

CHAPTER ONE

OWL POST

Harry Potter was a highly unusual boy in many ways. For one thing, he hated the summer holidays more than any other boy he knew, and he was not alone in this. For another thing, he was forced to do it in secret, in the dead of night. And he also happened to be a wizard.

It was nearly midnight, and he was lying on his stomach in bed, the blankets drawn right over his head like a tent, a copy of *Witch Burning in the Fourteenth Century Was Completely Pointless — discuss.* by Bathilda Bagshot propped open against the pillow. Harry moved the tip of his eagle-feather quill down to write his essay.

The quill paused at the top of a likely-looking paragraph. Harry pushed his round glasses up the bridge of his nose, not that it mattered. Non-magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not of fire. Even if you were a real witch or wizard, burning had no effect whatsoever. The witch or wizard would perform a basic Flame-Freezing Charm, and the resulting , tickling sensation. Indeed, Wendelin the Weird enjoyed being burned so much that she allowed herself to be caught in a fire. Harry put his quill between his teeth and reached underneath his pillow for his ink bottle and a roll of parchment. Slipping the quill into it, and began to write, pausing every now and then to listen, because if any of the Dursleys heard the scratching, they would find himself locked in the cupboard under the stairs for the rest of the summer.

The Dursley family of number four, Privet Drive, was the reason that Harry never enjoyed his summer holidays. Unloving relatives. They were Muggles, and they had a very medieval attitude toward magic. Harry's dead parents, who had died on the Dursleys' roof. For years, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had hoped that if they kept Harry as downtrodden as possible, the fury, they had been unsuccessful. These days they lived in terror of anyone finding out that Harry had spent most of his summer holidays at home. The most they could do, however, was to lock away Harry's spellbooks, wand, cauldron, and broomstick at the start of the school year. This separation from his spellbooks had been a real problem for Harry, because his teachers at Hogwarts had given him a lot of trouble. One about shrinking potions, was for Harry's least favorite teacher, Professor Snape, who would be delighted to have him. He re seized his chance in the first week of the holidays. While Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley had gone out into the street, shouting in very loud voices, so that the rest of the street would notice it too), Harry had crept downstairs, picked the lock on the door to his bedroom, and hidden them in his bedroom. As long as he didn't leave spots of ink on the sheets, the Dursleys need never know that he had his books. Harry was particularly keen to avoid trouble with his aunt and uncle at the moment, as they were already in an especially bad mood. He had been ill from a fellow wizard one week into the school vacation.

Ron Weasley, who was one of Harry's best friends at Hogwarts, came from a whole family of wizards. This meant that he was not a Muggle. Before, most unluckily, it had been Uncle Vernon who had answered the call.

"Vernon Dursley speaking."

Harry, who happened to be in the room at the time, froze as he heard Ron's voice answer.

"HELLO? HELLO? CAN YOU HEAR ME? I — WANT — TO — TALK — TO — HARRY — POTTER!"

Ron was yelling so loudly that Uncle Vernon jumped and held the receiver a foot away from his ear, staring at it with

"WHO IS THIS?" he roared in the direction of the mouthpiece. "WHO ARE YOU?"

"RON — WEASLEY!" Ron bellowed back, as though he and Uncle Vernon were speaking from opposite ends of a football field.

Uncle Vernon's small eyes swiveled around to Harry, who was rooted to the spot.

"THERE IS NO HARRY POTTER HERE!" he roared, now holding the receiver at arm's

NTACT ME AGAIN! DON'T YOU COME NEAR MY FAMILY!"

And he threw the receiver back onto the telephone as if

The fight that had followed had been one of the worst ever.

"HOW DARE YOU GIVE THIS NUMBER TO PEOPLE LIKE — PE

Ron obviously realized that he'd gotten Harry into trouble, because he hadn't called again. Harry's other best friend f

arry suspected that Ron had warned Hermione not to call, which was a pity, because Hermione, the cleverest witch in

a telephone, and would probably have had enough sense not to say that she went to Hogwarts.

So Harry had had no word from any of his wizarding friends for five long weeks, and this summer was turning out to be no improvement — after swearing that he wouldn't use her to send letters to any of his friends, Harry had been allowed to use Hedwig because of the racket Hedwig made if she was locked in her cage all the time.

Harry finished writing about Wendelin the Weird and paused to listen again. The silence in the dark house was broken by a faint, distant sound. It must be very late, Harry thought. His eyes were itching with tiredness. Perhaps he'd finish this essay tomorrow.

He replaced the top of the ink bottle; pulled an old pillowcase from under his bed; put the flashlight, A History of Ma

hid the lot under a loose floorboard under his bed. Then he stood up, stretched, and checked the time on the luminous

It was one o'clock in the morning. Harry's stomach gave a funny jolt. He had been thirteen years old, without realizing it.

Yet another unusual thing about Harry was how little he looked forward to his birthdays. He had never received a birthday card, and he had never had a birthday party. He had even forgotten his last two birthdays, and he had no reason to suppose they would remember this one.

Harry walked across the dark room, past Hedwig's large, empty cage, to the open window. He leaned on the sill, the anklets. Hedwig had been absent for two nights now. Harry wasn't worried about her: She'd been gone this long before in this house who didn't flinch at the sight of him.

Harry, though still rather small and skinny for his age, had grown a few inches over the last year. His jet-black hair, however he did to it. The eyes behind his glasses were bright green, and on his forehead, clearly visible through his hair, was a lightning-bolt-shaped scar. Of all the unusual things about Harry, this scar was the most extraordinary of all. It was not, as the Dursleys had pretended, because Lily and James Potter had not died in a car crash. They had been murdered, murdered by

Harry had escaped from the same attack with nothing more than a scar on his forehead, where Voldemort's curse, in the end, Voldemort had fled. . . .

But Harry had come face-to-face with him at Hogwarts. Remembering their last meeting as he stood at the dark window on his ninth birthday.

He scanned the starry sky for a sign of Hedwig, perhaps soaring back to him with a dead mouse dangling from her beak. A few seconds before Harry realized what he was seeing.

Silhouetted against the golden moon, and growing larger every moment, was a large, strangely lopsided creature, and he was making it sink lower and lower. For a split second he hesitated, his hand on the window latch, wondering whether to slam the window shut. The street lamps of Privet Drive, and Harry, realizing what it was, leapt aside.

Through the window soared three owls, two of them holding up the third, which appeared to be unconscious. They landed on the large and gray, keeled right over and lay motionless. There was a large package tied to its legs.

Harry recognized the unconscious owl at once — his name was Errol, and he belonged to the Weasley family. Harry untied the parcel, and then carried Errol to Hedwig's cage. Errol opened one bleary eye, gave a feeble hoot of thanks, and began to flap.

Harry turned back to the remaining owls. One of them, the large snowy female, was his own Hedwig. She, too, was carrying a package. Hedwig gave Harry an affectionate nip with her beak as he removed her burden, then flew across the room to join Errol.

Harry didn't recognize the third owl, a handsome tawny one, but he knew at once where it had come from, because it had the Hogwarts crest. When Harry relieved this owl of its burden, it ruffled its feathers importantly, stretched its wings, and landed on Harry's bed.

Harry sat down on his bed and grabbed Errol's package, ripped off the brown paper, and discovered a present wrapped in silver paper. He opened the envelope. Two pieces of paper fell out — a letter and a newspaper clipping.

The clipping had clearly come out of the wizarding newspaper, the Daily Prophet, because the people in the black-and-white photograph looked like it, and read:

MINISTRY OF MAGIC EMPLOYEE SCOOPS GRAND PRIZE

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, has won the annual Daily Prophet Drawing Competition. A delighted Mr. Weasley told the Daily Prophet, "We will be spending the gold on a summer holiday in Egypt, where our children are already saving Bank."

The Weasley family will be spending a month in Egypt, returning for the start of the new school year at Hogwarts, where Harry scanned the moving photograph, and a grin spread across his face as he saw all nine of the Weasleys waving from the picture.

Mrs. Weasley; tall, balding Mr. Weasley; six sons; and one daughter, all (though the black-and-white picture didn't show them all) — there was Ron, tall and gangling, with his pet rat, Scabbers, on his shoulder and his arm around his little sister, Ginny.

Harry couldn't think of anyone who deserved to win a large pile of gold more than the Weasleys, who were very nice people.

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday!

Look, I'm really sorry about that telephone call. I hope the Muggles didn't give you a hard time. I asked Dad, and he really was right. It's amazing here in Egypt. Bill's taken us around all the tombs and you wouldn't believe the curses those old Egyptians put on things. One. There were all these mutant skeletons in there, of Muggles who'd broken in and grown extra heads and stuff.

I couldn't believe it when Dad won the Daily Prophet Draw. Seven hundred Galleons! Most of it's gone on this trip, but it was a good win. Harry remembered only too well the occasion when Ron's old wand had snapped. It had happened when the car they were in had crashed on the school grounds.

We'll be back about a week before term starts and we'll be going up to London to get my wand and our new books. And don't let the Muggles get you down!

Try and come to London,

P.S. Percy's Head Boy. He got the letter last week.

Harry glanced back at the photograph. Percy, who was in his seventh and final year at Hogwarts, was looking particularly smart in his uniform, with his untidy hair, his horn-rimmed glasses flashing in the Egyptian sun.

Harry now turned to his present and unwrapped it. Inside was what looked like a miniature glass spinning top. There was a note attached to it. Harry — this is a Pocket Sneakoscope. If there's someone untrustworthy around, it's supposed to light up and spin. Errol told me it was, because it kept lighting up at dinner last night. But he didn't realize Fred and George had put beetles in his soup.

Bye —

Harry put the Pocket Sneakoscope on his bedside table, where it stood quite still, balanced on its point, reflecting the light. A few seconds, then picked up the parcel Hedwig had brought.

Inside this, too, there was a wrapped present, a card, and a letter, this time from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

Ron wrote to me and told me about his phone call to your Uncle Vernon. I do hope you're all right.

I'm on holiday in France at the moment and I didn't know how I was going to send this to you — what if they'd opened it? I thought I'd better make sure you got something for your birthday for a change. I bought your present by owl-order; there was an advertisement for it (it's so good to keep up with what's going on in the wizarding world). Did you see that picture of Ron and his family a while ago? The ancient Egyptian wizards were fascinating.

There's some interesting local history of witchcraft here, too. I've rewritten my whole History of Magic essay to include it — it's two rolls of parchment more than Professor Binns asked for.

Ron says he's going to be in London in the last week of the holidays. Can you make it? Will your aunt and uncle let you go?

arts Express on September first!

Love from

P.S. Ron says Percy's Head Boy. I'll bet Percy's really pleased. Ron doesn't seem too happy about it.

Harry laughed as he put Hermione's letter aside and picked up her present. It was very heavy. Knowing Hermione, he knew it was something special, but it wasn't. His heart gave a huge bound as he ripped back the paper and saw a sleek black leather case, with silver clasps. "Wow, Hermione!" Harry whispered, unzipping the case to look inside.

There was a large jar of Fleetwood's High-Finish Handle Polish, a pair of gleaming silver Tail-Twig Clippers, a tiny brass dobook of Do-It-Yourself Broomcare.

Apart from his friends, the thing that Harry missed most about Hogwarts was Quidditch, the most popular sport in the wizarding world. Harry happened to be a very good Quidditch player; he had been the youngest person in a century to become a professional player. One of his prized possessions was his Nimbus Two Thousand racing broom.

Harry put the leather case aside and picked up his last parcel. He recognized the untidy scrawl on the brown paper as the top layer of paper and glimpsed something green and leathery, but before he could unwrap it properly, the parcel — as though it had jaws.

Harry froze. He knew that Hagrid would never send him anything dangerous on purpose, but then, Hagrid didn't have to befriend giant spiders, buy vicious, three-headed dogs from men in pubs, and sneak illegal dragon eggs into his class. Harry poked the parcel nervously. It snapped loudly again. Harry reached for the lamp on his bedside table, gripped it, and switched it off. Then he seized the rest of the wrapping paper in his other hand and pulled.

And out fell — a book. Harry just had time to register its handsome green cover, emblazoned with the golden title *The* cuttled sideways along the bed like some weird crab.

"Uh-oh," Harry muttered.

The book toppled off the bed with a loud clunk and shuffled rapidly across the room. Harry followed it stealthily. The Dursleys were still fast asleep, Harry got down on his hands and knees and reached toward it.

"Ouch!"

The book snapped shut on his hand and then flapped past him, still scuttling on its covers. Harry scrambled around, gave a loud, sleepy grunt in the room next door.

Hedwig and Errol watched interestedly as Harry clamped the struggling book tightly in his arms, hurried to his chest and it. The Monster Book shuddered angrily, but could no longer flap and snap, so Harry threw it down on the bed and

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday!

Think you might find this useful for next year. Won't say no more here. Tell you when I see you.

Hope the Muggles are treating you right.

All the best,

Hagrid

It struck Harry as ominous that Hagrid thought a biting book would come in useful, but he put Hagrid's card up next to the letter from Hogwarts.

Noticing that it was rather thicker than usual, Harry slit open the envelope, pulled out the first page of parchment with the words:

Dear Mr. Potter,

Please note that

k. Third years are permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade on certain weekends. Please give the enclosed permission

A list of books for next year is enclosed.

Yours sincerely,

Deputy Headmistress

Harry pulled out the Hogsmeade permission form and looked at it, no longer grinning. It would be wonderful to visit the castle, and he had never set foot there. But how on earth was he going to persuade Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia to sign it?

He looked over at the alarm clock. It was now two o'clock in the morning.

Deciding that he'd worry about the Hogsmeade form when he woke up, Harry got back into bed and reached up to count the days left until his return to Hogwarts. Then he took off his glasses and lay down, eyes open, facing his three birth

Extremely unusual though he was, at that moment Harry Potter felt just like everyone else — glad, for the first time in

CHAPTER THREE

THE KNIGHT BUS

Harry was several streets away before he collapsed onto a low wall in Magnolia Crescent, panting from the effort of pushing through the crowd, listening to the frantic thumping of his heart.

But after ten minutes alone in the dark street, a new emotion overtook him: panic. Whichever way he looked at it, he was trapped in the dark Muggle world, with absolutely nowhere to go. And the worst of it was, he had just done serious magic, which had broken the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry so badly, he was surprised the Ministry of Magic representatives hadn't already come. Harry shivered and looked up and down Magnolia Crescent. What was going to happen to him? Would he be arrested for his part in the attack on Ron and Hermione, and his heart sank even lower. Harry was sure that, criminal or not, Ron and Hermione would v

, he had no means of contacting them.

He didn't have any Muggle money, either. There was a little wizard gold in the money bag at the bottom of his trunk, in a vault at Gringotts Wizarding Bank in London. He'd never be able to drag his trunk all the way to London. Unless . . . He looked down at his wand, which he was still clutching in his hand. If he was already expelled (his heart was now thumping wildly) the Invisibility Cloak he had inherited from his father — what if he bewitched the trunk to make it feather-light, tied it to London? Then he could get the rest of his money out of his vault and . . . begin his life as an outcast. It was a horrible thought, but he'd find himself trying to explain to Muggle police why he was out in the dead of night with a trunkful of spellbooks. Harry opened his trunk again and pushed the contents aside, looking for the Invisibility Cloak — but before he had found it, he heard a faint e.

A funny prickling on the back of his neck had made Harry feel he was being watched, but the street appeared to be empty. He bent over his trunk again, but almost immediately stood up once more, his hand clenched on his wand. He had seen a narrow gap between the garage and the fence behind him. Harry squinted at the black alleyway. If only it would move. He saw a se.

"Lumos," Harry muttered, and a light appeared at the end of his wand, almost dazzling him. He held it high over his head; the garage door gleamed, and between them Harry saw, quite distinctly, the hulking outline of something very big, very dark. Harry stepped backward. His legs hit his trunk and he tripped. His wand flew out of his hand as he flung out an arm to catch himself. There was a deafening BANG, and Harry threw up his hands to shield his eyes against a sudden blinding light — a bright, searing light. With a yell, he rolled back onto the pavement, just in time. A second later, a gigantic pair of wheels and headlights screeched to a halt. They belonged, as Harry saw when he raised his head, to a triple-decker, violently purple bus, which had appeared out of the darkness. t Bus.

For a split second, Harry wondered if he had been knocked silly by his fall. Then a conductor in a purple uniform leapt from the bus. "Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. Just stick out your wand hand, sir, and I am Stan Shunpike, and I will be your conductor this eve —"

The conductor stopped abruptly. He had just caught sight of Harry, who was still sitting on the ground. Harry snatched up his wand. That Stan Shunpike was only a few years older than he was, eighteen or nineteen at most, with large, protruding ears and a wide grin. "What were you doin' down there?" said Stan, dropping his professional manner.

"Fell over," said Harry.

"Choo fall over for?" sniggered Stan.

"I didn't do it on purpose," said Harry, annoyed. One of the knees in his jeans was torn, and the hand he had thrown out to catch himself had fallen over and turned around quickly to stare at the alleyway between the garage and fence. The Knight Bus's headlights were still shining on him.

"Choo lookin' at?" said Stan.

"There was a big black thing," said Harry, pointing uncertainly into the gap. "Like a dog . . . but massive . . ."

He looked around at Stan, whose mouth was slightly open. With a feeling of unease, Harry saw Stan's eyes move to the gap between the garage and the fence.

"Woss that on your 'ead?" said Stan abruptly.

"Nothing," said Harry quickly, flattening his hair over his scar. If the Ministry of Magic was looking for him, he didn't want to be seen.

"Woss your name?" Stan persisted.

"Neville Longbottom," said Harry, saying the first name that came into his head. "So — so this bus," he went on quickly.

"Yep," said Stan proudly, "anywhere you like, long's it's on land. Can't do nuffink underwater. 'Ere," he said, looking suddenly at Harry's wand. "Your wand 'and, dincha?"

"Yes," said Harry quickly. "Listen, how much would it be to get to London?"

"Eleven Sickles," said Stan, "but for fifteen you get 'ot chocolate, and for fifteen you get an 'ot water bottle an' a toofbrush. You choose."

Harry rummaged once more in his trunk, extracted his money bag, and shoved some silver into Stan's hand. He and Stan stepped onto the steps of the bus.

There were no seats; instead, half a dozen brass bedsteads stood beside the curtained windows. Candles were burning in scones on the walls.

A tiny wizard in a nightcap at the rear of the bus muttered, "Not now, thanks, I'm pickling some slugs" and rolled over to the other side.

"You 'ave this one," Stan whispered, shoving Harry's trunk under the bed right behind the driver, who was sitting in a large armchair. "This is Ernie Prang. This is Neville Longbottom, Ern."

Ernie Prang, an elderly wizard wearing very thick glasses, nodded to Harry, who nervously flattened his bangs again.

"Take 'er away, Ern," said Stan, sitting down in the armchair next to Ernie's.

There was another tremendous BANG, and the next moment Harry found himself flat on his back, thrown backward by the force of the explosion. He looked out of the dark window and saw that they were now bowling along a completely different street. Stan was watching Harry's face.

"This is where we was before you flagged us down," he said. "Where are we, Ern? Somewhere in Wales?"

"Ar," said Ernie.

"How come the Muggles don't hear the bus?" said Harry.

"Them!" said Stan contemptuously. "Don't listen properly, do they? Don't look properly either. Never notice nuffink, that's the Muggle way."

"Best go wake up Madam Marsh, Stan," said Ern. "We'll be in Abergavenny in a minute."

Stan passed Harry's bed and disappeared up a narrow wooden staircase. Harry was still looking out of the window, feeling a little better now. The Knight Bus kept mounting the pavement, but it didn't hit anything; lines of lampposts, and a few trees, and back into position once it had passed.

Stan came back downstairs, followed by a faintly green witch wrapped in a traveling cloak.

in dressing gowns and slippers descended from the upper floors to leave the bus. They all looked very pleased to go. Finally, Harry was the only passenger left.

"Right then, Neville," said Stan, clapping his hands, "whereabouts in London?"

"Diagon Alley," said Harry.

"Righto," said Stan. "'Old tight, then . . ."

BANG!

They were thundering along Charing Cross Road. Harry sat up and watched buildings and benches squeezing themselves together. He would lie low for a couple of hours, go to Gringotts the moment it opened, then set off — where, he didn't know. Ern slammed on the brakes and the Knight Bus skidded to a halt in front of a small and shabby-looking pub, the Leaky Cauldron.

"Thanks," Harry said to Ern.

He jumped down the steps and helped Stan lower his trunk and Hedwig's cage onto the pavement.

"Well," said Harry. "'Bye then!"

But Stan wasn't paying attention. Still standing in the doorway to the bus, he was goggling at the shadowy entrance to the pub.

"There you are, Harry," said a voice.

Before Harry could turn, he felt a hand on his shoulder. At the same time, Stan shouted, "Blimey! Ern, come 'ere! Come 'ere!"

Harry looked up at the owner of the hand on his shoulder and felt a bucketful of ice cascade into his stomach — he knew it was Stan.

Stan leapt onto the pavement beside them.

"What didja call Neville, Minister?" he said excitedly.

Fudge, a portly little man in a long, pinstriped cloak, looked cold and exhausted.

"Neville?" he repeated, frowning. "This is Harry Potter."

"I knew it!" Stan shouted gleefully. "Ern! Ern! Guess 'oo Neville is, Ern! 'E's 'Arry Potter! I can see 'is scar!"

"Yes," said Fudge testily, "well, I'm very glad the Knight Bus picked Harry up, but he and I need to step inside the Leaky Cauldron."

Fudge increased the pressure on Harry's shoulder, and Harry found himself being steered inside the pub. A stooping, bearded man in a nightgown and apron beckoned them.

It was Tom, the wizened, toothless landlord.

"You've got him, Minister!" said Tom. "Will you be wanting anything? Beer? Brandy?"

"Perhaps a pot of tea," said Fudge, who still hadn't let go of Harry.

There was a loud scraping and puffing from behind them, and Stan and Ern appeared, carrying Harry's trunk and Hedwig's cage.

"Ow come you di'n't tell us 'oo you are, eh, Neville?" said Stan, beaming at Harry, while Ern's owlish face peered into Harry's.

"And a private parlor, please, Tom," said Fudge pointedly.

"'Bye," Harry said miserably to Stan and Ern as Tom beckoned Fudge toward the passage that led from the bar.

"'Bye, Neville!" called Stan.

Fudge marched Harry along the narrow passage after Tom's lantern, and then into a small parlor. Tom clicked his fingers, and the door closed behind them.

"Sit down, Harry," said Fudge, indicating a chair by the fire.

Harry sat down, feeling goose bumps rising up his arms despite the glow of the fire. Fudge took off his pinstriped cloak and a dark green suit and sat down opposite Harry.

"I am Cornelius Fudge, Harry. The Minister of Magic."

Harry already knew this, of course; he had seen Fudge once before, but as he had been wearing his father's Invisibility Cloak.

Tom the innkeeper reappeared, wearing an apron over his nightshirt and bearing a tray of tea and crumpets. He placed the tray on the table and closed the door behind him.

"Well, Harry," said Fudge, pouring out tea, "you've had us all in a right flap, I don't mind telling you. Running away from the Ministry . . . but you're safe, and that's what matters."

