seemed to look back at him with a quizzical half smile on her face, beautiful yet slightly intimidating. On top of her head. It was not unlike the tiara Fleur had worn at her wedding. There were tiny words etched into it. Harry stepped up to the statue's plinth to read them.

"'Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure.'"

"Which makes you pretty skint, witless," said a cackling voice.

Harry whirled around, slipped off the plinth, and landed on the floor. The sloping-shouldered figure of Alecko Carroway pressed a stubby forefinger to the skull and snake branded on her forearm.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE SACKING OF SEVERUS SNAPE

The moment her finger touched the Mark, Harry's scar burned savagely, the starry room vanished from sight, and he was washing around him and there was triumph in his heart — They have the boy.

A loud bang brought Harry back to where he stood: Disoriented, he raised his wand, but the witch before him was already gone. The bookcases tinkled.

"I've never Stunned anyone except in our D.A. lessons," said Luna, sounding mildly interested. "That was noisier than this." And sure enough, the ceiling had begun to tremble. Scurrying, echoing footsteps were growing louder from behind the door. "Sleeping above."

"Luna, where are you? I need to get under the Cloak!"

Luna's feet appeared out of nowhere; he hurried to her side and she let the Cloak fall back over them as the door opened. They slipped into the common room. There were gasps and cries of surprise as they saw Alecko lying there unconscious. Slowly, they moved forward, one by one, and attacked them. Then one brave little first-year darted up to her and prodded her backside with his big toe.

"I think she might be dead!" he shouted with delight.

"Oh, look," whispered Luna happily, as the Ravenclaws crowded in around Alecto. "They're pleased!"

"Yeah . . . great . . ."

Harry closed his eyes, and as his scar throbbed he chose to sink again into Voldemort's mind . . . He was moving along the edge of the locket before coming . . . but that would not take him long. . . .

There was a rap on the common room door and every Ravenclaw froze. From the other side, Harry heard the soft, muffled sounds of objects going to their destinations.

"I dunno, do I? Shut it!" snarled an uncouth voice that Harry knew was that of the Carrow brother, Amicus. "Alecto? Answer me!"

The Ravenclaws were whispering amongst themselves, terrified. Then, without warning, there came a series of loud bangs.

"ALECTO! If he comes, and we haven't got Potter — d'you want to go the same way as the Malfoys? ANSWER ME!" Amicus shouted.

The door was not open. The Ravenclaws were all backing away, and some of the most frightened began scampering back up the stairs. They ought not to blast open the door and stun Amicus before the Death Eater could do anything else, a second, most familiar thought came into Harry's mind.

"May I ask what you are doing, Professor Carrow?"

"Trying — to get — through this damned — door!" shouted Amicus. "Go and get Flitwick! Get him to open it, now!"

"But isn't your sister in there?" asked Professor McGonagall. "Didn't Professor Flitwick let her in earlier this evening, and she's a friend of yours? Then you needn't wake up half the castle."

"She ain't answering, you old besom! You open it! Garn! Do it, now!"

"Certainly, if you wish it," said Professor McGonagall, with awful coldness. There was a genteel tap of the knocker and the door opened.

"Where do Vanished objects go?"

"Into nonbeing, which is to say, everything," replied Professor McGonagall.

"Nicely phrased," replied the eagle door knocker, and the door swung open.

The few Ravenclaws who had remained behind sprinted for the stairs as Amicus burst over the threshold, brandishing his wand. He let out a yell of fury and fear. He saw tiny eyes, which fell at once on Alecto, sprawled motionless on the floor.

"What've they done, the little whelps?" he screamed. "I'll Cruciate the lot of 'em till they tell me who did it — and what they've done to your sister and smacking himself on the forehead with his fist. "We haven't got him, and they've gorn and killed her!"

"She's only Stunned," said Professor McGonagall impatiently, who had stooped down to examine Alecto. "She'll be perfectly all right in a moment."

"No she bludgering well won't!" bellowed Amicus. "Not after the Dark Lord gets hold of her! She's gorn and sent for her!"

"Got Potter?" said Professor McGonagall sharply. "What do you mean, 'got Potter'?"

"He told us Potter might try and get inside Ravenclaw Tower, and to send for him if we caught him!"

"Why would Harry Potter try to get inside Ravenclaw Tower? Potter belongs in my House!"

Beneath the disbelief and anger, Harry heard a little strain of pride in her voice, and affection for Minerva McGonagall.

"We was told he might come in here!" said Carrow. "I dunno why, do I?"

Professor McGonagall stood up and her beady eyes swept the room. Twice they passed right over the place where Harry had been.

"We can push it off on the kids," said Amicus, his piglike face suddenly crafty. "Yeah, that's what we'll do. We'll say Alecto forced her to do it. We'll say she was forced to press her Mark, and that's why she's so stupid."

"More or less, what's the difference?"

"Only the difference between truth and lies, courage and cowardice," said Professor McGonagall, who had turned pale. "You are not going to pass off your many ineptitudes on the students."

"Excuse me?"

Amicus moved forward until he was offensively close to Professor McGonagall, his face within inches of hers. She recoiled in disgust. She had found herself stuck to a lavatory seat.

"It's not a case of what you'll permit, Minerva McGonagall. Your time's over. It's us what's in charge here now, and you're out of order. And he spat in her face."

Harry pulled the Cloak off himself, raised his wand, and said, "You shouldn't have done that."

As Amicus spun around, Harry shouted, "Crucio!"

The Death Eater was lifted off his feet. He writhed through the air like a drowning man, thrashing and howling in pain. He landed in the front of a bookcase and crumpled, insensible, to the floor.

"I see what Bellatrix meant," said Harry, the blood thundering through his brain, "you need to really mean it."

"Potter!" whispered Professor McGonagall, clutching her heart. "Potter — you're here! What — ? How — ?" She struggled to her feet.

"He spat at you," said Harry.

"Potter, I — that was very — very gallant of you — but don't you realize — ?"

"Yeah, I do," Harry assured her. Somehow her panic steadied him. "Professor McGonagall, Voldemort's on the way."

"Oh, are we allowed to say the name now?" asked Luna with an air of interest, pulling off the Invisibility Cloak. This appeared to be the first time she had seen Professor McGonagall, who staggered backward and fell into a nearby chair, clutching at the neck of her old tartan dressing gown.

"I don't think it makes any difference what we call him," Harry told Luna. "He already knows where I am."

In a distant part of Harry's brain, that part connected to the angry, burning scar, he could see Voldemort sailing fast across the sea. He had nearly reached the island where the stone basin stood. . . .

"You must flee," whispered Professor McGonagall. "Now, Potter, as quickly as you can!"

"I can't," said Harry. "There's something I need to do. Professor, do you know where the diadem of Ravenclaw is?"

"The diadem of Ravenclaw? Of course not — hasn't it been lost for centuries?" She sat up a little straighter. "Potter, you must flee!"

—"

"I had to," said Harry. "Professor, there's something hidden here that I'm supposed to find, and it could be the diadem. There was a sound of movement, of clinking glass: Amycus was coming round. Before Harry or Luna could act, Professor Snape ate the Eater, and said, "Imperio."

Amycus got up, walked over to his sister, picked up her wand, then shuffled obediently to Professor McGonagall and stood beside Alecto. Professor McGonagall waved her wand again, and a length of shimmering silver rope appeared out of thin air.

"Potter," said Professor McGonagall, turning to face him again with superb indifference to the Carrows' predicament, "—"

As she said it, a wrath that was like physical pain blazed through Harry, setting his scar on fire, and for a second he lost his head that no golden locket lay safe beneath the surface —

"Potter, are you all right?" said a voice, and Harry came back: He was clutching Luna's shoulder to steady himself.

"Time's running out, Voldemort's getting nearer. Professor, I'm acting on Dumbledore's orders, I must find what he wants — searching the castle — it's me Voldemort wants, but he won't care about killing a few more or less, not now —" not in his head.

"You're acting on Dumbledore's orders?" she repeated with a look of dawning wonder. Then she drew herself up to her full height.

"We shall secure the school against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named while you search for this — this object."

"Is that possible?"

"I think so," said Professor McGonagall dryly, "we teachers are rather good at magic, you know. I am sure we will be able to get into it. Of course, something will have to be done about Professor Snape —"

"Let me —"

"— and if Hogwarts is about to enter a state of siege, with the Dark Lord at the gates, it would indeed be advisable to have the Floo Network under observation, and Apparition impossible within the grounds —"

"There's a way," said Harry quickly, and he explained about the passageway leading into the Hog's Head.

"Potter, we're talking about hundreds of students —"

"I know, Professor, but if Voldemort and the Death Eaters are concentrating on the school boundaries they won't be looking for this."

"There's something in that," she agreed. She pointed her wand at the Carrows, and a silver net fell upon their bound heads where they dangled beneath the blue-and-gold ceiling like two large, ugly sea creatures. "Come. We must alert the others." She marched toward the door, and as she did so she raised her wand. From the tip burst three silver cats with spectral forms, filling the spiral staircase with silvery light, as Professor McGonagall, Harry, and Luna hurried back down.

Along the corridors they raced, and one by one the Patronuses left them; Professor McGonagall's tartan dressing gown over the Cloak.

They had descended two more floors when another set of quiet footsteps joined theirs. Harry, whose scar was still pulsing, for the Marauder's Map, but before he could take it out, McGonagall too seemed to become aware of their company.

"It is I," said a low voice.

From behind a suit of armor stepped Severus Snape.

Hatred boiled up in Harry at the sight of him: He had forgotten the details of Snape's appearance in the magnitude of the darkness around his thin face, how his black eyes had a dead, cold look. He was not wearing nightclothes, but was dressed in a dark robe for a fight.

"Where are the Carrows?" he asked quietly.

"Wherever you told them to be, I expect, Severus," said Professor McGonagall.

Snape stepped nearer, and his eyes flitted over Professor McGonagall into the air around her, as if he knew that Harry was there.

"I was under the impression," said Snape, "that Alecto had apprehended an intruder."

"Really?" said Professor McGonagall. "And what gave you that impression?"

Snape made a slight flexing movement of his left arm, where the Dark Mark was branded into his skin.

"Oh, but naturally," said Professor McGonagall. "You Death Eaters have your own private means of communication, I know."

Snape pretended not to have heard her. His eyes were still probing the air all about her, and he was moving gradually toward her.

"I did not know that it was your night to patrol the corridors, Minerva."

"You have some objection?"

"I wonder what could have brought you out of your bed at this late hour?"

"I thought I heard a disturbance," said Professor McGonagall.

"Really? But all seems calm."

Snape looked into her eyes.

"Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva? Because if you have, I must insist —"

Professor McGonagall moved faster than Harry could have believed: Her wand slashed through the air and for a split second the swiftness of his Shield Charm was such that McGonagall was thrown off balance. She brandished her wand at a torch.

Snape, was forced to pull Luna out of the way of the descending flames, which became a ring of fire that filled the corridor.

Then it was no longer fire, but a great black serpent that McGonagall blasted to smoke, which re-formed and solidified behind them only by forcing the suit of armor in front of him, and with echoing clangs the daggers sank, one after another.

"Minerva!" said a squeaky voice, and looking behind him, still shielding Luna from flying spells, Harry saw Professors

their nightclothes, with the enormous Professor Slughorn panting along at the rear.

"No!" squealed Flitwick, raising his wand. "You'll do no more murder at Hogwarts!"

Flitwick's spell hit the suit of armor behind which Snape had taken shelter: With a clatter it came to life. Snape struggled

his attackers: Harry and Luna had to dive sideways to avoid it as it smashed into the wall and shattered. When Harry

, and Sprout all thundering after him: He hurtled through a classroom door and, moments later, he heard McGonagall

"What's happened, what's happened?" asked Luna.

Harry dragged her to her feet and they raced along the corridor, trailing the Invisibility Cloak behind them, into the

Sprout were standing at a smashed window.

"He jumped," said Professor McGonagall as Harry and Luna ran into the room.

"You mean he's dead?" Harry sprinted to the window, ignoring Flitwick's and Sprout's yells of shock at his sudden app

"No, he's not dead," said McGonagall bitterly. "Unlike Dumbledore, he was still carrying a wand . . . and he seems to h

With a tingle of horror, Harry saw in the distance a huge, batlike shape flying through the darkness toward the perim

There were heavy footfalls behind them, and a great deal of puffing: Slughorn had just caught up.

"Harry!" he panted, massaging his immense chest beneath his emerald-green silk pajamas. "My dear boy . . . what a s

. . . ?"

"Our headmaster is taking a short break," said Professor McGonagall, pointing at the Snape-shaped hole in the wind

"Professor!" Harry shouted, his hands at his forehead. He could see the Inferi-filled lake sliding beneath him, and he

and Voldemort leapt from it with murder in his heart —

"Professor, we've got to barricade the school, he's coming now!"

"Very well. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is coming," she told the other teachers. Sprout and Flitwick gasped; Slughor

edore's orders. We need to put in place every protection of which we are capable while Potter does what he needs to

"You realize, of course, that nothing we do will be able to keep out You-Know-Who indefinitely?" squeaked Flitwick.

"But we can hold him up," said Professor Sprout.

"Thank you, Pomona," said Professor McGonagall, and between the two witches there passed a look of grim underst

n gather our students and meet in the Great Hall. Most must be evacuated, though if any of those who are over age

"Agreed," said Professor Sprout, already hurrying toward the door. "I shall meet you in the Great Hall in twenty minu

And as she jogged out of sight, they could hear her muttering, "Tentacula. Devil's Snare. And Snargaluff pods . . . yes,

"I can act from here," said Flitwick, and although he could barely see out of it, he pointed his wand through the smas

ty. Harry heard a weird rushing noise, as though Flitwick had unleashed the power of the wind into the grounds.

"Professor," Harry said, approaching the little Charms master, "Professor, I'm sorry to interrupt, but this is important

"— Protego Horribilis — the diadem of Ravenclaw?" squeaked Flitwick. "A little extra wisdom never goes amiss, Potte

"I only meant — do you know where it is? Have you ever seen it?"

"Seen it? Nobody has seen it in living memory! Long since lost, boy!"

Harry felt a mixture of desperate disappointment and panic. What, then, was the Horcrux?

"We shall meet you and your Ravenclaws in the Great Hall, Filius!" said Professor McGonagall, beckoning to Harry and

They had just reached the door when Slughorn rumbled into speech.

"My word," he puffed, pale and sweaty, his walrus mustache aquiver. "What a to-do! I'm not at all sure whether this is

one who has tried to delay him will be in most grievous peril —"

"I shall expect you and the Slytherins in the Great Hall in twenty minutes, also," said Professor McGonagall. "If you wi

any of you attempt to sabotage our resistance or take up arms against us within this castle, then, Horace, we duel to

"Minerva!" he said, aghast.

"The time has come for Slytherin House to decide upon its loyalties," interrupted Professor McGonagall. "Go and wak

Harry did not stay to watch Slughorn splutter: He and Luna ran after Professor McGonagall, who had taken up a pos

"Piertotum — oh, for heaven's sake, Filch, not now —"

The aged caretaker had just come hobbling into view, shouting, "Students out of bed! Students in the corridors!"

"They're supposed to be, you blithering idiot!" shouted McGonagall. "Now go and do something constructive! Find Pe

"P-Peeves?" stammered Filch as though he had never heard the name before.

"Yes, Peeves, you fool, Peeves! Haven't you been complaining about him for a quarter of a century? Go and fetch him

Filch evidently thought Professor McGonagall had taken leave of her senses, but hobbled away, hunch-shouldered, r

"And now — Piertotum Locomotor!" cried Professor McGonagall.

And all along the corridor the statues and suits of armor jumped down from their plinths, and from the echoing cras

throughout the castle had done the same.

"Hogwarts is threatened!" shouted Professor McGonagall. "Man the boundaries, protect us, do your duty to our scho

Clattering and yelling, the horde of moving statues stampeded past Harry: some of them smaller, others larger, than

ndished swords and spiked balls on chains.

"Now, Potter," said McGonagall, "you and Miss Lovegood had better return to your friends and bring them to the Gre

They parted at the top of the next staircase, Harry and Luna running back toward the concealed entrance to the Roo

aring traveling cloaks over their pajamas, being shepherded down to the Great Hall by teachers and prefects.

"That was Potter!"

"Harry Potter!"

"It was him, I swear, I just saw him!"

But Harry did not look back, and at last they reached the entrance to the Room of Requirement. Harry leaned against the wall and peeped back down the steep staircase.

"Wh — ?"

As the room came into view, Harry slipped down a few stairs in shock. It was packed, far more crowded than when he had been there as were Oliver Wood, Katie Bell, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet, Bill and Fleur, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"Harry, what's happening?" said Lupin, meeting him at the foot of the stairs.

"Voldemort's on his way, they're barricading the school — Snape's run for it — What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

"We sent messages to the rest of Dumbledore's Army," Fred explained. "You couldn't expect everyone to miss the funeral — it kind of snowballed."

"What first, Harry?" called George. "What's going on?"

"They're evacuating the younger kids and everyone's meeting in the Great Hall to get organized," Harry said. "We're finishing up the funeral here."

There was a great roar and a surge toward the foot of the stairs; he was pressed back against the wall as they ran past him. There were Dumbledore's Army, and Harry's old Quidditch team, all with their wands drawn, heading up into the main castle.

"Come on, Luna," Dean called as he passed, holding out his free hand; she took it and followed him back up the stairs.

The crowd was thinning: Only a little knot of people remained below in the Room of Requirement, and Harry joined them. There were Sirius, Remus, and the twins, Fred, George, Bill, and Fleur.

"You're underage!" Mrs. Weasley shouted at her daughter as Harry approached. "I won't permit it! The boys, yes, but you, no!"

Ginny's hair flew as she pulled her arm out of her mother's grip.

"I'm in Dumbledore's Army —"

"A teenagers' gang!"

"A teenagers' gang that's about to take him on, which no one else has dared to do!" said Fred.

"She's sixteen!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "She's not old enough! What you two were thinking, bringing her with you —" Fred and George looked slightly ashamed of themselves.

"Mum's right, Ginny," said Bill gently. "You can't do this. Everyone underage will have to leave, it's only right."

"I can't go home!" Ginny shouted, angry tears sparkling in her eyes. "My whole family's here, I can't stand waiting there!" Her eyes met Harry's for the first time. She looked at him beseechingly, but he shook his head and she turned away.

"Fine," she said, staring at the entrance to the tunnel back to the Hog's Head. "I'll say good-bye now, then, and —"

There was a scuffling and a great thump: Someone else had clambered out of the tunnel, overbalanced slightly, and landed on his face. He wore round, rough lopsided horn-rimmed glasses, and said, "Am I too late? Has it started? I only just found out, so I — I —"

Percy spluttered into silence. Evidently he had not expected to run into most of his family. There was a long moment of silence, then a wildly transparent attempt to break the tension, "So — 'ow eez leetle Teddy?"

Lupin blinked at her, startled. The silence between the Weasleys seemed to be solidifying, like ice.

"I — oh yes — he's fine!" Lupin said loudly. "Yes, Tonks is with him — at her mother's —"

Percy and the other Weasleys were still staring at one another, frozen.

"Here, I've got a picture!" Lupin shouted, pulling a photograph from inside his jacket and showing it to Fleur and Harry. It was a picture of the twins, having fat fists at the camera.

"I was a fool!" Percy roared, so loudly that Lupin nearly dropped his photograph. "I was an idiot, I was a pompous prat!"

"Ministry-loving, family-disowning, power-hungry moron," said Fred.

Percy swallowed.

"Yes, I was!"

"Well, you can't say fairer than that," said Fred, holding out his hand to Percy.

Mrs. Weasley burst into tears. She ran forward, pushed Fred aside, and pulled Percy into a strangling hug, while he panted.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Percy said.

Mr. Weasley blinked rather rapidly, then he too hurried to hug his son.

"What made you see sense, Percy?" inquired George.

"It's been coming on for a while," said Percy, mopping his eyes under his glasses with a corner of his traveling cloak. "I've been thinking about the Ministry, they're imprisoning traitors all the time. I managed to make contact with Aberforth and he tipped me off ten minutes before he was taken. I am."

"Well, we do look to our prefects to take a lead at times such as these," said George in a good imitation of Percy's manner. "The good Death Eaters'll be taken."

"So, you're my sister-in-law now?" said Percy, shaking hands with Fleur as they hurried off toward the staircase with Bill.

"Ginny!" barked Mrs. Weasley.

Ginny had been attempting, under cover of the reconciliation, to sneak upstairs too.

"Molly, how about this," said Lupin. "Why doesn't Ginny stay here, then at least she'll be on the scene and know what's going on?"

"That's a good idea," said Mr. Weasley firmly. "Ginny, you stay in this room, you hear me?"

Ginny did not seem to like the idea much, but under her father's unusually stern gaze, she nodded. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley looked at each other.

"Where's Ron?" asked Harry. "Where's Hermione?"

"They must have gone up to the Great Hall already," Mr. Weasley called over his shoulder.

"I didn't see them pass me," said Harry.

"They said something about a bathroom," said Ginny, "not long after you left."

"A bathroom?"

Harry strode across the room to an open door leading off the Room of Requirement and checked the bathroom beyond.

"You're sure they said bath — ?"

But then his scar seared and the Room of Requirement vanished: He was looking through the high wrought-iron gates of the castle grounds toward the castle, which was ablaze with lights. Nagini lay draped over his shoulders. He was possessed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE BATTLE OF HOGWARTS

The enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall was dark and scattered with stars, and below it the four long House tables were crowded with students in dressing gowns. Here and there shone the pearly white figures of the school ghosts. Every eye, living and dead, was turned toward the raised platform at the top of the Hall. Behind her stood the remaining teachers, including the palomino centaur, Firenze. The battle was about to begin.

"... evacuation will be overseen by Mr. Filch and Madam Pomfrey. Prefects, when I give the word, you will organize your own evacuation point."

Many of the students looked petrified. However, as Harry skirted the walls, scanning the Gryffindor table for Ron and Hermione, he shouted, "And what if we want to stay and fight?"

There was a smattering of applause.

"If you are of age, you may stay," said Professor McGonagall.

"What about our things?" called a girl at the Ravenclaw table. "Our trunks, our owls?"