Fudge buttered himself a crumpet and pushed the plate toward Harry.

"Eat, Harry, you look dead on your feet. Now then . . . You will be pleased to hear that we have dealt with the unfortunate accident. The accidental Magic Reversal Squad were dispatched to Privet Drive a few hours ago. Miss Dursley has been punctured and is recovering. No harm done at all. So that's that, and no harm done."

Fudge smiled at Harry over the rim of his teacup, rather like an uncle surveying a favorite nephew. Harry, who could not say anything to say, and closed it again.

"Ah, you're worrying about the reaction of your aunt and uncle?" said Fudge. "Well, I won't deny that they are extremely worried. But as long as you stay at Hogwarts for the Christmas and Easter holidays."

Harry unstuck his throat.

"I always stay at Hogwarts for the Christmas and Easter holidays," he said, "and I don't ever want to go back to Privet Drive."

"Now, now, I'm sure you'll feel differently once you've calmed down," said Fudge in a worried tone. "They are your family, after all. Very deep down."

It didn't occur to Harry to put Fudge right. He was still waiting to hear what was going to happen to him now.

"So all that remains," said Fudge, now buttering himself a second crumpet, "is to decide where you're going to spend the holidays. Here at the Leaky Cauldron and —"

"Hang on," blurted Harry. "What about my punishment?"

Fudge blinked.

"Punishment?"

"I broke the law!" Harry said. "The Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry!"

"Oh, my dear boy, we're not going to punish you for a little thing like that!" cried Fudge, waving his crumpled impatience for blowing up their aunts!"

But this didn't tally at all with Harry's past dealings with the Ministry of Magic.

"Last year, I got an official warning just because a house-elf smashed a pudding in my uncle's house!" he told Fudge, "arts if there was any more magic there!"

Unless Harry's eyes were deceiving him, Fudge was suddenly looking awkward.

"Circumstances change, Harry. . . . We have to take into account . . . in the present climate . . . Surely you don't want to

"Of course I don't," said Harry.

"Well then, what's all the fuss about?" laughed Fudge. "Now, have a crumpled, Harry, while I go and see if Tom's got a

Fudge strode out of the parlor and Harry stared after him. There was something extremely odd going on. Why had Fudge for what he'd done? And now Harry came to think of it, surely it wasn't usual for the Minister of Magic himself to get

Fudge came back, accompanied by Tom the innkeeper.

"Room eleven's free, Harry," said Fudge. "I think you'll be very comfortable. Just one thing, and I'm sure you'll understand all right? Keep to Diagon Alley. And you're to be back here before dark each night. Sure you'll understand. Tom will be

"Okay," said Harry slowly, "but why — ?"

"Don't want to lose you again, do we?" said Fudge with a hearty laugh. "No, no . . . best we know where you are. . . . I

Fudge cleared his throat loudly and picked up his pinstriped cloak.

"Well, I'll be off, plenty to do, you know. . . ."

"Have you had any luck with Black yet?" Harry asked.

Fudge's finger slipped on the silver fastenings of his cloak.

"What's that? Oh, you've heard — well, no, not yet, but it's only a matter of time. The Azkaban guards have never yet Fudge shuddered slightly.

"So, I'll say good-bye."

He held out his hand and Harry, shaking it, had a sudden idea.

"Er — Minister? Can I ask you something?"

"Certainly," said Fudge with a smile.

"Well, third years at Hogwarts are allowed to visit Hogsmeade, but my aunt and uncle didn't sign the permission form Fudge was looking uncomfortable.

"Ah," he said. "No, no, I'm very sorry, Harry, but as I'm not your parent or guardian —"

"But you're the Minister of Magic," said Harry eagerly. "If you gave me permission —"

"No, I'm sorry, Harry, but rules are rules," said Fudge flatly. "Perhaps you'll be able to visit Hogsmeade next year. In fact I'll be off. Enjoy your stay, Harry."

And with a last smile and shake of Harry's hand, Fudge left the room. Tom now moved forward, beaming at Harry.

"If you'll follow me, Mr. Potter," he said, "I've already taken your things up. . . ."

Harry followed Tom up a handsome wooden staircase to a door with a brass number eleven on it, which Tom unlocked. Inside was a very comfortable-looking bed, some highly polished oak furniture, a cheerfully crackling fire and, perched on

"Hedwig!" Harry gasped.

The snowy owl clicked her beak and fluttered down onto Harry's arm.

"Very smart owl you've got there," chuckled Tom. "Arrived about five minutes after you did. If there's anything you need He gave another bow and left.

Harry sat on his bed for a long time, absentmindedly stroking Hedwig. The sky outside the window was changing rapidly to pink shot with gold. Harry could hardly believe that he'd left Privet Drive only a few hours ago, that he wasn't expecting weeks.

"It's been a very weird night, Hedwig," he yawned.

And without even removing his glasses, he slumped back onto his pillows and fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

AUNT MARGE'S BIG MISTAKE

Harry went down to breakfast the next morning to find the three Dursleys already sitting around the kitchen table. The summer present for Dudley, who had been complaining loudly about the long walk between the fridge and the television, his piggy little eyes fixed on the screen and his five chins wobbling as he ate continually.

Harry sat down between Dudley and Uncle Vernon, a large, beefy man with very little neck and a lot of mustache. Family sign that they had noticed Harry enter the room, but Harry was far too used to this to care. He helped himself to a portion, who was halfway through a report on an escaped convict:

". . . The public is warned that Black is armed and extremely dangerous. A special hot line has been set up, and any s

"No need to tell us he's no good," snorted Uncle Vernon, staring over the top of his newspaper at the prisoner. "Look

He shot a nasty look sideways at Harry, whose untidy hair had always been a source of great annoyance to Uncle Vernon. He was surrounded by a matted, elbow-length tangle, Harry felt very well groomed indeed.

The reporter had reappeared.

"The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries will announce today —"

"Hang on!" barked Uncle Vernon, staring furiously at the reporter. "You didn't tell us where that maniac's escaped from now!"

Aunt Petunia, who was bony and horse-faced, whipped around and peered intently out of the kitchen window. Harry's number. She was the nosiest woman in the world and spent most of her life spying on the boring, law-abiding neighbor.

"When will they learn," said Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his large purple fist, "that hanging's the only way to deal with them!"

"Very true," said Aunt Petunia, who was still squinting into next door's runner beans.

Uncle Vernon drained his teacup, glanced at his watch, and added, "I'd better be off in a minute, Petunia. Marge's train is late." Harry, whose thoughts had been upstairs with the Broomstick Servicing Kit, was brought back to earth with an unpleasant reminder.

"Aunt Marge?" he blurted out. "She — she's not coming here, is she?"

Aunt Marge was Uncle Vernon's sister. Even though she was not a blood relative of Harry's (whose mother had been a Muggle), she was as much a part of his life as his father. Aunt Marge lived in the country, in a house with a large garden, where she bred bulldogs. She didn't often stay at home, but each of her visits stood out horribly vividly in Harry's mind.

At Dudley's fifth birthday party, Aunt Marge had whacked Harry around the shins with her walking stick to stop him from running. She had turned up at Christmas with a computerized robot for Dudley and a box of dog biscuits for Harry. On her last visit, she had trodden on the tail of her favorite dog. Ripper had chased Harry out into the garden and up a tree, and Aunt Marge had been there to see his incident still brought tears of laughter to Dudley's eyes.

"Marge'll be here for a week," Uncle Vernon snarled, "and while we're on the subject" — he pointed a fat finger threateningly — "I go and collect her."

Dudley smirked and withdrew his gaze from the television. Watching Harry being bullied by Uncle Vernon was Dudley's favorite pastime. "Firstly," growled Uncle Vernon, "you'll keep a civil tongue in your head when you're talking to Marge."

"All right," said Harry bitterly, "if she does when she's talking to me."

"Secondly," said Uncle Vernon, acting as though he had not heard Harry's reply, "as Marge doesn't know anything about the wizarding world, you behave yourself, got me?"

"I will if she does," said Harry through gritted teeth.

"And thirdly," said Uncle Vernon, his mean little eyes now slits in his great purple face, "we've told Marge you attend Hogwarts. What?" Harry yelled.

"And you'll be sticking to that story, boy, or there'll be trouble," spat Uncle Vernon.

Harry sat there, white-faced and furious, staring at Uncle Vernon, hardly able to believe it. Aunt Marge coming for a visit was something he had never had, including that pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks.

"Well, Petunia," said Uncle Vernon, getting heavily to his feet, "I'll be off to the station, then. Want to come along for the ride?"

"No," said Dudley, whose attention had returned to the television now that Uncle Vernon had finished threatening Harry.

"Daddy's got to make himself smart for his auntie," said Aunt Petunia, smoothing Dudley's thick blond hair. "Mummy's got to go to work." Uncle Vernon clapped Dudley on his porky shoulder.

"See you in a bit, then," he said, and he left the kitchen.

Harry, who had been sitting in a kind of horrified trance, had a sudden idea. Abandoning his toast, he got quickly to his feet. Uncle Vernon was pulling on his car coat.

"I'm not taking you," he snarled as he turned to see Harry watching him.

"Like I wanted to come," said Harry coldly. "I want to ask you something."

Uncle Vernon eyed him suspiciously.

"Third years at Hog — at my school are allowed to visit the village sometimes," said Harry.

"So?" snapped Uncle Vernon, taking his car keys from a hook next to the door.

"I need you to sign the permission form," said Harry in a rush.

"And why should I do that?" sneered Uncle Vernon.

"Well," said Harry, choosing his words carefully, "it'll be hard work, pretending to Aunt Marge I go to that St. Whatsits."

"St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys!" bellowed Uncle Vernon, and Harry was pleased to hear a definite note of anger.

"Exactly," said Harry, looking calmly up into Uncle Vernon's large, purple face. "It's a lot to remember. I'll have to make sure I don't forget anything." "You'll get the stuffing knocked out of you, won't you?" roared Uncle Vernon, advancing on Harry with his fist raised.

"Knocking the stuffing out of me won't make Aunt Marge forget what I could tell her," he said grimly. Uncle Vernon stopped, his fist still raised, his face an ugly puce.

"But if you sign my permission form," Harry went on quickly, "I swear I'll remember where I'm supposed to go to school." Harry could tell that Uncle Vernon was thinking it over, even if his teeth were bared and a vein was throbbing in his temple.

"Right," he snapped finally. "I shall monitor your behavior carefully during Marge's visit. If, at the end of it, you've told me anything, I'll be pleased to hear it." He wheeled around, pulled open the front door, and slammed it so hard that one of the little panes of glass at the top fell out. Harry didn't return to the kitchen. He went back upstairs to his bedroom. If he was going to act like a real Muggle, he had to look the part. He resents and his birthday cards and hid them under the loose floorboard with his homework. Then he went to Hedwig's cage, heads under their wings. Harry sighed, then poked them both awake.

"Hedwig," he said gloomily, "you're going to have to clear off for a week. Go with Errol. Ron'll look after you. I'll write home." Hedwig's large amber eyes were reproachful — "it's not my fault. It's the only way I'll be allowed to visit Hogsmeade." Ten minutes later, Errol and Hedwig (who had a note to Ron bound to her leg) soared out of the window and out of sight, the way inside the wardrobe.

But Harry didn't have long to brood. In next to no time, Aunt Petunia was shrieking up the stairs for Harry to come down. "Do something about your hair!" Aunt Petunia snapped as he reached the hall.

Harry couldn't see the point of trying to make his hair lie flat. Aunt Marge loved criticizing him, so the untidier he looked, the more she liked him. All too soon, there was a crunch of gravel outside as Uncle Vernon's car pulled back into the driveway, then the clunk of the door.

"Get the door!" Aunt Petunia hissed at Harry.

A feeling of great gloom in his stomach, Harry pulled the door open.

On the threshold stood Aunt Marge. She was very like Uncle Vernon: large, beefy, and purple-faced, she even had a large nose. A brown suitcase, and tucked under the other was an old and evil-tempered bulldog.

"Where's my Dudders?" roared Aunt Marge. "Where's my neffy-poo?"

Dudley came waddling down the hall, his blond hair plastered flat to his fat head, a bow tie just visible under his maroon jacket. He was knocking the wind out of him, seized Dudley in a tight one-armed hug, and planted a large kiss on his cheek.

Harry knew perfectly well that Dudley only put up with Aunt Marge's hugs because he was well paid for it, and sure enough, he clutched in his fat fist.

"Petunia!" shouted Aunt Marge, striding past Harry as though he was a hat stand. Aunt Marge and Aunt Petunia kissed each other on the cheekbone.

Uncle Vernon now came in, smiling jovially as he shut the door.

"Tea, Marge?" he said. "And what will Ripper take?"

"Ripper can have some tea out of my saucer," said Aunt Marge as they all trooped into the kitchen, leaving Harry alone. Any excuse not to be with Aunt Marge was fine by him, so he began to heave the case upstairs into the spare bedroom.

By the time he got back to the kitchen, Aunt Marge had been supplied with tea and fruitcake, and Ripper was lapping up the crumbs. He pecks of tea and drool flecked her clean floor. Aunt Petunia hated animals.

"Who's looking after the other dogs, Marge?" Uncle Vernon asked.

"Oh, I've got Colonel Fubster managing them," boomed Aunt Marge. "He's retired now, good for him to have something to do with his hands from me."

Ripper began to growl again as Harry sat down. This directed Aunt Marge's attention to Harry for the first time.

"So!" she barked. "Still here, are you?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Don't you say 'yes' in that ungrateful tone," Aunt Marge growled. "It's damn good of Vernon and Petunia to keep you out of an orphanage if you'd been dumped on my doorstep."

Harry was bursting to say that he'd rather live in an orphanage than with the Dursleys, but the thought of the Hogsmeade feast held him back.

"Don't you smirk at me!" boomed Aunt Marge. "I can see you haven't improved since I last saw you. I hoped school would have done something for you. I hoped you'd shaved your mustache, and said, 'Where is it that you send him, again, Vernon?'"

"St. Brutus's," said Uncle Vernon promptly. "It's a first-rate institution for hopeless cases."

"I see," said Aunt Marge. "Do they use the cane at St. Brutus's, boy?" she barked across the table.

"Er —"

Uncle Vernon nodded curtly behind Aunt Marge's back.

"Yes," said Harry. Then, feeling he might as well do the thing properly, he added, "All the time."

"Excellent," said Aunt Marge. "I won't have this namby-pamby, wishy-washy nonsense about not hitting people who deserve it. You've got a hundred. Have you been beaten often?"

"Oh, yeah," said Harry, "loads of times."

Aunt Marge narrowed her eyes.

"I still don't like your tone, boy," she said. "If you can speak of your beatings in that casual way, they clearly aren't hitting you. Make it clear that you approve the use of extreme force in this boy's case."

Perhaps Uncle Vernon was worried that Harry might forget their bargain; in any case, he changed the subject abruptly. "Heard the news this morning, Marge? What about that escaped prisoner, eh?"

As Aunt Marge started to make herself at home, Harry caught himself thinking almost longingly of life at number four. He was glad to see the Dursleys go, glad to see Harry to stay out of their way, which Harry was only too happy to do. Aunt Marge, on the other hand, wanted Harry to improve. She delighted in comparing Harry with Dudley, and took huge pleasure in buying Dudley expensive things that Harry hadn't got a present too. She also kept throwing out dark hints about what made Harry such an unsatisfactory person.

"You mustn't blame yourself for the way the boy's turned out, Vernon," she said over lunch on the third day. "If there's anything you can do about it."

Harry tried to concentrate on his food, but his hands shook and his face was starting to burn with anger. Remembering the Dursleys, he thought, Don't rise —

Aunt Marge reached for her glass of wine.

"It's one of the basic rules of breeding," she said. "You see it all the time with dogs. If there's something wrong with the dog, you hit it. At that moment, the wineglass Aunt Marge was holding exploded in her hand. Shards of glass flew in every direction."

g.

"Marge!" squealed Aunt Petunia. "Marge, are you all right?"

"Not to worry," grunted Aunt Marge, mopping her face with her napkin. "Must have squeezed it too hard. Did the same to me once, a, I have a very firm grip . . ."

But Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were both looking at Harry suspiciously, so he decided he'd better skip dessert altogether. Outside in the hall, he leaned against the wall, breathing deeply. It had been a long time since he'd lost control and miscalculated. The Hog's Head form wasn't the only thing at stake — if he carried on like that, he'd be in trouble with the Ministry. Harry was still an underage wizard, and he was forbidden by wizard law to do magic outside school. His record wasn't perfect, but nothing that had stated quite clearly that if the Ministry got wind of any more magic in Privet Drive, Harry would face a charge. He heard the Dursleys leaving the table and hurried upstairs out of the way.

Harry got through the next three days by forcing himself to think about his Handbook of Do-It-Yourself Broomcare while Aunt Marge seemed to give him a glazed look, because Aunt Marge started voicing the opinion that he was mentally subnormal. At last, at long last, the final evening of Marge's stay arrived. Aunt Petunia cooked a fancy dinner and Uncle Vernon used the soup and the salmon without a single mention of Harry's faults; during the lemon meringue pie, Uncle Vernon brought out the company; then Aunt Petunia made coffee and Uncle Vernon brought out a bottle of brandy.

"Can I tempt you, Marge?"

Aunt Marge had already had quite a lot of wine. Her huge face was very red.

"Just a small one, then," she chuckled. "A bit more than that . . . and a bit more . . . that's the ticket."

Dudley was eating his fourth slice of pie. Aunt Petunia was sipping coffee with her little finger sticking out. Harry really didn't like Uncle Vernon's angry little eyes and knew he would have to sit it out.

"Aah," said Aunt Marge, smacking her lips and putting the empty brandy glass back down. "Excellent nosh, Petunia. It's a shame to look after. . . ." She burped richly and patted her great tweed stomach. "Pardon me. But I do like to see a healthy-stomach-sized man, Dudders, like your father. Yes, I'll have a spot more brandy, Vernon. . . ."

"Now, this one here —"

She jerked her head at Harry, who felt his stomach clench. The Handbook, he thought quickly.

"This one's got a mean, runty look about him. You get that with dogs. I had Colonel Fubster drown one last year. Rattled him."

Harry was trying to remember page twelve of his book: A Charm to Cure Reluctant Reversers.

"It all comes down to blood, as I was saying the other day. Bad blood will out. Now, I'm saying nothing against your father's shovel-like one — "but your sister was a bad egg. They turn up in the best families. Then she ran off with a wastrel and a badger. Harry was staring at his plate, a funny ringing in his ears. Grasp your broom firmly by the tail, he thought. But he couldn't. He was being bored into him like one of Uncle Vernon's drills.

"This Potter," said Aunt Marge loudly, seizing the brandy bottle and splashing more into her glass and over the tablecloth. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were looking extremely tense. Dudley had even looked up from his pie to gape at his aunt.

"He — didn't work," said Uncle Vernon, with half a glance at Harry. "Unemployed."

"As I expected!" said Aunt Marge, taking a huge swig of brandy and wiping her chin on her sleeve. "A no-account, good-for-nothing."

"He was not," said Harry suddenly. The table went very quiet. Harry was shaking all over. He had never felt so angry in his life.

"MORE BRANDY!" yelled Uncle Vernon, who had gone very white. He emptied the bottle into Aunt Marge's glass. "You're a good girl."

"No, Vernon," hiccuped Aunt Marge, holding up a hand, her tiny bloodshot eyes fixed on Harry's. "Go on, boy, go on. You're a good boy."

"in a car crash (drunk, I expect) —"

"They didn't die in a car crash!" said Harry, who found himself on his feet.

"They died in a car crash, you nasty little liar, and left you to be a burden on their decent, hardworking relatives!" screamed Aunt Marge. "Ungrateful little —"

But Aunt Marge suddenly stopped speaking. For a moment, it looked as though words had failed her. She seemed to be struggling. Her great red face started to expand, her tiny eyes bulged, and her mouth stretched too tightly for speech — next second she was inflated like a monstrous balloon, her stomach bursting free of her tweed waistband, and she was floating off the walls — she was inflating like a monstrous balloon, her stomach bursting free of her tweed waistband, and she was floating off the walls —

"MARGE!" yelled Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia together as Aunt Marge's whole body began to rise off her chair towards the ceiling, with piggy eyes, and her hands and feet stuck out weirdly as she drifted up into the air, making apoplectic popping noises.

"NOOOOOOO!"

Uncle Vernon seized one of Marge's feet and tried to pull her down again, but was almost lifted from the floor himself. Aunt Petunia grabbed Uncle Vernon's leg.

Harry tore from the dining room before anyone could stop him, heading for the cupboard under the stairs. The cupboard door heaved his trunk to the front door. He sprinted upstairs and threw himself under the bed, wrenching up the loose floorboards and taking his presents. He wriggled out, seized Hedwig's empty cage, and dashed back downstairs to his trunk, just as Uncle Vernon came in. "S."

"COME BACK IN HERE!" he bellowed. "COME BACK AND PUT HER RIGHT!"

But a reckless rage had come over Harry. He kicked his trunk open, pulled out his wand, and pointed it at Uncle Vernon.

"She deserved it," Harry said, breathing very fast. "She deserved what she got. You keep away from me."

He fumbled behind him for the latch on the door.

"I'm going," Harry said. "I've had enough."

And in the next moment, he was out in the dark, quiet street, heaving his heavy trunk behind him, Hedwig's cage under his arm.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LEAKY CAULDRON

It took Harry several days to get used to his strange new freedom. Never before had he been able to get up whenever he pleased, as long as it was in Diagon Alley, and as this long cobbled street was packed with the most fascinating Wizardry to Fudge and stray back into the Muggle world.

Harry ate breakfast each morning in the Leaky Cauldron, where he liked watching the other guests: funny little wizards arguing over the latest article in *Transfiguration Today*; wild-looking warlocks; raucous dwarfs; and once, what he called the Greasy Sneeze from behind a thick woollen balaclava.

After breakfast Harry would go out into the backyard, take out his wand, tap the third brick from the left above the tunnel in the wall.

Harry spent the long sunny days exploring the shops and eating under the brightly colored umbrellas outside cafés, or else discussing the case of Sirius Black (he's back in Azkaban?). Harry didn't have to do his homework under the blankets by flashlight anymore; now he could sit in the Gryffindor Common Room, finishing all his essays with occasional help from Florean Fortescue himself, who, apart from knowing a great deal about the wizarding world, was a very half an hour.

Once Harry had refilled his money bag with gold Galleons, silver Sickles, and bronze Knuts from his vault at Gringotts, he had a lot at once. He had to keep reminding himself that he had five years to go at Hogwarts, and how it would feel to see the Sorting Hat. He was sorely tempted, too, by the perfect, moving model of the galaxy in a large glass ball, which would have been a good thing that tested Harry's resolution most appeared in his favorite shop, Quality Quidditch Supplies, a week after he'd been there. Curious to know what the crowd in the shop was staring at, Harry edged his way inside and squeezed in among the crowd to see the broom on which was mounted the most magnificent broom he had ever seen in his life.

"Just come out — prototype —" a square-jawed wizard was telling his companion.

"It's the fastest broom in the world, isn't it, Dad?" squeaked a boy younger than Harry, who was swinging off his father's shoulders.

"Irish International Side's just put in an order for seven of these beauties!" the proprietor of the shop told the crowd.

A large witch in front of Harry moved, and he was able to read the sign next to the broom:

THE FIREBOLT

This state-of-the-art racing broom sports a streamlined, superfine handle of ash, treated with a diamond-hard polish. The usually selected birch twig in the broomtail has been honed to aerodynamic perfection, giving the Firebolt unsurpassable speed. It can reach a top speed of 150 miles an hour in ten seconds and incorporates an unbreakable Braking Charm. Price on request.

Price on request . . . Harry didn't like to think how much gold the Firebolt would cost. He had never wanted anything so fast. He had bought the Firebolt on his Nimbus Two Thousand, and what was the point in emptying his Gringotts vault for the Firebolt, when he could have the Firebolt when he returned, almost every day after that, just to look at the Firebolt.

There were, however, things that Harry needed to buy. He went to the Apothecary to replenish his store of potions ingredients. For a sprain in the arm and leg, he visited Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions and bought new ones. Most important of all, he bought the new books for his two new subjects, *Care of Magical Creatures* and *Divination*.

Harry got a surprise as he looked in at the bookshop window. Instead of the usual display of gold-embossed spellbooks, he saw a display of the new book, *The Monster Book of Monsters*. Torn pages were flying everywhere as the books fought with each other, snapping aggressively.

Harry pulled his booklist out of his pocket and consulted it for the first time. The *Monster Book of Monsters* was listed first. He understood why Hagrid had said it would come in useful. He felt relieved; he had been wondering whether Hagrid was right.

As Harry entered Flourish and Blotts, the manager came hurrying toward him.

"Hogwarts?" he said abruptly. "Come to get your new books?"

"Yes," said Harry, "I need —"

"Get out of the way," said the manager impatiently, brushing Harry aside. He drew on a pair of very thick gloves, picked up the books, and went to the door of the Monster Books' cage.

"Hang on," said Harry quickly, "I've already got one of those."

"Have you?" A look of enormous relief spread over the manager's face. "Thank heavens for that. I've been bitten five times by them. A loud ripping noise rent the air; two of the Monster Books had seized a third and were pulling it apart.

"Stop it! Stop it!" cried the manager, poking the walking stick through the bars and knocking the books apart. "I'm never going to see the worst when we bought two hundred copies of the *Invisible Book of Invisibility* — cost a fortune, and we never saw it. You'll never see it with you?"

"Yes," said Harry, looking down his booklist, "I need *Unfogging the Future* by Cassandra Vablatsky."

"Ah, starting *Divination*, are you?" said the manager, stripping off his gloves and leading Harry into the back of the shop. A small table was stacked with volumes such as *Predicting the Unpredictable: Insulate Yourself Against Shocks and Broken Bones*.

"Here you are," said the manager, who had climbed a set of steps to take down a thick, black-bound book. "Unfogging the Future — palmistry, crystal balls, bird entrails —"

But Harry wasn't listening. His eyes had fallen on another book, which was among a display on a small table: *Death and the Dementors*.

"Oh, I wouldn't read that if I were you," said the manager lightly, looking to see what Harry was staring at. "You'll start seeing things."

yone to death."

But Harry continued to stare at the front cover of the book; it showed a black dog large as a bear, with gleaming eyes. The manager pressed Unfogging the Future into Harry's hands.

"Anything else?" he said.

"Yes," said Harry, tearing his eyes away from the dog's and dazedly consulting his booklist. "Er — I need Intermediate." Harry emerged from Flourish and Blotts ten minutes later with his new books under his arms and made his way back into several people.

He tramped up the stairs to his room, went inside, and tipped his books onto his bed. Somebody had been in to tidy up the buses rolling by in the unseen Muggle street behind him and the sound of the invisible crowd below in Diagon Alley. "It can't have been a death omen," he told his reflection defiantly. "I was panicking when I saw that thing in Magnolia." He raised his hand automatically and tried to make his hair lie flat.

"You're fighting a losing battle there, dear," said his mirror in a wheezy voice.

As the days slipped by, Harry started looking wherever he went for a sign of Ron or Hermione. Plenty of Hogwarts students were so near. Harry met Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, his fellow Gryffindors, in Quality Quidditch Supplies, where they were Longbottom, a round-faced, forgetful boy, outside Flourish and Blotts. Harry didn't stop to chat; Neville appeared to be a formidable-looking grandmother. Harry hoped she never found out that he'd pretended to be Neville while on the run. Harry woke on the last day of the holidays, thinking that he would at least meet Ron and Hermione tomorrow, on the Firebolt, and was just wondering where he'd have lunch, when someone yelled his name and he turned.

"Harry! HARRY!"

They were there, both of them, sitting outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor — Ron looking incredibly freckly,

"Finally!" said Ron, grinning at Harry as he sat down. "We went to the Leaky Cauldron, but they said you'd left, and we

"I got all my school stuff last week," Harry explained. "And how come you knew I'm staying at the Leaky Cauldron?"

"Dad," said Ron simply.

Mr. Weasley, who worked at the Ministry of Magic, would of course have heard the whole story of what had happened.

"Did you really blow up your aunt, Harry?" said Hermione in a very serious voice.

"I didn't mean to," said Harry, while Ron roared with laughter. "I just — lost control."

"It's not funny, Ron," said Hermione sharply. "Honestly, I'm amazed Harry wasn't expelled."

"So am I," admitted Harry. "Forget expelled, I thought I was going to be arrested." He looked at Ron. "Your dad doesn't

"Probably 'cause it's you, isn't it?" shrugged Ron, still chuckling. "Famous Harry Potter and all that. I'd hate to see what they'd have to dig me up first, because Mum would've killed me. Anyway, you can ask Dad yourself this evening. We're getting the King's Cross with us tomorrow! Hermione's there as well!"

Hermione nodded, beaming. "Mum and Dad dropped me off this morning with all my Hogwarts things."

"Excellent!" said Harry happily. "So, have you got all your new books and stuff?"

"Look at this," said Ron, pulling a long thin box out of a bag and opening it. "Brand-new wand. Fourteen inches, willow, s —" He pointed at a large bag under his chair. "What about those Monster Books, eh? The assistant nearly cried when I

"What's all that, Hermione?" Harry asked, pointing at not one but three bulging bags in the chair next to her.

"Well, I'm taking more new subjects than you, aren't I?" said Hermione. "Those are my books for Arithmancy, Care of Magical Creatures, and —"

"What are you doing Muggle Studies for?" said Ron, rolling his eyes at Harry. "You're Muggle-born! Your mum and dad

"But it'll be fascinating to study them from the Wizarding point of view," said Hermione earnestly.

"Are you planning to eat or sleep at all this year, Hermione?" asked Harry, while Ron sniggered. Hermione ignored them.

"I've still got ten Galleons," she said, checking her purse. "It's my birthday in September, and Mum and Dad gave me some

"How about a nice book?" said Ron innocently.

"No, I don't think so," said Hermione composedly. "I really want an owl. I mean, Harry's got Hedwig and you've got Errol."

"I haven't," said Ron. "Errol's a family owl. All I've got is Scabbers." He pulled his pet rat out of his pocket. "And I want to sit at the table in front of them. I don't think Egypt agreed with him."

Scabbers was looking thinner than usual, and there was a definite droop to his whiskers.

"There's a magical creature shop just over there," said Harry, who knew Diagon Alley very well by now. "You could see if you want an owl."

So they paid for their ice cream and crossed the street to the Magical Menagerie.

There wasn't much room inside. Every inch of wall was hidden by cages. It was smelly and very noisy because the owls were hissing. The witch behind the counter was already advising a wizard on the care of double-ended newts, so Harry, Ron, and Hermione went to the back. A pair of enormous purple toads sat gulping wetly and feasting on dead blowflies. A gigantic tortoise with a jewel-encrusted shell had its nails oozing slowly up the side of their glass tank, and a fat white rabbit kept changing into a silk top hat and back again. Every color, a noisy cage of ravens, a basket of funny custard-colored furballs that were humming loudly, and on the other side a sort of skipping game using their long, bald tails.

The double-ended newt wizard left, and Ron approached the counter.

"It's my rat," he told the witch. "He's been a bit off-color ever since I brought him back from Egypt."

"Bang him on the counter," said the witch, pulling a pair of heavy black spectacles out of her pocket.

Ron lifted Scabbers out of his inside pocket and placed him next to the cage of his fellow rats, who stopped their skipping

Like nearly everything Ron owned, Scabbers the rat was second-hand (he had once belonged to Ron's brother Percy) specially woebegone.

"Hm," said the witch, picking up Scabbers. "How old is this rat?"

"Dunno," said Ron. "Quite old. He used to belong to my brother."

"What powers does he have?" said the witch, examining Scabbers closely.

"Er —" The truth was that Scabbers had never shown the faintest trace of interesting powers. The witch's eyes moved over him, but nothing was missing, and tutted loudly.

"He's been through the mill, this one," she said.

"He was like that when Percy gave him to me," said Ron defensively.

"An ordinary common or garden rat like this can't be expected to live longer than three years or so," said the witch. "But you might like one of these —"

She indicated the black rats, who promptly started skipping again. Ron muttered, "Show-offs."

"Well, if you don't want a replacement, you can try this rat tonic," said the witch, reaching under the counter and bringing out a bottle.

"Okay," said Ron. "How much — OUCH!"

Ron buckled as something huge and orange came soaring from the top of the highest cage, landed on his head, and

"NO, CROOKSHANKS, NO!" cried the witch, but Scabbers shot from between her hands like a bar of soap, landed splat on the floor.

"Scabbers!" Ron shouted, racing out of the shop after him; Harry followed.

It took them nearly ten minutes to catch Scabbers, who had taken refuge under a wastepaper bin outside Quality Quidditch Supplies, and straightened up, massaging his head.

"What was that?"

"It was either a very big cat or quite a small tiger," said Harry.

"Where's Hermione?"

"Probably getting her owl —"

They made their way back up the crowded street to the Magical Menagerie. As they reached it, Hermione came out, carrying a basket, and the enormous ginger cat.

"You bought that monster?" said Ron, his mouth hanging open.

"He's gorgeous, isn't he?" said Hermione, glowing.

That was a matter of opinion, thought Harry. The cat's ginger fur was thick and fluffy, but it was definitely a bit bowled over by the fact that it had run headlong into a brick wall. Now that Scabbers was out of sight, however, the cat was purring contentedly.

"Hermione, that thing nearly scalped me!" said Ron.

"He didn't mean to, did you, Crookshanks?" said Hermione.

"And what about Scabbers?" said Ron, pointing at the lump in his chest pocket. "He needs rest and relaxation! How's he getting on?"

"That reminds me, you forgot your rat tonic," said Hermione, slapping the small red bottle into Ron's hand. "And stop worrying about Scabbers in yours, what's the problem? Poor Crookshanks, that witch said he'd been in there for ages; no one wanted him."

"I wonder why," said Ron sarcastically as they set off toward the Leaky Cauldron.

They found Mr. Weasley sitting in the bar, reading the Daily Prophet.

"Harry!" he said, smiling as he looked up. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks," said Harry as he, Ron, and Hermione joined Mr. Weasley with all their shopping.

Mr. Weasley put down his paper, and Harry saw the now-familiar picture of Sirius Black staring up at him.

"They still haven't caught him, then?" he asked.

"No," said Mr. Weasley, looking extremely grave. "They've pulled us all off our regular jobs at the Ministry to try and find him."

"Would we get a reward if we caught him?" asked Ron. "It'd be good to get some more money —"

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron," said Mr. Weasley, who on closer inspection looked very strained. "Black's not going to be caught. He'll get him back, you mark my words."

At that moment Mrs. Weasley entered the bar, laden with shopping bags and followed by the twins, Fred and George, who were both dressed as Head Boy, Percy; and the Weasleys' youngest child and only girl, Ginny.

Ginny, who had always been very taken with Harry, seemed even more heartily embarrassed than usual when she saw him. She went very red and muttered "Hello" without looking at him. Percy, however, held out his hand solely to shake hands with Harry.

"Hello, Percy," said Harry, trying not to laugh.

"I hope you're well?" said Percy pompously, shaking hands. It was rather like being introduced to the mayor.

"Very well, thanks —"

"Harry!" said Fred, elbowing Percy out of the way and bowing deeply. "Simply splendid to see you, old boy —"

"Marvelous," said George, pushing Fred aside and seizing Harry's hand in turn. "Absolutely spiffing."

Percy scowled.

"That's enough, now," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Mum!" said Fred as though he'd only just spotted her and seizing her hand too. "How really corking to see you —"

"I said, that's enough," said Mrs. Weasley, depositing her shopping in an empty chair. "Hello, Harry, dear. I suppose you've got your silver badge on Percy's chest. "Second Head Boy in the family!" she said, swelling with pride.

"And last," Fred muttered under his breath.

"I don't doubt that," said Mrs. Weasley, frowning suddenly. "I notice they haven't made you two prefects."

"What do we want to be prefects for?" said George, looking revolted at the very idea. "It'd take all the fun out of life." Ginny giggled.

"You want to set a better example for your sister!" snapped Mrs. Weasley.

"Ginny's got other brothers to set her an example, Mother," said Percy loftily. "I'm going up to change for dinner. . . ."

He disappeared and George heaved a sigh.

"We tried to shut him in a pyramid," he told Harry. "But Mum spotted us."

Dinner that night was a very enjoyable affair. Tom the innkeeper put three tables together in the parlor, and the seven delicious courses.

"How're we getting to King's Cross tomorrow, Dad?" asked Fred as they dug into a sumptuous chocolate pudding.

"The Ministry's providing a couple of cars," said Mr. Weasley.

Everyone looked up at him.

"Why?" said Percy curiously.

"It's because of you, Perce," said George seriously. "And there'll be little flags on the hoods, with HB on them —"

"— for Humongous Bighead," said Fred.

Everyone except Percy and Mrs. Weasley snorted into their pudding.

"Why are the Ministry providing cars, Father?" Percy asked again, in a dignified voice.

"Well, as we haven't got one anymore," said Mr. Weasley, "— and as I work there, they're doing me a favor —"

His voice was casual, but Harry couldn't help noticing that Mr. Weasley's ears had gone red, just like Ron's did when he was embarrassed.

"Good thing, too," said Mrs. Weasley briskly. "Do you realize how much luggage you've all got between you? A nice sign aren't you?"

"Ron hasn't put all his new things in his trunk yet," said Percy, in a long-suffering voice. "He's dumped them on my bed."

"You'd better go and pack properly, Ron, because we won't have much time in the morning," Mrs. Weasley called down.

After dinner everyone felt very full and sleepy. One by one they made their way upstairs to their rooms to check their trunks.

He had just closed and locked his own trunk when he heard angry voices through the wall, and went to see what was going on.

The door of number twelve was ajar and Percy was shouting.

"It was here, on the bedside table, I took it off for polishing —"

"I haven't touched it, all right?" Ron roared back.

"What's up?" said Harry.

"My Head Boy badge is gone," said Percy, rounding on Harry.

"So's Scabbers's rat tonic," said Ron, throwing things out of his trunk to look. "I think I might've left it in the bar —"

"You're not going anywhere till you've found my badge!" yelled Percy.

"I'll get Scabbers's stuff, I'm packed," Harry said to Ron, and he went downstairs.

Harry was halfway along the passage to the bar, which was now very dark, when he heard another pair of angry voices — Mr. Weasley's and Mrs. Weasley's. He hesitated, not wanting them to know he'd heard them arguing, when the sound of his own name came.

"... makes no sense not to tell him," Mr. Weasley was saying heatedly. "Harry's got a right to know. I've tried to tell Fudge for thirteen years old and —"

"Arthur, the truth would terrify him!" said Mrs. Weasley shrilly. "Do you really want to send Harry back to school with that knowledge?"

"I don't want to make him miserable, I want to put him on his guard!" retorted Mr. Weasley. "You know what Harry's capable of in the Forbidden Forest! But Harry mustn't do that this year! When I think what could have happened to him that night, I'm prepared to bet he would have been dead before the Ministry found him."

"But he's not dead, he's fine, so what's the point —"

"Molly, they say Sirius Black's mad, and maybe he is, but he was clever enough to escape from Azkaban, and that's sure as eggs is eggs. Not a hair of him, and I don't care what Fudge keeps telling the Daily Prophet, we're no nearer catching Black than in the year of what Black's after —"

"But Harry will be perfectly safe at Hogwarts."

"We thought Azkaban was perfectly safe. If Black can break out of Azkaban, he can break into Hogwarts."

"But no one's really sure that Black's after Harry —"

There was a thud on wood, and Harry was sure Mr. Weasley had banged his fist on the table.

"Molly, how many times do I have to tell you? They didn't report it in the press because Fudge wanted it kept quiet, but he's told Fudge that Black's been talking in his sleep for a while now. Always the same words: 'He's at Hogwarts . . . he's after me.' I bet you he's after me. If you ask me, he thinks murdering Harry will bring You-Know-Who back to power. Black lost everything the night he got into Azkaban to brood on that. . . ."

There was a silence. Harry leaned still closer to the door, desperate to hear more.

"Well, Arthur, you must do what you think is right. But you're forgetting Albus Dumbledore. I don't think anything could escape him. He knows about all this?"

"Of course he knows. We had to ask him if he minds the Azkaban guards stationing themselves around the entrance to the castle."

"Not happy? Why shouldn't he be happy, if they're there to catch Black?"

"Dumbledore isn't fond of the Azkaban guards," said Mr. Weasley heavily. "Nor am I, if it comes to that . . . but when you're a wizard, you're a wizard."

"If they save Harry —"

Harry heard chairs move. As quietly as he could, he hurried down the passage to the bar and out of sight. The parlor

The bottle of rat tonic was lying under the table they had sat at earlier. Harry waited until he heard Mr. and Mrs. Weasley

Fred and George were crouching in the shadows on the landing, heaving with laughter as they listened to Percy dism

The badge now read Bighead Boy.

So Sirius Black was after him. That explained everything. Fudge had been lenient with him because he was so relieved

ry until he was on the train.

iously thought Harry would be panic-stricken if he knew the truth. But Harry happened to agree wholeheartedly with

st as frightened of him?

f getting inside seemed very remote.

e until Black was caught; in fact, Harry suspected his every move would be carefully watched until the danger had passed.

Unbidden, the image of the beast in the shadows of Magnolia Crescent crossed his mind. What to do when you know

"That's the spirit, dear," said his mirror sleepily.

THE DEMENTOR

ged his way into the room, pulling a sweatshirt over his head and looking irritable.

know," Ron grimaced, "his girlfriend. She's hidden her face under the frame because her nose has gone all blotchy. .

They headed down to breakfast, where Mr. Weasley was reading the front page of the Daily Prophet with a furrowed

"What were you saying?" Ron asked Harry as they sat down.

Harry had no chance to speak to Ron or Hermione in the chaos of leaving; they were too busy heaving all their trunk

"It's all right, Crookshanks," Hermione cooed through the wickerwork. "I'll let you out on the train."

He pointed at his chest, where a large lump indicated that Scabbers was curled up in his pocket.

"They're here," he said. "Harry, come on."

suit of emerald velvet.

Harry got into the back of the car and was shortly joined by Hermione, Ron, and, to Ron's disgust, Percy.

slide through gaps that Uncle Vernon's new company car certainly couldn't have managed. They reached King's Cross

Mr. Weasley kept close to Harry's elbow all the way into the station.

Mr. Weasley strolled toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten, pushing Harry's trolley and apparently very

In a moment, they had fallen sideways through the solid metal onto platform nine and three-quarters and looked up

Percy and Ginny suddenly appeared behind Harry. They were panting and had apparently taken the barrier at a run.

"Ah, there's Penelope!" said Percy, smoothing his hair and going pink again. Ginny caught Harry's eye, and they both

I with long, curly hair, walking with his chest thrown out so that she couldn't miss his shiny badge.

Once the remaining Weasleys and Hermione had joined them, Harry and Ron led the way to the end of the train, passed the trunks onto it, stowed Hedwig and Crookshanks in the luggage rack, then went back outside to say good-bye to Mrs. Weasley. She kissed all her children, then Hermione, and finally, Harry. He was embarrassed, but really quite pleased. "Do take care, won't you, Harry?" she said as she straightened up, her eyes oddly bright. Then she opened her enormous mouth and said, "You are, Ron . . . no, they're not corned beef. . . . Fred? Where's Fred? Here you are, dear. . . ."

"Harry," said Mr. Weasley quietly, "come over here a moment."

He jerked his head toward a pillar, and Harry followed him behind it, leaving the others crowded around Mrs. Weasley.

"There's something I've got to tell you before you leave —" said Mr. Weasley, in a tense voice.

"It's all right, Mr. Weasley," said Harry. "I already know."

"You know? How could you know?"

"I — er — I heard you and Mrs. Weasley talking last night. I couldn't help hearing," Harry added quickly. "Sorry —"

"That's not the way I'd have chosen for you to find out," said Mr. Weasley, looking anxious.

"No — honestly, it's okay. This way, you haven't broken your word to Fudge and I know what's going on."

"Harry, you must be very scared —"

"I'm not," said Harry sincerely. "Really," he added, because Mr. Weasley was looking disbelieving. "I'm not trying to be brave, can he?"

Mr. Weasley flinched at the sound of the name but overlooked it.

"Harry, I knew you were, well, made of stronger stuff than Fudge seems to think, and I'm obviously pleased that you're not."

"Arthur!" called Mrs. Weasley, who was now shepherding the rest onto the train. "Arthur, what are you doing? It's about time!"

"He's coming, Molly!" said Mr. Weasley, but he turned back to Harry and kept talking in a lower and more hurried voice.

"— that I'll be a good boy and stay in the castle?" said Harry gloomily.

"Not entirely," said Mr. Weasley, who looked more serious than Harry had ever seen him. "Harry, swear to me you won't go."

Harry stared. "What?"

There was a loud whistle. Guards were walking along the train, slamming all the doors shut.

"Promise me, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, talking more quickly still, "that whatever happens —"

"Why would I go looking for someone I know wants to kill me?" said Harry blankly.

"Swear to me that whatever you might hear —"

"Arthur, quickly!" cried Mrs. Weasley.

Steam was billowing from the train; it had started to move. Harry ran to the compartment door and Ron threw it open. They waved at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley until the train turned a corner and blocked them from view.

"I need to talk to you in private," Harry muttered to Ron and Hermione as the train picked up speed.

"Go away, Ginny," said Ron.

"Oh, that's nice," said Ginny huffily, and she stalked off.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off down the corridor, looking for an empty compartment, but all were full except for the first one.

This had only one occupant, a man sitting fast asleep next to the window. Harry, Ron, and Hermione checked on the man, and they had never seen an adult there before, except for the witch who pushed the food cart.

The stranger was wearing an extremely shabby set of wizard's robes that had been darned in several places. He looked old, his hair flecked with gray.

"Who d'you reckon he is?" Ron hissed as they sat down and slid the door shut, taking the seats farthest away from the man.

"Professor R. J. Lupin," whispered Hermione at once.

"How d'you know that?"