"We have no time to collect possessions," said Professor McGonagall. "The important thing is to get you out of here safely."

"Where's Professor Snape?" shouted a girl from the Slytherin table.

"He has, to use the common phrase, done a bunk," replied Professor McGonagall, and a great cheer erupted from the Gryffindor table. Harry moved up the Hall alongside the Gryffindor table, still looking for Ron and Hermione. As he passed, faces turned to watch him go.

"We have already placed protection around the castle," Professor McGonagall was saying, "but it is unlikely to hold for long. We must move quickly and calmly, and do as your prefects —"

But her final words were drowned as a different voice echoed throughout the Hall. It was high, cold, and clear: There was no escape. The walls themselves. Like the monster it had once commanded, it might have lain dormant there for centuries.

"I know that you are preparing to fight." There were screams amongst the students, some of whom clutched each other. The teachers' words are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to harm any of you.

There was silence in the Hall now, the kind of silence that presses against the eardrums, that seems too huge to be broken.

"Give me Harry Potter," said Voldemort's voice, "and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the rest of you in peace."

"You have until midnight."

The silence swallowed them all again. Every head turned, every eye in the place seemed to have found Harry, to hold him. Pansy Parkinson rose from the Slytherin table and he recognized Pansy Parkinson as she raised a shaking arm and screamed, "Fight! Fight!" Before Harry could speak, there was a massive movement. The Gryffindors in front of him had risen and stood facing the Slytherins. At the same moment, the Ravenclaws, all of them with their backs to Harry, all of them looking toward Pansy Parkinson. Everywhere, pulled from beneath cloaks and from under sleeves.

"Thank you, Miss Parkinson," said Professor McGonagall in a clipped voice. "You will leave the Hall first with Mr. Filch. The Gryffindors will follow. The Slytherins will follow last."

Harry heard the grinding of benches and then the sound of the Slytherins trooping out on the other side of the Hall. "Ravenclaws, follow on!" cried Professor McGonagall.

Slowly the four tables emptied. The Slytherin table was completely deserted, but a number of older Ravenclaws remained behind, and half of Gryffindor remained in their seats, necessitating Professor McGonagall's descent from the platform.

"Absolutely not, Creevey, go! And you, Peakes!"

Harry hurried over to the Weasleys, all sitting together at the Gryffindor table.

"Where are Ron and Hermione?"

"Haven't you found — ?" began Mr. Weasley, looking worried.

But he broke off as Kingsley had stepped forward on the raised platform to address those who had remained behind. "We've only got half an hour until midnight, so we need to act fast! A battle plan has been agreed between the teachers. Professor Sprout, and McGonagall are going to take groups of fighters up to the three highest towers — Ravenclaw, Astronomy, and Gryffindor — to positions from which to work spells. Meanwhile Remus — he indicated Lupin — 'Arthur' — he pointed toward Mr. Weasley — to the grounds. We'll need somebody to organize defense of the entrances of the passageways into the school —"

"Sounds like a job for us," called Fred, indicating himself and George, and Kingsley nodded his approval.

"All right, leaders up here and we'll divide up the troops!"

"Potter," said Professor McGonagall, hurrying up to him, as students flooded the platform, jostling for position, receiving orders. "What's the plan?"

"What? Oh," said Harry, "oh yeah!"

He had almost forgotten about the Horcrux, almost forgotten that the battle was being fought so that he could search rily driven every other thought from his mind.

"Then go, Potter, go!"

"Right — yeah —"

He sensed eyes following him as he ran out of the Great Hall again, into the entrance hall still crowded with evacuating case with them, but at the top he hurried off along a deserted corridor. Fear and panic were clouding his thought pro Horcrux, but his thoughts buzzed as frantically and fruitlessly as wasps trapped beneath a glass. Without Ron and He wed down, coming to a halt halfway along an empty passage, where he sat down upon the plinth of a departed statu could not see Ron's or Hermione's names anywhere on it, though the density of the crowd of dots now making its wa He put the map away, pressed his hands over his face, and closed his eyes, trying to concentrate. . . .

Voldemort thought I'd go to Ravenclaw Tower.

There it was: a solid fact, the place to start. Voldemort had stationed Alecto Carrow in the Ravenclaw common room, rry already knew his Horcrux was connected to that House.

But the only object anyone seemed to associate with Ravenclaw was the lost diadem . . . and how could the Horcrux ad found the diadem that had eluded generations of Ravenclaws? Who could have told him where to look, when nob

In living memory . . .

Beneath his fingers, Harry's eyes flew open again. He leapt up from the plinth and tore back the way he had come, n e marching toward the Room of Requirement grew louder and louder as he returned to the marble stairs. Prefects w eir own Houses; there was much pushing and shoving; Harry saw Zacharias Smith bowling over first-years to get to t s, while older ones called desperately for friends or siblings. . . .

Harry caught sight of a pearly white figure drifting across the entrance hall below and yelled as loudly as he could ov

"Nick! NICK! I need to talk to you!"

He forced his way back through the tide of students, finally reaching the bottom of the stairs, where Nearly Headless

"Harry! My dear boy!"

Nick made to grasp Harry's hands with both of his own: Harry's felt as though they had been thrust into icy water.

"Nick, you've got to help me. Who's the ghost of Ravenclaw Tower?"

Nearly Headless Nick looked surprised and a little offended.

"The Gray Lady, of course; but if it is ghostly services you require — ?"

"It's got to be her — d'you know where she is?"

"Let's see. . . ."

Nick's head wobbled a little on his ruff as he turned hither and thither, peering over the heads of the swarming stud

"That's her over there, Harry, the young woman with the long hair."

Harry looked in the direction of Nick's transparent, pointing finger and saw a tall ghost who caught sight of Harry loo olid wall.

Harry ran after her. Once through the door of the corridor into which she had disappeared, he saw her at the very e

"Hey — wait — come back!"

She consented to pause, floating a few inches from the ground. Harry supposed that she was beautiful, with her wai and proud. Close to, he recognized her as a ghost he had passed several times in the corridor, but to whom he had r

"You're the Gray Lady?"

She nodded but did not speak.

"The ghost of Ravenclaw Tower?"

"That is correct."

Her tone was not encouraging.

"Please: I need some help. I need to know anything you can tell me about the lost diadem."

A cold smile curved her lips.

"I am afraid," she said, turning to leave, "that I cannot help you."

"WAIT!"

He had not meant to shout, but anger and panic were threatening to overwhelm him. He glanced at his watch as she

"This is urgent," he said fiercely. "If that diadem's at Hogwarts, I've got to find it, fast."

"You are hardly the first student to covet the diadem," she said disdainfully. "Generations of students have badgered

"This isn't about trying to get better marks!" Harry shouted at her. "It's about Voldemort — defeating Voldemort — or She could not blush, but her transparent cheeks became more opaque, and her voice was heated as she replied, "Of

"Well, help me, then!"

Her composure was slipping.

"It — it is not a question of —" she stammered. "My mother's diadem —"

"Your mother's?"

She looked angry with herself.

"When I lived," she said stiffly, "I was Helena Ravenclaw."

"You're her daughter? But then, you must know what happened to it!"

"While the diadem bestows wisdom," she said with an obvious effort to pull herself together, "I doubt that it would give himself Lord —"

"Haven't I just told you, I'm not interested in wearing it!" Harry said fiercely. "There's no time to explain — but if you care, you've got to tell me anything you know about the diadem!"

She remained quite still, floating in midair, staring down at him, and a sense of hopelessness engulfed Harry. Of course, Dumbledore, who had surely asked her the same question. He had shaken his head and made to turn away when she said, "I stole the diadem from my mother."

"You — you did what?"

"I stole the diadem," repeated Helena Ravenclaw in a whisper. "I sought to make myself cleverer, more important than my mother. He did not know how he had managed to gain her confidence, and did not ask; he simply listened, hard, as she went on. 'My mother, they say, never admitted that the diadem was gone, but pretended that she had it still. She concealed her warts. Then my mother fell ill — fatally ill. In spite of my perfidy, she was desperate to see me one more time. She sent a messenger and me. She knew that he would not rest until he had done so.'"

Harry waited. She drew a deep breath and threw back her head.

"He tracked me to the forest where I was hiding. When I refused to return with him, he became violent. The Baron wanted his freedom, he stabbed me."

"The Baron? You mean — ?"

"The Bloody Baron, yes," said the Gray Lady, and she lifted aside the cloak she wore to reveal a single dark wound in her forehead, with remorse. He took the weapon that had claimed my life, and used it to kill himself. All these centuries later, he was still there, he added bitterly.

"And . . . and the diadem?"

"It remained where I had hidden it when I heard the Baron blundering through the forest toward me. Concealed inside a hollow tree?" repeated Harry. "What tree? Where was this?"

"A forest in Albania. A lonely place I thought was far beyond my mother's reach."

"Albania," repeated Harry. Sense was emerging miraculously from confusion, and now he understood why she was telling him this story, haven't you? Another student?"

She closed her eyes and nodded.

"I had . . . no idea. . . . He was . . . flattering. He seemed to . . . to understand . . . to sympathize. . . ."

Yes, Harry thought, Tom Riddle would certainly have understood Helena Ravenclaw's desire to possess fabulous objects. "Well, you weren't the first person Riddle wormed things out of," Harry muttered. "He could be charming when he wanted to. So Voldemort had managed to wheedle the location of the lost diadem out of the Gray Lady. He had traveled to that forest, perhaps as soon as he left Hogwarts, before he even started work at Borgin and Burkes. And wouldn't those secluded Albanian woods have seemed an excellent refuge when, so much later, Voldemort had come? But the diadem, once it became his precious Horcrux, had not been left in that lowly tree. . . . No, the diadem had been hidden. . . . put it there —"

"— the night he asked for a job!" said Harry, finishing his thought.

"I beg your pardon?"

"He hid the diadem in the castle, the night he asked Dumbledore to let him teach!" said Harry. Saying it out loud enabled him to see on his way up to, or down from, Dumbledore's office! But it was still worth trying to get the job — then he might've gotten the thanks!"

Harry left her floating there, looking utterly bewildered. As he rounded the corner back into the entrance hall, he checked his pocket. He now knew what the last Horcrux was, he was no closer to discovering where it was. . . .

Generations of students had failed to find the diadem; that suggested that it was not in Ravenclaw Tower — but if not there, where in the Hogwarts Castle, that he believed would remain secret forever?

Lost in desperate speculation, Harry turned a corner, but he had taken only a few steps down the new corridor when he was startled. Sh. As he leapt aside, a gigantic body flew in through the window and hit the opposite wall. Something large and furry had landed itself at Harry.

"Hagrid!" Harry bellowed, fighting off Fang the boarhound's attentions as the enormous bearded figure clambered to his feet.

"Harry, yer here! Yer here!"

Hagrid stooped down, bestowed upon Harry a cursory and rib-cracking hug, then ran back to the shattered window.

"Good boy, Grawpy!" he bellowed through the hole in the window. "I'll see yer in a moment, there's a good lad!"

Beyond Hagrid, out in the dark night, Harry saw bursts of light in the distance and heard a weird, keening scream. He waited.

"Blimey, Harry," panted Hagrid, "this is it, eh? Time ter fight?"

"Hagrid, where have you come from?"

"Heard You-Know-Who from up in our cave," said Hagrid grimly. "Voice carried, didn't it? Yeh got till midnight ter gimme the diadem. Get down, Fang. So we come ter join in, me an' Grawpy an' Fang. Smashed our way through the boundary by the front gate, the castle, so he shoved me through the window, bless him. Not exac'ly what I meant, bu' — where's Ron an' Hermione?"

"That," said Harry, "is a really good question. Come on."

They hurried together along the corridor, Fang lolloping beside them. Harry could hear movement through the corridor, but he could see more flashes of light in the dark grounds.

"Where're we goin'?" puffed Hagrid, pounding along at Harry's heels, making the floorboards quake.

"I dunno exactly," said Harry, making another random turn, "but Ron and Hermione must be around here somewhere."

The first casualties of the battle were already strewn across the passage ahead: The two stone gargoyles that usually guarded the entrance, a jinx that had sailed through another broken window. Their remains stirred feebly on the floor, and as Harry leapt over them, he didn't mind me . . . I'll just lie here and crumble. . . ."

Its ugly stone face made Harry think suddenly of the marble bust of Rowena Ravenclaw at Xenophilius's house, wearing the stone diadem upon her white curls. . . .

And as he reached the end of the passage, the memory of a third stone effigy came back to him: that of an ugly old woman wearing a red old tiara. The shock shot through Harry with the heat of firewhisky, and he nearly stumbled.

He knew, at last, where the Horcrux sat waiting for him. . . .

Tom Riddle, who confided in no one and operated alone, might have been arrogant enough to assume that he, and Sirius Black, Albus Dumbledore and Flitwick, those model pupils, had never set foot in that particular place, but he, Harry, had struck. There was a secret he and Voldemort knew, that Dumbledore had never discovered —

He was roused by Professor Sprout, who was thundering past followed by Neville and half a dozen others, all of them shouting. . . .

"Mandrakes!" Neville bellowed at Harry over his shoulder as he ran. "Going to lob them over the walls — they won't let you in!"

Harry knew now where to go: He sped off, with Hagrid and Fang galloping behind him. They passed portrait after portrait, portraits in ruffs and breeches, in armor and cloaks, cramming themselves into each others' canvases, screaming news of the battle. . . .

Idor, the whole castle shook, and Harry knew, as a gigantic vase blew off its plinth with explosive force, that it was in the hands of the teachers and the Order.

"It's all right, Fang — it's all right!" yelled Hagrid, but the great boarhound had taken flight as slivers of china flew like shrapnel from the terrified dog, leaving Harry alone.

He forged on through the trembling passages, his wand at the ready, and for the length of one corridor the little pair followed him, clanking along in his armor, screaming encouragement, his fat little pony cantering behind him.

"Braggarts and rogues, dogs and scoundrels, drive them out, Harry Potter, see them off!"

Harry hurtled around a corner and found Fred and a small knot of students, including Lee Jordan and Hannah Abbott, gathered around a secret passageway. Their wands were drawn and they were listening at the concealed hole.

"Nice night for it!" Fred shouted as the castle quaked again, and Harry sprinted by, elated and terrified in equal measure. . . .

owls everywhere, and Mrs. Norris was hissing and trying to bat them with her paws, no doubt to return them to the safety of the castle. . . .

"Potter!"

Aberforth Dumbledore stood blocking the corridor ahead, his wand held ready.

"I've had hundreds of kids thundering through my pub, Potter!"

"I know, we're evacuating," Harry said, "Voldemort's —"

"— attacking because they haven't handed you over, yeah," said Aberforth, "I'm not deaf, the whole of Hogsmeade heard you. . . . Are the kids hostages? There are kids of Death Eaters you've just sent to safety. Wouldn't it have been a bit smarter to keep 'em here?"

"It wouldn't stop Voldemort," said Harry, "and your brother would never have done it."

Aberforth grunted and tore away in the opposite direction.

Your brother would never have done it . . . Well, it was the truth, Harry thought as he ran on again; Dumbledore, who would have done it for a ransom. . . .

And then he skidded around a final corner and with a yell of mingled relief and fury he saw them: Ron and Hermione. . . .

Ron with a broomstick under his arm.

"Where the hell have you been?" Harry shouted.

"Chamber of Secrets," said Ron.

"Chamber — what?" said Harry, coming to an unsteady halt before them.

"It was Ron, all Ron's idea!" said Hermione breathlessly. "Wasn't it absolutely brilliant? There we were, after you left, and we were going to get rid of it? We still hadn't got rid of the cup! And then he thought of it! The basilisk!"

"What the —?"

"Something to get rid of Horcruxes," said Ron simply.

Harry's eyes dropped to the objects clutched in Ron and Hermione's arms: great curved fangs, torn, he now realized, from the basilisk's mouth.

"But how did you get in there?" he asked, staring from the fangs to Ron. "You need to speak Parseltongue!"

"He did!" whispered Hermione. "Show him, Ron!"

Ron made a horrible strangled hissing noise.

"It's what you did to open the locket," he told Harry apologetically. "I had to have a few goes to get it right, but," he shrugged.

"He was amazing!" said Hermione. "Amazing!"

"So . . ." Harry was struggling to keep up. "So . . ."

"So we're another Horcrux down," said Ron, and from under his jacket he pulled the mangled remains of Hufflepuff's cup. . . .

pleasure yet."

"Genius!" yelled Harry.

"It was nothing," said Ron, though he looked delighted with himself. "So what's new with you?"

As he said it, there was an explosion from overhead: All three of them looked up as dust fell from the ceiling and the floor. "I know what the diadem looks like, and I know where it is," said Harry, talking fast. "He hid it exactly where I hid my cloak of invisibility. He thought he was the only one to find it. Come on."

As the walls trembled again, he led the other two back through the concealed entrance and down the staircase into the kitchen. There were Tonks, and an elderly witch wearing a moth-eaten hat, whom Harry recognized immediately as Neville's grandmother. "Ah, Potter," she said crisply as if she had been waiting for him. "You can tell us what's going on."

"Is everyone okay?" said Ginny and Tonks together.

"So far as we know," said Harry. "Are there still people in the passage to the Hog's Head?"

He knew that the room would not be able to transform while there were still users inside it.

"I was the last to come through," said Mrs. Longbottom. "I sealed it, I think it unwise to leave it open now Aberforth is fighting."

"He's fighting," said Harry.

"Naturally," said the old lady proudly. "Excuse me, I must go and assist him."

With surprising speed she trotted off toward the stone steps.

Harry looked at Tonks.

"I thought you were supposed to be with Teddy at your mother's?"

"I couldn't stand not knowing —" Tonks looked anguished. "She'll look after him — have you seen Remus?"

"He was planning to lead a group of fighters into the grounds —"

Without another word, Tonks sped off.

"Ginny," said Harry, "I'm sorry, but we need you to leave too. Just for a bit. Then you can come back in."

Ginny looked simply delighted to leave her sanctuary.

"And then you can come back in!" he shouted after her as she ran up the steps after Tonks. "You've got to come back in!"

"Hang on a moment!" said Ron sharply. "We've forgotten someone!"

"Who?" asked Hermione.

"The house-elves, they'll all be down in the kitchen, won't they?"

"You mean we ought to get them fighting?" asked Harry.

"No," said Ron seriously, "I mean we should tell them to get out. We don't want any more Dobbies, do we? We can't afford them."

There was a clatter as the basilisk fangs cascaded out of Hermione's arms. Running at Ron, she flung them around his head and broomstick he was holding and responded with such enthusiasm that he lifted Hermione off her feet.

"Is this the moment?" Harry asked weakly, and when nothing happened except that Ron and Hermione gripped each other, he said, "Well, it's a moment. There's a war going on here!"

Ron and Hermione broke apart, their arms still around each other.

"I know, mate," said Ron, who looked as though he had recently been hit on the back of the head with a Bludger, "so don't worry."

"Never mind that, what about the Horcrux?" Harry shouted. "Do you think you could just — just hold it in until we've got it?"

"Yeah — right — sorry —" said Ron, and he and Hermione set about gathering up fangs, both pink in the face.

It was clear, as the three of them stepped back into the corridor upstairs, that in the minutes that they had spent in the corridor they had deteriorated severely: The walls and ceiling were shaking worse than ever; dust filled the air, and through the nearest window Harry could see the foot of the castle that he knew the Death Eaters must be very near to entering the place. Looking down, Harry saw a gargoyle torn from the roof and roaring his displeasure.

"Let's hope he steps on some of them!" said Ron as more screams echoed from close by.

"As long as it's not any of our lot!" said a voice: Harry turned and saw Ginny and Tonks, both with their wands drawn. They watched, Ginny sent a well-aimed jinx into a crowd of fighters below.

"Good girl!" roared a figure running through the dust toward them, and Harry saw Aberforth again, his gray hair flying. "If the giants might be breaching the north battlements, they've brought giants of their own!"

"Have you seen Remus?" Tonks called after him.

"He was dueling Dolohov," shouted Aberforth, "haven't seen him since!"

"Tonks," said Ginny, "Tonks, I'm sure he's okay —"

But Tonks had run off into the dust after Aberforth.

Ginny turned, helpless, to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"They'll be all right," said Harry, though he knew they were empty words. "Ginny, we'll be back in a moment, just keep the door open, and they ran back to the stretch of wall beyond which the Room of Requirement was waiting to do the bidding of its users. I need the place where everything is hidden, Harry begged of it inside his head, and the door materialized on their threshold. The furor of the battle died the moment they crossed the threshold and closed the door behind them: All was silent. Harry looked out of a city, its towering walls built of objects hidden by thousands of long-gone students.

"And he never realized anyone could get in?" said Ron, his voice echoing in the silence.

"He thought he was the only one," said Harry. "Too bad for him I've had to hide stuff in my time . . . this way," he added. He passed the stuffed troll and the Vanishing Cabinet Draco Malfoy had mended last year with such disastrous consequences. He did not remember where to go next. . . .

"Accio Diadem!" cried Hermione in desperation, but nothing flew through the air toward them. It seemed that, like the others, she had not learned that easily.

"Let's split up," Harry told the other two. "Look for a stone bust of an old man wearing a wig and a tiara! It's standing . . ."

They sped off up adjacent aisles; Harry could hear the others' footsteps echoing through the towering piles of junk, clatters . . .

"Somewhere near here," Harry muttered to himself. "Somewhere . . . somewhere . . ."

Deeper and deeper into the labyrinth he went, looking for objects he recognized from his one previous trip into the room. He began to shiver: There it was, right ahead, the blistered old cupboard in which he had hidden his old Potions book, and the wig and what looked like an ancient, discolored tiara.

He had already stretched out his hand, though he remained ten feet away, when a voice behind him said, "Hold it, Potter!"

He skidded to a halt and turned around. Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him, shoulder to shoulder, wands raised. The faces he saw Draco Malfoy.

"That's my wand you're holding, Potter," said Malfoy, pointing his own through the gap between Crabbe and Goyle.

"Not anymore," panted Harry, tightening his grip on the hawthorn wand. "Winners, keepers, Malfoy. Who's lent you that?"

"My mother," said Draco.

Harry laughed, though there was nothing very humorous about the situation. He could not hear Ron or Hermione anywhere.

"So how come you three aren't with Voldemort?" asked Harry.