"It's on his case," she replied, pointing at the luggage rack over the man's head, where there was a small, battered card. The name Professor R. J. Lupin was stamped across one corner in peeling letters.

"Wonder what he teaches?" said Ron, frowning at Professor Lupin's pallid profile.

"That's obvious," whispered Hermione. "There's only one vacancy, isn't there? Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had already had two Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, both of whom had lasted only a year.

"Well, I hope he's up to it," said Ron doubtfully. "He looks like one good hex would finish him off, doesn't he? Anyway, he's got to be better than the last one."

Harry explained all about Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's argument and the warning Mr. Weasley had just given him. When he finished, Hermione opened her mouth. She finally lowered them to say, "Sirius Black escaped to come after you? Oh, Harry . . . you'll have to be careful."

"I don't go looking for trouble," said Harry, nettled. "Trouble usually finds me."

"How thick would Harry have to be, to go looking for a nutter who wants to kill him?" said Ron shakily.

They were taking the news worse than Harry had expected. Both Ron and Hermione seemed to be much more frightened than Harry.

"No one knows how he got out of Azkaban," said Ron uncomfortably. "No one's ever done it before. And he was a top wizard."

"But they'll catch him, won't they?" said Hermione earnestly. "I mean, they've got all the Muggles looking out for him."

"What's that noise?" said Ron suddenly.

A faint, tinny sort of whistle was coming from somewhere. They looked all around the compartment.

"It's coming from your trunk, Harry," said Ron, standing up and reaching into the luggage rack. A moment later he had the trunk. It was spinning very fast in the palm of Ron's hand and glowing brilliantly.

"Is that a Sneakoscope?" said Hermione interestedly, standing up for a better look.

"Yeah . . . mind you, it's a very cheap one," Ron said. "It went haywire just as I was tying it to Errol's leg to send it to Hagrid."

"Were you doing anything untrustworthy at the time?" said Hermione shrewdly.

"No! Well . . . I wasn't supposed to be using Errol. You know he's not really up to long journeys . . . but how else was I to get the Sneakoscope?"

"Stick it back in the trunk," Harry advised as the Sneakoscope whistled piercingly, "or it'll wake him up."

He nodded toward Professor Lupin. Ron stuffed the Sneakoscope into a particularly horrible pair of Uncle Vernon's old trousers and closed the trunk on it.

"We could get it checked in Hogsmeade," said Ron, sitting back down. "They sell that sort of thing in Dervish and Banges."

"Do you know much about Hogsmeade?" asked Hermione keenly. "I've read it's the only entirely non-Muggle settlement in the wizarding world."

"Yeah, I think it is," said Ron in an offhand sort of way, "but that's not why I want to go. I just want to get inside Honeydukes' sweetshop."

"What's that?" said Hermione.

"It's this sweetshop," said Ron, a dreamy look coming over his face, "where they've got everything. . . . Pepper Imps — full of strawberry mousse and clotted cream, and really excellent sugar quills, which you can suck in class and just look innocent."

"But Hogsmeade's a very interesting place, isn't it?" Hermione pressed on eagerly. "In Sites of Historical Sorcery it says that the Shrieking Shack's supposed to be the most severely haunted building in Britain —"

"— and massive sherbet balls that make you levitate a few inches off the ground while you're sucking them," said Ron. Hermione looked around at Harry.

"Won't it be nice to get out of school for a bit and explore Hogsmeade?"

"Spect it will," said Harry heavily. "You'll have to tell me when you've found out."

"What d'you mean?" said Ron.

"I can't go. The Dursleys didn't sign my permission form, and Fudge wouldn't either."

Ron looked horrified.

"You're not allowed to come? But — no way — McGonagall or someone will give you permission —"

Harry gave a hollow laugh. Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor House, was very strict.

"— or we can ask Fred and George, they know every secret passage out of the castle —"

"Ron!" said Hermione sharply. "I don't think Harry should be sneaking out of school with Black on the loose —"

"Yeah, I expect that's what McGonagall will say when I ask for permission," said Harry bitterly.

"But if we're with him," said Ron spiritedly to Hermione, "Black wouldn't dare —"

"Oh, Ron, don't talk rubbish," snapped Hermione. "Black's already murdered a whole bunch of people in the middle of the night. He attacked Harry just because we're there?"

She was fumbling with the straps of Crookshanks's basket as she spoke.

"Don't let that thing out!" Ron said, but too late; Crookshanks leapt lightly from the basket, stretched, yawned, and spat. He shoved Crookshanks angrily away.

"Get out of here!"

"Ron, don't!" said Hermione angrily.

Ron was about to answer back when Professor Lupin stirred. They watched him apprehensively, but he simply turned back to the window.

The Hogwarts Express moved steadily north and the scenery outside the window became wilder and darker while the train moved on. The Hogwarts Express moved steadily north and the scenery outside the window became wilder and darker while the train moved on. The Hogwarts Express moved steadily north and the scenery outside the window became wilder and darker while the train moved on.

ast the door of their compartment. Crookshanks had now settled in an empty seat, his squashed face turned toward the window.

At one o'clock, the plump witch with the food cart arrived at the compartment door.

"D'you think we should wake him up?" Ron asked awkwardly, nodding toward Professor Lupin. "He looks like he could be asleep."

Hermione approached Professor Lupin cautiously.

"Er — Professor?" she said. "Excuse me — Professor?"

He didn't move.

"Don't worry, dear," said the witch as she handed Harry a large stack of Cauldron Cakes. "If he's hungry when he wakes up, he'll eat them."

"I suppose he is asleep?" said Ron quietly as the witch slid the compartment door closed. "I mean — he hasn't died, has he?"

"No, no, he's breathing," whispered Hermione, taking the Cauldron Cake Harry passed her.

He might not be very good company, but Professor Lupin's presence in their compartment had its uses. Mid-afternoon, as the train moved on, the window, they heard footsteps in the corridor again, and their three least favorite people appeared at the door: Draco Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle.

Draco Malfoy and Harry had been enemies ever since they had met on their very first train journey to Hogwarts. Malfoy was tall, thin, and pale; he played Seeker on the Slytherin Quidditch team, the same position that Harry played on the Gryffindor team. Crabbe was thick and muscle-bound; Crabbe was taller, with a pudding-bowl haircut and a very thick neck; Goyle had short, bristly hair.

"Well, look who it is," said Malfoy in his usual lazy drawl, pulling open the compartment door. "Potty and the Weasel. They're here too."

Crabbe and Goyle chuckled trollishly.

"I heard your father finally got his hands on some gold this summer, Weasley," said Malfoy. "Did your mother die of starvation?" Ron stood up so quickly he knocked Crookshanks's basket to the floor. Professor Lupin gave a snort.

"Who's that?" said Malfoy, taking an automatic step backward as he spotted Lupin.

"New teacher," said Harry, who got to his feet, too, in case he needed to hold Ron back. "What were you saying, Malfoy?" Malfoy's pale eyes narrowed; he wasn't fool enough to pick a fight right under a teacher's nose.

"C'mon," he muttered resentfully to Crabbe and Goyle, and they disappeared.

Harry and Ron sat down again, Ron massaging his knuckles.

"I'm not going to take any crap from Malfoy this year," he said angrily. "I mean it. If he makes one more crack about me, I'll—" Ron made a violent gesture in midair.

"Ron," hissed Hermione, pointing at Professor Lupin, "be careful . . ."

But Professor Lupin was still fast asleep.

The rain thickened as the train sped yet farther north; the windows were now a solid, shimmering gray, which gradually faded into idlers and over the luggage racks. The train rattled, the rain hammered, the wind roared, but still, Professor Lupin slept.

"We must be nearly there," said Ron, leaning forward to look past Professor Lupin at the now completely black window.

The words had hardly left him when the train started to slow down.

"Great," said Ron, getting up and walking carefully past Professor Lupin to try and see outside. "I'm starving. I want to eat."

"We can't be there yet," said Hermione, checking her watch.

"So why're we stopping?"

The train was getting slower and slower. As the noise of the pistons fell away, the wind and rain sounded louder than ever.

Harry, who was nearest the door, got up to look into the corridor. All along the carriage, heads were sticking curiously out.

The train came to a stop with a jolt, and distant thuds and bangs told them that luggage had fallen out of the racks. The compartment plunged into total darkness.

"What's going on?" said Ron's voice from behind Harry.

"Ouch!" gasped Hermione. "Ron, that was my foot!"

Harry felt his way back to his seat.

"D'you think we've broken down?"

"Dunno . . ."

There was a squeaking sound, and Harry saw the dim black outline of Ron, wiping a patch clean on the window and peering out.

"There's something moving out there," Ron said. "I think people are coming aboard. . . ."

The compartment door suddenly opened and someone fell painfully over Harry's legs.

"Sorry — d'you know what's going on? — Ouch — sorry —"

"Hullo, Neville," said Harry, feeling around in the dark and pulling Neville up by his cloak.

"Harry? Is that you? What's happening?"

"No idea — sit down —"

There was a loud hissing and a yelp of pain; Neville had tried to sit on Crookshanks.

"I'm going to go and ask the driver what's going on," came Hermione's voice. Harry felt her pass him, heard the door slam.

"Who's that?"

"Who's that?"

"Ginny?"

"Hermione?"

"What are you doing?"

"I was looking for Ron —"

"Come in and sit down —"

"Not here!" said Harry hurriedly. "I'm here!"

"Ouch!" said Neville.

"Quiet!" said a hoarse voice suddenly.

Professor Lupin appeared to have woken up at last. Harry could hear movements in his corner. None of them spoke.

There was a soft, crackling noise, and a shivering light filled the compartment. Professor Lupin appeared to be holding a wand. But his eyes looked alert and wary.

"Stay where you are," he said in the same hoarse voice, and he got slowly to his feet with his handful of fire held out. But the door slid slowly open before Lupin could reach it.

Standing in the doorway, illuminated by the shivering flames in Lupin's hand, was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Harry's eyes darted downward, and what he saw made his stomach contract. There was a hand protruding from the cloak, holding a thing dead that had decayed in water. . . .

But it was visible only for a split second. As though the creature beneath the cloak sensed Harry's gaze, the hand was withdrawn.

And then the thing beneath the hood, whatever it was, drew a long, slow, rattling breath, as though it were trying to speak.

An intense cold swept over them all. Harry felt his own breath catch in his chest. The cold went deeper than his skin.

Harry's eyes rolled up into his head. He couldn't see. He was drowning in cold. There was a rushing in his ears as though the train were crashing. . . .

And then, from far away, he heard screaming, terrible, terrified, pleading screams. He wanted to help whoever it was. He was swirling around him, inside him —

"Harry! Harry! Are you all right?"

Someone was slapping his face.

"W-what?"

Harry opened his eyes; there were lanterns above him, and the floor was shaking — the Hogwarts Express was moving. He fell from his seat onto the floor. Ron and Hermione were kneeling next to him, and above them he could see Neville and Professor Lupin.

d to push his glasses back on, he felt cold sweat on his face.

Ron and Hermione heaved him back onto his seat.

"Are you okay?" Ron asked nervously.

"Yeah," said Harry, looking quickly toward the door. The hooded creature had vanished. "What happened? Where's the hooded creature?"

"No one screamed," said Ron, more nervously still.

Harry looked around the bright compartment. Ginny and Neville looked back at him, both very pale.

"But I heard screaming —"

A loud snap made them all jump. Professor Lupin was breaking an enormous slab of chocolate into pieces.

"Here," he said to Harry, handing him a particularly large piece. "Eat it. It'll help."

Harry took the chocolate but didn't eat it.

"What was that thing?" he asked Lupin.

"A dementor," said Lupin, who was now giving chocolate to everyone else. "One of the dementors of Azkaban."

Everyone stared at him. Professor Lupin crumpled up the empty chocolate wrapper and put it in his pocket.

"Eat," he repeated. "It'll help. I need to speak to the driver, excuse me . . ."

He strolled past Harry and disappeared into the corridor.

"Are you sure you're okay, Harry?" said Hermione, watching Harry anxiously.

"I don't get it. . . . What happened?" said Harry, wiping more sweat off his face.

"Well — that thing — the dementor — stood there and looked around (I mean, I think it did, I couldn't see its face) —"

"I thought you were having a fit or something," said Ron, who still looked scared. "You went sort of rigid and fell out of your seat."

"And Professor Lupin stepped over you, and walked toward the dementor, and pulled out his wand," said Hermione, "and he cast a spell."

"But the dementor didn't move, so Lupin muttered something, and a silvery thing shot out of his wand at it, and it turned into a cloud of smoke." "It was horrible," said Neville, in a higher voice than usual. "Did you feel how cold it got when it came in?"

"I felt weird," said Ron, shifting his shoulders uncomfortably. "Like I'd never be cheerful again. . . ."

Ginny, who was huddled in her corner looking nearly as bad as Harry felt, gave a small sob; Hermione went over and hugged her.

"But didn't any of you — fall off your seats?" said Harry awkwardly.

"No," said Ron, looking anxiously at Harry again. "Ginny was shaking like mad, though. . . ."

Harry didn't understand. He felt weak and shivery, as though he were recovering from a bad bout of flu; he also felt a little better now that he knew what had happened.

When no one else had?

Professor Lupin had come back. He paused as he entered, looked around, and said, with a small smile, "I haven't poisoned anyone yet."

Harry took a bite and to his great surprise felt warmth spread suddenly to the tips of his fingers and toes.

"We'll be at Hogwarts in ten minutes," said Professor Lupin. "Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry didn't ask how Professor Lupin knew his name.

"Fine," he muttered, embarrassed.

They didn't talk much during the remainder of the journey. At long last, the train stopped at Hogsmeade station, and the doors opened.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stepped out onto the tiny platform; rain was driving cold wind across the water.

"Firs' years this way!" called a familiar voice. Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned and saw the gigantic outline of Hagrid standing in the crowd.

"Follow me, please," he called, and they followed him, the first-year students following him, the older students following them.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed the rest of the school along the platform and out onto a roundabout where the carriages were waiting.

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king witch who wore her hair in a tight bun; her sharp eyes were framed with square spectacles. Harry fought his way and a way of making him feel he must have done something wrong.

"There's no need to look so worried — I just want a word in my office," she told them. "Move along there, Weasley." Ron stared as Professor McGonagall ushered Harry and Hermione away from the chattering crowd; they accompanied her in silence.

Once they were in her office, a small room with a large, welcoming fire, Professor McGonagall motioned Harry and Hermione abruptly, "Professor Lupin sent an owl ahead to say that you were taken ill on the train, Potter."

Before Harry could reply, there was a soft knock on the door and Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, came bustling in. Harry felt himself going red in the face. It was bad enough that he'd passed out, or whatever he had done, without even being seen.

"I'm fine," he said, "I don't need anything —"

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Madam Pomfrey, ignoring this and bending down to stare closely at him. "I suppose you've been ill?"

"It was a dementor, Poppy," said Professor McGonagall.

They exchanged a dark look, and Madam Pomfrey clucked disapprovingly.

"Setting dementors around a school," she muttered, pushing back Harry's hair and feeling his forehead. "He won't be ill again, but they are, and the effect they have on people who are already delicate —"

"I'm not delicate!" said Harry crossly.

"Of course you're not," said Madam Pomfrey absentmindedly, now taking his pulse.

"What does he need?" said Professor McGonagall crisply. "Bed rest? Should he perhaps spend tonight in the hospital wing?"

"I'm fine!" said Harry, jumping up. The thought of what Draco Malfoy would say if he had to go to the hospital wing was enough to make him jump.

"Well, he should have some chocolate, at the very least," said Madam Pomfrey, who was now trying to peer into Harry's eyes.

"I've already had some," said Harry. "Professor Lupin gave me some. He gave it to all of us."

"Did he, now?" said Madam Pomfrey approvingly. "So we've finally got a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who knows his stuff."

"Are you sure you feel all right, Potter?" Professor McGonagall said sharply.

"Yes," said Harry.

"Very well. Kindly wait outside while I have a quick word with Miss Granger about her course schedule, then we can go."

Harry went back into the corridor with Madam Pomfrey, who left for the hospital wing, muttering to herself. He had to wait.

Madam Pomfrey, followed by Professor McGonagall, and the three of them made their way back down the marble staircase.

It was a sea of pointed black hats; each of the long House tables was lined with students, their faces glimmering by the light of the candles.

Tables in midair. Professor Flitwick, who was a tiny little wizard with a shock of white hair, was carrying an ancient hat on a tray.

"Oh," said Hermione softly, "we've missed the Sorting!"

New students at Hogwarts were sorted into Houses by trying on the Sorting Hat, which shouted out the House they belonged to.

Professor McGonagall strode off toward her empty seat at the staff table, and Harry and Hermione set off in the other direction.

People looked around at them as they passed along the back of the hall, and a few of them pointed at Harry. Had he been ill?

He and Hermione sat down on either side of Ron, who had saved them seats.

"What was all that about?" he muttered to Harry.

Harry started to explain in a whisper, but at that moment the headmaster stood up to speak, and he broke off.

Professor Dumbledore, though very old, always gave an impression of great energy. He had several feet of long silver hair.

He was often described as the greatest wizard of the age, but that wasn't why Harry respected him. You couldn't be afraid of him.

Around at the students, he felt really calm for the first time since the dementor had entered the train compartment.

"Welcome!" said Dumbledore, the candlelight shimmering on his beard. "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! I have a feast for you."

"I think it best to get it out of the way before you become befuddled by our excellent feast. . . ."

Dumbledore cleared his throat and continued, "As you will all be aware after their search of the Hogwarts Express, our new students are here."

"Muggle-borns, who are here on Ministry of Magic business."

He paused, and Harry remembered what Mr. Weasley had said about Dumbledore not being happy with the dementors.

"They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds," Dumbledore continued, "and while they are with us, I must mention that dementors are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises — or even Invisibility Cloaks," he added blandly, and Harry and Ron nodded.

"I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you."

"that no student runs afoul of the dementors," he said.

Percy, who was sitting a few seats down from Harry, puffed out his chest again and stared around impressively. Dumbledore's words had been clear.

nobody moved or made a sound.

"On a happier note," he continued, "I am pleased to welcome two new teachers to our ranks this year."

"First, Professor Lupin, who has kindly consented to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

There was some scattered, rather unenthusiastic applause. Only those who had been in the compartment on the train looked particularly shabby next to all the other teachers in their best robes.

"Look at Snape!" Ron hissed in Harry's ear.

Professor Snape, the Potions master, was staring along the staff table at Professor Lupin. It was common knowledge that he hated Lupin.

Harry, who hated Snape, was startled at the expression twisting his thin, sallow face. It was beyond anger: It was loathing.

Every time he set eyes on Harry.

"As to our second new appointment," Dumbledore continued as the lukewarm applause for Professor Lupin died away.

Magical Creatures teacher, retired at the end of last year in order to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs. How the other than Rubeus Hagrid, who has agreed to take on this teaching job in addition to his gamekeeping duties."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another, stunned. Then they joined in with the applause, which was tumultuous. Hagrid, who was ruby-red in the face and staring down at his enormous hands, his wide grin hidden in the tangle of hair.

"We should've known!" Ron roared, pounding the table. "Who else would have assigned us a biting book?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were the last to stop clapping, and as Professor Dumbledore started speaking again, they clapped.

"Well, I think that's everything of importance," said Dumbledore. "Let the feast begin!"

The golden plates and goblets before them filled suddenly with food and drink. Harry, suddenly ravenous, helped himself. It was a delicious feast; the hall echoed with talk, laughter, and the clatter of knives and forks. Harry, Ron, and Hermione talked to Hagrid. They knew how much being made a teacher would mean to him. Hagrid wasn't a fully qualified wizard, but he had not committed. It had been Harry, Ron, and Hermione who had cleared Hagrid's name last year.

At long last, when the last morsels of pumpkin tart had melted from the golden platters, Dumbledore gave the word to start.

"Congratulations, Hagrid!" Hermione squealed as they reached the teachers' table.

"All down ter you three," said Hagrid, wiping his shining face on his napkin as he looked up at them. "Can' believe it. . . after Professor Kettleburn said he'd had enough. . . . It's what I always wanted. . . ."

Overcome with emotion, he buried his face in his napkin, and Professor McGonagall shooed them away.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined the Gryffindors streaming up the marble staircase and, very tired now, along more corridors to the Tower. A large portrait of a fat lady in a pink dress asked them, "Password?"

"Coming through, coming through!" Percy called from behind the crowd. "The new password's 'Fortuna Major!'"

"Oh no," said Neville Longbottom sadly. He always had trouble remembering the passwords.

Through the portrait hole and across the common room, the girls and boys divided toward their separate staircases. Hagrid was how glad he was to be back. They reached their familiar, circular dormitory with its five four-poster beds, and Harry,

CHAPTER SIX

TALONS AND TEA LEAVES

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the Great Hall for breakfast the next day, the first thing they saw was Draco Malfoy with a very funny story. As they passed, Malfoy did a ridiculous impression of a swooning fit and there was a roar of laughter.

"Ignore him," said Hermione, who was right behind Harry. "Just ignore him, it's not worth it. . . ."

"Hey, Potter!" shrieked Pansy Parkinson, a Slytherin girl with a face like a pug. "Potter! The dementors are coming, Potter!"

Harry dropped into a seat at the Gryffindor table, next to George Weasley.

"New third-year course schedules," said George, passing them over. "What's up with you, Harry?"

"Malfoy," said Ron, sitting down on George's other side and glaring over at the Slytherin table.

George looked up in time to see Malfoy pretending to faint with terror again.

"That little git," he said calmly. "He wasn't so cocky last night when the dementors were down at our end of the train."

"Nearly wet himself," said Fred, with a contemptuous glance at Malfoy.

"I wasn't too happy myself," said George. "They're horrible things, those dementors. . . ."

"Sort of freeze your insides, don't they?" said Fred.

"You didn't pass out, though, did you?" said Harry in a low voice.

"Forget it, Harry," said George bracingly. "Dad had to go out to Azkaban one time, remember, Fred? And he said it was a nightmare. . . . They suck the happiness out of a place, dementors. Most of the prisoners go mad in there."

"Anyway, we'll see how happy Malfoy looks after our first Quidditch match," said Fred. "Gryffindor versus Slytherin, first match of the season."

The only time Harry and Malfoy had faced each other in a Quidditch match, Malfoy had definitely come off worse. Fred had won, and Harry had a bruise on his forehead from a bludger and a fried tomato.

Hermione was examining her new schedule.

"Ooh, good, we're starting some new subjects today," she said happily.

"Hermione," said Ron, frowning as he looked over her shoulder, "they've messed up your schedule. Look — they've given you too many classes."

"I'll manage. I've fixed it all with Professor McGonagall."

"But look," said Ron, laughing, "see this morning? Nine o'clock, Divination. And underneath, nine o'clock, Muggle Studies. And underneath that, Arithmancy, nine o'clock. I mean, I know you're good, Hermione, but no one's that good. How can you fit all that in?"

"Don't be silly," said Hermione shortly. "Of course I won't be in three classes at once."

"Well, then —"

"Pass the marmalade," said Hermione.

"But —"

"Oh, Ron, what's it to you if my schedule's a bit full?" Hermione snapped. "I told you, I've fixed it all with Professor McGonagall."

Just then, Hagrid entered the Great Hall. He was wearing his long moleskin overcoat and was absentmindedly swinging a broom.

"All right?" he said eagerly, pausing on the way to the staff table. "Yer in my first ever lesson! Right after lunch! Bin up to the staff table. . . . Me, a teacher . . . honest'ly. . . ."

He grinned broadly at them and headed off to the staff table, still swinging the polecat.

"Wonder what he's been getting ready?" said Ron, a note of anxiety in his voice.

The hall was starting to empty as people headed off toward their first lesson. Ron checked his course schedule.

"We'd better go, look, Divination's at the top of North Tower. It'll take us ten minutes to get there. . . ."

They finished their breakfasts hastily, said good-bye to Fred and George, and walked back through the hall. As they passed the portrait of the Fat Lady, she gave a fainting fit. The shouts of laughter followed Harry into the entrance hall.

The journey through the castle to North Tower was a long one. Two years at Hogwarts hadn't taught them everything.

"There's — got — to — be — a — shortcut," Ron panted as they climbed their seventh long staircase and emerged onto a bare stretch of grass hanging on the stone wall.

"I think it's this way," said Hermione, peering down the empty passage to the right.

"Can't be," said Ron. "That's south, look, you can see a bit of the lake out of the window. . . ."

Harry was watching the painting. A fat, dapple-gray pony had just ambled onto the grass and was grazing nonchalantly, and leaving their frames to visit one another, but he always enjoyed watching it. A moment later, a short, squat knight had fallen off. By the look of the grass stains on his metal knees, he had just fallen off.

"Aha!" he yelled, seeing Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "What villains are these, that trespass upon my private lands! Come and fight!"

They watched in astonishment as the little knight tugged his sword out of its scabbard and began brandishing it violently at them; a particularly wild swing made him overbalance, and he landed facedown in the grass.

"Are you all right?" said Harry, moving closer to the picture.

"Get back, you scurvy braggart! Back, you rogue!"

The knight seized his sword again and used it to push himself back up, but the blade sank deeply into the grass and he was unable to move. Finally, he had to flop back down onto the grass and push up his visor to mop his sweating face.

"Listen," said Harry, taking advantage of the knight's exhaustion, "we're looking for the North Tower. You don't know where it is, do you?"

"A quest!" The knight's rage seemed to vanish instantly. He clanked to his feet and shouted, "Come follow me, dear friends, I will lead you in the charge!"

He gave the sword another fruitless tug, tried and failed to mount the fat pony, gave up, and cried, "On foot then, gentlemen! And he ran, clanking loudly, into the left side of the frame and out of sight.

They hurried after him along the corridor, following the sound of his armor. Every now and then they spotted him running through the corridors.

"Be of stout heart, the worst is yet to come!" yelled the knight, and they saw him reappear in front of an alarmed group of students in a narrow spiral staircase.

Puffing loudly, Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the tightly spiraling steps, getting dizzy and dizzy, until at last they reached the classroom.

"Farewell!" cried the knight, popping his head into a painting of some sinister-looking monks. "Farewell, my comrades! I shall call upon Sir Cadogan!"

"Yeah, we'll call you," muttered Ron as the knight disappeared, "if we ever need someone mental."

They climbed the last few steps and emerged onto a tiny landing, where most of the class was already assembled. They looked up at the ceiling, where there was a circular trapdoor with a brass plaque on it.

"Sybill Trelawney, Divination teacher," Harry read. "How're we supposed to get up there?"

As though in answer to his question, the trapdoor suddenly opened, and a silvery ladder descended right at Harry's feet.

"After you," said Ron, grinning, so Harry climbed the ladder first.

He emerged into the strangest-looking classroom he had ever seen. In fact, it didn't look like a classroom at all, more like a shop. At least twenty small, circular tables were crammed inside it, all surrounded by chintz armchairs and fat little poufs. The paintings at the windows were all closed, and the many lamps were draped with dark red scarves. It was stiflingly warm, and a strong, heavy, sickly sort of perfume as it heated a large copper kettle. The shelves running around the circular walls were crowded with many packs of tattered playing cards, countless silvery crystal balls, and a huge array of teacups.

Ron appeared at Harry's shoulder as the class assembled around them, all talking in whispers.

"Where is she?" Ron said.

A voice came suddenly out of the shadows, a soft, misty sort of voice.

"Welcome," it said. "How nice to see you in the physical world at last."

Harry's immediate impression was of a large, glittering insect. Professor Trelawney moved into the firelight, and they saw that she was several times their natural size, and she was draped in a gauzy spangled shawl. Innumerable chains and beads were attached to her dress, and she was covered with bangles and rings.

"Sit, my children, sit," she said, and they all climbed awkwardly into armchairs or sank onto poufs. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down.

"Welcome to Divination," said Professor Trelawney, who had seated herself in a winged armchair in front of the fire.

"I find that descending too often into the hustle and bustle of the main school clouds my Inner Eye."

Nobody said anything to this extraordinary pronouncement. Professor Trelawney delicately rearranged her shawl and began to speak. "I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you. . . ."

At these words, both Harry and Ron glanced, grinning, at Hermione, who looked startled at the news that books would be of no use to them.

"Many witches and wizards, talented though they are in the area of loud bangs and smells and sudden disappearing, do not have the Sight," Professor Trelawney went on, her enormous, gleaming eyes moving from face to nervous face. "It is a Gift granted to a few. . . ."

Harry said, "Is your grandmother well?"

"I think so," said Neville tremulously.

"I wouldn't be so sure if I were you, dear," said Professor Trelawney, the firelight glinting on her long emerald earring. We will be covering the basic methods of Divination this year. The first term will be devoted to reading the tea leaves. . . . r," she shot suddenly at Parvati Patil, "beware a red-haired man."

Parvati gave a startled look at Ron, who was right behind her, and edged her chair away from him.

"In the second term," Professor Trelawney went on, "we shall progress to the crystal ball — if we have finished with first February by a nasty bout of flu. I myself will lose my voice. And around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever. A very tense silence followed this pronouncement, but Professor Trelawney seemed unaware of it.

"I wonder, dear," she said to Lavender Brown, who was nearest and shrank back in her chair, "if you could pass me the teapot. Lavender, looking relieved, stood up, took an enormous teapot from the shelf, and put it down on the table in front of her. "Thank you, my dear. Incidentally, that thing you are dreading — it will happen on Friday the sixteenth of October."

Lavender trembled.

"Now, I want you all to divide into pairs. Collect a teacup from the shelf, come to me, and I will fill it. Then sit down around the cup three times with the left hand, then turn the cup upside down on its saucer, wait for the last of the tea to drain. You will interpret the patterns using pages five and six of Unfogging the Future. I shall move among you, helping and instructing. . . . made to stand up — "after you've broken your first cup, would you be so kind as to select one of the blue-patterned teacups. Sure enough, Neville had no sooner reached the shelf of teacups when there was a tinkle of breaking china. Professor Trelawney, "One of the blue ones, then, dear, if you wouldn't mind . . . thank you. . . ."

When Harry and Ron had had their teacups filled, they went back to their table and tried to drink the scalding tea quickly. As instructed, then drained the cups and swapped them.

"Right," said Ron as they both opened their books at pages five and six. "What can you see in mine?"

"A load of soggy brown stuff," said Harry. The heavily perfumed smoke in the room was making him feel sleepy and . . .

"Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!" Professor Trelawney cried through the smoke. Harry tried to pull himself together.

"Right, you've got a crooked sort of cross . . ." He consulted Unfogging the Future. "That means you're going to have 'trouble' that could be the sun . . . hang on . . . that means 'great happiness' . . . so you're going to suffer but be very happy. . . ."

"You need your Inner Eye tested, if you ask me," said Ron, and they both had to stifle their laughs as Professor Trelawney . . .

"My turn . . ." Ron peered into Harry's teacup, his forehead wrinkled with effort. "There's a blob a bit like a bowler hat. Magic. . . ."

He turned the teacup the other way up.

"But this way it looks more like an acorn. . . . What's that?" He scanned his copy of Unfogging the Future. "'A windfall, but there's a thing here,'" he turned the cup again, "that looks like an animal . . . yeah, if that was its head . . . it looks like a cat." Professor Trelawney whirled around as Harry let out a snort of laughter.

"Let me see that, my dear," she said reprovingly to Ron, sweeping over and snatching Harry's cup from him. Everyone was watching. Professor Trelawney was staring into the teacup, rotating it counterclockwise.

"The falcon . . . my dear, you have a deadly enemy."

"But everyone knows that," said Hermione in a loud whisper. Professor Trelawney stared at her.

"Well, they do," said Hermione. "Everybody knows about Harry and You-Know-Who."

Harry and Ron stared at her with a mixture of amazement and admiration. They had never heard Hermione speak to Professor Trelawney. She lowered her huge eyes to Harry's cup again and continued to turn it.

"The club . . . an attack. Dear, dear, this is not a happy cup. . . ."

"I thought that was a bowler hat," said Ron sheepishly.

"The skull . . . danger in your path, my dear. . . ."

Everyone was staring, transfixed, at Professor Trelawney, who gave the cup a final turn, gasped, and then screamed. There was another tinkle of breaking china; Neville had smashed his second cup. Professor Trelawney sank into a vacant stare.

"My dear boy . . . my poor, dear boy . . . no . . . it is kinder not to say . . . no . . . don't ask me. . . ."

"What is it, Professor?" said Dean Thomas at once. Everyone had got to their feet, and slowly they crowded around Harry's cup to get a good look at Harry's cup.

"My dear," Professor Trelawney's huge eyes opened dramatically, "you have the Grim."

"The what?" said Harry.

He could tell that he wasn't the only one who didn't understand; Dean Thomas shrugged at him and Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil had their mouths in horror.

"The Grim, my dear, the Grim!" cried Professor Trelawney, who looked shocked that Harry hadn't understood. "The greatest evil — the worst omen — of death!"

Harry's stomach lurched. That dog on the cover of Death Omens in Flourish and Blotts — the dog in the shadows of the Forbidden Forest — the dog that had killed Sirius — the dog that had killed . . . h too. Everyone was looking at Harry, everyone except Hermione, who had gotten up and moved around to the back of the room.

"I don't think it looks like a Grim," she said flatly.

Professor Trelawney surveyed Hermione with mounting dislike.

"You'll forgive me for saying so, my dear, but I perceive very little aura around you. Very little receptivity to the resonant energies of the universe."

Seamus Finnigan was tilting his head from side to side.

"It looks like a Grim if you do this," he said, with his eyes almost shut, "but it looks more like a donkey from here," he said. "When you've all finished deciding whether I'm going to die or not!" said Harry, taking even himself by surprise. Now "I think we will leave the lesson here for today," said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest voice. "Yes . . . please pack away your things. Silently the class took their teacups back to Professor Trelawney, packed away their books, and closed their bags. Even Neville. "Until we meet again," said Professor Trelawney faintly, "fair fortune be yours. Oh, and dear" — she pointed at Neville. "Catch up."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione descended Professor Trelawney's ladder and the winding stair in silence, then set off for the dungeons to find her classroom that, early as they had left Divination, they were only just in time.

Harry chose a seat right at the back of the room, feeling as though he were sitting in a very bright spotlight; the rest of the class were about to drop dead at any moment. He hardly heard what Professor McGonagall was telling them about Arithmancy when she transformed herself in front of their eyes into a tabby cat with spectacle markings around her eyes. "Really, what has got into you all today?" said Professor McGonagall, turning back into herself with a faint pop, and she was the first time my transformation's not got applause from a class."

Everybody's heads turned toward Harry again, but nobody spoke. Then Hermione raised her hand.

"Please, Professor, we've just had our first Divination class, and we were reading the tea leaves, and —"

"Ah, of course," said Professor McGonagall, suddenly frowning. "There is no need to say any more, Miss Granger. Tell me, what do you think?" Everyone stared at her.

"Me," said Harry, finally.

"I see," said Professor McGonagall, fixing Harry with her beady eyes. "Then you should know, Potter, that Sybill Trelawney arrived at this school. None of them has died yet. Seeing death omens is her favorite way of greeting a new class. If it were you —"

Professor McGonagall broke off, and they saw that her nostrils had gone white. She went on, more calmly, "Divination is a dangerous deal from you that I have very little patience with it. True Seers are very rare, and Professor Trelawney —"

She stopped again, and then said, in a very matter-of-fact tone, "You look in excellent health to me, Potter, so you will live long enough to see that if you die, you need not hand it in."

Hermione laughed. Harry felt a bit better. It was harder to feel scared of a lump of tea leaves away from the dim red light. Not everyone was convinced, however. Ron still looked worried, and Lavender whispered, "But what about Neville's? When the Transfiguration class had finished, they joined the crowd thundering toward the Great Hall for lunch.

"Ron, cheer up," said Hermione, pushing a dish of stew toward him. "You heard what Professor McGonagall said."

Ron spooned stew onto his plate and picked up his fork but didn't start.

"Harry," he said, in a low, serious voice, "you haven't seen a great black dog anywhere, have you?"

"Yeah, I have," said Harry. "I saw one the night I left the Dursleys'."

Ron let his fork fall with a clatter.

"Probably a stray," said Hermione calmly.

Ron looked at Hermione as though she had gone mad.

"Hermione, if Harry's seen a Grim, that's — that's bad," he said. "My — my uncle Bilius saw one and — and he died two weeks ago."

"Coincidence," said Hermione airily, pouring herself some pumpkin juice.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" said Ron, starting to get angry. "Grims scare the living daylights out of most people."

"There you are, then," said Hermione in a superior tone. "They see the Grim and die of fright. The Grim's not an omen, it's just a stupid dog. It's not stupid enough to see one and think, right, well, I'd better kick the bucket then!"

Ron mouthed wordlessly at Hermione, who opened her bag, took out her new Arithmancy book, and propped it open.

"I think Divination seems very woolly," she said, searching for her page. "A lot of guesswork, if you ask me."

"There was nothing woolly about the Grim in that cup!" said Ron hotly.

"You didn't seem quite so confident when you were telling Harry it was a sheep," said Hermione coolly.

"Professor Trelawney said you didn't have the right aura! You just don't like being bad at something for a change!"

He had touched a nerve. Hermione slammed her Arithmancy book down on the table so hard that bits of meat and bones flew up.

"If being good at Divination means I have to pretend to see death omens in a lump of tea leaves, I'm not sure I'll be so good at it. I'll be sure to do well in my Arithmancy class!"

She snatched up her bag and stalked away.

Ron frowned after her.

"What's she talking about?" he said to Harry. "She hasn't been to an Arithmancy class yet."

Harry was pleased to get out of the castle after lunch. Yesterday's rain had cleared; the sky was a clear, pale gray, and the sun was shining. They went to their first-ever Care of Magical Creatures class.

Ron and Hermione weren't speaking to each other. Harry walked beside them in silence as they went down the slope. He was only when he spotted three only-too-familiar backs ahead of them that he realized they must be having these lessons with Hagrid. Goyle, who were chortling. Harry was quite sure he knew what they were talking about.

Hagrid was waiting for his class at the door of his hut. He stood in his moleskin overcoat, with Fang the boarhound at his side. "C'mon, now, get a move on!" he called as the class approached. "Got a real treat for yeh today! Great lesson comin' up!"

For one nasty moment, Harry thought that Hagrid was going to lead them into the forest; Harry had had enough unpleasure

strolled off around the edge of the trees, and five minutes later, they found themselves outside a kind of paddock. The
 "Everyone gather 'round the fence here!" he called. "That's it — make sure yeh can see — now, firs' thing yeh'll want t
 "How?" said the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy.
 "Eh?" said Hagrid.
 "How do we open our books?" Malfoy repeated. He took out his copy of The Monster Book of Monsters, which he ha
 ome, like Harry, had belted their book shut; others had crammed them inside tight bags or clamped them together w
 "Hasn' — hasn' anyone bin able ter open their books?" said Hagrid, looking crestfallen.
 The class all shook their heads.
 "Yeh've got ter stroke 'em," said Hagrid, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. "Look —"
 He took Hermione's copy and ripped off the Spellotape that bound it. The book tried to bite, but Hagrid ran a giant fo
 pen and lay quiet in his hand.
 "Oh, how silly we've all been!" Malfoy sneered. "We should have stroked them! Why didn't we guess!"
 "I — I thought they were funny," Hagrid said uncertainly to Hermione.
 "Oh, tremendously funny!" said Malfoy. "Really witty, giving us books that try and rip our hands off!"
 "Shut up, Malfoy," said Harry quietly. Hagrid was looking downcast and Harry wanted Hagrid's first lesson to be a suc
 "Righ' then," said Hagrid, who seemed to have lost his thread, "so — so yeh've got yer books an' — an' — now yeh ne
 . . ."
 He strode away from them into the forest and out of sight.
 "God, this place is going to the dogs," said Malfoy loudly. "That oaf teaching classes, my father'll have a fit when I tell
 "Shut up, Malfoy," Harry repeated.
 "Careful, Potter, there's a dementor behind you —"
 "Oooooooh!" squealed Lavender Brown, pointing toward the opposite side of the paddock.
 Trotting toward them were a dozen of the most bizarre creatures Harry had ever seen. They had the bodies, hind leg
 t seemed to be giant eagles, with cruel, steel-colored beaks and large, brilliantly orange eyes. The talons on their fron
 beasts had a thick leather collar around its neck, which was attached to a long chain, and the ends of all of these we
 paddock behind the creatures.
 "Gee up, there!" he roared, shaking the chains and urging the creatures toward the fence where the class stood. Ever
 reatures to the fence.
 "Hippogriffs!" Hagrid roared happily, waving a hand at them. "Beau'iful, aren' they?"
 Harry could sort of see what Hagrid meant. Once you got over the first shock of seeing something that was half hors
 coats, changing smoothly from feather to hair, each of them a different color: stormy gray, bronze, pinkish roan, glea
 "So," said Hagrid, rubbing his hands together and beaming around, "if yeh wan' ter come a bit nearer —"
 No one seemed to want to. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, approached the fence cautiously.
 "Now, firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud," said Hagrid. "Easily offended, hippogriffs are. Do
 do."
 Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle weren't listening; they were talking in an undertone and Harry had a nasty feeling they we
 "Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff ter make the firs' move," Hagrid continued. "It's polite, see? Yeh walk toward him,
 r touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish, 'cause those talons hurt."
 "Right — who wants ter go first?"
 Most of the class backed farther away in answer. Even Harry, Ron, and Hermione had misgivings. The hippogriffs we
 didn't seem to like being tethered like this.
 "No one?" said Hagrid, with a pleading look.
 "I'll do it," said Harry.
 There was an intake of breath from behind him, and both Lavender and Parvati whispered, "Oooh, no, Harry, remem
 Harry ignored them. He climbed over the paddock fence.
 "Good man, Harry!" roared Hagrid. "Right then — let's see how yeh get on with Buckbeak."
 He untied one of the chains, pulled the gray hippogriff away from its fellows, and slipped off its leather collar. The cla
 s breath. Malfoy's eyes were narrowed maliciously.
 "Easy, now, Harry," said Hagrid quietly. "Yeh've got eye contact, now try not ter blink. . . . Hippogriffs don' trust yeh if y
 Harry's eyes immediately began to water, but he didn't shut them. Buckbeak had turned his great, sharp head and w
 "Tha's it," said Hagrid. "Tha's it, Harry . . . now, bow . . ."
 Harry didn't feel much like exposing the back of his neck to Buckbeak, but he did as he was told. He gave a short bow
 The hippogriff was still staring haughtily at him. It didn't move.
 "Ah," said Hagrid, sounding worried. "Right — back away, now, Harry, easy does it —"
 But then, to Harry's enormous surprise, the hippogriff suddenly bent its scaly front knees and sank into what was an
 "Well done, Harry!" said Hagrid, ecstatic. "Right — yeh can touch him! Pat his beak, go on!"
 Feeling that a better reward would have been to back away, Harry moved slowly toward the hippogriff and reached o
 osed its eyes lazily, as though enjoying it.
 The class broke into applause, all except for Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were looking deeply disappointed.
 "Righ' then, Harry," said Hagrid. "I reckon he might' let yeh ride him!"

This was more than Harry had bargained for. He was used to a broomstick; but he wasn't sure a hippogriff would be. "Yeh climb up there, jus' behind the wing joint," said Hagrid, "an' mind yeh don' pull any of his feathers out, he won' li. Harry put his foot on the top of Buckbeak's wing and hoisted himself onto its back. Buckbeak stood up. Harry wasn't h feathers.

"Go on, then!" roared Hagrid, slapping the hippogriff's hindquarters.

Without warning, twelve-foot wings flapped open on either side of Harry; he just had time to seize the hippogriff around the broomstick, and Harry knew which one he preferred; the hippogriff's wings beat uncomfortably on either side of him. He didn't want to be thrown off; the glossy feathers slipped under his fingers and he didn't dare get a stronger grip; instead of the smooth motion of a broom, he was king backward and forward as the hindquarters of the hippogriff rose and fell with its wings.

Buckbeak flew him once around the paddock and then headed back to the ground; this was the bit Harry had been dreading to slip off over the beak, then felt a heavy thud as the four ill-assorted feet hit the ground. He just managed to hold on.

"Good work, Harry!" roared Hagrid as everyone except Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle cheered. "Okay, who else wants a go?" Emboldened by Harry's success, the rest of the class climbed cautiously into the paddock. Hagrid untied the hippogriff from the paddock.

Neville ran repeatedly backward from his, which didn't seem to want to bend its knees. Ron and Hermione followed. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had taken over Buckbeak. He had bowed to Malfoy, who was now patting his beak, looking triumphant.

"This is very easy," Malfoy drawled, loud enough for Harry to hear him. "I knew it must have been, if Potter could do it." He turned to the hippogriff. "Are you, you great ugly brute?"

It happened in a flash of steely talons; Malfoy let out a high-pitched scream and next moment, Hagrid was wrestling him. Malfoy lay curled in the grass, blood blossoming over his robes.

"I'm dying!" Malfoy yelled as the class panicked. "I'm dying, look at me! It's killed me!"

"Yer not dyin'!" said Hagrid, who had gone very white. "Someone help me — gotta get him outta here —"

Hermione ran to hold open the gate as Hagrid lifted Malfoy easily. As they passed, Harry saw that there was a long, deep cut on his arm. He ran with him, up the slope toward the castle.

Very shaken, the Care of Magical Creatures class followed at a walk. The Slytherins were all shouting about Hagrid.

"They should fire him straight away!" said Pansy Parkinson, who was in tears.

"It was Malfoy's fault!" snapped Dean Thomas. Crabbe and Goyle flexed their muscles threateningly.

They all climbed the stone steps into the deserted entrance hall.

"I'm going to see if he's okay!" said Pansy, and they all watched her run up the marble staircase. The Slytherins, still muttering, followed her to their dungeon common room; Harry, Ron, and Hermione proceeded upstairs to Gryffindor Tower.

"D'you think he'll be all right?" said Hermione nervously.

"Course he will. Madam Pomfrey can mend cuts in about a second," said Harry, who had had far worse injuries mended.