"We're gonna be rewarded," said Crabbe: His voice was surprisingly soft for such an enormous person; Harry had heard him promise a large bag of sweets. "We 'ung back, Potter. We decided not to go. Decided to bring you to 'im."

"Good plan," said Harry in mock admiration. He could not believe that he was this close, and was going to be thwarted.

oward the place where the Horcrux sat lopsided upon the bust. If he could just get his hands on it before the fight broke out.

"So how did you get in here?" he asked, trying to distract them.

"I virtually lived in the Room of Hidden Things all last year," said Malfoy, his voice brittle. "I know how to get in."

"We was hiding in the corridor outside," grunted Goyle. "We can do Diss-lusion Charms now! And then," his face split open, "you was looking for a die-dum! What's a die-dum?"

"Harry?" Ron's voice echoed suddenly from the other side of the wall to Harry's right. "Are you talking to someone?"

With a whiplike movement, Crabbe pointed his wand at the fifty-foot mountain of old furniture, of broken trunks, of broken chests.

The wall began to totter, then the top third crumbled into the aisle next door where Ron stood.

"Ron!" Harry bellowed, as somewhere out of sight Hermione screamed, and Harry heard innumerable objects crashing.

his wand at the rampart, cried, "Finite!" and it steadied.

"No!" shouted Malfoy, staying Crabbe's arm as the latter made to repeat his spell. "If you wreck the room you might be in trouble."

"What's that matter?" said Crabbe, tugging himself free. "It's Potter the Dark Lord wants, who cares about a die-dum?"

"Potter came in here to get it," said Malfoy with ill-disguised impatience at the slow-wittedness of his colleagues, "so he must mean?"

"Crabbe turned on Malfoy with undisguised ferocity. "Who cares what you think? I don't take your orders!"

"Harry?" shouted Ron again, from the other side of the junk wall. "What's going on?"

"Harry?" mimicked Crabbe. "What's going — no, Potter! Crucio!"

Harry had lunged for the tiara; Crabbe's curse missed him but hit the stone bust, which flew into the air; the diadem fell.

cts on which the bust had rested.

"STOP!" Malfoy shouted at Crabbe, his voice echoing through the enormous room. "The Dark Lord wants him alive —"

"So? I'm not killing him, am I?" yelled Crabbe, throwing off Malfoy's restraining arm. "But if I can, I will, the Dark Lord wants him!"

A jet of scarlet light shot past Harry by inches: Hermione had run around the corner behind him and sent a Stunning Spell.

lled him out of the way.

"It's that Mudblood! Avada Kedavra!"

Harry saw Hermione dive aside, and his fury that Crabbe had aimed to kill wiped all else from his mind. He shot a Stunning Spell.

oy's wand out of his hand; it rolled out of sight beneath a mountain of broken furniture and boxes.

"Don't kill him! DON'T KILL HIM!" Malfoy yelled at Crabbe and Goyle, who were both aiming at Harry: Their split second.

"Expelliarmus!"

Goyle's wand flew out of his hand and disappeared into the bulwark of objects beside him; Goyle leapt foolishly on top of Crabbe.

mione's second Stunning Spell, and Ron, appearing suddenly at the end of the aisle, shot a full Body-Bind Curse at Crabbe.

Crabbe wheeled around and screamed, "Avada Kedavra!" again. Ron leapt out of sight to avoid the jet of green light.

mione charged toward them, hitting Goyle with a Stunning Spell as she came.

"It's somewhere here!" Harry yelled at her, pointing at the pile of junk into which the old tiara had fallen. "Look for it!"

"HARRY!" she screamed.

A roaring, billowing noise behind him gave him a moment's warning. He turned and saw both Ron and Crabbe running.

"Like it hot, scum?" roared Crabbe as he ran.

But he seemed to have no control over what he had done. Flames of abnormal size were pursuing them, licking up the walls.

touch.

"Aguamenti!" Harry bawled, but the jet of water that soared from the tip of his wand evaporated in the air.

"RUN!"

Malfoy grabbed the Stunned Goyle and dragged him along; Crabbe outstripped all of them, now looking terrified; Harry and Ron followed them. It was not normal fire; Crabbe had used a curse of which Harry had no knowledge: As they turned a corner they found themselves upon killing them. Now the fire was mutating, forming a gigantic pack of fiery beasts: Flaming serpents, chimaeras, and other creatures on which they were feeding was thrown up in the air into their fanged mouths, tossed high on clawed feet, before Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had vanished from view: Harry, Ron, and Hermione stopped dead; the fiery monsters were lashed, and the heat was solid as a wall around them.

"What can we do?" Hermione screamed over the deafening roars of the fire. "What can we do?"

"Here!"

Harry seized a pair of heavy-looking broomsticks from the nearest pile of junk and threw one to Ron, who pulled Hermione and, with hard kicks to the ground, they soared up into the air, missing by feet the horned beak of a flaming raptor. The fire was overwhelming: Below them the cursed fire was consuming the contraband of generations of hunted students, the countless souls who had sought refuge in the room. Harry could not see a trace of Malfoy, Crabbe, or Goyle anywhere. He tried to try to find them, but there was nothing but fire: What a terrible way to die. . . . He had never wanted this. . . .

"Harry, let's get out, let's get out!" bellowed Ron, though it was impossible to see where the door was through the black smoke. And then Harry heard a thin, piteous human scream from amidst the terrible commotion, the thunder of devouring flames. "It's — too — dangerous — !" Ron yelled, but Harry wheeled in the air. His glasses giving his eyes some small protection, he saw a limb or a face that was not yet charred like wood. . . .

And he saw them: Malfoy with his arms around the unconscious Goyle, the pair of them perched on a fragile tower of smoke. He reached out one arm, but even as Harry grasped it he knew at once that it was no good: Goyle was too heavy and Malfoy's hand, cold and numb, slipped. "IF WE DIE FOR THEM, I'LL KILL YOU, HARRY!" roared Ron's voice, and, as a great flaming chimaera bore down upon them, Harry leapt and pitching, into the air once more as Malfoy clambered up behind Harry.

"The door, get to the door, the door!" screamed Malfoy in Harry's ear, and Harry sped up, following Ron, Hermione, and the Headless Hunt: and all around them the last few objects unburned by the devouring flames were flung into the air, as the creatures devoured them: a sparkling necklace, and an old, discolored tiara —

"What are you doing, what are you doing, the door's that way!" screamed Malfoy, but Harry made a hairpin swerve and then he had it, caught it around his wrist —

Harry swerved again as the serpent lunged at him; he soared upward and straight toward the place where, he prayed, the door was. The serpent was screaming and holding Harry so tightly it hurt. Then, through the smoke, Harry saw a rectangular patch on the wall. He reached his lungs and they collided with the wall in the corridor beyond.

Malfoy fell off the broom and lay facedown, gasping, coughing, and retching. Harry rolled over and sat up: The door was open. He was panting on the floor beside Goyle, who was still unconscious.

"C-Crabbe," choked Malfoy as soon as he could speak. "C-Crabbe . . ."

"He's dead," said Ron harshly.

There was silence, apart from panting and coughing. Then a number of huge bangs shook the castle, and a great cavalcade of creatures, screaming with bloodlust under their arms. Harry staggered to his feet when the Headless Hunt had passed and looked for more screams than those of the retreating ghosts. Panic flared within him.

"Where's Ginny?" he said sharply. "She was here. She was supposed to be going back into the Room of Requirement."

"Blimey, d'you reckon it'll still work after that fire?" asked Ron, but he too got to his feet, rubbing his chest and looking for the door.

"No," said Hermione, getting to her feet too. Malfoy and Goyle remained slumped hopelessly on the corridor floor; no one else was there. "Harry, what's that on your arm?"

"What? Oh yeah —"

He pulled the diadem from his wrist and held it up. It was still hot, blackened with soot, but as he looked at it closely he saw a faint, shimmering light. "WIT BEYOND MEASURE IS MAN'S GREATEST TREASURE."

A bloodlike substance, dark and tarry, seemed to be leaking from the diadem. Suddenly Harry felt the thing vibrate with a faint, urgent light. He heard the faintest, most distant scream of pain, echoing not from the grounds or the castle, but from the thing in his hand.

"It must have been Fiendfyre!" whimpered Hermione, her eyes on the broken pieces.

"Sorry?"

"Fiendfyre — cursed fire — it's one of the substances that destroy Horcruxes, but I would never, ever have dared use it on you."

"Must've learned from the Carrows," said Harry grimly.

"Shame he wasn't concentrating when they mentioned how to stop it, really," said Ron, whose hair, like Hermione's, was still damp. "Well, it's a bit of a shame he was dead."

"But don't you realize?" whispered Hermione. "This means, if we can just get the snake —"

But she broke off as yells and shouts and the unmistakable noises of dueling filled the corridor. Harry looked around. He saw the Headless Hunt. Fred and Percy had just backed into view, both of them dueling masked and hooded men.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione ran forward to help: Jets of light flew in every direction and the man dueling Percy backed away. The Headless Hunt streaked hair —

"Hello, Minister!" bellowed Percy, sending a neat jinx straight at Thicknesse, who dropped his wand and clawed at the ground. "I'm resigning?"

"You're joking, Perce!" shouted Fred as the Death Eater he was battling collapsed under the weight of three separate pikes erupting all over him; he seemed to be turning into some form of sea urchin. Fred looked at Percy with glee.

"You actually are joking, Perce. . . . I don't think I've heard you joke since you were —"

The air exploded. They had been grouped together, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and Percy, the two Death Eaters at the top of a moment, when danger seemed temporarily at bay, the world was rent apart. Harry felt himself flying through the air, holding a thin stick of wood that was his one and only weapon, and shield his head in his arms: He heard the screams and yells of his friends as they fell to them —

And then the world resolved itself into pain and semidarkness: He was half buried in the wreckage of a corridor that the side of the castle had been blown away, and hot stickiness on his cheek told him that he was bleeding copiously. He felt a suffocating, pressed agony of a kind neither flame nor curse could cause, and he stood up, swaying, more frightened than he had ever been in his life. . . .

And Hermione was struggling to her feet in the wreckage, and three redheaded men were grouped on the ground around her, staggered and stumbled over stone and wood.

"No — no — no!" someone was shouting. "No! Fred! No!"

And Percy was shaking his brother, and Ron was kneeling beside them, and Fred's eyes stared without seeing, the ghastly expression on his face.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE ELDER WAND

The world had ended, so why had the battle not ceased, the castle fallen silent in horror, and every combatant laid down his arms in control, unable to grasp the impossibility, because Fred Weasley could not be dead, the evidence of all his senses must be false. And then a body fell past the hole blown into the side of the school, and curses flew in at them from the darkness, hissing and hissing. "Get down!" Harry shouted, as more curses flew through the night: He and Ron had both grabbed Hermione and pulled her out of harm's way, and when Harry shouted, "Percy, come on, we've got to move!" he shook his head.

"Percy!" Harry saw tear tracks streaking the grime coating Ron's face as he seized his elder brother's shoulders and pulled him up. "Percy, for him! We're going to —"

Hermione screamed, and Harry, turning, did not need to ask why. A monstrous spider the size of a small car was trying to crush them. Its descendants had joined the fight.

Ron and Harry shouted together; their spells collided and the monster was blown backward, its legs jerking horribly. "It brought friends!" Harry called to the others, glancing over the edge of the castle through the hole in the wall the corner of the building, liberated from the Forbidden Forest, into which the Death Eaters must have penetrated. Harry fired a curse at its fellows, so that they rolled back down the building and out of sight. Then more curses came soaring over Harry's head. "Let's move, NOW!"

Pushing Hermione ahead of him with Ron, Harry stooped to seize Fred's body under the armpits. Percy, realizing what they were doing, crouching low to avoid the curses flying at them from the grounds, they hauled Fred out of the way.

"Here," said Harry, and they placed him in a niche where a suit of armor had stood earlier. He could not bear to look at the body, but he took off after Ron and Hermione. Malfoy and Goyle had vanished, but at the end of the corridor, as long gone from the windows, he saw many people running backward and forward, whether friends or foes he could not tell. "OOD!" and sprinted off in the direction of a tall man, who was pursuing a couple of students.

"Harry, in here!" Hermione screamed.

She had pulled Ron behind a tapestry: They seemed to be wrestling together, and for one mad second Harry thought of trying to restrain Ron, to stop him running after Percy.

"Listen to me — LISTEN, RON!"

"I wanna help — I wanna kill Death Eaters —"

His face was contorted, smeared with dust and smoke, and he was shaking with rage and grief.

"Ron, we're the only ones who can end it! Please — Ron — we need the snake, we've got to kill the snake!" said Hermione.

But Harry knew how Ron felt: Pursuing another Horcrux could not bring the satisfaction of revenge; he too wanted to find the other Weasleys, and above all make sure, make quite sure, that Ginny was not — but he could not persuade Ron.

"We will fight!" Hermione said. "We'll have to, to reach the snake! But let's not lose sight now of what we're supposed to be doing. She was crying too, and she wiped her face on her torn and singed sleeve as she spoke, but she took great heaving breaths and turned to Harry.

"You need to find out where Voldemort is, because he'll have the snake with him, won't he? Do it, Harry — look inside the castle. Why was it so easy? Because his scar had been burning for hours, yearning to show him Voldemort's thoughts? He closed his eyes and all the discordant sounds of the battle were drowned until they became distant, as though he stood far, far away. He was standing in the middle of a desolate but strangely familiar room, with peeling paper on the walls and all the voices of the castle were muffled and distant. The single unblocked window revealed distant bursts of light where the castle stood in the night.

He was rolling his wand between his fingers, watching it, his thoughts on the room in the castle, the secret room only he knew of. He was clever and cunning and inquisitive to discover. . . . He was confident that the boy would not find the diadem . . . and he had never expected . . . too far. . . .

"My Lord," said a voice, desperate and cracked. He turned: There was Lucius Malfoy sitting in the darkest corner, ragged and old after the boy's last escape. One of his eyes remained closed and puffy. "My Lord . . . please . . . my son . . ."

"If your son is dead, Lucius, it is not my fault. He did not come and join me, like the rest of the Slytherins. Perhaps he

"No — never," whispered Malfoy.

"You must hope not."

"Aren't — aren't you afraid, my Lord, that Potter might die at another hand but yours?" asked Malfoy, his voice shaking off this battle, enter the castle, and seek him y-yourself?"

"Do not pretend, Lucius. You wish the battle to cease so that you can discover what has happened to your son. And I have come to find me."

Voldemort dropped his gaze once more to the wand in his fingers. It troubled him . . . and those things that troubled

"Go and fetch Snape."

"Snape, m-my Lord?"

"Snape. Now. I need him. There is a — service — I require from him. Go."

Frightened, stumbling a little through the gloom, Lucius left the room. Voldemort continued to stand there, twirling t

"It is the only way, Nagini," he whispered, and he looked around, and there was the great thick snake, now suspended in the pace he had made for her, a starry, transparent sphere somewhere between glittering cage and tank.

With a gasp, Harry pulled back and opened his eyes; at the same moment his ears were assaulted with the screeches

"He's in the Shrieking Shack. The snake's with him, it's got some sort of magical protection around it. He's just sent L

"Voldemort's sitting in the Shrieking Shack?" said Hermione, outraged. "He's not — he's not even fighting?"

"He doesn't think he needs to fight," said Harry. "He thinks I'm going to go to him."

"But why?"

"He knows I'm after Horcruxes — he's keeping Nagini close beside him — obviously I'm going to have to go to him to

"Right," said Ron, squaring his shoulders. "So you can't go, that's what he wants, what he's expecting. You stay here and Harry cut across Ron.

"You two stay here, I'll go under the Cloak and I'll be back as soon as I —"

"No," said Hermione, "it makes much more sense if I take the Cloak and —"

"Don't even think about it," Ron snarled at her.

Before Hermione could get farther than "Ron, I'm just as capable —" the tapestry at the top of the staircase on which "POTTER!"

Two masked Death Eaters stood there, but even before their wands were fully raised, Hermione shouted, "Glisseo!"

The stairs beneath their feet flattened into a chute and she, Harry, and Ron hurtled down it, unable to control their s

ar over their heads. They shot through the concealing tapestry at the bottom and spun onto the floor, hitting the opp

"Duro!" cried Hermione, pointing her wand at the tapestry, and there were two loud, sickening crunches as the tapes

ainst it.

"Get back!" shouted Ron, and he, Harry, and Hermione flattened themselves against a door as a herd of galloping de

She appeared not to notice them: Her hair had come down and there was a gash on her cheek. As she turned the co

"Harry, you get the Cloak on," said Hermione. "Never mind us —"

But he threw it over all three of them; large though they were, he doubted anyone would see their disembodied feet

mer of spells.

They ran down the next staircase and found themselves in a corridor full of duelers. The portraits on either side of th

uragement, while Death Eaters, both masked and unmasked, dueled students and teachers. Dean had won himself a

, Ron, and Hermione raised their wands at once, ready to strike, but the duelers were weaving and darting around so

wn side if they cast curses. Even as they stood braced, looking for the opportunity to act, there came a great "Wheee

dropping Snargaluff pods down onto the Death Eaters, whose heads were suddenly engulfed in wriggling green tub

"Argh!"

A fistful of tubers had hit the Cloak over Ron's head; the slimy green roots were suspended improbably in midair as l

"Someone's invisible there!" shouted a masked Death Eater, pointing.

Dean made the most of the Death Eater's momentary distraction, knocking him out with a Stunning Spell; Dolohov a

"LET'S GO!" Harry yelled, and he, Ron, and Hermione gathered the Cloak tightly around themselves and pelted, head

s of Snargaluff juice, toward the top of the marble staircase into the entrance hall.

"I'm Draco Malfoy, I'm Draco, I'm on your side!"

Draco was on the upper landing, pleading with another masked Death Eater. Harry Stunned the Death Eater as they

d him from under the Cloak. Malfoy fell backward on top of the Death Eater, his mouth bleeding, utterly bemused.

"And that's the second time we've saved your life tonight, you two-faced bastard!" Ron yelled.

There were more duelers all over the stairs and in the hall, Death Eaters everywhere Harry looked: Yaxley, close to th

eling Kingsley right beside them. Students ran in every direction, some carrying or dragging injured friends. Harry di

d but nearly hit Neville, who had emerged from nowhere brandishing armfuls of Venomous Tentacula, which looped

.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sped down the marble staircase: Glass shattered to their left, and the Slytherin hourglass

o that people slipped and staggered as they ran. Two bodies fell from the balcony overhead as they reached the gro

across the hall to sink its teeth into one of the fallen.

"NO!" shrieked Hermione, and with a deafening blast from her wand, Fenrir Greyback was thrown backward from th

nd struggled to return to his feet. Then, with a bright white flash and a crack, a crystal ball fell on top of his head, and

"I have more!" shrieked Professor Trelawney from over the banisters. "More for any who want them! Here —" And with a movement like a tennis serve, she heaved another enormous crystal sphere from her bag, waved her wand, and it flew through a window. At the same moment, the heavy wooden front doors burst open, and more of the gigantic spiders came out. Screams of terror rent the air: The fighters scattered, Death Eaters and Hogwartsians alike, and red and green jets of light whirled and reared, more terrifying than ever.

"How do we get out?" yelled Ron over all the screaming, but before either Harry or Hermione could answer they were being pulled back by the force of his flowery pink umbrella.

"Don't hurt 'em, don't hurt 'em!" he yelled.

"HAGRID, NO!"

Harry forgot everything else: He sprinted out from under the Cloak, running bent double to avoid the curses illuminating the courtyard.

"HAGRID, COME BACK!"

But he was not even halfway to Hagrid when he saw it happen: Hagrid vanished amongst the spiders, and with a great crash, a great clatter of spells, Hagrid buried in their midst.

"HAGRID!"

Harry heard someone calling his own name, whether friend or foe he did not care: He was sprinting down the front steps, his head down, trying to reach their prey, and he could see nothing of Hagrid at all.

"HAGRID!"

He thought he could make out an enormous arm waving from the midst of the spider swarm, but as he made to charge, a giant's foot came down on him, and he fell out of the darkness and made the ground on which he stood shudder. He looked up: A giant stood before him, two enormous shins illuminated by light from the castle doors. With one brutal, fluid movement, it smashed a massive fist through the roof of the castle, and he fell back under the shelter of the doorway.

"Oh my —!" shrieked Hermione, as she and Ron caught up with Harry and gazed upward at the giant now trying to smash the castle roof.

"DON'T!" Ron yelled, grabbing Hermione's hand as she raised her wand. "Stun him and he'll crush half the castle —"

"HAGGER?"

Grawp came lurching around the corner of the castle; only now did Harry realize that Grawp was, indeed, an undersized giant. He looked around and let out a roar. The stone steps trembled as he stomped toward his smaller kin, and Grawp roared back; and then they launched themselves at each other with the savagery of lions.

"RUN!" Harry roared; the night was full of hideous yells and blows as the giants wrestled, and he seized Hermione's hand and ran. He had not lost hope of finding and saving Hagrid; he ran so fast that they were halfway toward the forest before he knew it.

The air around them had frozen: Harry's breath caught and solidified in his chest. Shapes moved out in the darkness, toward the castle, their faces hooded and their breath rattling. . . .

Ron and Hermione closed in beside him as the sounds of fighting behind them grew suddenly muted, deadened, becoming a distant hum. The night, and Fred was gone, and Hagrid was surely dying or already dead. . . .

"Come on, Harry!" said Hermione's voice from a very long way away. "Patronuses, Harry, come on!"

He raised his wand, but a dull hopelessness was spreading through him: How many more lay dead that he did not yet know? . . .

"HARRY, COME ON!" screamed Hermione.

A hundred dementors were advancing, gliding toward them, sucking their way closer to Harry's despair, which was like a cold, hard stone. He saw Ron's silver terrier burst into the air, flicker feebly, and expire; he saw Hermione's otter twist in midair and fall. He felt the oncoming oblivion, the promise of nothing, of no feeling. . . .

And then a silver hare, a boar, and a fox soared past Harry, Ron, and Hermione's heads: The dementors fell back before them, the darkness to stand beside them, their wands outstretched, continuing to cast their Patronuses: Luna, Ernie, and Seamus.

"That's right," said Luna encouragingly, as if they were back in the Room of Requirement and this was simply spell practice. "That's something happy. . . ."