"That was a really bad thing to happen in Hagrid's first class, though, wasn't it?" said Ron, looking worried. "Trust Malfoy to do that."

They were among the first to reach the Great Hall at dinnertime, hoping to see Hagrid, but he wasn't there.

"They wouldn't fire him, would they?" said Hermione anxiously, not touching her steak-and-kidney pudding.

"They'd better not," said Ron, who wasn't eating either.

Harry was watching the Slytherin table. A large group including Crabbe and Goyle was huddled together, deep in conversation. He wondered how Malfoy had been injured.

"Well, you can't say it wasn't an interesting first day back," said Ron gloomily.

They went up to the crowded Gryffindor common room after dinner and tried to do the homework Professor McGonagall had given them, looking out of the tower window.

"There's a light on in Hagrid's window," Harry said suddenly.

Ron looked at his watch.

"If we hurried, we could go down and see him. It's still quite early. . . ."

"I don't know," Hermione said slowly, and Harry saw her glance at him.

"I'm allowed to walk across the grounds," he said pointedly. "Sirius Black hasn't got past the dementors here, has he?"

So they put their things away and headed out of the portrait hole, glad not to meet anybody on their way to the front entrance.

The grass was still wet and looked almost black in the twilight. When they reached Hagrid's hut, they knocked, and a moment later Hagrid was sitting in his shirtsleeves at his scrubbed wooden table; his boarhound, Fang, had his head in Hagrid's lap.

There was a pewter tankard almost as big as a bucket in front of him, and he seemed to be having difficulty getting them in. "Spect it's a record," he said thickly, when he recognized them. "Don' reckon they've ever had a teacher who lasted o' this long."

"You haven't been fired, Hagrid!" gasped Hermione.

"Not yet," said Hagrid miserably, taking a huge gulp of whatever was in the tankard. "But 's only a matter o' time, i'n't it?"

"How is he?" said Ron as they all sat down. "It wasn't serious, was it?"

"Madam Pomfrey fixed him best she could," said Hagrid dully, "but he's sayin' it's still agony. . . . covered in bandages."

"He's faking it," said Harry at once. "Madam Pomfrey can mend anything. She regrew half my bones last year. Trust M." "School gov'nors have bin told, o' course," said Hagrid miserably. "They reckon I started too big. Shoulda left hippogriffs to the experts."

"School gov'nors have bin told, o' course," said Hagrid miserably. "They reckon I started too big. Shoulda left hippogriffs to the experts. I thought it'd make a good firs' lesson. . . . 'S all my fault. . . ."

"It's all Malfoy's fault, Hagrid!" said Hermione earnestly.

"We're witnesses," said Harry. "You said hippogriffs attack if you insult them. It's Malfoy's problem that he wasn't listened to."

"Yeah, don't worry, Hagrid, we'll back you up," said Ron.

Tears leaked out of the crinkled corners of Hagrid's beetle-black eyes. He grabbed both Harry and Ron and pulled them both outside. "I think you've had enough to drink, Hagrid," said Hermione firmly. She took the tankard from the table and went out ly outside. They heard a loud splash.

"What's he done?" said Harry nervously as Hermione came back in with the empty tankard.

"Stuck his head in the water barrel," said Hermione, putting the tankard away.

Hagrid came back, his long hair and beard sopping wet, wiping the water out of his eyes.

"Tha's better," he said, shaking his head like a dog and drenching them all. "Listen, it was good of yeh ter come an' see me."

Hagrid stopped dead, staring at Harry as though he'd only just realized he was there.

"WHAT D'YEH THINK YOU'RE DOIN', EH?" he roared, so suddenly that they jumped a foot in the air. "YEH'RE NOT TO COME BACK HERE."

Hagrid strode over to Harry, grabbed his arm, and pulled him to the door.

"C'mon!" Hagrid said angrily. "I'm takin' yer all back up ter school, an' don't let me catch yeh walkin' down ter see me again."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BOGGART IN THE WARDROBE

Malfoy didn't reappear in classes until late on Thursday morning, when the Slytherins and Gryffindors were halfway through their lessons. The Slytherin common room covered in bandages and bound up in a sling, acting, in Harry's opinion, as though he were the heroic survivor of a battle.

"How is it, Draco?" simpered Pansy Parkinson. "Does it hurt much?"

"Yeah," said Malfoy, putting on a brave sort of grimace. But Harry saw him wink at Crabbe and Goyle when Pansy had gone.

"Settle down, settle down," said Professor Snape idly.

Harry and Ron scowled at each other; Snape wouldn't have said "settle down" if they'd walked in late, he'd have given them a detention. Nothing in Snape's classes; Snape was head of Slytherin House, and generally favored his own students above all others.

They were making a new potion today, a Shrinking Solution. Malfoy set up his cauldron right next to Harry and Ron, and began to chop up roots.

"Sir," Malfoy called, "sir, I'll need help cutting up these daisy roots, because of my arm —"

"Weasley, cut up Malfoy's roots for him," said Snape without looking up.

Ron went brick red.

"There's nothing wrong with your arm," he hissed at Malfoy.

Malfoy smirked across the table.

"Weasley, you heard Professor Snape; cut up these roots."

Ron seized his knife, pulled Malfoy's roots toward him, and began to chop them roughly, so that they were all different sizes.

"Professor," drawled Malfoy, "Weasley's mutilating my roots, sir."

Snape approached their table, stared down his hooked nose at the roots, then gave Ron an unpleasant smile from behind his half-moon spectacles.

"Change roots with Malfoy, Weasley."

"But, sir — !"

Ron had spent the last quarter of an hour carefully shredding his own roots into exactly equal pieces.

"Now," said Snape in his most dangerous voice.

Ron shoved his own beautifully cut roots across the table at Malfoy, then took up the knife again.

"And, sir, I'll need this shrivelfig skinned," said Malfoy, his voice full of malicious laughter.

"Potter, you can skin Malfoy's shrivelfig," said Snape, giving Harry the look of loathing he always reserved just for him.

Harry took Malfoy's shrivelfig as Ron began trying to repair the damage to the roots he now had to use. Harry skinned the shrivelfig and laid it on the table at Malfoy without speaking. Malfoy was smirking more broadly than ever.

"Seen your pal Hagrid lately?" he asked them quietly.

"None of your business," said Ron jerkily, without looking up.

"I'm afraid he won't be a teacher much longer," said Malfoy in a tone of mock sorrow. "Father's not very happy about it."

"Keep talking, Malfoy, and I'll give you a real injury," snarled Ron.

"— he's complained to the school governors. And to the Ministry of Magic. Father's got a lot of influence, you know. And he's got a lot of money. He can get anything he wants. He knows if my arm'll ever be the same again?"

"So that's why you're putting it on," said Harry, accidentally beheading a dead caterpillar because his hand was shaking.

"Well," said Malfoy, lowering his voice to a whisper, "partly, Potter. But there are other benefits too. Weasley, slice my roots into equal pieces. A few cauldrons away, Neville was in trouble. Neville regularly went to pieces in Potions lessons; it was his worst subject. He was a mess. His potion, which was supposed to be a bright, acid green, had turned —"

"Orange, Longbottom," said Snape, ladling some up and allowing it to splash back into the cauldron, so that everyone could see. "What's the matter with your hick skull of yours? Didn't you hear me say, quite clearly, that only one rat spleen was needed? Didn't I state plainly that you were to make you understand, Longbottom?"

Neville was pink and trembling. He looked as though he was on the verge of tears.

"Please, sir," said Hermione, "please, I could help Neville put it right —"

"I don't remember asking you to show off, Miss Granger," said Snape coldly, and Hermione went as pink as Neville. "Let Neville finish this potion to your toad and see what happens. Perhaps that will encourage you to do it properly."

Snape moved away, leaving Neville breathless with fear.

"Help me!" he moaned to Hermione.

"Hey, Harry," said Seamus Finnigan, leaning over to borrow Harry's brass scales, "have you heard? Daily Prophet this

"Where?" said Harry and Ron quickly. On the other side of the table, Malfoy looked up, listening closely.

"Not too far from here," said Seamus, who looked excited. "It was a Muggle who saw him. 'Course, she didn't really understand they? So she phoned the telephone hot line. By the time the Ministry of Magic got there, he was gone."

"Not too far from here . . .," Ron repeated, looking significantly at Harry. He turned around and saw Malfoy watching. But Malfoy's eyes were shining malevolently, and they were fixed on Harry. He leaned across the table.

"Thinking of trying to catch Black single-handed, Potter?"

"Yeah, that's right," said Harry offhandedly.

Malfoy's thin mouth was curving in a mean smile.

"Of course, if it was me," he said quietly, "I'd have done something before now. I wouldn't be staying in school like a ghost."

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" said Ron roughly.

"Don't you know, Potter?" breathed Malfoy, his pale eyes narrowed.

"Know what?"

Malfoy let out a low, sneering laugh.

"Maybe you'd rather not risk your neck," he said. "Want to leave it to the dementors, do you? But if it was me, I'd want to be drunk, so clear away while it simmers and then we'll test Longbottom's. . . ."

Crabbe and Goyle laughed openly, watching Neville sweat as he stirred his potion feverishly. Hermione was muttering under her breath. Harry and Ron packed away their unused ingredients and went to wash their hands and ladles in the sink. "What did Malfoy mean?" Harry muttered to Ron as he stuck his hands under the icy jet that poured from the gargoyles.

"He's making it up," said Ron savagely. "He's trying to make you do something stupid. . . ."

The end of the lesson in sight, Snape strode over to Neville, who was cowering by his cauldron.

"Everyone gather 'round," said Snape, his black eyes glittering, "and watch what happens to Longbottom's toad. If he's a tadpole. If, as I don't doubt, he has done it wrong, his toad is likely to be poisoned."

The Gryffindors watched fearfully. The Slytherins looked excited. Snape picked up Trevor the toad in his left hand and held it over the cauldron. He trickled a few drops down Trevor's throat.

There was a moment of hushed silence, in which Trevor gulped; then there was a small pop, and Trevor the tadpole disappeared. The Gryffindors burst into applause. Snape, looking sour, pulled a small bottle from the pocket of his robe, poured a drop into the cauldron.

"Five points from Gryffindor," said Snape, which wiped the smiles from every face. "I told you not to help him, Miss Granger. Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the steps to the entrance hall. Harry was still thinking about what Malfoy had said."

"Five points from Gryffindor because the potion was all right! Why didn't you lie, Hermione? You should've said Neville's toad was a tadpole." Hermione didn't answer. Ron looked around.

"Where is she?"

Harry turned too. They were at the top of the steps now, watching the rest of the class pass them, heading for the Great Hall. "She was right behind us," said Ron, frowning.

Malfoy passed them, walking between Crabbe and Goyle. He smirked at Harry and disappeared. "There she is," said Harry.

Hermione was panting slightly, hurrying up the stairs; one hand clutched her bag, the other seemed to be tucking something into it. "How did you do that?" said Ron.

"What?" said Hermione, joining them.

"One minute you were right behind us, the next moment, you were back at the bottom of the stairs again."

"What?" Hermione looked slightly confused. "Oh — I had to go back for something. Oh no —"

A seam had split on Hermione's bag. Harry wasn't surprised; he could see that it was crammed with at least a dozen books. "Why are you carrying all these around with you?" Ron asked her.

"You know how many subjects I'm taking," said Hermione breathlessly. "Couldn't hold these for me, could you?"

"But —" Ron was turning over the books she had handed him, looking at the covers. "You haven't got any of these subjects, have you?"

"Oh yes," said Hermione vaguely, but she packed all the books back into her bag just the same. "I hope there's something useful in them." f toward the Great Hall.

"D'you get the feeling Hermione's not telling us something?" Ron asked Harry.

Professor Lupin wasn't there when they arrived at his first Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. They all sat down, to wait for him. When he finally entered the room, Lupin smiled vaguely and placed his tatty old briefcase on the teacher's desk. He was looking tired, as though he had had a few square meals.

"Good afternoon," he said. "Would you please put all your books back in your bags. Today's will be a practical lesson. A few curious looks were exchanged as the class put away their books. They had never had a practical Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson since the year when their old teacher had brought a cageful of pixies to class and set them loose.

"Right then," said Professor Lupin, when everyone was ready. "If you'd follow me."

Neville looked startled, but said, "Well . . . always the same hat. A tall one with a stuffed vulture on top. And a long drarf."

"And a handbag?" prompted Professor Lupin.

"A big red one," said Neville.

"Right then," said Professor Lupin. "Can you picture those clothes very clearly, Neville? Can you see them in your mind?"

"Yes," said Neville uncertainly, plainly wondering what was coming next.

"When the boggart bursts out of this wardrobe, Neville, and sees you, it will assume the form of Professor Snape," said Lupin. "Remember the words 'Riddikulus' — and concentrate hard on your grandmother's clothes. If all goes well, Professor Boggart Snape will be forced to drop his big red handbag."

There was a great shout of laughter. The wardrobe wobbled more violently.

"If Neville is successful, the boggart is likely to shift his attention to each of us in turn," said Professor Lupin. "I would like you to think of something that scares you most, and imagine how you might force it to look comical. . . ."

The room went quiet. Harry thought . . . What scared him most in the world?

His first thought was Lord Voldemort — a Voldemort returned to full strength. But before he had even started to plan, a face came floating to the surface of his mind. . . .

A rotting, glistening hand, slithering back beneath a black cloak . . . a long, rattling breath from an unseen mouth . . .

Harry shivered, then looked around, hoping no one had noticed. Many people had their eyes shut tight. Ron was muttering about spiders. That was about Ron's greatest fear was spiders.

"Everyone ready?" said Professor Lupin.

Harry felt a lurch of fear. He wasn't ready. How could you make a dementor less frightening? But he didn't want to ask for help.

"Neville, we're going to back away," said Professor Lupin. "Let you have a clear field, all right? I'll call the next person forward when you have a clear shot —"

They all retreated, backed against the walls, leaving Neville alone beside the wardrobe. He looked pale and frightened, but his wand ready.

"On the count of three, Neville," said Professor Lupin, who was pointing his own wand at the handle of the wardrobe.

A jet of sparks shot from the end of Professor Lupin's wand and hit the doorknob. The wardrobe burst open. Hook-naked.

Neville backed away, his wand up, mouthing wordlessly. Snape was bearing down upon him, reaching inside his robes.

"R-R-Riddikulus!" squeaked Neville.

There was a noise like a whip crack. Snape stumbled; he was wearing a long, lace-trimmed dress and a towering hat with a big red handbag.

There was a roar of laughter; the boggart paused, confused, and Professor Lupin shouted, "Parvati! Forward!"

Parvati walked forward, her face set. Snape rounded on her. There was another crack, and where he had stood was a mummy. Parvati and it began to walk toward her very slowly, dragging its feet, its stiff arms rising —

"Riddikulus!" cried Parvati.

A bandage unraveled at the mummy's feet; it became entangled, fell face forward, and its head rolled off.

"Seamus!" roared Professor Lupin.

Seamus darted past Parvati.

Crack! Where the mummy had been was a woman with floor-length black hair and a skeletal, green-tinged face — a banshee. A long, wailing shriek that made the hair on Harry's head stand on end —

"Riddikulus!" shouted Seamus.

The banshee made a rasping noise and clutched her throat; her voice was gone.

Crack! The banshee turned into a rat, which chased its tail in a circle, then — crack! — became a rattlesnake, which slithered toward Harry's eyeball.

"It's confused!" shouted Lupin. "We're getting there! Dean!"

Dean hurried forward.

Crack! The eyeball became a severed hand, which flipped over and began to creep along the floor like a crab.

"Riddikulus!" yelled Dean.

There was a snap, and the hand was trapped in a mousetrap.

"Excellent! Ron, you next!"

Ron leapt forward.

Crack!

Quite a few people screamed. A giant spider, six feet tall and covered in hair, was advancing on Ron, clicking its pincers.

"Riddikulus!" bellowed Ron, and the spider's legs vanished; it rolled over and over; Lavender Brown squealed and ran.

Ron held his wand, ready, but —

"Here!" shouted Professor Lupin suddenly, hurrying forward.

Crack!

The legless spider had vanished. For a second, everyone looked wildly around to see where it was. Then they saw a small, pale, hairless figure.

Riddikulus!" almost lazily.

Crack!

"Forward, Neville, and finish him off!" said Lupin as the boggart landed on the floor as a cockroach. Crack! Snape was "Riddikulus!" he shouted, and they had a split second's view of Snape in his lacy dress before Neville let out a great "Hoo!" and tiny wisps of smoke, and was gone.

"Excellent!" cried Professor Lupin as the class broke into applause. "Excellent, Neville. Well done, everyone. . . . Let me acknowledge the boggart — ten for Neville because he did it twice . . . and five each to Hermione and Harry."

"But I didn't do anything," said Harry.

"You and Hermione answered my questions correctly at the start of the class, Harry," Lupin said lightly. "Very well, even on boggarts and summarize it for me . . . to be handed in on Monday. That will be all."

Talking excitedly, the class left the staffroom. Harry, however, wasn't feeling cheerful. Professor Lupin had deliberately he'd seen Harry collapse on the train, and thought he wasn't up to much? Had he thought Harry would pass out again? But no one else seemed to have noticed anything.

"Did you see me take that banshee?" shouted Seamus.

"And the hand!" said Dean, waving his own around.

"And Snape in that hat!"

"And my mummy!"

"I wonder why Professor Lupin's frightened of crystal balls?" said Lavender thoughtfully.

"That was the best Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson we've ever had, wasn't it?" said Ron excitedly as they made to leave.

"He seems like a very good teacher," said Hermione approvingly. "But I wish I could have had a turn with the boggart."

"What would it have been for you?" said Ron, sniggering. "A piece of homework that only got nine out of ten?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

FLIGHT OF THE FAT LADY

In no time at all, Defense Against the Dark Arts had become most people's favorite class. Only Draco Malfoy and his friends

"Look at the state of his robes," Malfoy would say in a loud whisper as Professor Lupin passed. "He dresses like our classmate."

But no one else cared that Professor Lupin's robes were patched and frayed. His next few lessons were just as interesting as the first, with the class learning to recognize the little goblinlike creatures that lurked wherever there had been bloodshed: in the dungeons of castles and the potholes of the streets.

Often lost. From Red Caps they moved on to kappas, creepy water-dwellers that looked like scaly monkeys, with webbed fingers and

Harry only wished he was as happy with some of his other classes. Worst of all was Potions. Snape was in a particularly bad mood

The story of the boggart assuming Snape's shape, and the way that Neville had dressed it in his grandmother's clothing, made

them to find it funny. His eyes flashed menacingly at the very mention of Professor Lupin's name, and he was bullying the

Harry was also growing to dread the hours he spent in Professor Trelawney's stifling tower room, deciphering lopsided

her enormous eyes filled with tears every time she looked at him. He couldn't like Professor Trelawney, even though she was

the class. Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown had taken to haunting Professor Trelawney's tower room at lunchtimes, and

though they knew things the others didn't. They had also started using hushed voices whenever they spoke to Harry.

Nobody really liked Care of Magical Creatures, which, after the action-packed first class, had become extremely dull.

Each lesson after lesson learning how to look after flobberworms, which had to be some of the most boring creatures in the

"Why would anyone bother looking after them?" said Ron, after yet another hour of poking shredded lettuce down their throats.

At the start of October, however, Harry had something else to occupy him, something so enjoyable it more than made up for the

chasing, and Oliver Wood, Captain of the Gryffindor team, called a meeting one Thursday evening to discuss tactics for the

There were seven people on a Quidditch team: three Chasers, whose job it was to score goals by putting the Quaffle through the

s at each end of the field; two Beaters, who were equipped with heavy bats to repel the Bludgers (two heavy black balls that

who defended the goalposts, and the Seeker, who had the hardest job of all, that of catching the Golden Snitch, a tiny, invisible

earned the Seeker's team an extra one hundred and fifty points.

Oliver Wood was a burly seventeen-year-old, now in his seventh and final year at Hogwarts. There was a quiet sort of authority

bers in the chilly locker rooms on the edge of the darkening Quidditch field.

"This is our last chance — my last chance — to win the Quidditch Cup," he told them, striding up and down in front of them

another shot at it.

"Gryffindor hasn't won for seven years now. Okay, so we've had the worst luck in the world — injuries — then the tournament

though the memory still brought a lump to his throat. "But we also know we've got the best — ruddy — team — in — the world."

manic glint back in his eye.

"We've got three superb Chasers."

Wood pointed at Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson, and Katie Bell.

"We've got two unbeatable Beaters."

"Stop it, Oliver, you're embarrassing us," said Fred and George Weasley together, pretending to blush.

"And we've got a Seeker who has never failed to win us a match!" Wood rumbled, glaring at Harry with a kind of furious

"We think you're very good too, Oliver," said George.

"Spanking good Keeper," said Fred.

"The point is," Wood went on, resuming his pacing, "the Quidditch Cup should have had our name on it these last two

as in the bag. But we haven't got it, and this year's the last chance we'll get to finally see our name on the thing. . . ."

Wood spoke so dejectedly that even Fred and George looked sympathetic.

"Oliver, this year's our year," said Fred.

"We'll do it, Oliver!" said Angelina.

"Definitely," said Harry.

Full of determination, the team started training sessions, three evenings a week. The weather was getting colder and could tarnish Harry's wonderful vision of finally winning the huge, silver Quidditch Cup.

Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room one evening after training, cold and stiff but pleased with the way p

"What's happened?" he asked Ron and Hermione, who were sitting in two of the best chairs by the fireside and comp

"First Hogsmeade weekend," said Ron, pointing at a notice that had appeared on the battered old bulletin board. "En

"Excellent," said Fred, who had followed Harry through the portrait hole. "I need to visit Zonko's. I'm nearly out of Stir

Harry threw himself into a chair beside Ron, his high spirits ebbing away. Hermione seemed to read his mind.

"Harry, I'm sure you'll be able to go next time," she said. "They're bound to catch Black soon. He's been sighted once a

"Black's not fool enough to try anything in Hogsmeade," said Ron. "Ask McGonagall if you can go this time, Harry. The

"Ron!" said Hermione. "Harry's supposed to stay in school —"

"He can't be the only third year left behind," said Ron. "Ask McGonagall, go on, Harry —"

"Yeah, I think I will," said Harry, making up his mind.

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but at that moment Crookshanks leapt lightly onto her lap. A large, dead spid

"Does he have to eat that in front of us?" said Ron, scowling.

"Clever Crookshanks, did you catch that all by yourself?" said Hermione.

Crookshanks slowly chewed up the spider, his yellow eyes fixed insolently on Ron.

"Just keep him over there, that's all," said Ron irritably, turning back to his star chart. "I've got Scabbers asleep in my l

Harry yawned. He really wanted to go to bed, but he still had his own star chart to complete. He pulled his bag toward

"You can copy mine, if you like," said Ron, labeling his last star with a flourish and shoving the chart toward Harry.

Hermione, who disapproved of copying, pursed her lips but didn't say anything. Crookshanks was still staring unblink

arning, he pounced.

"OY!" Ron roared, seizing his bag as Crookshanks sank four sets of claws deeply into it and began tearing ferociously

Ron tried to pull the bag away from Crookshanks, but Crookshanks clung on, spitting and slashing.

"Ron, don't hurt him!" squealed Hermione; the whole common room was watching; Ron whirled the bag around, Cro

"CATCH THAT CAT!" Ron yelled as Crookshanks freed himself from the remnants of the bag, sprang over the table, an

George Weasley made a lunge for Crookshanks but missed; Scabbers streaked through twenty pairs of legs and sho

hed low on his bandy legs, and started making furious swipes beneath it with his front paw.

Ron and Hermione hurried over; Hermione grabbed Crookshanks around the middle and heaved him away; Ron thr

by the tail.

"Look at him!" he said furiously to Hermione, dangling Scabbers in front of her. "He's skin and bone! You keep that ca

"Crookshanks doesn't understand it's wrong!" said Hermione, her voice shaking. "All cats chase rats, Ron!"

"There's something funny about that animal!" said Ron, who was trying to persuade a frantically wiggling Scabbers b

"

"Oh, what rubbish," said Hermione impatiently. "Crookshanks could smell him, Ron, how else d'you think —"

"That cat's got it in for Scabbers!" said Ron, ignoring the people around him, who were starting to giggle. "And Scabb

Ron marched through the common room and out of sight up the stairs to the boys' dormitories.

Ron was still in a bad mood with Hermione next day. He barely talked to her all through Herbology, even though he,

"How's Scabbers?" Hermione asked timidly as they stripped fat pink pods from the plants and emptied the shining b

"He's hiding at the bottom of my bed, shaking," said Ron angrily, missing the pail and scattering beans over the green

"Careful, Weasley, careful!" cried Professor Sprout as the beans burst into bloom before their very eyes.

They had Transfiguration next. Harry, who had resolved to ask Professor McGonagall after the lesson whether he co

ss trying to decide how he was going to argue his case. He was distracted, however, by a disturbance at the front of t

Lavender Brown seemed to be crying. Parvati had her arm around her and was explaining something to Seamus Fin

"What's the matter, Lavender?" said Hermione anxiously as she, Harry, and Ron went to join the group.

"She got a letter from home this morning," Parvati whispered. "It's her rabbit, Binky. He's been killed by a fox."

"Oh," said Hermione, "I'm sorry, Lavender."

"I should have known!" said Lavender tragically. "You know what day it is?"

"Er —"

"The sixteenth of October! That thing you're dreading, it will happen on the sixteenth of October!" Remember? She w

The whole class was gathered around Lavender now. Seamus shook his head seriously. Hermione hesitated; then sh

"Well, not necessarily by a fox," said Lavender, looking up at Hermione with streaming eyes, "but I was obviously drea

"Oh," said Hermione. She paused again. Then —

"Was Binky an old rabbit?"

"N-no!" sobbed Lavender. "H-he was only a baby!"

Parvati tightened her arm around Lavender's shoulders.

"But then, why would you dread him dying?" said Hermione.

Parvati glared at her.

"Well, look at it logically," said Hermione, turning to the rest of the group. "I mean, Binky didn't even die today, did he? — and she can't have been dreading it, because it's come as a real shock —"

"Don't mind Hermione, Lavender," said Ron loudly, "she doesn't think other people's pets matter very much."

Professor McGonagall opened the classroom door at that moment, which was perhaps lucky; Hermione and Ron were sitting on either side of Harry and didn't talk to each other for the whole class.

Harry still hadn't decided what he was going to say to Professor McGonagall when the bell rang at the end of the lesson.

"One moment, please!" she called as the class made to leave. "As you're all in my House, you should hand Hogsmeade cards to the village, so don't forget!"

Neville put up his hand.

"Please, Professor, I — I think I've lost —"

"Your grandmother sent yours to me directly, Longbottom," said Professor McGonagall. "She seemed to think it was important."

"Ask her now," Ron hissed at Harry.

"Oh, but —" Hermione began.

"Go for it, Harry," said Ron stubbornly.

Harry waited for the rest of the class to disappear, then headed nervously for Professor McGonagall's desk.

"Yes, Potter?"

Harry took a deep breath.

"Professor, my aunt and uncle — er — forgot to sign my form," he said.

Professor McGonagall looked over her square spectacles at him but didn't say anything.

"So — er — d'you think it would be all right — I mean, will it be okay if I — if I go to Hogsmeade?"

Professor McGonagall looked down and began shuffling papers on her desk.

"I'm afraid not, Potter," she said. "You heard what I said. No form, no visiting the village. That's the rule."

"But — Professor, my aunt and uncle — you know, they're Muggles, they don't really understand about — about Hogsmeade —" Harry protested.

"But I don't say so," said Professor McGonagall, standing up and piling her papers neatly into a drawer. "The form clearly states that no one without a signed form may visit the village. She turned to look at him, with an odd expression on her face. Was it pity? "I'm sorry, Potter, but that's my final word on this."

There was nothing to be done. Ron called Professor McGonagall a lot of names that greatly annoyed Hermione; Hermione tried to intervene, but she was too shy, and Harry had to endure everyone in the class talking loudly and happily about what they were going to do first.

"There's always the feast," said Ron, in an effort to cheer Harry up. "You know, the Halloween feast, in the evening."

"Yeah," said Harry gloomily, "great."

The Halloween feast was always good, but it would taste a lot better if he was coming to it after a day in Hogsmeade. Harry had been left behind. Dean Thomas, who was good with a quill, had offered to forge Uncle Vernon's signature on the form, but when he didn't have it signed, that was no good. Ron halfheartedly suggested the Invisibility Cloak, but Hermione stamped on that idea because of the dangers of being able to see through them. Percy had said what were possibly the least helpful words of comfort.

"They make a fuss about Hogsmeade, but I assure you, Harry, it's not all it's cracked up to be," he said seriously. "All right, it's a bit of a mess, and yes, the Shrieking Shack's always worth a visit, but really, Harry, apart from that, you're not missing much."

On Halloween morning, Harry awoke with the rest and went down to breakfast, feeling thoroughly depressed, though he tried to hide it.

"We'll bring you lots of sweets back from Honeydukes," said Hermione, looking desperately sorry for him.

"Yeah, loads," said Ron. He and Hermione had finally forgotten their squabble about Crookshanks in the face of Harry's misery.

"Don't worry about me," said Harry, in what he hoped was an offhand voice, "I'll see you at the feast. Have a good time."

He accompanied them to the entrance hall, where Filch, the caretaker, was standing inside the front doors, checking the list of names, and making sure that no one was sneaking out who shouldn't be going.

"Staying here, Potter?" shouted Malfoy, who was standing in line with Crabbe and Goyle. "Scared of passing the demon?"

Harry ignored him and made his solitary way up the marble staircase, through the deserted corridors, and back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Password?" said the Fat Lady, jerking out of a doze.

"Fortuna Major," said Harry listlessly.

The portrait swung open and he climbed through the hole into the common room. It was full of chattering first and second years who had been in Hogsmeade so often the novelty had worn off.

"Harry! Harry! Hi, Harry!"

It was Colin Creevey, a second year who was deeply in awe of Harry and never missed an opportunity to speak to him.

"Aren't you going to Hogsmeade, Harry? Why not? Hey" — Colin looked eagerly around at his friends — "you can come with us!"

"Er — no, thanks, Colin," said Harry, who wasn't in the mood to have a lot of people staring avidly at the scar on his forehead. "I've got some work done."

After that, he had no choice but to turn right around and head back out of the portrait hole again.

"What was the point waking me up?" the Fat Lady called grumpily after him as he walked away.

Harry wandered dispiritedly toward the library, but halfway there he changed his mind; he didn't feel like working. He turned back and headed for the feast.

sly just seen off the last of the Hogsmeade visitors.

"What are you doing?" Filch snarled suspiciously.

"Nothing," said Harry truthfully.

"Nothing!" spat Filch, his jowls quivering unpleasantly. "A likely story! Sneaking around on your own — why aren't you getting Worms like the rest of your nasty little friends?"

Harry shrugged.

"Well, get back to your common room where you belong!" snapped Filch, and he stood glaring until Harry had passed. But Harry didn't go back to the common room; he climbed a staircase, thinking vaguely of visiting the Owlery to see if inside one of the rooms said, "Harry?"

Harry doubled back to see who had spoken and met Professor Lupin, looking around his office door.

"What are you doing?" said Lupin, though in a very different voice from Filch. "Where are Ron and Hermione?"

"Hogsmeade," said Harry, in a would-be casual voice.

"Ah," said Lupin. He considered Harry for a moment. "Why don't you come in? I've just taken delivery of a grindylow from

"A what?" said Harry.

He followed Lupin into his office. In the corner stood a very large tank of water. A sickly green creature with sharp little tentacles and flexing its long, spindly fingers.

"Water demon," said Lupin, surveying the grindylow thoughtfully. "We shouldn't have much difficulty with him, not as long as he has normally long fingers? Strong, but very brittle."

The grindylow bared its green teeth and then buried itself in a tangle of weeds in a corner.

"Cup of tea?" Lupin said, looking around for his kettle. "I was just thinking of making one."

"All right," said Harry awkwardly.

Lupin tapped the kettle with his wand and a blast of steam issued suddenly from the spout.

"Sit down," said Lupin, taking the lid off a dusty tin. "I've only got teabags, I'm afraid — but I daresay you've had enough of those."

Harry looked at him. Lupin's eyes were twinkling.

"How did you know about that?" Harry asked.

"Professor McGonagall told me," said Lupin, passing Harry a chipped mug of tea. "You're not worried, are you?"

"No," said Harry.

He thought for a moment of telling Lupin about the dog he'd seen in Magnolia Crescent but decided not to. He didn't want to seem like he couldn't cope with a boggart.

Something of Harry's thoughts seemed to have shown on his face, because Lupin said, "Anything worrying you, Harry?"

"No," Harry lied. He drank a bit of tea and watched the grindylow brandishing a fist at him. "Yes," he said suddenly, "what about the boggart?"

"Yes," said Lupin slowly.

"Why didn't you let me fight it?" said Harry abruptly.

Lupin raised his eyebrows.

"I would have thought that was obvious, Harry," he said, sounding surprised.

Harry, who had expected Lupin to deny that he'd done any such thing, was taken aback.

"Why?" he said again.

"Well," said Lupin, frowning slightly, "I assumed that if the boggart faced you, it would assume the shape of Lord Voldemort. Harry stared. Not only was this the last answer he'd expected, but Lupin had said Voldemort's name. The only person who had ever said that name was Professor Dumbledore.

"Clearly, I was wrong," said Lupin, still frowning at Harry. "But I didn't think it a good idea for Lord Voldemort to mate with a boggart."

"But then," said Harry honestly. "I — I remembered those dementors."

"I see," said Lupin thoughtfully. "Well, well . . . I'm impressed." He smiled slightly at the look of surprise on Harry's face. "Very wise, Harry."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, so he drank some more tea.

"So you've been thinking that I didn't believe you capable of fighting the boggart?" said Lupin shrewdly.

"Well . . . yeah," said Harry. He was suddenly feeling a lot happier. "Professor Lupin, you know the dementors —"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in," called Lupin.

The door opened, and in came Snape. He was carrying a goblet, which was smoking faintly, and stopped at the sight of Lupin.

"Ah, Severus," said Lupin, smiling. "Thanks very much. Could you leave it here on the desk for me?"

Snape set down the smoking goblet, his eyes wandering between Harry and Lupin.

"I was just showing Harry my grindylow," said Lupin pleasantly, pointing at the tank.

"Fascinating," said Snape, without looking at it. "You should drink that directly, Lupin."

"Yes, yes, I will," said Lupin.

"I made an entire cauldronful," Snape continued. "If you need more."

"I should probably take some again tomorrow. Thanks very much, Severus."

"Not at all," said Snape, but there was a look in his eye Harry didn't like. He backed out of the room, unsmiling and without a word.

"Professor Snape has very kindly concocted a potion for me," he said. "I have never been much of a potion-brewer and I have never tasted it. Pity sugar makes it useless," he added, taking a sip and shuddering.

"I've been feeling a bit off-color," he said. "This potion is the only thing that helps. I am very lucky to be working along p to making it."

"Professor Snape's very interested in the Dark Arts," he blurted out.

"Some people reckon —" Harry hesitated, then plunged recklessly on, "some people reckon he'd do anything to get t

Lupin drained the goblet and pulled a face.

"Right," said Harry, putting down his empty teacup.

"There you go," said Ron. "We got as much as we could carry."

"Thanks," said Harry, picking up a packet of tiny black Pepper Imps. "What's Hogsmeade like? Where did you go?"

"The post office, Harry! About two hundred owls, all sitting on shelves, all color-coded depending on how fast you want the letter to arrive."

"We think we saw an ogre, honestly, they get all sorts at the Three Broomsticks —"

"What did you do?" said Hermione, looking anxious. "Did you get any work done?"

He told them all about the goblet. Ron's mouth fell open.

"Lupin drank it?" he gasped. "Is he mad?"

Hermione checked her watch.

"We'd better go down, you know, the feast'll be starting in five minutes. . . ." They hurried through the portrait hole and

"But if he — you know" — Hermione dropped her voice, glancing nervously around — "if he was trying to — to poison

"Yeah, maybe," said Harry as they reached the entrance hall and crossed into the Great Hall. It had been decorated v

luttering live bats, and many flaming orange streamers, which were swimming lazily across the stormy ceiling like br

The food was delicious; even Hermione and Ron, who were full to bursting with Honeydukes sweets, managed second

ssor Lupin looked cheerful and as well as he ever did; he was talking animatedly to tiny little Professor Flitwick, the C

place where Snape sat. Was he imagining it, or were Snape's eyes flickering toward Lupin more often than was natural?

The feast finished with an entertainment provided by the Hogwarts ghosts. They popped out of the walls and tables

dor ghost, had a great success with a reenactment of his own botched beheading.

It had been such a pleasant evening that Harry's good mood couldn't even be spoiled by Malfoy, who shouted through

e, Potter!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed the rest of the Gryffindors along the usual path to Gryffindor Tower, but when th

dy, they found it jammed with students.

"Why isn't anyone going in?" said Ron curiously.

Harry peered over the heads in front of him. The portrait seemed to be closed.

"Let me through, please," came Percy's voice, and he came bustling importantly through the crowd. "What's the hold

Head Boy —"

And then a silence fell over the crowd, from the front first, so that a chill seemed to spread down the corridor. They

essor Dumbledore. Quick."

People's heads turned; those at the back were standing on tiptoe.

"What's going on?" said Ginny, who had just arrived.

A moment later, Professor Dumbledore was there, sweeping toward the portrait; the Gryffindors squeezed together

what the trouble was.

"Oh, my —" Hermione grabbed Harry's arm.

The Fat Lady had vanished from her portrait, which had been slashed so viciously that strips of canvas littered the floor.

Dumbledore took one quick look at the ruined painting and turned, his eyes somber, to see Professors McGonagall,

"We need to find her," said Dumbledore. "Professor McGonagall, please go to Mr. Filch at once and tell him to search

"You'll be lucky!" said a cackling voice.

It was Peeves the Poltergeist, bobbing over the crowd and looking delighted, as he always did, at the sight of wreckage.

"What do you mean, Peeves?" said Dumbledore calmly, and Peeves's grin faded a little. He didn't dare taunt Dumbledo

ackle.

"Ashamed, Your Headship, sir. Doesn't want to be seen. She's a horrible mess. Saw her running through the landscape, looking dreadful," he said happily. "Poor thing," he added unconvincingly.

"Did she say who did it?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Oh yes, Professorhead," said Peeves, with the air of one cradling a large bombshell in his arms. "He got very angry with me. Grinned at Dumbledore from between his own legs. 'Nasty temper he's got, that Sirius Black.'"

CHAPTER NINE

GRIM DEFEAT

Professor Dumbledore sent all the Gryffindors back to the Great Hall, where they were joined ten minutes later by the other houses, all looking extremely confused.

"The teachers and I need to conduct a thorough search of the castle," Professor Dumbledore told them as Professor McGonagall stood that, for your own safety, you will have to spend the night here. I want the prefects to stand guard over the entrance. Any disturbance should be reported to me immediately," he added to Percy, who was looking immensely proud and anxious. Professor Dumbledore paused, about to leave the hall, and said, "Oh, yes, you'll be needing . . ."

One casual wave of his wand and the long tables flew to the edges of the hall and stood themselves against the walls, and the purple sleeping bags.

"Sleep well," said Professor Dumbledore, closing the door behind him.

The hall immediately began to buzz excitedly; the Gryffindors were telling the rest of the school what had just happened.

"Everyone into their sleeping bags!" shouted Percy. "Come on, now, no more talking! Lights out in ten minutes!"

"C'mon," Ron said to Harry and Hermione; they seized three sleeping bags and dragged them into a corner.

"Do you think Black's still in the castle?" Hermione whispered anxiously.

"Dumbledore obviously thinks he might be," said Ron.

"It's very lucky he picked tonight, you know," said Hermione as they climbed fully dressed into their sleeping bags and found that they weren't in the tower. . . ."

"I reckon he's lost track of time, being on the run," said Ron. "Didn't realize it was Halloween. Otherwise he'd have come in already." Hermione shuddered.

All around them, people were asking one another the same question: "How did he get in?"

"Maybe he knows how to Apparate," said a Ravenclaw a few feet away. "Just appear out of thin air, you know."

"Disguised himself, probably," said a Hufflepuff fifth year.

"He could've flown in," suggested Dean Thomas.

"Honestly, am I the only person who's ever bothered to read Hogwarts: A History?" said Hermione crossly to Harry and Ron.

"Probably," said Ron. "Why?"

"Because the castle's protected by more than walls, you know," said Hermione. "There are all sorts of enchantments in here. And I'd like to see the disguise that could fool those dementors. They're guarding every single entrance to the castle. All the secret passages, they'll have them covered. . . ."

"The lights are going out now!" Percy shouted. "I want everyone in their sleeping bags and no more talking!"

The candles all went out at once. The only light now came from the silvery ghosts, who were drifting about talking to each other. The sky outside, was scattered with stars. What with that, and the whispering that still filled the hall, Harry felt as though he was in a dream.

Once every hour, a teacher would reappear in the hall to check that everything was quiet. Around three in the morning, Professor Dumbledore came in. Harry watched him looking around for Percy, who had been prowling between the sleeping bags, telling the others what he was doing, Ron, and Hermione, who quickly pretended to be asleep as Dumbledore's footsteps drew nearer.

"Any sign of him, Professor?" asked Percy in a whisper.

"No. All well here?"

"Everything under control, sir."

"Good. There's no point moving them all now. I've found a temporary guardian for the Gryffindor portrait hole. You'll be all right."

"And the Fat Lady, sir?"

"Hiding in a map of Argyllshire on the second floor. Apparently she refused to let Black in without the password, so he had to go down, I'll have Mr. Filch restore her."

Harry heard the door of the hall creak open again, and more footsteps.

"Headmaster?" It was Snape. Harry kept quite still, listening hard. "The whole of the third floor has been searched. He's not there."

"What about the Astronomy Tower? Professor Trelawney's room? The Owlery?"

"All searched . . ."

"Very well, Severus. I didn't really expect Black to linger."

"Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?" asked Snape.

Harry raised his head very slightly off his arms to free his other ear.

"Many, Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next."

Harry opened his eyes a fraction and squinted up to where they stood; Dumbledore's back was to him, but he could see that he was looking angry.

"You remember the conversation we had, Headmaster, just before — ah — the start of term?" said Snape, who was looking at Harry.

versation.

"I do, Severus," said Dumbledore, and there was something like warning in his voice.

"It seems — almost impossible — that Black could have entered the school without inside help. I did express my con-

"I do not believe a single person inside this castle would have helped Black enter it," said Dumbledore, and his tone r-

reply. "I must go down to the dementors," said Dumbledore. "I said I would inform them when our search was compl-

"Didn't they want to help, sir?" said Percy.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore coldly. "But I'm afraid no dementor will cross the threshold of this castle while I am headm-

Percy looked slightly abashed. Dumbledore left the hall, walking quickly and quietly. Snape stood for a moment, wat-

face; then he too left.

Harry glanced sideways at Ron and Hermione. Both of them had their eyes open too, reflecting the starry ceiling.

"What was all that about?" Ron mouthed.

The school talked of nothing but Sirius Black for the next few days. The theories about how he had entered the castle - much of their next Herbology class telling anyone who'd listen that Black could turn into a flowering shrub.

The Fat Lady's ripped canvas had been taken off the wall and replaced with the portrait of Sir Cadogan and his fat gr- f his time challenging people to duels, and the rest thinking up ridiculously complicated passwords, which he change-

"He's a complete lunatic," said Seamus Finnigan angrily to Percy. "Can't we get anyone else?"

"None of the other pictures wanted the job," said Percy. "Frightened of what happened to the Fat Lady. Sir Cadogan v-

Sir Cadogan, however, was the least of Harry's worries. He was now being closely watched. Teachers found excuses t- unsuspected, on his mother's orders) was tailing him everywhere like an extremely pompous guard dog. To cap it all, Pro- ber expression on her face Harry thought someone must have died.

"There's no point hiding it from you any longer, Potter," she said in a very serious voice. "I know this will come as a sh-

"I know he's after me," said Harry wearily. "I heard Ron's dad telling his mum. Mr. Weasley works for the Ministry of M-

Professor McGonagall seemed very taken aback. She stared at Harry for a moment or two, then said, "I see! Well, in t- idea for you to be practicing Quidditch in the evenings. Out on the field with only your team members, it's very expo-

"We've got our first match on Saturday!" said Harry, outraged. "I've got to train, Professor!"

Professor McGonagall considered him intently. Harry knew she was deeply interested in the Gryffindor team's prosp- he first place. He waited, holding his breath.

"Hmm . . ." Professor McGonagall stood up and stared out of the window at the Quidditch field, just visible through th- Cup at last . . . but all the same, Potter . . . I'd be happier if a teacher were present. I'll ask Madam Hooch to oversee y-

The weather worsened steadily as the first Quidditch match drew nearer. Undaunted, the Gryffindor team was traini- al training session before Saturday's match, Oliver Wood gave his team some unwelcome news.

"We're not playing Slytherin!" he told them, looking very angry. "Flint's just been to see me. We're playing Hufflepuff i-

"Why?" chorused the rest of the team.

"Flint's excuse is that their Seeker's arm's still injured," said Wood, grinding his teeth furiously. "But it's obvious why th- nk it'll damage their chances. . . ."

There had been strong winds and heavy rain all day, and as Wood spoke, they heard a distant rumble of thunder.

"There's nothing wrong with Malfoy's arm!" said Harry furiously. "He's faking it!"

"I know that, but we can't prove it," said Wood bitterly. "And we've been practicing all those moves assuming we're pl- quite different. They've got a new Captain and Seeker, Cedric Diggory —"

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie suddenly giggled.

"What?" said Wood, frowning at this lighthearted behavior.

"He's that tall, good-looking one, isn't he?" said Angelina.

"Strong and silent," said Katie, and they started to giggle again.

"He's only silent because he's too thick to string two words together," said Fred impatiently. "I don't know why you're - d them, Harry caught the Snitch in about five minutes, remember?"