"Something happy?" he said, his voice cracked.

"We're all still here," she whispered, "we're still fighting. Come on, now. . . ."

There was a silver spark, then a wavering light, and then, with the greatest effort it had ever cost him, the stag burst into being. The dementors scattered in earnest, and immediately the night was mild again, but the sounds of the surrounding battle were still there.

"Can't thank you enough," said Ron shakily, turning to Luna, Ernie, and Seamus, "you just saved —"

With a roar and an earth-quaking tremor, another giant came lurching out of the darkness from the direction of the castle. "RUN!" Harry shouted again, but the others needed no telling: They all scattered, and not a second too soon, for next moment a giant's foot came down on him, and he fell.

"Let's get out of range!" yelled Ron as the giant swung its club again and its bellows echoed through the night, across the courtyard, and into the castle.

illuminate the darkness.

"The Whomping Willow," said Harry, "go!"

Somehow he walled it all up in his mind, crammed it into a small space into which he could not look now: Thoughts of the battle that had raged in and outside the castle, must all wait, because they had to run, had to reach the snake and Voldemort, because that was the only way to win. He sprinted, half believing he could outdistance death itself, ignoring the jets of light flying in the darkness all around him, the creaking of the Forbidden Forest though the night was windless; through grounds that seemed themselves to have been laid out for him, and it was he who saw the great tree first, the Willow that protected the secret at its roots with whiplike, slashing branches.

Panting and gasping, Harry slowed down, skirting the Willow's swiping branches, peering through the darkness toward the old tree that would paralyze it. Ron and Hermione caught up, Hermione so out of breath she could not speak. "How — how're we going to get in?" panted Ron. "I can — see the place — if we just had — Crookshanks again —" "Crookshanks?" wheezed Hermione, bent double, clutching her chest. "Are you a wizard, or what?" "Oh — right — yeah —"

Ron looked around, then directed his wand at a twig on the ground and said, "Wingardium Leviosa!" The twig flew up into the air, then zoomed directly at the trunk through the Willow's ominously swaying branches. It jabbed at a place near the top. "Perfect!" panted Hermione.

"Wait."

For one teetering second, while the crashes and booms of the battle filled the air, Harry hesitated. Voldemort wanted to catch Hermione into a trap?

But then the reality seemed to close upon him, cruel and plain: The only way forward was to kill the snake, and the snake was in this tunnel. . . .

"Harry, we're coming, just get in there!" said Ron, pushing him forward.

Harry wriggled into the earthy passage hidden in the tree's roots. It was a much tighter squeeze than it had been the first time they had had to double up to move through it nearly four years previously; now there was nothing for it but to crawl. He tried to meet barriers, but none came. They moved in silence, Harry's gaze fixed upon the swinging beam of the wand held by Ron. At last the tunnel began to slope upward and Harry saw a sliver of light ahead. Hermione tugged at his ankle. "The Cloak!" she whispered. "Put the Cloak on!"

He groped behind him and she forced the bundle of slippery cloth into his free hand. With difficulty he dragged it over his shoulders, continued on his hands and knees, as silently as possible, all his senses straining, expecting every second to be discovered. And then he heard voices coming from the room directly ahead of them, only slightly muffled by the fact that the opening was like an old crate. Hardly daring to breathe, Harry edged right up to the opening and peered through a tiny gap left by the crate. The room beyond was dimly lit, but he could see Nagini, swirling and coiling like a serpent underwater, safe in her enclosure. He could see the edge of a table, and a long-fingered white hand toying with a wand. Then Snape spoke, and Harry's heart leapt. ". . . my Lord, their resistance is crumbling —"

"— and it is doing so without your help," said Voldemort in his high, clear voice. "Skilled wizard though you are, Severus, you are almost there . . . almost."

"Let me find the boy. Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please."

Snape strode past the gap, and Harry drew back a little, keeping his eyes fixed upon Nagini, wondering whether there was a chance for her, but he could not think of anything. One failed attempt, and he would give away his position. . . .

Voldemort stood up. Harry could see him now, see the red eyes, the flattened, serpentine face, the pallor of him gleaming in the dark. "I have a problem, Severus," said Voldemort softly.

"My Lord?" said Snape.

Voldemort raised the Elder Wand, holding it as delicately and precisely as a conductor's baton.

"Why doesn't it work for me, Severus?"

In the silence Harry imagined he could hear the snake hissing slightly as it coiled and uncoiled — or was it Voldemort's voice? "My — my Lord?" said Snape blankly. "I do not understand. You — you have performed extraordinary magic with this wand." "No," said Voldemort. "I have performed my usual magic. I am extraordinary, but this wand . . . no. It has not revealed its secret. It is not the wand and the one I procured from Ollivander all those years ago."

Voldemort's tone was musing, calm, but Harry's scar had begun to throb and pulse: Pain was building in his forehead. "Voldemort."

"No difference," said Voldemort again.

Snape did not speak. Harry could not see his face: He wondered whether Snape sensed danger, was trying to find the wand. Voldemort started to move around the room: Harry lost sight of him for seconds as he prowled, speaking in that same low, calm voice. "I have thought long and hard, Severus. . . . Do you know why I have called you back from the battle?"

And for a moment Harry saw Snape's profile: His eyes were fixed upon the coiling snake in its enchanted cage. "No, my Lord, but I beg you will let me return. Let me find Potter."

"You sound like Lucius. Neither of you understands Potter as I do. He does not need finding. Potter will come to me. He will catch the others struck down around him, knowing that it is for him that it happens. He will want to stop it at any cost." "But my Lord, he might be killed accidentally by one other than yourself —"

"My instructions to my Death Eaters have been perfectly clear. Capture Potter. Kill his friends — the more, the better. But it is of you that I wished to speak, Severus, not Harry Potter. You have been very valuable to me. Very valuable."

"My Lord knows I seek only to serve him. But — let me go and find the boy, my Lord. Let me bring him to you. I know where he is." "I have told you, no!" said Voldemort, and Harry caught the glint of red in his eyes as he turned again, and the swishing of his robe. It was not Voldemort's impatience in his burning scar. "My concern at the moment, Severus, is what will happen when I finally catch Potter." "My Lord, there can be no question, surely — ?"

"— but there is a question, Severus. There is."

Voldemort halted, and Harry could see him plainly again as he slid the Elder Wand through his white fingers, staring at it. "Why did both the wands I have used fail when directed at Harry Potter?"

"I — I cannot answer that, my Lord."

"Can't you?"

The stab of rage felt like a spike driven through Harry's head: He forced his own fist into his mouth to stop himself from shouting at Voldemort, looking into Snape's pale face.

"My wand of yew did everything of which I asked it, Severus, except to kill Harry Potter. Twice it failed. Ollivander told me to try your wand. I did so, but Lucius's wand shattered upon meeting Potter's."

"I — I have no explanation, my Lord."

Snape was not looking at Voldemort now. His dark eyes were still fixed upon the coiling serpent in its protective sphere.

"I sought a third wand, Severus. The Elder Wand, the Wand of Destiny, the Deathstick. I took it from its previous master. And now Snape looked at Voldemort, and Snape's face was like a death mask. It was marble white and so still that white light shined from his blank eyes.

"My Lord — let me go to the boy —"

"All this long night, when I am on the brink of victory, I have sat here," said Voldemort, his voice barely louder than a whisper. "I am to be what it ought to be, refuses to perform as legend says it must perform for its rightful owner . . . and I think I have waited long enough." Snape did not speak.

"Perhaps you already know it? You are a clever man, after all, Severus. You have been a good and faithful servant, and I have been a good master. My Lord —"

"The Elder Wand cannot serve me properly, Severus, because I am not its true master. The Elder Wand belongs to the one who has defeated its previous master. As long as you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot be truly mine."

"My Lord!" Snape protested, raising his wand.

"It cannot be any other way," said Voldemort. "I must master the wand, Severus. Master the wand, and I master Potter. And Voldemort swiped the air with the Elder Wand. It did nothing to Snape, who for a split second seemed to think he had been struck. The snake's cage was rolling through the air, and before Snape could do anything more than yell, it had encased him in a black cage.

"Kill."

There was a terrible scream. Harry saw Snape's face losing the little color it had left; it whitened as his black eyes widened. He tried to push the enchanted cage off himself, as his knees gave way and he fell to the floor.

"I regret it," said Voldemort coldly.

He turned away; there was no sadness in him, no remorse. It was time to leave this shack and take charge, with a wand in his hand. The cage holding the snake, which drifted upward, off Snape, who fell sideways onto the floor, blood gushing from the wound. He took a quick glance, and the great serpent floated after him in its huge protective sphere.

Back in the tunnel and his own mind, Harry opened his eyes: He had drawn blood biting down on his knuckles in the darkness. Between crate and wall, watching a foot in a black boot trembling on the floor.

"Harry!" breathed Hermione behind him, but he had already pointed his wand at the crate blocking his view. It lifted and he could, he pulled himself up into the room.

He did not know why he was doing it, why he was approaching the dying man: He did not know what he felt as he saw the blood on the floor and at his neck. Harry took off the Invisibility Cloak and looked down upon the man he hated, whose widening black eyes stared at him. Snape seized the front of his robes and pulled him close.

A terrible rasping, gurgling noise issued from Snape's throat.

"Take . . . it . . . Take . . . it . . ."

Something more than blood was leaking from Snape. Silvery blue, neither gas nor liquid, it gushed from his mouth and he did not know what to do —

A flask, conjured from thin air, was thrust into his shaking hands by Hermione. Harry lifted the silvery substance into his mouth. Snape looked as though there was no blood left in him, his grip on Harry's robes slackened.

"Look . . . at . . . me . . ."

he whispered. The green eyes found the black, but after a second, something in the depths of the dark pair seemed to vanish, leaving only a blank stare. He fell to the floor, and Snape moved no more.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE PRINCE'S TALE

Harry remained kneeling at Snape's side, simply staring down at him, until quite suddenly a high, cold voice spoke so close to his ear that he gripped his wand tightly in his hands, thinking that Voldemort had reentered the room.

Voldemort's voice reverberated from the walls and floor, and Harry realized that he was talking to Hogwarts and to all those still fighting in the castle would hear him as clearly as if he stood beside them, his breath on the back of their necks.

"You have fought," said the high, cold voice, "valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery.

"Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. I do not wish to waste time."

"Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately.

"You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured.

"I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. At the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences. This time, I shall be victorious."

I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour."

Both Ron and Hermione shook their heads frantically, looking at Harry.

"Don't listen to him," said Ron.

"It'll be all right," said Hermione wildly. "Let's — let's get back to the castle, if he's gone to the forest we'll need to think."

She glanced at Snape's body, then hurried back to the tunnel entrance. Ron followed her. Harry gathered up the Invisibility Cloak, except shock at the way Snape had been killed, and the reason for which it had been done. . . .

They crawled back through the tunnel, none of them talking, and Harry wondered whether Ron and Hermione could hear him.

You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest.

Small bundles seemed to litter the lawn at the front of the castle. It could only be an hour or so from dawn, yet it was already light.

A lone clog, the size of a small boat, lay abandoned in front of them. There was no other sign of Grawp or of his attack.

The castle was unnaturally silent. There were no flashes of light now, no bangs or screams or shouts. The flagstones were still scattered all over the floor, along with pieces of marble and splintered wood. Part of the banisters had been broken.

"Where is everyone?" whispered Hermione.

Ron led the way to the Great Hall. Harry stopped in the doorway.

The House tables were gone and the room was crowded. The survivors stood in groups, their arms around each other for support.

Madam Pomfrey and a group of helpers. Firenze was amongst the injured; his flank poured blood and he shook with pain.

The dead lay in a row in the middle of the Hall. Harry could not see Fred's body, because his family surrounded him.

He saw Mrs. Weasley's chest, her body shaking, Mr. Weasley stroking her hair while tears cascaded down his cheeks.

Without a word to Harry, Ron and Hermione walked away. Harry saw Hermione approach Ginny, whose face was swollen with grief.

She put an arm around Ron's shoulders. As Ginny and Hermione moved closer to the rest of the family, Harry had a clear view of the ceiling.

It was ill and peaceful-looking, apparently asleep beneath the dark, enchanted ceiling.

The Great Hall seemed to fly away, become smaller, shrink, as Harry reeled backward from the doorway. He could not see who else had died for him.

He could not bear to join the Weasleys, could not look into their eyes, when if he looked he would see who else had died for him. . . .

He turned away and ran up the marble staircase. Lupin, Tonks . . . He yearned not to feel . . . He wished he could rip the pain out of his head.

He wished he could rip the pain out of his head. . . .

The castle was completely empty; even the ghosts seemed to have joined the mass mourning in the Great Hall. Harry stood in the doorway, his thoughts, and he did not slow down until he reached the stone gargoyle guarding the headmaster's office.

"Password?"

"Dumbledore!" said Harry without thinking, because it was he whom he yearned to see, and to his surprise the gargoyle stepped aside.

But when Harry burst into the circular office he found a change. The portraits that hung all around the walls were empty.

; all, it seemed, had flitted away, charging through the paintings that lined the castle, so that they could have a clear view of the world.

Harry glanced hopelessly at Dumbledore's deserted frame, which hung directly behind the headmaster's chair, then he looked at the desk.

It had always been: Harry heaved it onto the desk and poured Snape's memories into the wide basin with its runic markings.

It was a blessed relief. . . . Nothing that even Snape had left him could be worse than his own thoughts. The memories swirled in the basin.

He felt a relief of reckless abandonment, as though this would assuage his torturing grief, Harry dived.

He fell headlong into sunlight, and his feet found warm ground. When he straightened up, he saw that he was in a new world.

ant skyline. Two girls were swinging backward and forward, and a skinny boy was watching them from behind a clump of trees.

He noticed that it looked deliberate: too short jeans, a shabby, overlarge coat that might have belonged to a grown man, and a pair of sneakers.

Harry moved closer to the boy. Snape looked no more than nine or ten years old, sallow, small, stringy. There was unattractiveness everywhere.

Two girls swinging higher and higher than her sister.

"Lily, don't do it!" shrieked the elder of the two.

But the girl had let go of the swing at the very height of its arc and flown into the air, quite literally flown, launched horizontally.

Instead of crumpling on the playground asphalt, she soared like a trapeze artist through the air, staying up far too long, landing with a crash.

"Mummy told you not to!"

Petunia stopped her swing by dragging the heels of her sandals on the ground, making a crunching, grinding sound, and she looked up at the sky.

"Mummy said you weren't allowed, Lily!"

"But I'm fine," said Lily, still giggling. "Tuney, look at this. Watch what I can do."

Petunia glanced around. The playground was deserted apart from themselves and, though the girls did not know it, the flower.

Snape lurked. Petunia advanced, evidently torn between curiosity and disapproval. Lily waited until Petunia was near the flower.

She sat there, opening and closing its petals, like some bizarre, many-lipped oyster.

"Stop it!" shrieked Petunia.

"It's not hurting you," said Lily, but she closed her hand on the blossom and threw it back to the ground.

"It's not right," said Petunia, but her eyes had followed the flower's flight to the ground and lingered upon it. "How do you know?"

her voice.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Snape could no longer contain himself, but had jumped out from behind the bushes. Petunia started.

She was startled, remained where she was. Snape seemed to regret his appearance. A dull flush of color mounted the sides of his face.

"What's obvious?" asked Lily.

Snape had an air of nervous excitement. With a glance at the distant Petunia, now hovering beside the swings, he looked back at Lily.

"What do you mean?"

"You're . . . you're a witch," whispered Snape.

She looked affronted.

"That's not a very nice thing to say to somebody!"

She turned, nose in the air, and marched off toward her sister.

"No!" said Snape. He was highly colored now, and Harry wondered why he did not take off the ridiculously large coat and h it. He flapped after the girls, looking ludicrously batlike, like his older self.

The sisters considered him, united in disapproval, both holding on to one of the swing poles as though it was the safe

"You are," said Snape to Lily. "You are a witch. I've been watching you for a while. But there's nothing wrong with that." Petunia's laugh was like cold water.

"Wizard!" she shrieked, her courage returned now that she had recovered from the shock of his unexpected appearance. "er's End by the river," she told Lily, and it was evident from her tone that she considered the address a poor recommendation.

"Haven't been spying," said Snape, hot and uncomfortable and dirty-haired in the bright sunlight. "Wouldn't spy on you." Though Petunia evidently did not understand the word, she could hardly mistake the tone.

"Lily, come on, we're leaving!" she said shrilly. Lily obeyed her sister at once, glaring at Snape as she left. He stood waiting and Harry, the only one left to observe him, recognized Snape's bitter disappointment, and understood that Snape had been wrong. . . .

The scene dissolved, and before Harry knew it, re-formed around him. He was now in a small thicket of trees. He could see the castle cast by the trees made a basin of cool green shade. Two children sat facing each other, cross-legged on the ground. Harry was in the half light.

". . . and the Ministry can punish you if you do magic outside school, you get letters."

"But I have done magic outside school!"

"We're all right. We haven't got wands yet. They let you off when you're a kid and you can't help it. But once you're eleven, when you've got to go careful."

There was a little silence. Lily had picked up a fallen twig and twirled it in the air, and Harry knew that she was imagining. She looked toward the boy, and said, "It is real, isn't it? It's not a joke? Petunia says you're lying to me. Petunia says there is magic."

"It's real for us," said Snape. "Not for her. But we'll get the letter, you and me."

"Really?" whispered Lily.

"Definitely," said Snape, and even with his poorly cut hair and his odd clothes, he struck an oddly impressive figure standing

"And will it really come by owl?" Lily whispered.

"Normally," said Snape. "But you're Muggle-born, so someone from the school will have to come and explain to your parents."

"Does it make a difference, being Muggle-born?"

Snape hesitated. His black eyes, eager in the greenish gloom, moved over the pale face, the dark red hair.

"No," he said. "It doesn't make any difference."

"Good," said Lily, relaxing: It was clear that she had been worrying.

"You've got loads of magic," said Snape. "I saw that. All the time I was watching you . . ."

His voice trailed away; she was not listening, but had stretched out on the leafy ground and was looking up at the castle which watched her in the playground.

"How are things at your house?" Lily asked.

A little crease appeared between his eyes.

"Fine," he said.

"They're not arguing anymore?"

"Oh yes, they're arguing," said Snape. He picked up a fistful of leaves and began tearing them apart, apparently unaware of the girl gone."

"Doesn't your dad like magic?"

"He doesn't like anything, much," said Snape.

"Severus?"

A little smile twisted Snape's mouth when she said his name.

"Yeah?"

"Tell me about the dementors again."

"What d'you want to know about them for?"

"If I use magic outside school —"

"They wouldn't give you to the dementors for that! Dementors are for people who do really bad stuff. They guard the castle. You're too —"

He turned red again and shredded more leaves. Then a small rustling noise behind Harry made him turn: Petunia, holding a branch.

"Tuney!" said Lily, surprise and welcome in her voice, but Snape had jumped to his feet.

"Who's spying now?" he shouted. "What d'you want?"

Petunia was breathless, alarmed at being caught. Harry could see her struggling for something hurtful to say.

"What is that you're wearing, anyway?" she said, pointing at Snape's chest. "Your mum's blouse?"

There was a crack: A branch over Petunia's head had fallen. Lily screamed: The branch caught Petunia on the shoulder.

"Tuney!"

But Petunia was running away. Lily rounded on Snape.

"Did you make that happen?"

"No." He looked both defiant and scared.

"You did!" She was backing away from him. "You did! You hurt her!"

"No — no I didn't!"

But the lie did not convince Lily: After one last burning look, she ran from the little thicket, off after her sister, and Sn And the scene re-formed. Harry looked around: He was on platform nine and three-quarters, and Snape stood beside a man who greatly resembled him. Snape was staring at a family of four a short distance away. The two girls stood a li r sister; Harry moved closer to listen.

". . . I'm sorry, Tuney, I'm sorry! Listen —" She caught her sister's hand and held tight to it, even though Petunia tried t ! Maybe once I'm there, I'll be able to go to Professor Dumbledore and persuade him to change his mind!"

"I don't — want — to — go!" said Petunia, and she dragged her hand back out of her sister's grasp. "You think I want t Her pale eyes roved over the platform, over the cats mewling in their owners' arms, over the owls fluttering and hoo heir long black robes, loading trunks onto the scarlet steam engine or else greeting one another with glad cries after

"— you think I want to be a — a freak?"

Lily's eyes filled with tears as Petunia succeeded in tugging her hand away.

"I'm not a freak," said Lily. "That's a horrible thing to say."

"That's where you're going," said Petunia with relish. "A special school for freaks. You and that Snape boy . . . weirdos from normal people. It's for our safety."

Lily glanced toward her parents, who were looking around the platform with an air of wholehearted enjoyment, drink was low and fierce.

"You didn't think it was such a freak's school when you wrote to the headmaster and begged him to take you."

Petunia turned scarlet.

"Beg? I didn't beg!"

"I saw his reply. It was very kind."

"You shouldn't have read —" whispered Petunia, "that was my private — how could you — ?"

Lily gave herself away by half-glancing toward where Snape stood nearby. Petunia gasped.

"That boy found it! You and that boy have been sneaking in my room!"

"No — not sneaking —" Now Lily was on the defensive. "Severus saw the envelope, and he couldn't believe a Muggle ards working undercover in the postal service who take care of —"

"Apparently wizards poke their noses in everywhere!" said Petunia, now as pale as she had been flushed. "Freak!" she ood. . . .

The scene dissolved again. Snape was hurrying along the corridor of the Hogwarts Express as it clattered through th Perhaps taken the first opportunity to take off his dreadful Muggle clothes. At last he stopped, outside a compartmen r seat beside the window was Lily, her face pressed against the windowpane.

Snape slid open the compartment door and sat down opposite Lily. She glanced at him and then looked back out of

"I don't want to talk to you," she said in a constricted voice.

"Why not?"

"Tuney h-hates me. Because we saw that letter from Dumbledore."

"So what?"

She threw him a look of deep dislike.

"So she's my sister!"

"She's only a —" He caught himself quickly; Lily, too busy trying to wipe her eyes without being noticed, did not hear

"But we're going!" he said, unable to suppress the exhilaration in his voice. "This is it! We're off to Hogwarts!"

She nodded, mopping her eyes, but in spite of herself, she half smiled.

"You'd better be in Slytherin," said Snape, encouraged that she had brightened a little.

"Slytherin?"

One of the boys sharing the compartment, who had shown no interest at all in Lily or Snape until that point, looked a ntirely on the two beside the window, saw his father: slight, black-haired like Snape, but with that indefinable air of h cuously lacked.

"Who wants to be in Slytherin? I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?" James asked the boy lounging on the seats opposite h id not smile.

"My whole family have been in Slytherin," he said.

"Blimey," said James, "and I thought you seemed all right!"

Sirius grinned.

"Maybe I'll break the tradition. Where are you heading, if you've got the choice?"

James lifted an invisible sword.

"Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart! Like my dad."

Snape made a small, disparaging noise. James turned on him.

"Got a problem with that?"

"No," said Snape, though his slight sneer said otherwise. "If you'd rather be brawny than brainy —"

"Where're you hoping to go, seeing as you're neither?" interjected Sirius.

James roared with laughter. Lily sat up, rather flushed, and looked from James to Sirius in dislike.

"Come on, Severus, let's find another compartment."

"Oooooo . . ."

James and Sirius imitated her lofty voice; James tried to trip Snape as he passed.

"See ya, Snivellus!" a voice called, as the compartment door slammed. . . .

And the scene dissolved once more. . . .

Harry was standing right behind Snape as they faced the candlelit House tables, lined with rapt faces. Then Professor

He watched his mother walk forward on trembling legs and sit down upon the rickety stool. Professor McGonagall d

d touched the dark red hair, the hat cried, "Gryffindor!"

Harry heard Snape let out a tiny groan. Lily took off the hat, handed it back to Professor McGonagall, then hurried to

at Snape, and there was a sad little smile on her face. Harry saw Sirius move up the bench to make room for her. Sh

olded her arms, and firmly turned her back on him.

The roll call continued. Harry watched Lupin, Pettigrew, and his father join Lily and Sirius at the Gryffindor table. At la

essor McGonagall called Snape.

Harry walked with him to the stool, watched him place the hat upon his head. "Slytherin!" cried the Sorting Hat.

And Severus Snape moved off to the other side of the Hall, away from Lily, to where the Slytherins were cheering him

, patted Snape on the back as he sat down beside him. . . .

And the scene changed. . . .

Lily and Snape were walking across the castle courtyard, evidently arguing. Harry hurried to catch up with them, to li

oth were: A few years seemed to have passed since their Sorting.

". . . thought we were supposed to be friends?" Snape was saying. "Best friends?"

"We are, Sev, but I don't like some of the people you're hanging round with! I'm sorry, but I detest Avery and Mulciber

ow what he tried to do to Mary Macdonald the other day?"

Lily had reached a pillar and leaned against it, looking up into the thin, sallow face.

"That was nothing," said Snape. "It was a laugh, that's all —"

"It was Dark Magic, and if you think that's funny —"

"What about the stuff Potter and his mates get up to?" demanded Snape. His color rose again as he said it, unable, it

"What's Potter got to do with anything?" said Lily.

"They sneak out at night. There's something weird about that Lupin. Where does he keep going?"

"He's ill," said Lily. "They say he's ill —"

"Every month at the full moon?" said Snape.

"I know your theory," said Lily, and she sounded cold. "Why are you so obsessed with them anyway? Why do you care

"I'm just trying to show you they're not as wonderful as everyone seems to think they are."

The intensity of his gaze made her blush.

"They don't use Dark Magic, though." She dropped her voice. "And you're being really ungrateful. I heard what happe

mping Willow, and James Potter saved you from whatever's down there —"

Snape's whole face contorted and he spluttered, "Saved? Saved? You think he was playing the hero? He was saving h

—"

"Let me? Let me?"

Lily's bright green eyes were slits. Snape backtracked at once.

"I didn't mean — I just don't want to see you made a fool of — He fancies you, James Potter fancies you!" The words s

everyone thinks . . . big Quidditch hero —" Snape's bitterness and dislike were rendering him incoherent, and Lily's eye

"I know James Potter's an arrogant toerag," she said, cutting across Snape. "I don't need you to tell me that. But Mulc

n't understand how you can be friends with them."

Harry doubted that Snape had even heard her strictures on Mulciber and Avery. The moment she had insulted Jame

a new spring in Snape's step. . . .

And the scene dissolved. . . .

Harry watched again as Snape left the Great Hall after sitting his O.W.L. in Defense Against the Dark Arts, watched as

se to the place beneath the beech tree where James, Sirius, Lupin, and Pettigrew sat together. But Harry kept his dist

oisted Severus into the air and taunted him; he knew what had been done and said, and it gave him no pleasure to h

Snape's defense. Distantly he heard Snape shout at her in his humiliation and his fury, the unforgivable word: "Mudb

The scene changed. . . .

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not interested."

"I'm sorry!"

"Save your breath."

It was nighttime. Lily, who was wearing a dressing gown, stood with her arms folded in front of the portrait of the Fa

"I only came out because Mary told me you were threatening to sleep here."

"I was. I would have done. I never meant to call you Mudblood, it just —"

"Slipped out?" There was no pity in Lily's voice. "It's too late. I've made excuses for you for years. None of my friends or my little Death Eater friends — you see, you don't even deny it! You don't even deny that's what you're all aiming to be!" He opened his mouth, but closed it without speaking.

"I can't pretend anymore. You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine."

"No — listen, I didn't mean —"

"— to call me Mudblood? But you call everyone of my birth Mudblood, Severus. Why should I be any different?"

He struggled on the verge of speech, but with a contemptuous look she turned and climbed back through the portrait. The corridor dissolved, and the scene took a little longer to re-form: Harry seemed to fly through shifting shapes and a hilltop, forlorn and cold in the darkness, the wind whistling through the branches of a few leafless trees. The adult was tightly in his hand, waiting for something or for someone . . . His fear infected Harry too, even though he knew that he knew what it was that Snape was waiting for —

Then a blinding, jagged jet of white light flew through the air: Harry thought of lightning, but Snape had dropped to his knees.

"Don't kill me!"

"That was not my intention."

Any sound of Dumbledore Apparating had been drowned by the sound of the wind in the branches. He stood before him, from below in the light cast by his wand.

"Well, Severus? What message does Lord Voldemort have for me?"

"No — no message — I'm here on my own account!"

Snape was wringing his hands: He looked a little mad, with his straggling black hair flying around him.

"I — I come with a warning — no, a request — please —"

Dumbledore flicked his wand. Though leaves and branches still flew through the night air around them, silence fell once more.

"What request could a Death Eater make of me?"

"The — the prophecy . . . the prediction . . . Trelawney . . ."

"Ah, yes," said Dumbledore. "How much did you relay to Lord Voldemort?"

"Everything — everything I heard!" said Snape. "That is why — it is for that reason — he thinks it means Lily Evans!"

"The prophecy did not refer to a woman," said Dumbledore. "It spoke of a boy born at the end of July —"

"You know what I mean! He thinks it means her son, he is going to hunt her down — kill them all —"

"If she means so much to you," said Dumbledore, "surely Lord Voldemort will spare her? Could you not ask for mercy?"

"I have — I have asked him —"

"You disgust me," said Dumbledore, and Harry had never heard so much contempt in his voice. Snape seemed to shiver and child? They can die, as long as you have what you want?"

Snape said nothing, but merely looked up at Dumbledore.

"Hide them all, then," he croaked. "Keep her — them — safe. Please."

"And what will you give me in return, Severus?"

"In — in return?" Snape gaped at Dumbledore, and Harry expected him to protest, but after a long moment he said, "I will."

The hilltop faded, and Harry stood in Dumbledore's office, and something was making a terrible sound, like a wound being torn open, standing over him, looking grim. After a moment or two, Snape raised his face, and he looked like a man who had lived through a war.

"I thought . . . you were going . . . to keep her . . . safe. . . ."

"She and James put their faith in the wrong person," said Dumbledore. "Rather like you, Severus. Weren't you hoping for the best?"

Snape's breathing was shallow.

"Her boy survives," said Dumbledore.

With a tiny jerk of the head, Snape seemed to flick off an irksome fly.

"Her son lives. He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and color of Lily Evans's eyes, I am sure."

"DON'T!" bellowed Snape. "Gone . . . dead . . ."

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

"I wish . . . I wish I were dead. . . ."

"And what use would that be to anyone?" said Dumbledore coldly. "If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then you would have protected her. You failed. Now you must live with the consequences. Snape seemed to peer through a haze of pain, and Dumbledore's words appeared to take a long time to reach him.

"What — what do you mean?"

"You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily's son."

"He does not need protection. The Dark Lord has gone —"

"The Dark Lord will return, and Harry Potter will be in terrible danger when he does."

There was a long pause, and slowly Snape regained control of himself, mastered his own breathing. At last he said, "I will do what you ask. But there must be no more secrets between us! Swear it! I cannot bear . . . especially Potter's son . . . I want your word!"

"My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you?" Dumbledore sighed, looking down into Snape's ferocious eyes.

The office dissolved but re-formed instantly. Snape was pacing up and down in front of Dumbledore.

"— mediocre, arrogant as his father, a determined rule-breaker, delighted to find himself famous, attention-seeking."

"You see what you expect to see, Severus," said Dumbledore, without raising his eyes from a copy of Transfiguration. "He is not as good as he seems. But he is also not as bad as he seems. Personally, I find him an engaging child."

Dumbledore turned a page, and said, without looking up, "Keep an eye on Quirrell, won't you?"

A whirl of color, and now everything darkened, and Snape and Dumbledore stood a little apart in the entrance hall, waiting for the way to bed.

"Well?" murmured Dumbledore.

"Karkaroff's Mark is becoming darker too. He is panicking, he fears retribution; you know how much help he gave the school. . . . Dumbledore's crooked-nosed profile. "Karkaroff intends to flee if the Mark burns."

"Does he?" said Dumbledore softly, as Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies came giggling in from the grounds. "And are you sure?"

"No," said Snape, his black eyes on Fleur's and Roger's retreating figures. "I am not such a coward."

"No," agreed Dumbledore. "You are a braver man by far than Igor Karkaroff. You know, I sometimes think we Sort too late. He walked away, leaving Snape looking stricken. . . .

And now Harry stood in the headmaster's office yet again. It was nighttime, and Dumbledore sagged sideways in the high-backed chair. His right hand dangled over the side, blackened and burned. Snape was muttering incantations, pointing his wand at the wall. A thick golden potion down Dumbledore's throat. After a moment or two, Dumbledore's eyelids fluttered and opened.

"Why," said Snape, without preamble, "why did you put on that ring? It carries a curse, surely you realized that. Why did you do it?" Marvolo Gaunt's ring lay on the desk before Dumbledore. It was cracked; the sword of Gryffindor lay beside it.

Dumbledore grimaced.

"I . . . was a fool. Sorely tempted . . ."

"Tempted by what?"

Dumbledore did not answer.

"It is a miracle you managed to return here!" Snape sounded furious. "That ring carried a curse of extraordinary power. You held it in one hand for the time being —"

Dumbledore raised his blackened, useless hand, and examined it with the expression of one being shown an interesting object.

"You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?"

Dumbledore's tone was conversational; he might have been asking for a weather forecast. Snape hesitated, and then said, "I am not sure, but I think it will last for a long time. . . . I forever. It will spread eventually, it is the sort of curse that strengthens over time."

Dumbledore smiled. The news that he had less than a year to live seemed a matter of little or no concern to him.

"I am fortunate, extremely fortunate, that I have you, Severus."

"If you had only summoned me a little earlier, I might have been able to do more, buy you more time!" said Snape furiously. "Do you think that breaking the ring would break the curse?"

"Something like that . . . I was delirious, no doubt" said Dumbledore. With an effort he straightened himself in his high-backed chair. "I am not a fool."

Snape looked utterly perplexed. Dumbledore smiled.

"I refer to the plan Lord Voldemort is revolving around me. His plan to have the poor Malfoy boy murder me."

Snape sat down in the chair Harry had so often occupied, across the desk from Dumbledore. Harry could tell that he was not the other held it up in polite refusal to discuss the matter further. Scowling, Snape said, "The Dark Lord does not expect me to fail. He has seen my recent failures. Slow torture for Draco's parents, while they watch him fail and pay the price."

"In short, the boy has had a death sentence pronounced upon him as surely as I have," said Dumbledore. "Now, I should like to know, is it you, or is it yourself?"

There was a short pause.

"That, I think, is the Dark Lord's plan."

"Lord Voldemort foresees a moment in the near future when he will not need a spy at Hogwarts?"

"He believes the school will soon be in his grasp, yes."

"And if it does fall into his grasp," said Dumbledore, almost, it seemed, as an aside, "I have your word that you will do your duty?" Snape gave a stiff nod.

"Good. Now then. Your first priority will be to discover what Draco is up to. A frightened teenage boy is a danger to our school. . . . ought to accept, he likes you —"

"— much less since his father has lost favor. Draco blames me, he thinks I have usurped Lucius's position."

"All the same, try. I am concerned less for myself than for accidental victims of whatever schemes might occur to the Dark Lord. . . . if we are to save him from Lord Voldemort's wrath."

Snape raised his eyebrows and his tone was sardonic as he asked, "Are you intending to let him kill you?"

"Certainly not. You must kill me."

There was a long silence, broken only by an odd clicking noise. Fawkes the phoenix was gnawing a bit of cuttlebone.

"Would you like me to do it now?" asked Snape, his voice heavy with irony. "Or would you like a few moments to consider?"

"Oh, not quite yet," said Dumbledore, smiling. "I daresay the moment will present itself in due course. Given what has happened, I am sure that it will happen within a year."

"If you don't mind dying," said Snape roughly, "why not let Draco do it?"

"That boy's soul is not yet so damaged," said Dumbledore. "I would not have it ripped apart on my account."

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"

"You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation," said Dumbledore. "I am not a fool. . . . for me as surely as the Chudley Cannons will finish bottom of this year's league. I confess I should prefer a quick, painless death."

for instance, Greyback is involved — I hear Voldemort has recruited him? Or dear Bellatrix, who likes to play with her son. His tone was light, but his blue eyes pierced Snape as they had frequently pierced Harry, as though the soul they disclosed in Dumbledore seemed satisfied.

"Thank you, Severus . . ."

The office disappeared, and now Snape and Dumbledore were strolling together in the deserted castle grounds by the lake.

"What are you doing with Potter, all these evenings you are closeted together?" Snape asked abruptly.

Dumbledore looked weary.

"Why? You aren't trying to give him more detentions, Severus? The boy will soon have spent more time in detention than in school."

"He is his father over again —"

"In looks, perhaps, but his deepest nature is much more like his mother's. I spend time with Harry because I have time, and it is too late."

"Information," repeated Snape. "You trust him . . . you do not trust me."

"It is not a question of trust. I have, as we both know, limited time. It is essential that I give the boy enough information to survive."

"And why may I not have the same information?"

"I prefer not to put all of my secrets in one basket, particularly not a basket that spends so much time dangling on the edge of oblivion."

"Which I do on your orders!"

"And you do it extremely well. Do not think that I underestimate the constant danger in which you place yourself, Severus. While withholding the essentials is a job I would entrust to nobody but you."

"Yet you confide much more in a boy who is incapable of Occlumency, whose magic is mediocre, and who has a direct connection with Voldemort?"

"Voldemort fears that connection," said Dumbledore. "Not so long ago he had one small taste of what truly sharing his secrets is like. He will not try to possess Harry again, I am sure of it. Not in that way."

"I don't understand."

"Lord Voldemort's soul, maimed as it is, cannot bear close contact with a soul like Harry's. Like a tongue on frozen stone, it withers. Souls? We were talking of minds!"

"Souls? We were talking of minds!"

"In the case of Harry and Lord Voldemort, to speak of one is to speak of the other."

Dumbledore glanced around to make sure that they were alone. They were close by the Forbidden Forest now, but the castle was still visible in the distance.

"After you have killed me, Severus —"

"You refuse to tell me everything, yet you expect that small service of me!" snarled Snape, and real anger flared in his eyes. "Perhaps I have changed my mind!"

"You gave me your word, Severus. And while we are talking about services you owe me, I thought you agreed to keep my secrets. Snape looked angry, mutinous. Dumbledore sighed.

"Come to my office tonight, Severus, at eleven, and you shall not complain that I have no confidence in you. . . ."

They were back in Dumbledore's office, the windows dark, and Fawkes sat silent as Snape sat quite still, as Dumbledore spoke.

"Harry must not know, not until the last moment, not until it is necessary, otherwise how could he have the strength to survive?"

"But what must he do?"

"That is between Harry and me. Now listen closely, Severus. There will come a time — after my death — do not argue with me. I do not seem to fear for the life of his snake."

"For Nagini?" Snape looked astonished.

"Precisely. If there comes a time when Lord Voldemort stops sending that snake forth to do his bidding, but keeps it close by his side, it will be safe to tell Harry."

"Tell him what?"

Dumbledore took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"Tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the part of Voldemort's soul was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself onto the only living soul left in that collapsing castle. It is that which gives him the power of speech with snakes, and a connection with Lord Voldemort's mind that he has never lost. Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die."

Harry seemed to be watching the two men from one end of a long tunnel, they were so far away from him, their voices so faint. "So the boy . . . the boy must die?" asked Snape quite calmly.

"And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential."

Another long silence. Then Snape said, "I thought . . . all these years . . . that we were protecting him for her. For Lily. . . ."

"We have protected him because it has been essential to teach him, to raise him, to let him try his strength," said Dumbledore. "The connection between them grows ever stronger, a parasitic growth: Sometimes I have thought he suspects it himself. If I know he does, it will truly mean the end of Voldemort."

Dumbledore opened his eyes. Snape looked horrified.

"You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?"

"Don't be shocked, Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?"

"Lately, only those whom I could not save," said Snape. He stood up. "You have used me."

"Meaning?"

"I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you. Everything was supposed to be to keep Lily Potter's son safe. Like a pig for slaughter —"

"But this is touching, Severus," said Dumbledore seriously. "Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?"

"For him?" shouted Snape. "Expecto Patronum!"

From the tip of his wand burst the silver doe: She landed on the office floor, bounded once across the office, and so

her silvery glow faded he turned back to Snape, and his eyes were full of tears.

"After all this time?"

"Always," said Snape.

And the scene shifted. Now, Harry saw Snape talking to the portrait of Dumbledore behind his desk.

"You will have to give Voldemort the correct date of Harry's departure from his aunt and uncle's," said Dumbledore. "You are so well informed. However, you must plant the idea of decoys; that, I think, ought to ensure Harry's safety. Try Confundus. Your part in the chase, be sure to act your part convincingly . . . I am counting upon you to remain in Lord Voldemort's good mercy of the Carrows. . . ."

Now Snape was head to head with Mundungus in an unfamiliar tavern, Mundungus's face looking curiously blank, Sn

"You will suggest to the Order of the Phoenix," Snape murmured, "that they use decoys. Polyjuice Potion. Identical Portraits. . . . I have suggested this. You will present it as your own idea. You understand?"

"I understand," murmured Mundungus, his eyes unfocused. . . .

Now Harry was flying alongside Snape on a broomstick through a clear dark night: He was accompanied by other ho

rage. . . . A Death Eater moved ahead of Snape and raised his wand, pointing it directly at Lupin's back —

"Sectumsempra!" shouted Snape.

But the spell, intended for the Death Eater's wand hand, missed and hit George instead —

And next, Snape was kneeling in Sirius's old bedroom. Tears were dripping from the end of his hooked nose as he re

ds:

could ever have been friends with Gellert Grindelwald. I think her mind's going, personally!

Lots of love,

Snape took the page bearing Lily's signature, and her love, and tucked it inside his robes. Then he ripped in two the p

hich Lily laughed, throwing the portion showing James and Harry back onto the floor, under the chest of drawers. . . .

And now Snape stood again in the headmaster's study as Phineas Nigellus came hurrying into his portrait.

"Headmaster! They are camping in the Forest of Dean! The Mudblood —"

"Do not use that word!"

"— the Granger girl, then, mentioned the place as she opened her bag and I heard her!"

"Good. Very good!" cried the portrait of Dumbledore behind the headmaster's chair. "Now, Severus, the sword! Do not

and he must not know that you give it! If Voldemort should read Harry's mind and see you acting for him —"

"I know," said Snape curtly. He approached the portrait of Dumbledore and pulled at its side. It swung forward, revealing

ryffindor.

"And you still aren't going to tell me why it's so important to give Potter the sword?" said Snape as he swung a traveli

"No, I don't think so," said Dumbledore's portrait. "He will know what to do with it. And Severus, be very careful, they

s mishap —"

Snape turned at the door.

"Don't worry, Dumbledore," he said coolly. "I have a plan. . . ."

And Snape left the room. Harry rose up out of the Pensieve, and moments later he lay on the carpeted floor in exact

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE FOREST AGAIN

Finally, the truth. Lying with his face pressed into the dusty carpet of the office where he had once thought he was le

e was not supposed to survive. His job was to walk calmly into Death's welcoming arms. Along the way, he was to dis

he flung himself across Voldemort's path, and did not raise a wand to defend himself, the end would be clean, and th

nished: Neither would live, neither could survive.

He felt his heart pounding fiercely in his chest. How strange that in his dread of death, it pumped all the harder, valia

Its beats were numbered. How many would there be time for, as he rose and walked through the castle for the last

Terror washed over him as he lay on the floor, with that funeral drum pounding inside him. Would it hurt to die? All t

ed, he had never really thought of the thing itself: His will to live had always been so much stronger than his fear of d

utrun Voldemort. It was over, he knew it, and all that was left was the thing itself: dying.

If he could only have died on that summer's night when he had left number four, Privet Drive, for the last time, when

have died like Hedwig, so quickly he would not have known it had happened! Or if he could have launched himself in

parents' deaths now. This cold-blooded walk to his own destruction would require a different kind of bravery. He fel

hem, although no one could see him; the portraits on the walls were all empty.

Slowly, very slowly, he sat up, and as he did so he felt more alive and more aware of his own living body than ever be

and nerve and bounding heart? It would all be gone . . . or at least, he would be gone from it. His breath came slow

were his eyes.

Dumbledore's betrayal was almost nothing. Of course there had been a bigger plan; Harry had simply been too fooli

assumption that Dumbledore wanted him alive. Now he saw that his life span had always been determined by how l

ob of destroying them to him, and obediently he had continued to chip away at the bonds tying not only Voldemort, lives, but to give the dangerous task to the boy who had already been marked for slaughter, and whose death would And Dumbledore had known that Harry would not duck out, that he would keep going to the end, even though it was Dumbledore knew, as Voldemort knew, that Harry would not let anyone else die for him now that he had discovered lying dead in the Great Hall forced their way back into his mind's eye, and for a moment he could hardly breathe: De But Dumbledore had overestimated him. He had failed: The snake survived. One Horcrux remained to bind Voldemort an easier job for somebody. He wondered who would do it . . . Ron and Hermione would know what needed to be done, confide in two others . . . so that if he fulfilled his true destiny a little early, they could carry on. . . .

Like rain on a cold window, these thoughts pattered against the hard surface of the incontrovertible truth, which was Ron and Hermione seemed a long way away, in a far-off country; he felt as though he had parted from them long ago of that. This was a journey they could not take together, and the attempts they would make to stop him would waste received on his seventeenth birthday. Nearly half of the hour allotted by Voldemort for his surrender had elapsed. He stood up. His heart was leaping against his ribs like a frantic bird. Perhaps it knew it had little time left, perhaps it end. He did not look back as he closed the office door.

The castle was empty. He felt ghostly striding through it alone, as if he had already died. The portrait people were still, as if all its remaining lifeblood were concentrated in the Great Hall where the dead and the mourners were crammed. Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak over himself and descended through the floors, at last walking down the marble steps, not to be sensed, to be seen, to be stopped, but the Cloak was, as ever, impenetrable, perfect, and he reached the fire. Then Neville nearly walked into him. He was one half of a pair that was carrying a body in from the grounds. Harry guessed, though underage, must have sneaked back just as Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had done. He was tiny in death. "You know what? I can manage him alone, Neville," said Oliver Wood, and he heaved Colin over his shoulder in a fire. Neville leaned against the door frame for a moment and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He looked like a man s to recover more bodies.

Harry took one glance back at the entrance of the Great Hall. People were moving around, trying to comfort each other, but not f the people he loved, no hint of Hermione, Ron, Ginny, or any of the other Weasleys, no Luna. He felt he would have found them; but then, would he ever have the strength to stop looking? It was better like this.

He moved down the steps and out into the darkness. It was nearly four in the morning, and the deathly stillness of the night to see whether he could do what he must.

Harry moved toward Neville, who was bending over another body.

"Neville."

"Blimey, Harry, you nearly gave me heart failure!"

Harry had pulled off the Cloak: The idea had come to him out of nowhere, born out of a desire to make absolutely sure.

"Where are you going, alone?" Neville asked suspiciously.

"It's all part of the plan," said Harry. "There's something I've got to do. Listen — Neville —"

"Harry!" Neville looked suddenly scared. "Harry, you're not thinking of handing yourself over?"

"No," Harry lied easily. "Course not . . . this is something else. But I might be out of sight for a while. You know Voldemort's got Nagini . . ."

"I've heard, yeah. . . . What about it?"

"It's got to be killed. Ron and Hermione know that, but just in case they —"

The awfulness of that possibility smothered him for a moment, made it impossible to keep talking. But he pulled himself together, kept a cool head, make sure there were backups, others to carry on. Dumbledore had died knowing that three people would keep the secret: There would still be three in the secret.

"Just in case they're — busy — and you get the chance —"

"Kill the snake?"

"Kill the snake," Harry repeated.

"All right, Harry. You're okay, are you?"

"I'm fine. Thanks, Neville."

But Neville seized his wrist as Harry made to move on.

"We're all going to keep fighting, Harry. You know that?"

"Yeah, I —"

The suffocating feeling extinguished the end of the sentence; he could not go on. Neville did not seem to find it strange. He went away to look for more bodies.

Harry swung the Cloak back over himself and walked on. Someone else was moving not far away, stooping over another body. He realized it was Ginny.

He stopped in his tracks. She was crouching over a girl who was whispering for her mother.

"It's all right," Ginny was saying. "It's okay. We're going to get you inside."

"But I want to go home," whispered the girl. "I don't want to fight anymore!"

"I know," said Ginny, and her voice broke. "It's going to be all right."

Ripples of cold undulated over Harry's skin. He wanted to shout out to the night, he wanted Ginny to know that he was not alone, that he was not being stepped on, to be dragged back, to be sent back home. . . .

But he was home. Hogwarts was the first and best home he had known. He and Voldemort and Snape, the abandoned Ginny was kneeling beside the injured girl now, holding her hand. With a huge effort Harry forced himself on. He thought she had sensed someone walking nearby, but he did not speak, and he did not look back.

Hagrid's hut loomed out of the darkness. There were no lights, no sound of Fang scrabbling at the door, his bark barking, a copper kettle on the fire, and rock cakes and giant grubs, and his great bearded face, and Ron vomiting slugs, and Harry. He moved on, and now he reached the edge of the forest, and he stopped.

A swarm of dementors was gliding amongst the trees; he could feel their chill, and he was not sure he would be able to resist. He could no longer control his own trembling. It was not, after all, so easy to die. Every second he breathed, the smile came back to think that people had years and years, time to waste, so much time it dragged, and he was clinging to each second, knowing that he must. The long game was ended, the Snitch had been caught, it was time to leave the air. . . .

The Snitch. His nerveless fingers fumbled for a moment with the pouch at his neck and he pulled it out. It was open at the close.

Breathing fast and hard, he stared down at it. Now that he wanted time to move as slowly as possible, it seemed to him that he had bypassed thought. This was the close. This was the moment.

He pressed the golden metal to his lips and whispered, "I am about to die."

The metal shell broke open. He lowered his shaking hand, raised Draco's wand beneath the Cloak, and murmured, "Resurrection Stone." The black stone with its jagged crack running down the center sat in the two halves of the Snitch. The Resurrection Stone. The triangle and circle representing the Cloak and the stone were still discernible.

And again Harry understood without having to think. It did not matter about bringing them back, for he was about to die.

He closed his eyes and turned the stone over in his hand three times.

He knew it had happened, because he heard slight movements around him that suggested frail bodies shifting their positions in the forest. He opened his eyes and looked around.

They were neither ghost nor truly flesh, he could see that. They resembled most closely the Riddle that had escaped from the lid. Less substantial than living bodies, but much more than ghosts, they moved toward him, and on each face, there was a face. James was exactly the same height as Harry. He was wearing the clothes in which he had died, and his hair was untidy like James's.

Sirius was tall and handsome, and younger by far than Harry had seen him in life. He loped with an easy grace, his hair was black. Lupin was younger too, and much less shabby, and his hair was thicker and darker. He looked happy to be back in the forest. Lily's smile was widest of all. She pushed her long hair back as she drew close to him, and her green eyes, so like his, were looking at him enough.

"You've been so brave."

He could not speak. His eyes feasted on her, and he thought that he would like to stand and look at her forever, and she was looking at him enough.

"You are nearly there," said James. "Very close. We are . . . so proud of you."

"Does it hurt?"

The childish question had fallen from Harry's lips before he could stop it.

"Dying? Not at all," said Sirius. "Quicker and easier than falling asleep."

"And he will want it to be quick. He wants it over," said Lupin.

"I didn't want you to die," Harry said. These words came without his volition. "Any of you. I'm sorry —"

He addressed Lupin more than any of them, beseeching him.

"— right after you'd had your son . . . Remus, I'm sorry —"

"I am sorry too," said Lupin. "Sorry I will never know him . . . but he will know why I died and I hope he will understand my life."

A chilly breeze that seemed to emanate from the heart of the forest lifted the hair at Harry's brow. He knew that they were looking at him enough.

"You'll stay with me?"

"Until the very end," said James.

"They won't be able to see you?" asked Harry.

"We are part of you," said Sirius. "Invisible to anyone else."

Harry looked at his mother.

"Stay close to me," he said quietly.

And he set off. The dementors' chill did not overcome him; he passed through it with his companions, and they acted as if they were not there. The trees that grew closely together, their branches tangled, their roots gnarled and twisted underfoot. Harry clutched the wand deeper into the forest, with no idea where exactly Voldemort was, but sure that he would find him. Beside him, the presence of his friends was his courage, and the reason he was able to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

His body and mind felt oddly disconnected now, his limbs working without conscious instruction, as if he were passing through a dream. The living back at the castle: Ron, Hermione, Sirius, and the others were much more real to him now than the living back at the castle: Ron, Hermione, Sirius, and the others. . . .

A thud and a whisper: Some other living creature had stirred close by. Harry stopped under the Cloak, peering around. . . .

"Someone there," came a rough whisper close at hand. "He's got an Invisibility Cloak. Could it be — ?"

Two figures emerged from behind a nearby tree: Their wands flared, and Harry saw Yaxley and Dolohov peering into the darkness. Sirius and Lupin stood. Apparently they could not see anything.

"Definitely heard something," said Yaxley. "Animal, d'you reckon?"

"That head case Hagrid kept a whole bunch of stuff in here," said Dolohov, glancing over his shoulder.

Yaxley looked down at his watch.

"Time's nearly up. Potter's had his hour. He's not coming."

"And he was sure he'd come! He won't be happy."

"Better go back," said Yaxley. "Find out what the plan is now."

He and Dolohov turned and walked deeper into the forest. Harry followed them, knowing that they would lead him to the place where Voldemort was. He led at him, and his father nodded encouragement.

They had traveled on mere minutes when Harry saw light ahead, and Yaxley and Dolohov stepped out into a clearing where the forest lived. The remnants of his vast web were there still, but the swarm of descendants he had spawned had been driven away. A fire burned in the middle of the clearing, and its flickering light fell over a crowd of completely silent, watchful Death Eaters. Some showed their faces. Two giants sat on the outskirts of the group, casting massive shadows over the scene, their faces lit by the fire. One was showing his long nails; the great blond Rowle was dabbing at his bleeding lip. He saw Lucius Malfoy, who looked defeated and weary. Harry felt a moment of apprehension.

Every eye was fixed upon Voldemort, who stood with his head bowed, and his white hands folded over the Elder Wand. Harry saw it clearly in his mind, and Harry, standing still on the edge of the scene, thought absurdly of a child counting in a game of hide-and-seek. The great snake Nagini floated in her glittering, charmed cage, like a monstrous halo.

When Dolohov and Yaxley rejoined the circle, Voldemort looked up.

"No sign of him, my Lord," said Dolohov.

Voldemort's expression did not change. The red eyes seemed to burn in the firelight. Slowly he drew the Elder Wand.

"My Lord —"

Bellatrix had spoken: She sat closest to Voldemort, disheveled, her face a little bloody but otherwise unharmed.

Voldemort raised his hand to silence her, and she did not speak another word, but eyed him in worshipful fascination.

"I thought he would come," said Voldemort in his high, clear voice, his eyes on the leaping flames. "I expected him to come."

Nobody spoke. They seemed as scared as Harry, whose heart was now throwing itself against his ribs as though determined to escape. He was sweating as he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and stuffed it beneath his robes, with his wand. He did not want to be seen.

"I was, it seems . . . mistaken," said Voldemort.

"You weren't."

Harry said it as loudly as he could, with all the force he could muster: He did not want to sound afraid. The Resurrection Stone was in the corner of his eyes he saw his parents, Sirius, and Lupin vanish as he stepped forward into the firelight. At that moment, the firelight was the only light. He saw the two of them.

The illusion was gone as soon as it had come. The giants roared as the Death Eaters rose together, and there were many of them. Voldemort's red eyes had found Harry, and he stared as Harry moved toward him, with nothing but the fire between them. Then a voice yelled: "HARRY! NO!"

He turned: Hagrid was bound and trussed, tied to a tree nearby. His massive body shook the branches overhead as he tried to break free.

"NO! NO! HARRY, WHAT'RE YEH — ?"

"QUIET!" shouted Rowle, and with a flick of his wand Hagrid was silenced.

Bellatrix, who had leapt to her feet, was looking eagerly from Voldemort to Harry, her breast heaving. The only thing that caught Harry's eye was the glittering cage behind Voldemort's head.

Harry could feel his wand against his chest, but he made no attempt to draw it. He knew that the snake was too well guarded. He knew that the Death Eaters would hit him first. And still, Voldemort and Harry looked at each other, and now Voldemort tilted his head back, and a singularly mirthless smile curled the lipless mouth.

"Harry Potter," he said very softly. His voice might have been part of the spitting fire. "The Boy Who Lived."

None of the Death Eaters moved. They were waiting: Everything was waiting. Hagrid was struggling, and Bellatrix was looking at Harry, and the feel of her lips on his —

Voldemort had raised his wand. His head was still tilted to one side, like a curious child, wondering what would happen next. He wanted it to happen now, quickly, while he could still stand, before he lost control, before he betrayed fear — He saw the mouth move and a flash of green light, and everything was gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

KING'S CROSS

He lay facedown, listening to the silence. He was perfectly alone. Nobody was watching. Nobody else was there. He was alone. A long time later, or maybe no time at all, it came to him that he must exist, must be more than disembodied thought. He knew he had a sense of touch, and the thing against which he lay existed too.

Almost as soon as he had reached this conclusion, Harry became conscious that he was naked. Convinced as he was that he was alone, he was slightly embarrassed. He wondered whether, as he could feel, he would be able to see. In opening his eyes, he discovered that he was alone. He lay in a bright mist, though it was not like mist he had ever experienced before. His surroundings were not hidden.

o surroundings. The floor on which he lay seemed to be white, neither warm nor cold, but simply there, a flat, blank. He sat up. His body appeared unscathed. He touched his face. He was not wearing glasses anymore. Then a noise reached him through the unformed nothingness that surrounded him: the small soft thumpings of something also slightly indecent. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he was eavesdropping on something furtive, shameful. For the first time, he wished he were clothed.

Barely had the wish formed in his head than robes appeared a short distance away. He took them and pulled them on. . . . appeared, just like that, the moment he had wanted them. . . .

He stood up, looking around. Was he in some great Room of Requirement? The longer he looked, the more there was. . . . Perhaps it was a palace. All was hushed and still, except for those odd thumping and whimpering noises coming from behind him. Harry turned slowly on the spot, and his surroundings seemed to invent themselves before his eyes. A wide-open space with that clear, domed glass ceiling. It was quite empty. He was the only person there, except for —

He recoiled. He had spotted the thing that was making the noises. It had the form of a small, naked child, curled on the floor, huddling under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath.

He was afraid of it. Small and fragile and wounded though it was, he did not want to approach it. Nevertheless he drew near enough to touch it, yet he could not bring himself to do it. He felt like a coward. He ought to comfort it, but it replied, "You cannot help."

He spun around. Albus Dumbledore was walking toward him, sprightly and upright, wearing sweeping robes of midnight blue. "Harry." He spread his arms wide, and his hands were both whole and white and undamaged. "You wonderful boy. You are alive. Stunned, Harry followed as Dumbledore strode away from where the flayed child lay whimpering, leading him to two seats under that high, sparkling ceiling. Dumbledore sat down in one of them, and Harry fell into the other, staring at his old professor, the piercingly blue eyes behind half-moon spectacles, the crooked nose: Everything was as he had remembered it. A voice came from the other seat. "But you're dead," said Harry.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore matter-of-factly.

"Then . . . I'm dead too?"

"Ah," said Dumbledore, smiling still more broadly. "That is the question, isn't it? On the whole, dear boy, I think not." They looked at each other, the old man still beaming.

"Not?" repeated Harry.

"Not," said Dumbledore.

"But . . ." Harry raised his hand instinctively toward the lightning scar. It did not seem to be there. "But I should have known."

"And that," said Dumbledore, "will, I think, have made all the difference."

Happiness seemed to radiate from Dumbledore like light, like fire: Harry had never seen the man so utterly, so palpably alive.

"Explain," said Harry.

"But you already know," said Dumbledore. He twiddled his thumbs together.

"I let him kill me," said Harry. "Didn't I?"

"You did," said Dumbledore, nodding. "Go on!"

"So the part of his soul that was in me . . ."

Dumbledore nodded still more enthusiastically, urging Harry onward, a broad smile of encouragement on his face.

" . . . has it gone?"

"Oh yes!" said Dumbledore. "Yes, he destroyed it. Your soul is whole, and completely your own, Harry."

"But then . . ."

Harry glanced over his shoulder to where the small, maimed creature trembled under the chair.

"What is that, Professor?"

"Something that is beyond either of our help," said Dumbledore.

"But if Voldemort used the Killing Curse," Harry started again, "and nobody died for me this time — how can I be alive?"

"I think you know," said Dumbledore. "Think back. Remember what he did, in his ignorance, in his greed and his cruelty." Harry thought. He let his gaze drift over his surroundings. If it was indeed a palace in which they sat, it was an odd one, and there, and still, he and Dumbledore and the stunted creature under the chair were the only beings there. Then the voice came again. "He took my blood," said Harry.

"Precisely!" said Dumbledore. "He took your blood and rebuilt his living body with it! Your blood in his veins, Harry, while he lives!"

"I live . . . while he lives? But I thought . . . I thought it was the other way round! I thought we both had to die? Or is it just me?"

He was distracted by the whimpering and thumping of the agonized creature behind them and glanced back at it yet again. "Are you sure we can't do anything?"

"There is no help possible."

"Then explain . . . more," said Harry, and Dumbledore smiled.

"You were the seventh Horcrux, Harry, the Horcrux he never meant to make. He had rendered his soul so unstable that he had to create seven other parts to it, the murder of your parents, the attempted killing of a child. But what escaped from that room was even less than he had intended. It latched to you, the would-be victim who had survived.

"And his knowledge remained woefully incomplete, Harry! That which Voldemort does not value, he takes no trouble

, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. Nothing. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power that he took by force. He took your blood believing it would strengthen him. He took into his body a tiny part of the enchantment your mother sacrificed to keep you alive, and while that enchantment survives, so do you and so does Voldemort's one last hope for himself."

Dumbledore smiled at Harry, and Harry stared at him.

"And you knew this? You knew — all along?"

"I guessed. But my guesses have usually been good," said Dumbledore happily, and they sat in silence for what seemed like an hour. Harry's hand began to tremble.

"There's more," said Harry. "There's more to it. Why did my wand break the wand he borrowed?"

"As to that, I cannot be sure."

"Have a guess, then," said Harry, and Dumbledore laughed.

"What you must understand, Harry, is that you and Lord Voldemort have journeyed together into realms of magic hitherto unexplored. It is unprecedented, and no wandmaker could, I think, ever have predicted it or explained it to Voldemort."

"Without meaning to, as you now know, Lord Voldemort doubled the bond between you when he returned to a human form. To strengthen himself, he took a part of your mother's sacrifice into himself. If he could only have understood the precise nature of the enchantment, he might have dared to touch your blood. . . . But then, if he had been able to understand, he could not be Lord Voldemort, a man who knows only the power of his own magic."

"Having ensured this two-fold connection, having wrapped your destinies together more securely than ever two wands could be, he created a wand that shared a core with yours. And now something very strange happened, as we know. The cores reacted in a way that neither of them, in their own right, had ever expected."

"He was more afraid than you were that night, Harry. You had accepted, even embraced, the possibility of death, so he was afraid. Your wand overpowered his. And in doing so, something happened between those wands, something that echoed the power of the Elder Wand."

"I believe that your wand imbibed some of the power and qualities of Voldemort's wand that night, which is to say that it recognized him when he pursued you, recognized a man who was both kin and mortal enemy, and it regurgitated some of the power that your wand had ever performed. Your wand now contained the power of your enormous courage and of Voldemort's wand."

"But if my wand was so powerful, how come Hermione was able to break it?" asked Harry.

"My dear boy, its remarkable effects were directed only at Voldemort, who had tampered so ill-advisedly with the deathly hallows. Otherwise it was a wand like any other . . . though a good one, I am sure," Dumbledore finished kindly.

Harry sat in thought for a long time, or perhaps seconds. It was very hard to be sure of things like time, here.

"He killed me with your wand."

"He failed to kill you with my wand," Dumbledore corrected Harry. "I think we can agree that you are not dead — though I am not sure."

"I do not minimize your sufferings, which I am sure were severe."

"I feel great at the moment, though," said Harry, looking down at his clean, unblemished hands. "Where are we, exactly?"

"Well, I was going to ask you that," said Dumbledore, looking around. "Where would you say that we are?"

Until Dumbledore had asked, Harry had not known. Now, however, he found that he had an answer ready to give.

"It looks," he said slowly, "like King's Cross station. Except a lot cleaner and empty, and there are no trains as far as I can see."

"King's Cross station!" Dumbledore was chuckling immoderately. "Good gracious, really?"

"Well, where do you think we are?" asked Harry, a little defensively.

"My dear boy, I have no idea. This is, as they say, your party."

Harry had no idea what this meant; Dumbledore was being infuriating. He glared at him, then remembered a much more important question.

"The Deathly Hallows," he said, and he was glad to see that the words wiped the smile from Dumbledore's face.

"Ah, yes," he said. He even looked a little worried.

"Well?"

For the first time since Harry had met Dumbledore, he looked less than an old man, much less. He looked fleetingly like a young man.

"Can you forgive me?" he said. "Can you forgive me for not trusting you? For not telling you? Harry, I only feared that you would make my mistakes. I crave your pardon, Harry. I have known, for some time now, that you are the better man."

"What are you talking about?" asked Harry, startled by Dumbledore's tone, by the sudden tears in his eyes.

"The Hallows, the Hallows," murmured Dumbledore. "A desperate man's dream!"

"But they're real!"

"Real, and dangerous, and a lure for fools," said Dumbledore. "And I was such a fool. But you know, don't you? I have learned my lesson."

"What do I know?"

Dumbledore turned his whole body to face Harry, and tears still sparkled in the brilliantly blue eyes.

"Master of death, Harry, master of Death! Was I better, ultimately, than Voldemort?"

"Of course you were," said Harry. "Of course — how can you ask that? You never killed if you could avoid it!"

"True, true," said Dumbledore, and he was like a child seeking reassurance. "Yet I too sought a way to conquer death."

"Not the way he did," said Harry. After all his anger at Dumbledore, how odd it was to sit here, beneath the high, vaulted ceiling of the Ministry of Magic, with the Deathly Hallows.

"Hallows," murmured Dumbledore, "not Horcruxes. Precisely."

There was a pause. The creature behind them whimpered, but Harry no longer looked around.

"Grindelwald was looking for them too?" he asked.

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment and nodded.

"It was the thing, above all, that drew us together," he said quietly. "Two clever, arrogant boys with a shared obsession. I guessed, because of the grave of Ighnotus Peverell. He wanted to explore the place the third brother had died."

"So it's true?" asked Harry. "All of it? The Peverell brothers —"

"— were the three brothers of the tale," said Dumbledore, nodding. "Oh yes, I think so. Whether they met Death on a journey or were simply gifted, dangerous wizards who succeeded in creating those powerful objects. The story of them being sprung up around such creations."

"The Cloak, as you know now, traveled down through the ages, father to son, mother to daughter, right down to Ignobolus Peverell, the last of his line, who lived in a small village of Godric's Hollow."

Dumbledore smiled at Harry.

"Me?"

"You. You have guessed, I know, why the Cloak was in my possession on the night your parents died. James had shown me a letter, a letter that had been detected wrongdoing at school! I could hardly believe what I was seeing. I asked to borrow it, to examine it. I had long wanted to know the truth, but I could not resist, could not help taking a closer look. . . . It was a Cloak the likes of which I had never seen, immensely old, perfectly preserved, and I had two Hallows at last, all to myself!"

His tone was unbearably bitter.

"The Cloak wouldn't have helped them survive, though," Harry said quickly. "Voldemort knew where my mum and dad were."

"True," sighed Dumbledore. "True."

Harry waited, but Dumbledore did not speak, so he prompted him.

"So you'd given up looking for the Hallows when you saw the Cloak?"

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore faintly. It seemed that he forced himself to meet Harry's eyes. "You know what happened. I was not strong enough. I was not brave enough. But I don't despise you —"

"Then you should," said Dumbledore. He drew a deep breath. "You know the secret of my sister's ill health, what those who loved her did to her. I sought revenge, and paid the price, died in Azkaban. You know how my mother gave up her own life to care for Ariana."

"I resented it, Harry."

Dumbledore stated it baldly, coldly. He was looking now over the top of Harry's head, into the distance.

"I was gifted, I was brilliant. I wanted to escape. I wanted to shine. I wanted glory."

"Do not misunderstand me," he said, and pain crossed the face so that he looked ancient again. "I loved them. I loved my wife, I loved my children, Harry, more selfish than you, who are a remarkably selfless person, could possibly imagine."

"So that, when my mother died, and I was left the responsibility of a damaged sister and a wayward brother, I returned home, and found that I was alone. I thought! And then, of course, he came. . . ."

Dumbledore looked directly into Harry's eyes again.

"Grindelwald. You cannot imagine how his ideas caught me, Harry, inflamed me. Muggles forced into subservience. Victory for the wizard. The dawn of the revolution."

"Oh, I had a few scruples. I assuaged my conscience with empty words. It would all be for the greater good, and any sacrifice was necessary. Did I know, in my heart of hearts, what Gellert Grindelwald was? I think I did, but I closed my eyes. If the plans we were to carry out were to succeed, it was necessary. And at the heart of our schemes, the Deathly Hallows! How they fascinated him, how they fascinated both of us! The resurrection Stone — to him, though I pretended not to know it, it meant an army of Inferi! To me, I confess, it meant the power to bring my mother back from my shoulders."

"And the Cloak . . . somehow, we never discussed the Cloak much, Harry. Both of us could conceal ourselves well enough. I thought it could be used to protect and shield others as well as its owner. I thought that, if we ever found it, it might be useful. I thought that it completed the trio, for the legend said that the man who united all three objects would then be truly master of death. I thought that I was invincible. Invincible masters of death, Grindelwald and Dumbledore! Two months of insanity, of cruel dreams, and neglect of my duties. I thought that I was invincible. And then . . . you know what happened. Reality returned in the form of my rough, unlettered, and infinitely more admirable sister. I did not want to hear that I could not set forth to seek Hallows with a fragile and unstable sister in tow. The argument became a fight. Grindelwald lost control. That which I had always sensed in him, though I pretended not to, that which I had always feared in my mother's care and caution . . . lay dead upon the floor."

Dumbledore gave a little gasp and began to cry in earnest. Harry reached out and was glad to find that he could touch him. He was not in control. He was not in control.

"Well, Grindelwald fled, as anyone but I could have predicted. He vanished, with his plans for seizing power, and his schemes, his dreams, in which I had encouraged him and helped him. He ran, while I was left to bury my sister, and learn to live. Years passed. There were rumors about him. They said he had procured a wand of immense power. I, meanwhile, was a failure. Naturally, I refused. I had learned that I was not to be trusted with power."

"But you'd have been better, much better, than Fudge or Scrimgeour!" burst out Harry.

"Would I?" asked Dumbledore heavily. "I am not so sure. I had proven, as a very young man, that power was my weakness. Those who are best suited to power are those who have never sought it. Those who, like you, have leadership thrust upon them. They are not surprised that they wear it well."

"I was safer at Hogwarts. I think I was a good teacher —"

"You were the best —"

"— you are very kind, Harry. But while I busied myself with the training of young wizards, Grindelwald was raising an army. I was not a leader, but I was a thinker, than I feared him."

"Oh, not death," said Dumbledore, in answer to Harry's questioning look. "Not what he could do to me magically. I know that. But death is a fearful thing. It is the most terrible of all. It is the only thing that is truly killful. It was the truth I feared. You see, I never knew which of us, in that last, horrific fight, had actually cast the curse that would be right. Harry, I dreaded beyond all things the knowledge that it had been I who brought about her death, not him. I was struck the blow that snuffed out her life."

"I think he knew it, I think he knew what frightened me. I delayed meeting him until finally, it would have been too sh unstoppable, and I had to do what I could.

"Well, you know what happened next. I won the duel. I won the wand."

Another silence. Harry did not ask whether Dumbledore had ever found out who struck Ariana dead. He did not want to know. At last he knew what Dumbledore would have seen when he looked in the Mirror of Erised, and why Dumbledore had never told him. They sat in silence for a long time, and the whimperings of the creature behind them barely disturbed Harry anymore. At last he said, "Grindelwald tried to stop Voldemort going after the wand. He lied, you know, pretended he had never seen it." Dumbledore nodded, looking down at his lap, tears still glittering on the crooked nose.

"They say he showed remorse in later years, alone in his cell at Nurmengard. I hope that it is true. I would like to think that the lies he told about the Hallows that lie to Voldemort was his attempt to make amends . . . to prevent Voldemort from taking the Hallows . . ."

"... or maybe from breaking into your tomb?" suggested Harry, and Dumbledore dabbed his eyes.

After another short pause Harry said, "You tried to use the Resurrection Stone."

Dumbledore nodded.

“When I discovered it, after all those years, buried in the abandoned home of the Gaunts — the Hallow I had craved for so many reasons — I lost my head, Harry. I quite forgot that it was now a Horcrux, that the ring was sure to carry a curse. I pitied myself. I was about to see Ariana, and my mother, and my father, and to tell them how very, very sorry I was. . . .

"I was such a fool, Harry. After all those years I had learned nothing. I was unworthy to unite the Deathly Hallows, I h

"Why?" said Harry. "It was natural! You wanted to see them again. What's wrong with that?"

"Maybe a man in a million could unite the Hallows, Harry. I was fit only to possess the meanest of them, the least ext^{ra} of it, and not to kill with it. I was permitted to tame and to use it, because I took it, not for gain, but to save others from

"But the Cloak, I took out of vain curiosity, and so it could never have worked for me as it works for you, its true owner. I would have liked to see those who are at peace, rather than to enable my self-sacrifice, as you did. You are the worthy possessor of the Hallow." Dumbledore patted Harry's hand, and Harry looked up at the old man and smiled; he could not help himself. How could he?

"Why did you have to make it so difficult?"

Dumbledore's smile was tremulous.

"I am afraid I counted on Miss Granger to slow you up, Harry. I was afraid that your hot head might dominate your good sense. About those tempting objects, you might seize the Hallows as I did, at the wrong time, for the wrong reasons. If you are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die. He chooses living world than dying."

"And Voldemort never knew about the Hallows?"

"I do not think so, because he did not recognize the Resurrection Stone he turned into a Horcrux. But even if he had, he would not think that he needed the Cloak, and as for the stone, whom would he want it?"

"But you expected him to go after the wand?"

"I have been sure that he would try, ever since your wand beat Voldemort's in the graveyard of Little Hangleton. At first, I thought he was just a desperate man. But then, after he had kidnapped Ollivander, however, he discovered the existence of the twin cores. He thought that explained it. So Voldemort, instead of asking himself what quality it was in you that had made your wand so strong, what gift you had, that, they said, would beat any other. For him, the Elder Wand has become an obsession to rival his obsession with power. It makes him truly invincible. Poor Severus . . ."

"If you planned your death with Snape, you meant him to end up with the Elder Wand, didn't you?"

"I admit that was my intention," said Dumbledore, "but it did not work as I intended, did it?"

"No," said Harry. "That bit didn't work out."

The creature behind them jerked and moaned, and Harry and Dumbledore sat without talking for the longest time yarry in the long minutes, like softly falling snow.

"I've got to go back, haven't I?"

"That is up to you."

"I've got a choice?"

"Oh yes." Dumbledore smiled at him. "We are in King's Cross, you say? I think that if you decided not to go back, you

"And where would it take me?"

"On," said Dumbledore simply.

Silence again.

"Voldemort's got the Elder Wand."

"True. Voldemort has the Elder Wand."

"But you want me to go back?"

"I think," said Dumbledore, "that if you choose to return, there is a chance that he may be finished for good. I cannot r from returning here than he does."

Harry glanced again at the raw-looking thing that trembled and choked in the shadow beneath the distant chair.

"Do not pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living, and, above all, those who live without love. By returning, you may ensure that. If that seems to you a worthy goal, then we say good-bye for the present."

Harry nodded and sighed. Leaving this place would not be nearly as hard as walking into the forest had been, but it was still a return to pain and the fear of more loss. He stood up, and Dumbledore did the same, and they looked for a long time. "Tell me one last thing," said Harry. "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?"

Dumbledore beamed at him, and his voice sounded loud and strong in Harry's ears even though the bright mist was still there. "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

THE FLAW IN THE PLAN

He was lying facedown on the ground again. The smell of the forest filled his nostrils. He could feel the cold hard ground beneath him, but he had been knocked sideways by the fall, cutting into his temple. Every inch of him ached, and the place where the Killing Curse had struck him did not stir, but remained exactly where he had fallen, with his left arm bent out at an awkward angle and his mouth open. He had expected to hear cheers of triumph and jubilation at his death, but instead hurried footsteps, whispers, and a low murmur. "My Lord . . . my Lord . . ."

It was Bellatrix's voice, and she spoke as if to a lover. Harry did not dare open his eyes, but allowed his other senses to focus. He felt a hand stowed beneath his robes because he could feel it pressed between his chest and the ground. A slight cushioning effect. A hand that was also there, stuffed out of sight.

"My Lord . . ."

"That will do," said Voldemort's voice.

More footsteps: Several people were backing away from the same spot. Desperate to see what was happening and wondering if it was too late. Voldemort seemed to be getting to his feet. Various Death Eaters were hurrying away from him, returning to the crowd. He was beside Voldemort.

Harry closed his eyes again and considered what he had seen. The Death Eaters had been huddled around Voldemort. He had hit Harry with the Killing Curse. Had Voldemort too collapsed? It seemed like it. And both of them had fallen.

"My Lord, let me —"

"I do not require assistance," said Voldemort coldly, and though he could not see it, Harry pictured Bellatrix withdrawing. There was complete silence in the clearing. Nobody approached Harry, but he felt their concentrated gaze; it seemed as if a hand or an eyelid might twitch.

"You," said Voldemort, and there was a bang and a small shriek of pain. "Examine him. Tell me whether he is dead." Harry did not know who had been sent to verify. He could only lie there, with his heart thumping traitorously, and wondering how long it was, that Voldemort was wary of approaching him, that Voldemort suspected that all had not gone to plan. . . . Hands, softer than he had been expecting, touched Harry's face, pulled back an eyelid, crept beneath his shirt, down his arm. Breathing, her long hair tickled his face. He knew that she could feel the steady pounding of life against his ribs.

"Is Draco alive? Is he in the castle?"

The whisper was barely audible; her lips were an inch from his ear, her head bent so low that her long hair shielded her face. "Yes," he breathed back.

He felt the hand on his chest contract; her nails pierced him. Then it was withdrawn. She had sat up.

"He is dead!" Narcissa Malfoy called to the watchers.

And now they shouted, now they yelled in triumph and stamped their feet, and through his eyelids, Harry saw bursts of light. Still feigning death on the ground, he understood. Narcissa knew that the only way she would be permitted to enter the castle was if she said that Harry was no longer cared whether Voldemort won.

"You see?" screeched Voldemort over the tumult. "Harry Potter is dead by my hand, and no man alive can threaten me now." Harry had been expecting it, knew his body would not be allowed to remain unsullied upon the forest floor; it must be lifted into the air, and it took all his determination to remain limp, yet the pain he expected did not come. He was thrown up and he felt his wand slide a little beneath his robes, but he kept himself floppy and lifeless, and when he fell to the ground, he heard shrieks of laughter.

"Now," said Voldemort, "we go to the castle, and show them what has become of their hero. Who shall drag the body to the castle?" There was a fresh outbreak of laughter, and after a few moments Harry felt the ground trembling beneath him.

"You carry him," Voldemort said. "He will be nice and visible in your arms, will he not? Pick up your little friend, Hagrid. He is a useful creature —"

Someone slammed Harry's glasses back onto his face with deliberate force, but the enormous hands that lifted him were still trembling with the force of his heaving sobs; great tears splashed down upon him as Hagrid cradled Harry in his arms. Harry knew that all was not, yet, lost.

"Move," said Voldemort, and Hagrid stumbled forward, forcing his way through the close-growing trees, back through the forest. He was quiescent, his mouth lolling open, his eyes shut, and in the darkness, while the Death Eaters crowed all around them, Harry could feel the pulse beat in the exposed neck of Harry Potter. . . .

The two giants crashed along behind the Death Eaters; Harry could hear trees creaking and falling as they passed; though the jeers of the Death Eaters were drowned. The victorious procession marched on toward the open ground, and Harry, through his closed eyelids, that the trees were beginning to thin.

"BANE!"

Hagrid's unexpected bellow nearly forced Harry's eyes open. "Happy now, are yeh, that yeh didn' fight, yeh cowardly Hagrid could not continue, but broke down in fresh tears. Harry wondered how many centaurs were watching their p
Eaters called insults at the centaurs as they left them behind. A little later, Harry sensed, by a freshening of the air, t
"Stop."

Harry thought that Hagrid must have been forced to obey Voldemort's command, because he lurched a little. And no
ping breath of the dementors that patrolled the outer trees. They would not affect him now. The fact of his own surv
ther's stag kept guardian in his heart.

Someone passed close by Harry, and he knew that it was Voldemort himself because he spoke a moment later, his v
ing upon Harry's eardrums.

"Harry Potter is dead. He was killed as he ran away, trying to save himself while you lay down your lives for him. We l

"The battle is won. You have lost half of your fighters. My Death Eaters outnumber you, and the Boy Who Lived is fin
man, woman, or child, will be slaughtered, as will every member of their family. Come out of the castle now, kneel b
ur brothers and sisters will live and be forgiven, and you will join me in the new world we shall build together."

There was silence in the grounds and from the castle. Voldemort was so close to him that Harry did not dare open h

"Come," said Voldemort, and Harry heard him move ahead, and Hagrid was forced to follow. Now Harry opened his
he great snake Nagini around his shoulders, now free of her enchanted cage. But Harry had no possibility of extracti
e Death Eaters, who marched on either side of them through the slowly lightening darkness. . . .

"Harry," sobbed Hagrid. "Oh, Harry . . . Harry . . ."

Harry shut his eyes tight again. He knew that they were approaching the castle and strained his ears to distinguish, a
footsteps, signs of life from those within.

"Stop."

The Death Eaters came to a halt: Harry heard them spreading out in a line facing the open front doors of the school.
t meant light streamed upon him from the entrance hall. He waited. Any moment, the people for whom he had tried

"NO!"

The scream was the more terrible because he had never expected or dreamed that Professor McGonagall could mak
llatrix gloried in McGonagall's despair. He squinted again for a single second and saw the open doorway filling with p
steps to face their vanquishers and see the truth of Harry's death for themselves. He saw Voldemort standing a little i
er. He closed his eyes again.

"No!"

"No!"

"Harry! HARRY!"

Ron's, Hermione's, and Ginny's voices were worse than McGonagall's; Harry wanted nothing more than to call back, y
; the crowd of survivors took up the cause, screaming and yelling abuse at the Death Eaters, until —

"SILENCE!" cried Voldemort, and there was a bang and a flash of bright light, and silence was forced upon them all. "I
Harry felt himself lowered onto the grass.

"You see?" said Voldemort, and Harry felt him striding backward and forward right beside the place where he lay. "Ha
othing, ever, but a boy who relied on others to sacrifice themselves for him!"

"He beat you!" yelled Ron, and the charm broke, and the defenders of Hogwarts were shouting and screaming again
e.

"He was killed while trying to sneak out of the castle grounds," said Voldemort, and there was relish in his voice for th
But Voldemort broke off: Harry heard a scuffle and a shout, then another bang, a flash of light, and a grunt of pain; h
free of the crowd and charged at Voldemort: Harry saw the figure hit the ground, Disarmed, Voldemort throwing the

"And who is this?" he said in his soft snake's hiss. "Who has volunteered to demonstrate what happens to those who
Bellatrix gave a delighted laugh.

"It is Neville Longbottom, my Lord! The boy who has been giving the Carrows so much trouble! The son of the Aurors

"Ah, yes, I remember," said Voldemort, looking down at Neville, who was struggling back to his feet, unarmed and un
the Death Eaters. "But you are a pureblood, aren't you, my brave boy?" Voldemort asked Neville, who stood facing h

"So what if I am?" said Neville loudly.

"You show spirit and bravery, and you come of noble stock. You will make a very valuable Death Eater. We need you
"I'll join you when hell freezes over," said Neville. "Dumbledore's Army!" he shouted, and there was an answering che
le to hold.

"Very well," said Voldemort, and Harry heard more danger in the silkiness of his voice than in the most powerful curs
I plan. On your head," he said quietly, "be it."

Still watching through his lashes, Harry saw Voldemort wave his wand. Seconds later, out of one of the castle's shatte
hrough the half light and landed in Voldemort's hand. He shook the mildewed object by its pointed end and it dangle

"There will be no more Sorting at Hogwarts School," said Voldemort. "There will be no more Houses. The emblem, sh
ce for everyone. Won't they, Neville Longbottom?"

He pointed his wand at Neville, who grew rigid and still, then forced the hat onto Neville's head, so that it slipped dov
wd in front of the castle, and as one, the Death Eaters raised their wands, holding the fighters of Hogwarts at bay.

"Neville here is now going to demonstrate what happens to anyone foolish enough to continue to oppose me," said V
burst into flames.

Screams split the dawn, and Neville was aflame, rooted to the spot, unable to move, and Harry could not bear it: He
And then many things happened at the same moment.

They heard uproar from the distant boundary of the school as what sounded like hundreds of people came swarming
ud war cries. At the same time, Grawp came lumbering around the side of the castle and yelled, "HAGGER!" His cry w
e bull elephants, making the earth quake. Then came hooves and the twangs of bows, and arrows were suddenly fal
e. Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak from inside his robes, swung it over himself, and sprang to his feet, as Neville mo
In one swift, fluid motion, Neville broke free of the Body-Bind Curse upon him; the flaming hat fell off him and he dre
handle —

The slash of the silver blade could not be heard over the roar of the oncoming crowd or the sounds of the clashing g
ery eye. With a single stroke Neville sliced off the great snake's head, which spun high into the air, gleaming in the lig
as open in a scream of fury that nobody could hear, and the snake's body thudded to the ground at his feet —

Hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, Harry cast a Shield Charm between Neville and Voldemort before the latter cou
hunderous stamps of the battling giants, Hagrid's yell came loudest of all.

"HARRY!" Hagrid shouted. "HARRY — WHERE'S HARRY?"

Chaos reigned. The charging centaurs were scattering the Death Eaters, everyone was fleeing the giants' stamping fe
me from who knew where; Harry saw great winged creatures soaring around the heads of Voldemort's giants, thestr
unched and pummeled them; and now the wizards, defenders of Hogwarts and Death Eaters alike, were being force
h Eater he could see, and they crumpled, not knowing what or who had hit them, and their bodies were trampled by
Still hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, Harry was buffeted into the entrance hall: He was searching for Voldemort
backed into the Great Hall, still screaming instructions to his followers as he sent curses flying left and right; Harry c
Seamus Finnigan and Hannah Abbott, darted past him into the Great Hall, where they joined the fight already flourish
And now there were more, even more people storming up the front steps, and Harry saw Charlie Weasley overtaking
ed to have returned at the head of what looked like the families and friends of every Hogwarts student who had rem
ade. The centaurs Bane, Ronan, and Magorian burst into the hall with a great clatter of hooves, as behind Harry the c
The house-elves of Hogwarts swarmed into the entrance hall, screaming and waving carving knives and cleavers, and
as Kreacher, his bullfrog's voice audible even above this din: "Fight! Fight! Fight for my Master, defender of house-elv
"

They were hacking and stabbing at the ankles and shins of Death Eaters, their tiny faces alive with malice, and every
of numbers, overcome by spells, dragging arrows from wounds, stabbed in the leg by elves, or else simply attempting
But it was not over yet: Harry sped between duelers, past struggling prisoners, and into the Great Hall.

Voldemort was in the center of the battle, and he was striking and smiting all within reach. Harry could not get a clea
eat Hall became more and more crowded as everyone who could walk forced their way inside.

Harry saw Yaxley slammed to the floor by George and Lee Jordan, saw Dolohov fall with a scream at Flitwick's hands,
e wall opposite, and slide unconscious to the ground. He saw Ron and Neville bringing down Fenrir Greyback, Aberfo
cius and Narcissa Malfoy running through the crowd, not even attempting to fight, screaming for their son.

Voldemort was now dueling McGonagall, Slughorn, and Kingsley all at once, and there was cold hatred in his face as
Bellatrix was still fighting too, fifty yards away from Voldemort, and like her master she dueled three at once: Hermio
was equal to them, and Harry's attention was diverted as a Killing Curse shot so close to Ginny that she missed deat
He changed course, running at Bellatrix rather than Voldemort, but before he had gone a few steps he was knocked
"NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!"

Mrs. Weasley threw off her cloak as she ran, freeing her arms. Bellatrix spun on the spot, roaring with laughter at the
"OUT OF MY WAY!" shouted Mrs. Weasley to the three girls, and with a swipe of her wand she began to duel. Harry w
wirled, and Bellatrix Lestrange's smile faltered and became a snarl. Jets of light flew from both wands, the floor arou
ighting to kill.

"No!" Mrs. Weasley cried as a few students ran forward, trying to come to her aid. "Get back! Get back! She is mine!"
Hundreds of people now lined the walls, watching the two fights, Voldemort and his three opponents, Bellatrix and M
tack and yet to protect, unable to be sure that he would not hit the innocent.

"What will happen to your children when I've killed you?" taunted Bellatrix, as mad as her master, capering as Molly's
reddie?"

"You — will — never — touch — our — children — again!" screamed Mrs. Weasley.

Bellatrix laughed, the same exhilarated laugh her cousin Sirius had given as he toppled backward through the veil, a
Molly's curse soared beneath Bellatrix's outstretched arm and hit her squarely in the chest, directly over her heart.
Bellatrix's gloating smile froze, her eyes seemed to bulge: For the tiniest space of time she knew what had happened
ort screamed.

Harry felt as though he turned in slow motion; he saw McGonagall, Kingsley, and Slughorn blasted backward, flailing
his last, best lieutenant exploded with the force of a bomb. Voldemort raised his wand and directed it at Molly Weas
"Protego!" roared Harry, and the Shield Charm expanded in the middle of the Hall, and Voldemort stared around for
The yell of shock, the cheers, the screams on every side of "Harry!" "HE'S ALIVE!" were stifled at once. The crowd was

"I don't want anyone else to try to help," Harry said loudly, and in the total silence his voice carried like a trumpet call. Voldermort hissed.

"Nobody," said Harry simply. "There are no more Horcruxes. It's just you and me. Neither can live while the other survives." "One of us?" jeered Voldemort, and his whole body was taut and his red eyes stared, a snake that was about to strike.

"Accident, was it, when my mother died to save me?" asked Harry. They were still moving sideways, both of them, in the dark, and for Harry no face existed but Voldemort's. "Accident, when I decided to fight in that graveyard? Accident, that I

"Accidents!" screamed Voldemort, but still he did not strike, and the watching crowd was frozen as if Petrified, and of wo. "Accident and chance and the fact that you crouched and sniveled behind the skirts of greater men and women,

"But you did not!"

“— I meant to, and that’s what did it. I’ve done what my mother did. They’re protected from you. Haven’t you noticed rture them. You can’t touch them. You don’t learn from your mistakes, Riddle, do you?”

"You dare —"

"Yes, I dare," said Harry. "I know things you don't know, Tom Riddle. I know lots of important things that you don't. When Voldemort did not speak, but prowled in a circle, and Harry knew that he kept him temporarily mesmerized and at bay, he knew a final secret. . . ."

"Is it love again?" said Voldemort, his snake's face jeering. "Dumbledore's favorite solution, love, which he claimed could save the world from the tower and breaking like an old waxwork? Love, which did not prevent me stamping out your Mudblood mother like a rat and this time and take my curse. So what will stop you dying now when I strike?"

"Just one thing," said Harry, and still they circled each other, wrapped in each other, held apart by nothing but the last

"If it is not love that will save you this time," said Voldemort, "you must believe that you have magic that I do not, or else you will die."

"I believe both," said Harry, and he saw shock flit across the snakelike face, though it was instantly dispelled; Voldemort's screams; humorless and insane, it echoed around the silent Hall.

"You think you know more magic than I do?" he said. "Than I, than Lord Voldemort, who has performed magic that D

"Oh, he dreamed of it," said Harry, "but he knew more than you, knew enough not to do what you've done."

"You mean he was weak!" screamed Voldemort. "Too weak to dare, too weak to take what might have been his, what

"No, he was cleverer than you," said Harry, "a better wizard, a better man."

"I brought about the death of Albus Dumbledore!"

"You thought you did," said Harry, "but you were wrong."

For the first time, the watching crowd stirred as the hundreds of people around the walls drew breath as one.

"Dumbledore is dead!" Voldemort hurled the words at Harry as though they would cause him unendurable pain. "His name is spoken, Potter, and he will not return!"

"Yes, Dumbledore's dead," said Harry calmly, "but you didn't have him killed. He chose his own manner of dying, choosing to die for you, the person you thought was your servant."

"What childish dream is this?" said Voldemort, but still he did not strike, and his red eyes did not waver from Harry's.

"Severus Snape wasn't yours," said Harry. "Snape was Dumbledore's, Dumbledore's from the moment you started hating him. You can't understand. You never saw Snape cast a Patronus, did you, Riddle?"

Voldemort did not answer. They continued to circle each other like wolves about to tear each other apart.

"Snape's Patronus was a doe," said Harry, "the same as my mother's, because he loved her for nearly all of his life, from

"he said as he saw Voldemort's nostrils flare, "he asked you to spare her life, didn't he?"

"He desired her, that was all," sneered Voldemort, "but when she had gone, he agreed that there were other women.

"Of course he told you that," said Harry, "but he was Dumbledore's spy from the moment you threatened her, and he was the one who killed her when Snape finished him!"

"It matters not!" shrieked Voldemort, who had followed every word with rapt attention, but now let out a cackle of merriment. "It is the will of the Dark Lord that counts, not the petty obstacles they tried to put in my path! I crushed them as I crushed your mother, Snape's supposed godson, and you do not understand!

"Dumbledore was trying to keep the Elder Wand from me! He intended that Snape should be the true master of the fore you could get your hands on it, I understood the truth before you caught up. I killed Severus Snape three hours truly mine! Dumbledore's last plan went wrong, Harry Potter!"

"Yeah, it did," said Harry. "You're right. But before you try to kill me, I'd advise you to think about what you've done. .

“What is this?”

Of all the things that Harry had said to him, beyond any revelation or taunt, nothing had shocked Voldemort like this and his eyes whiten.

"It's your one last chance," said Harry, "it's all you've got left. . . . I've seen what you'll be otherwise. . . . Be a man . . . try."

"You dare — ?" said Voldemort again.

"Yes, I dare," said Harry, "because Dumbledore's last plan hasn't backfired on me at all. It's backfired on you, Riddle." Voldemort's hand was trembling on the Elder Wand, and Harry gripped Draco's very tightly. The moment, he knew, was here. "That wand still isn't working properly for you because you murdered the wrong person. Severus Snape was never the master. He killed —"

"Aren't you listening? Snape never beat Dumbledore! Dumbledore's death was planned between them! Dumbledore, as planned, the wand's power would have died with him, because it had never been won from him!"

"But then, Potter, Dumbledore as good as gave me the wand!" Voldemort's voice shook with malicious pleasure. "I still follow my last master's wishes! Its power is mine!"

"You still don't get it, Riddle, do you? Possessing the wand isn't enough! Holding it, using it, doesn't make it really yours. I am a wizard. . . . The Elder Wand recognized a new master before Dumbledore died, someone who never even laid a hand on it. I did, never realizing exactly what he had done, or that the world's most dangerous wand had given him its allegiance. . . . Voldemort's chest rose and fell rapidly, and Harry could feel the curse coming, feel it building inside the wand pointed at him.

"The true master of the Elder Wand was Draco Malfoy."

Blank shock showed in Voldemort's face for a moment, but then it was gone.

"But what does it matter?" he said softly. "Even if you are right, Potter, it makes no difference to you and me. You no longer exist after I have killed you, I can attend to Draco Malfoy. . . ."

"But you're too late," said Harry. "You've missed your chance. I got there first. I overpowered Draco weeks ago. I took the wand from him. Harry twitched the hawthorn wand, and he felt the eyes of everyone in the Hall upon it.

"So it all comes down to this, doesn't it?" whispered Harry. "Does the wand in your hand know its last master was Draco Malfoy?"

A red-gold glow burst suddenly across the enchanted sky above them as an edge of dazzling sun appeared over the horizon at the same time, so that Voldemort's was suddenly a flaming blur. Harry heard the high voice shriek as he too yelled his battle cry.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

The bang was like a cannon blast, and the golden flames that erupted between them, at the dead center of the circle, were blinding. Harry saw Voldemort's green jet meet his own spell, saw the Elder Wand fly high, dark against the sunrise, spinning through the air toward the master it would not kill, who had come to take full possession of it at last. And Harry, with his right hand as Voldemort fell backward, arms splayed, the slit pupils of the scarlet eyes rolling upward. Tom Riddle hit the ground with his white hands empty, the snakelike face vacant and unknowing. Voldemort was dead, killed by his own rebounding curse, his enemy's shell.

One shivering second of silence, the shock of the moment suspended: and then the tumult broke around Harry as the sun rose. The fierce new sun dazzled the windows as they thundered toward him, and the first to reach him were Ron and Hermione. Their incomprehensible shouts that deafened him. Then Ginny, Neville, and Luna were there, and then all the Weasleys and Hagrid. Harry could not hear a word that anyone was shouting, nor tell whose hands were seizing him, pulling him, trying to hug him. He was pinned to touch the Boy Who Lived, the reason it was over at last —

The sun rose steadily over Hogwarts, and the Great Hall blazed with life and light. Harry was an indispensable part of the victory and celebration. They wanted him there with them, their leader and symbol, their savior and their guide, and that he seemed to occur to no one. He must speak to the bereaved, clasp their hands, witness their tears, receive their thanks. The long night drew on; that the Imperiused up and down the country had come back to themselves, that Death Eaters were fleeing, that the released at that very moment, and that Kingsley Shacklebolt had been named temporary Minister of Magic. . . .

They moved Voldemort's body and laid it in a chamber off the Hall, away from the bodies of Fred, Tonks, Lupin, Colin. Sirius had replaced the House tables, but nobody was sitting according to House anymore: All were jumbled together, teachers and students. Hermione lay recovering in a corner, and Grawp peered in through a smashed window, and people were throwing food. Harry found himself sitting on a bench beside Luna.

"I'd want some peace and quiet, if it were me," she said.

"I'd love some," he replied.

"I'll distract them all," she said. "Use your Cloak."

And before he could say a word she had cried, "Oooh, look, a Blibbering Humdinger!" and pointed out of the window at the giant spider. He looked, and got to his feet.

Now he could move through the Hall without interference. He spotted Ginny two tables away; she was sitting with her friends. He had hours and days and maybe years in which to talk. He saw Neville, the sword of Gryffindor lying beside his plate as he walked. Between the tables he walked, and he spotted the three Malfoys, huddled together as though unsure whether or not to approach. Everywhere he looked he saw families reunited, and finally, he saw the two whose company he craved most.

"It's me," he muttered, crouching down between them. "Will you come with me?"

They stood up at once, and together he, Ron, and Hermione left the Great Hall. Great chunks were missing from the floor, and the stairs occurred every few steps as they climbed.

Somewhere in the distance they could hear Peeves zooming through the corridors singing a victory song of his own. "We did it, we bashed them, wee Potter's the one, and Voldy's gone moldy, so now let's have fun!"

"Really gives a feeling for the scope and tragedy of the thing, doesn't it?" said Ron, pushing open a door to let Harry and Hermione pass.

Happiness would come, Harry thought, but at the moment it was muffled by exhaustion, and the pain of losing Fred. Most of all he felt the most stupendous relief, and a longing to sleep. But first he owed an explanation to Ron and the truth. Painstakingly he recounted what he had seen in the Pensieve and what had happened in the forest, and then at last they arrived at the place to which they had been walking, though none of them had mentioned their destination. Since he had last seen it, the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the headmaster's study had been knocked aside; it seemed as though it would be able to distinguish passwords anymore.

"Can we go up?" he asked the gargoyle.

"Feel free," groaned the statue.

They clambered over him and onto the spiral stone staircase that moved slowly upward like an escalator. Harry pushed open the door. He had one, brief glimpse of the stone Pensieve on the desk where he had left it, and then an earsplitting noise marked the rebirth of Voldemort —

But it was applause. All around the walls, the headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts were giving him a standing ovation. They reached through their frames to grip each other's hands; they danced up and down on the chairs in which they had been sitting. As waving his ear-trumpet; and Phineas Nigellus called, in his high, reedy voice, "And let it be noted that Slytherin House has been victorious. But Harry had eyes only for the man who stood in the largest portrait directly behind the headmaster's chair. Tears welled in his long silver beard, and the pride and the gratitude emanating from him filled Harry with the same balm as phoenix soot. At last, Harry held up his hands, and the portraits fell respectfully silent, beaming and mopping their eyes and waiting for the next move, however, and chose them with enormous care. Exhausted and bleary-eyed though he was, he must make one last speech. "The thing that was hidden in the Snitch," he began, "I dropped it in the forest. I don't know exactly where, but I'm not sure. "My dear boy, I do," said Dumbledore, while his fellow pictures looked confused and curious. "A wise and courageous decision. No one else knows where it fell?"

"No one," said Harry, and Dumbledore nodded his satisfaction.

"I'm going to keep Ignotus's present, though," said Harry, and Dumbledore beamed.

"But of course, Harry, it is yours forever, until you pass it on!"

"And then there's this."

Harry held up the Elder Wand, and Ron and Hermione looked at it with a reverence that, even in his befuddled and surprised state, he could not ignore.

"I don't want it," said Harry.

"What?" said Ron loudly. "Are you mental?"

"I know it's powerful," said Harry wearily. "But I was happier with mine. So . . ."

He rummaged in the pouch hung around his neck, and pulled out the two halves of holly still just connected by the flesh. He looked at them, not be repaired, that the damage was too severe. All he knew was that if this did not work, nothing would.

He laid the broken wand upon the headmaster's desk, touched it with the very tip of the Elder Wand, and said, "Repaired." As his wand resealed, red sparks flew out of its end. Harry knew that he had succeeded. He picked up the holly and put it away. The holly and hand were rejoicing at their reunion.

"I'm putting the Elder Wand," he told Dumbledore, who was watching him with enormous affection and admiration, "and I hope it will be like Ignotus, its power will be broken, won't it? The previous master will never have been defeated. That'll be the end of it." Dumbledore nodded. They smiled at each other.

"Are you sure?" said Ron. There was the faintest trace of longing in his voice as he looked at the Elder Wand.

"I think Harry's right," said Hermione quietly.

"That wand's more trouble than it's worth," said Harry. "And quite honestly," he turned away from the painted portraits, "I'm going to leave it in Gryffindor Tower, and wondering whether Kreacher might bring him a sandwich there, "I've had enough trouble with this wand."

NINETEEN YEARS LATER

EPILOGUE

NINETEEN YEARS LATER

Autumn seemed to arrive suddenly that year. The morning of the first of September was crisp and golden as an apple. Outside, on the great sooty station, the fumes of car exhausts and the breath of pedestrians sparkled like cobwebs in the cold air. The commuters were pushing; the owls inside them hooted indignantly, and the redheaded girl trailed tearfully behind her brother.

"It won't be long, and you'll be going too," Harry told her.

"Two years," sniffed Lily. "I want to go now!"

The commuters stared curiously at the owls as the family wove its way toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten. James was in the car; his sons had resumed the argument they had started in the car.

"I won't! I won't be in Slytherin!"

"James, give it a rest!" said Ginny.

"I only said he might be," said James, grinning at his younger brother. "There's nothing wrong with that. He might be in Gryffindor. But James caught his mother's eye and fell silent. The five Potters approached the barrier. With a slightly cocky look on his face, he looked at them from his mother and broke into a run. A moment later, he had vanished.

"You'll write to me, won't you?" Albus asked his parents immediately, capitalizing on the momentary absence of his brother.

"Every day, if you want us to," said Ginny.

"Not every day," said Albus quickly. "James says most people only get letters from home about once a month."

"We wrote to James three times a week last year," said Ginny.

"And you don't want to believe everything he tells you about Hogwarts," Harry put in. "He likes a laugh, your brother. Side by side, they pushed the second trolley forward, gathering speed. As they reached the barrier, Albus winced, but he and three-quarters, which was obscured by thick white steam that was pouring from the scarlet Hogwarts Express, had already disappeared.

"Where are they?" asked Albus anxiously, peering at the hazy forms they passed as they made their way down the platform. "We'll find them," said Ginny reassuringly.

But the vapor was dense, and it was difficult to make out anybody's faces. Detached from their owners, voices sounded only on broomstick regulations, and was quite glad of the excuse not to stop and say hello. . . .

"I think that's them, Al," said Ginny suddenly.

A group of four people emerged from the mist, standing alongside the very last carriage. Their faces only came into focus as they stepped out of the steam.

"Hi," said Albus, sounding immensely relieved.

Rose, who was already wearing her brand-new Hogwarts robes, beamed at him.

"Parked all right, then?" Ron asked Harry. "I did. Hermione didn't believe I could pass a Muggle driving test, did you? So I did."

"No, I didn't," said Hermione, "I had complete faith in you."

"As a matter of fact, I did Confund him," Ron whispered to Harry, as together they lifted Albus's trunk and owl onto the trolley. "Face it, I can use a Supersensory Charm for that."

Back on the platform, they found Lily and Hugo, Rose's younger brother, having an animated discussion about which house he should join.

"If you're not in Gryffindor, we'll disinherit you," said Ron, "but no pressure."

"Ron!"

Lily and Hugo laughed, but Albus and Rose looked solemn.

"He doesn't mean it," said Hermione and Ginny, but Ron was no longer paying attention. Catching Harry's eye, he nodded for a moment, and three people stood in sharp relief against the shifting mist.

"Look who it is."

Draco Malfoy was standing there with his wife and son, a dark coat buttoned up to his throat. His hair was receding so fast that Draco as much as Albus resembled Harry. Draco caught sight of Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny staring at him, and his face went red.

"So that's little Scorpius," said Ron under his breath. "Make sure you beat him in every test, Rosie. Thank God you inherited his brains."

"Ron, for heaven's sake," said Hermione, half stern, half amused. "Don't try to turn them against each other before they've even met."

"You're right, sorry," said Ron, but unable to help himself, he added, "Don't get too friendly with him, though, Rosie. C'mon, he's a blood traitor."

"Hey!"

James had reappeared; he had divested himself of his trunk, owl, and trolley, and was evidently bursting with news.

"Teddy's back there," he said breathlessly, pointing back over his shoulder into the billowing clouds of steam. "Just see him. He's snogging her!"

He gazed up at the adults, evidently disappointed by the lack of reaction.

"Our Teddy! Teddy Lupin! Snogging our Victoire! Our cousin! And I asked Teddy what he was doing —"

"You interrupted them?" said Ginny. "You are so like Ron —"

"— and he said he'd come to see her off! And then he told me to go away. He's snogging her!" James added as though he hadn't just said that.

"Oh, it would be lovely if they got married!" whispered Lily ecstatically. "Teddy would really be part of the family then!"

"He already comes round for dinner about four times a week," said Harry. "Why don't we just invite him to live with us?"

"Yeah!" said James enthusiastically. "I don't mind sharing with Al — Teddy could have my room!"

"No," said Harry firmly, "you and Al will share a room only when I want the house demolished."

He checked the battered old watch that had once been Fabian Prewett's.

"It's nearly eleven, you'd better get on board."

"Don't forget to give Neville our love!" Ginny told James as she hugged him.

"Mum! I can't give a professor love!"

"But you know Neville —"

James rolled his eyes.

"Outside, yeah, but at school he's Professor Longbottom, isn't he? I can't walk into Herbology and give him love. . . ."

Shaking his head at his mother's foolishness, he vented his feelings by aiming a kick at Albus.

"See you later, Al. Watch out for the thestrals."

"I thought they were invisible? You said they were invisible!"

But James merely laughed, permitted his mother to kiss him, gave his father a fleeting hug, then leapt onto the rapid trolley to find his friends.

"Thestrals are nothing to worry about," Harry told Albus. "They're gentle things, there's nothing scary about them. And they'll be going in the boats."

Ginny kissed Albus good-bye.

"See you at Christmas."

"Bye, Al," said Harry as his son hugged him. "Don't forget Hagrid's invited you to tea next Friday. Don't mess with Peeves. And James wind you up."

"What if I'm in Slytherin?"

The whisper was for his father alone, and Harry knew that only the moment of departure could have forced Albus to do it. Harry crouched down so that Albus's face was slightly above his own. Alone of Harry's three children, Albus had inherited his father's name. "Albus Severus," Harry said quietly, so that nobody but Ginny could hear, and she was tactful enough to pretend to be interested. "You'll be the second of two headmasters of Hogwarts. One of them was a Slytherin and he was probably the bravest man I ever knew."

"But just say —"

"— then Slytherin House will have gained an excellent student, won't it? It doesn't matter to us, Al. But if it matters to you, then the Sorting Hat takes your choice into account."

"Really?"

"It did for me," said Harry.

He had never told any of his children that before, and he saw the wonder in Albus's face when he said it. But now the train was moving, and the outlines of parents were swarming forward for final kisses, last-minute reminders. Albus jumped into the carriage and the windows nearest them. A great number of faces, both on the train and off, seemed to be turned toward Harry.

"Why are they all staring?" demanded Albus as he and Rose craned around to look at the other students.

"Don't let it worry you," said Ron. "It's me. I'm extremely famous."

Albus, Rose, Hugo, and Lily laughed. The train began to move, and Harry walked alongside it, watching his son's thin back as he disappeared into the distance, even though it was like a little bereavement, watching his son glide away from him. . . .

The last trace of steam evaporated in the autumn air. The train rounded a corner. Harry's hand was still raised in farewell.

"He'll be all right," murmured Ginny.

As Harry looked at her, he lowered his hand absentmindedly and touched the lightning scar on his forehead.

"I know he will."

The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well.