"We were playing in completely different conditions!" Wood shouted, his eyes bulging slightly. "Diggory's put a very s- 'd take it like this! We mustn't relax! We must keep our focus! Slytherin is trying to wrong-foot us! We must win!"

"Oliver, calm down!" said Fred, looking slightly alarmed. "We're taking Hufflepuff very seriously. Seriously."

The day before the match, the winds reached howling point and the rain fell harder than ever. It was so dark inside t- lit. The Slytherin team was looking very smug indeed, and none more so than Malfoy.

"Ah, if only my arm was feeling a bit better!" he sighed as the gale outside pounded the windows.

Harry had no room in his head to worry about anything except the match tomorrow. Oliver Wood kept hurrying up t- d, Wood talked for so long that Harry suddenly realized he was ten minutes late for Defense Against the Dark Arts, a-

a very fast swerve, Harry, so you might want to try looping him —"

Harry skidded to a halt outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, pulled the door open, and dashed insid-

"Sorry I'm late, Professor Lupin, I —"

But it wasn't Professor Lupin who looked up at him from the teacher's desk; it was Snape.

"This lesson began ten minutes ago, Potter, so I think we'll make it ten points from Gryffindor. Sit down."

But Harry didn't move.

"Where's Professor Lupin?" he said.

"He says he is feeling too ill to teach today," said Snape with a twisted smile. "I believe I told you to sit down?" But Harry stayed where he was.

"What's wrong with him?"

Snape's black eyes glittered.

"Nothing life-threatening," he said, looking as though he wished it were. "Five more points from Gryffindor, and if I had Harry walked slowly to his seat and sat down. Snape looked around at the class.

"As I was saying before Potter interrupted, Professor Lupin has not left any record of the topics you have covered so far."

"Please, sir, we've done boggarts, Red Caps, kappas, and grindylows," said Hermione quickly, "and we're just about to do werewolves."

"Be quiet," said Snape coldly. "I did not ask for information. I was merely commenting on Professor Lupin's lack of organization."

"He's the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we've ever had," said Dean Thomas boldly, and there was a murmur of agreement among the students.

"You are easily satisfied. Lupin is hardly overtaxing you — I would expect first years to be able to deal with Red Caps and werewolves. Harry watched him flick through the textbook, to the very back chapter, which he must know they hadn't covered.

"— werewolves," said Snape.

"But, sir," said Hermione, seemingly unable to restrain herself, "we're not supposed to do werewolves yet, we're due to do them next week."

"Miss Granger," said Snape in a voice of deadly calm, "I was under the impression that I am teaching this lesson, not you. Do not interrupt me around again. "All of you! Now!"

With many bitter sidelong looks and some sullen muttering, the class opened their books.

"Which of you can tell me how we distinguish between the werewolf and the true wolf?" said Snape.

Everyone sat in motionless silence; everyone except Hermione, whose hand, as it so often did, had shot straight into the air.

"Anyone?" Snape said, ignoring Hermione. His twisted smile was back. "Are you telling me that Professor Lupin hasn't covered this?"

"We told you," said Parvati suddenly, "we haven't got as far as werewolves yet, we're still on —"

"Silence!" snarled Snape. "Well, well, well, I never thought I'd meet a third-year class who wouldn't even recognize a werewolf. Professor Dumbledore how very behind you all are. . . ."

"Please, sir," said Hermione, whose hand was still in the air, "the werewolf differs from the true wolf in several small details."

"That is the second time you have spoken out of turn, Miss Granger," said Snape coolly. "Five more points from Gryffindor."

Hermione went very red, put down her hand, and stared at the floor with her eyes full of tears. It was a mark of how much she cared because every one of them had called Hermione a know-it-all at least once, and Ron, who told Hermione she was a know-it-all, and she knows the answer! Why ask if you don't want to be told?"

The class knew instantly he'd gone too far. Snape advanced on Ron slowly, and the room held its breath.

"Detention, Weasley," Snape said silkily, his face very close to Ron's. "And if I ever hear you criticize the way I teach a class, you'll be in detention for a month."

No one made a sound throughout the rest of the lesson. They sat and made notes on werewolves from the textbook. They had been doing with Professor Lupin.

"Very poorly explained . . . That is incorrect, the kappa is more commonly found in Mongolia. . . . Professor Lupin gave a very good explanation."

When the bell rang at last, Snape held them back.

"You will each write an essay, to be handed in to me, on the ways you recognize and kill werewolves. I want two rolls of parchment each."

It is time somebody took this class in hand. Weasley, stay behind, we need to arrange your detention."

Harry and Hermione left the room with the rest of the class, who waited until they were well out of earshot, then burst into a fit of giggles.

"Snape's never been like this with any of our other Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, even if he did want the job," said Hermione. "Do you think this is all because of the boggart?"

"I don't know," said Hermione pensively. "But I really hope Professor Lupin gets better soon. . . ."

Ron caught up with them five minutes later, in a towering rage.

"D'you know what that" — (he called Snape something that made Hermione say "Ron!") — "is making me do? I've got to go to detention. I'm breathing deeply, his fists clenched. "Why couldn't Black have hidden in Snape's office, eh? He could have finished him off."

Harry woke extremely early the next morning; so early that it was still dark. For a moment he thought the roaring of the wind was coming from his neck and sat bolt upright — Peeves the Poltergeist had been floating next to him, blowing hard in his ear.

"What did you do that for?" said Harry furiously.

Peeves puffed out his cheeks, blew hard, and zoomed backward out of the room, cackling.

Harry fumbled for his alarm clock and looked at it. It was half past four. Cursing Peeves, he rolled over and tried to go back to sleep. He was awake, to ignore the sounds of the thunder rumbling overhead, the pounding of the wind against the castle walls, and the howling of the wind. A few hours he would be out on the Quidditch field, battling through that gale. Finally, he gave up any thought of more sleep and walked quietly out of the dormitory.

As Harry opened the door, something brushed against his leg. He bent down just in time to grab Crookshanks by the tail.

"You know, I reckon Ron was right about you," Harry told Crookshanks suspiciously. "There are plenty of mice around here. You can catch them with your paws. Leave Scabbers alone."

The noise of the storm was even louder in the common room. Harry knew better than to think the match would be over yet. The weather was bad. The storms. Nevertheless, he was starting to feel very apprehensive. Wood had pointed out Cedric Diggory to him in the first round. Cedric was usually light and speedy, but Diggory's weight would be an advantage in this weather because he was less likely to be blown off his feet. Harry whiled away the hours until dawn in front of the fire, getting up every now and then to stop Crookshanks from

"Lucky the ground was so soft."

"I thought he was dead for sure."

"But he didn't even break his glasses."

Harry could hear the voices whispering, but they made no sense whatsoever. He didn't have a clue where he was, or where he knew was that every inch of him was aching as though it had been beaten.

"That was the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life."

Scariest . . . the scariest thing . . . hooded black figures . . . cold . . . screaming . . .

Harry's eyes snapped open. He was lying in the hospital wing. The Gryffindor Quidditch team, spattered with mud from the pitch, were also there, looking as though they'd just climbed out of a swimming pool.

"Harry!" said Fred, who looked extremely white underneath the mud. "How're you feeling?"

It was as though Harry's memory was on fast forward. The lightning — the Grim — the Snitch — and the dementors.

"What happened?" he said, sitting up so suddenly they all gasped.

"You fell off," said Fred. "Must've been — what — fifty feet?"

"We thought you'd died," said Alicia, who was shaking.

Hermione made a small, squeaky noise. Her eyes were extremely bloodshot.

"But the match," said Harry. "What happened? Are we doing a replay?"

No one said anything. The horrible truth sank into Harry like a stone.

"We didn't — lose?"

"Diggory got the Snitch," said George. "Just after you fell. He didn't realize what had happened. When he looked back at the match. But they won fair and square . . . even Wood admits it."

"Where is Wood?" said Harry, suddenly realizing he wasn't there.

"Still in the showers," said Fred. "We think he's trying to drown himself."

Harry put his face to his knees, his hands gripping his hair. Fred grabbed his shoulder and shook it roughly.

"C'mon, Harry, you've never missed the Snitch before."

"There had to be one time you didn't get it," said George.

"It's not over yet," said Fred. "We lost by a hundred points, right? So if Hufflepuff loses to Ravenclaw and we beat Ravenclaw."

"Hufflepuff'll have to lose by at least two hundred points," said George.

"But if they beat Ravenclaw . . ."

"No way, Ravenclaw is too good. But if Slytherin loses against Hufflepuff . . ."

"It all depends on the points — a margin of a hundred either way —"

Harry lay there, not saying a word. They had lost . . . for the first time ever, he had lost a Quidditch match.

After ten minutes or so, Madam Pomfrey came over to tell the team to leave him in peace.

"We'll come and see you later," Fred told him. "Don't beat yourself up, Harry, you're still the best Seeker we've ever had."

The team trooped out, trailing mud behind them. Madam Pomfrey shut the door behind them, looking disapprovingly at the mess.

"Dumbledore was really angry," Hermione said in a quaking voice. "I've never seen him like that before. He ran onto the pitch before you hit the ground. Then he whirled his wand at the dementors. Shot silver stuff at them. They left the stadium in a hurry. We heard him —"

"Then he magicked you onto a stretcher," said Ron. "And walked up to school with you floating on it. Everyone thought you were dead. His voice faded, but Harry hardly noticed. He was thinking about what the dementors had done to him . . . about the way they'd sucked the life out of him so anxiously that he quickly cast around for something matter-of-fact to say."

"Did someone get my Nimbus?"

Ron and Hermione looked quickly at each other.

"Er —"

"What?" said Harry, looking from one to the other.

"Well . . . when you fell off, it got blown away," said Hermione hesitantly.

"And?"

"And it hit — it hit — oh, Harry — it hit the Whomping Willow."

Harry's insides lurched. The Whomping Willow was a very violent tree that stood alone in the middle of the grounds.

"And?" he said, dreading the answer.

"Well, you know the Whomping Willow," said Ron. "It — it doesn't like being hit."

"Professor Flitwick brought it back just before you came around," said Hermione in a very small voice.

Slowly, she reached down for a bag at her feet, turned it upside down, and tipped a dozen bits of splintered wood and a broken broomstick.

CHAPTER TEN

THE MARAUDER'S MAP

Madam Pomfrey insisted on keeping Harry in the hospital wing for the rest of the weekend. He didn't argue or complain. He knew he was being stupid, knew that the Nimbus was beyond repair, but Harry couldn't help it. He had a stream of visitors, all intent on cheering him up. Hagrid sent him a bunch of earwiggy flowers that looked like little red worms. Hermione brought him a get-well card she had made herself, which sang shrilly unless Harry kept it shut under his bowl of fruit. The card was accompanied by Wood, who told Harry (in a hollow, dead sort of voice) that he didn't blame him in the slightest. Ron

yone said or did could make Harry feel any better, because they knew only half of what was troubling him. He hadn't told anyone about the Grim, not even Ron and Hermione, because he knew Ron would panic and Hermione, and both appearances had been followed by near-fatal accidents; the first time, he had nearly been run over by the car as the Grim going to haunt him until he actually died? Was he going to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder? And then there were the dementors. Harry felt sick and humiliated every time he thought of them. Everyone said the dementors went near one. No one else heard echoes in their head of their dying parents.

Because Harry knew who that screaming voice belonged to now. He had heard her words, heard them over and over again, staring at the strips of moonlight on the ceiling. When the dementors approached him, he heard the last moments of Sirius Black, and Voldemort's laughter before he murdered her. . . . Harry dozed fitfully, sinking into dreams full of clamor and again on his mother's voice.

It was a relief to return to the noise and bustle of the main school on Monday, where he was forced to think about other things. Malfoy was almost beside himself with glee at Gryffindor's defeat. He had finally taken off his bandages, and celebrated the news of Harry falling off his broom. Malfoy spent much of their next Potions class doing dementor imitations across the classroom, a cowardly heart at Malfoy, which hit him in the face and caused Snape to take fifty points from Gryffindor.

"If Snape's teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts again, I'm skiving off," said Ron as they headed toward Lupin's class. Hermione peered around the classroom door.

"It's okay!"

Professor Lupin was back at work. It certainly looked as though he had been ill. His old robes were hanging more loosely on him, but he smiled at the class as they took their seats, and they burst at once into an explosion of complaints about Snape.

"It's not fair, he was only filling in, why should he give us homework?"

"We don't know anything about werewolves —"

"— two rolls of parchment!"

"Did you tell Professor Snape we haven't covered them yet?" Lupin asked, frowning slightly.

The babble broke out again.

"Yes, but he said we were really behind —"

"— he wouldn't listen —"

"— two rolls of parchment!"

Professor Lupin smiled at the look of indignation on every face.

"Don't worry. I'll speak to Professor Snape. You don't have to do the essay."

"Oh no," said Hermione, looking very disappointed. "I've already finished it!"

They had a very enjoyable lesson. Professor Lupin had brought along a glass box containing a hinkypunk, a little one-eyed creature, rather frail and harmless-looking.

"Lures travelers into bogs," said Professor Lupin as they took notes. "You notice the lantern dangling from his hand?"

The hinkypunk made a horrible squelching noise against the glass.

When the bell rang, everyone gathered up their things and headed for the door, Harry among them, but —

"Wait a moment, Harry," Lupin called. "I'd like a word."

Harry doubled back and watched Professor Lupin covering the hinkypunk's box with a cloth.

"I heard about the match," said Lupin, turning back to his desk and starting to pile books into his briefcase, "and I'm sorry."

"No," said Harry. "The tree smashed it to bits."

Lupin sighed.

"They planted the Whomping Willow the same year that I arrived at Hogwarts. People used to play a game, trying to get past it. Gudgeon nearly lost an eye, and we were forbidden to go near it. No broomstick would have a chance."

"Did you hear about the dementors too?" said Harry with difficulty.

Lupin looked at him quickly.

"Yes, I did. I don't think any of us have seen Professor Dumbledore that angry. They have been growing restless for some time. . . . I suppose they were the reason you fell?"

"Yes," said Harry. He hesitated, and then the question he had to ask burst from him before he could stop himself. "Why?"

"It has nothing to do with weakness," said Professor Lupin sharply, as though he had read Harry's mind. "The dementors feed on your past that the others don't have."

A ray of wintery sunlight fell across the classroom, illuminating Lupin's gray hairs and the lines on his young face.

"Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in it, and feed off it of the air around them. Even Muggles feel their presence, though they can't see them. Get too near a dementor and you'll feel it. If it can, the dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself . . . soulless and evil. You'll lose your life. And the worst that happened to you, Harry, is enough to make anyone fall off their broom. You have nothing to fear."

"When they get near me —" Harry stared at Lupin's desk, his throat tight. "I can hear Voldemort murdering my mum."

Lupin made a sudden motion with his arm as though to grip Harry's shoulder, but thought better of it. There was a moment's silence.

"Why did they have to come to the match?" said Harry bitterly.

"They're getting hungry," said Lupin coolly, shutting his briefcase with a snap. "Dumbledore won't let them into the school grounds. I think they could resist the large crowd around the Quidditch field. All that excitement . . . emotions running high . . ."

"Azkaban must be terrible," Harry muttered. Lupin nodded grimly.

"The fortress is set on a tiny island, way out to sea, but they don't need walls and water to keep the prisoners in, not for a single cheerful thought. Most of them go mad within weeks."

"But Sirius Black escaped from them," Harry said slowly. "He got away. . . ."

Lupin's briefcase slipped from the desk; he had to stoop quickly to catch it.

"Yes," he said, straightening up, "Black must have found a way to fight them. I wouldn't have believed it possible. . . . He is left with them too long. . . ."

"You made that dementor on the train back off," said Harry suddenly.

"There are — certain defenses one can use," said Lupin. "But there was only one dementor on the train. The more the better."

"What defenses?" said Harry at once. "Can you teach me?"

"I don't pretend to be an expert at fighting dementors, Harry . . . quite the contrary. . . ."

"But if the dementors come to another Quidditch match, I need to be able to fight them —"

Lupin looked into Harry's determined face, hesitated, then said, "Well . . . all right. I'll try and help. But it'll have to wait until after the holidays. I chose a very inconvenient time to fall ill."

What with the promise of anti-dementor lessons from Lupin, the thought that he might never have to hear his mother's scolding over their Quidditch match at the end of November, Harry's mood took a definite upturn. Gryffindor were not out of the match. Wood became repossessed of his manic energy, and worked his team as hard as ever in the chilly haze of rain in the grounds. Dumbledore's anger seemed to be keeping them at their stations at the entrances.

Two weeks before the end of the term, the sky lightened suddenly to a dazzling, opaline white and the muddy grounds around the castle, there was a buzz of Christmas in the air. Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, had already decorated his classroom with tinkling fairies. The students were all happily discussing their plans for the holidays. Both Ron and Hermione had decided they couldn't stand two weeks with Percy, and Hermione insisted she needed to use the library, Harry wasn't fooled; the school was too quiet. To everyone's delight except Harry's, there was to be another Hogsmeade trip on the very last weekend of the term.

"We can do all our Christmas shopping there!" said Hermione. "Mum and Dad would really love those Toothflossing Socks. . . . Resigned to the fact that he would be the only third year staying behind again, Harry borrowed a copy of Which Broodmare Different makes. He had been riding one of the school brooms at team practice, an ancient Shooting Star, which was very fast. On the Saturday morning of the Hogsmeade trip, Harry bid good-bye to Ron and Hermione, who were wrapped in cloaks, and walked back toward Gryffindor Tower. Snow had started to fall outside the windows, and the castle was very still and quiet."

"Psst — Harry!"

He turned, halfway along the third-floor corridor, to see Fred and George peering out at him from behind a statue of a giant.

"What are you doing?" said Harry curiously. "How come you're not going to Hogsmeade?"

"We've come to give you a bit of festive cheer before we go," said Fred, with a mysterious wink. "Come in here. . . ."

He nodded toward an empty classroom to the left of the one-eyed statue. Harry followed Fred and George inside. George was sitting on the floor, and Harry.

"Early Christmas present for you, Harry," he said.

Fred pulled something from inside his cloak with a flourish and laid it on one of the desks. It was a large, square, very old parchment, and Harry, suspecting one of Fred and George's jokes, stared at it.

"What's that supposed to be?"

"This, Harry, is the secret of our success," said George, patting the parchment fondly.

"It's a wrench, giving it to you," said Fred, "but we decided last night, your need's greater than ours."

"Anyway, we know it by heart," said George. "We bequeath it to you. We don't really need it anymore."

"And what do I need with a bit of old parchment?" said Harry.

"A bit of old parchment!" said Fred, closing his eyes with a grimace as though Harry had mortally offended him. "Explains a lot."

"Well . . . when we were in our first year, Harry — young, carefree, and innocent —"

Harry snorted. He doubted whether Fred and George had ever been innocent.

"— well, more innocent than we are now — we got into a spot of bother with Filch."

"We let off a Dungbomb in the corridor and it upset him for some reason —"

"So he hauled us off to his office and started threatening us with the usual —"

"— detention —"

"— disembowelment —"

"— and we couldn't help noticing a drawer in one of his filing cabinets marked Confiscated and Highly Dangerous."

"Don't tell me —" said Harry, starting to grin.

"Well, what would you've done?" said Fred. "George caused a diversion by dropping another Dungbomb, I whipped the parchment out of his hands."

"It's not as bad as it sounds, you know," said George. "We don't reckon Filch ever found out how to work it. He probably never even tried it."

"And you know how to work it?"

"Oh yes," said Fred, smirking. "This little beauty's taught us more than all the teachers in this school."

"You're winding me up," said Harry, looking at the ragged old bit of parchment.

"Oh, are we?" said George.

He took out his wand, touched the parchment lightly, and said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

And at once, thin ink lines began to spread like a spider's web from the point that George's wand had touched. They crept across the parchment; then words began to blossom across the top, great, curly green words, that proclaimed: Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and ProngsPurveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makersare proud to present THE MARAUDER'S MAP

It was a map showing every detail of the Hogwarts castle and grounds. But the truly remarkable thing were the tiny ink figures that were writing. Astounded, Harry bent over it. A labeled dot in the top left corner showed that Professor Dumbledore was presently on the second floor; and Peeves the Poltergeist was currently bouncing around the trophy room. And as Harry's eyes traveled across the map, This map showed a set of passages he had never entered. And many of them seemed to lead —

"Right into Hogsmeade," said Fred, tracing one of them with his finger. "There are seven in all. Now, Filch knows about only ones who know about these. Don't bother with the one behind the mirror on the fourth floor. We used it until last year, but reckon anyone's ever used this one, because the Whomping Willow's planted right over the entrance. But this one he's used it loads of times. And as you might've noticed, the entrance is right outside this room, through that one-eyed old crook."

"Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," sighed George, patting the heading of the map. "We owe them so much."

"Noble men, working tirelessly to help a new generation of lawbreakers," said Fred solemnly.

"Right," said George briskly. "Don't forget to wipe it after you've used it —"

"— or anyone can read it," Fred said warningly.

"Just tap it again and say, 'Mischief managed!' And it'll go blank."

"So, young Harry," said Fred, in an uncanny impersonation of Percy, "mind you behave yourself."

"See you in Honeydukes," said George, winking.

They left the room, both smirking in a satisfied sort of way.

Harry stood there, gazing at the miraculous map. He watched the tiny ink Mrs. Norris turn left and pause to sniff at something. He didn't have to pass the dementors at all. . . .

But even as he stood there, flooded with excitement, something Harry had once heard Mr. Weasley say came floating through his mind. Never trust anything that can think for itself, if you can't see where it keeps its brain.

This map was one of those dangerous magical objects Mr. Weasley had been warning against. . . . Aids for Magical Mischief-Makers. . . . e it to get into Hogsmeade, it wasn't as though he wanted to steal anything or attack anyone . . . and Fred and George. . . .

Harry traced the secret passage to Honeydukes with his finger.

Then, quite suddenly, as though following orders, he rolled up the map, stuffed it inside his robes, and hurried to the end of the corridor. There was no one outside. Very carefully, he edged out of the room and behind the statue of the one-eyed witch.

What did he have to do? He pulled out the map again and saw, to his astonishment, that a new ink figure had appeared. It was a tiny figure, where the real Harry was standing, about halfway down the third-floor corridor. Harry watched carefully. His little ink figure quickly took out his real wand and tapped the statue. Nothing happened. He looked back at the map. The tiniest ink figure he'd ever seen, id, "Dissendium."

"Dissendium!" Harry whispered, tapping the stone witch again.

At once, the statue's hump opened wide enough to admit a fairly thin person. Harry glanced quickly up and down the corridor. No one. He slipped his head first, and pushed himself forward.

He slid a considerable way down what felt like a stone slide, then landed on cold, damp earth. He stood up, looking around.

"and saw that he was in a very narrow, low, earthy passageway. He raised the map, tapped it with the tip of his wand, and it glowed. He folded it carefully, tucked it inside his robes, then, heart beating fast, both excited and apprehensive, he set off.

The passage twisted and turned, more like the burrow of a giant rabbit than anything else. Harry hurried along it, still holding the map. It was in front of him.

It took ages, but Harry had the thought of Honeydukes to sustain him. After what felt like an hour, the passage began to level out.

Ten minutes later, he came to the foot of some worn stone steps, which rose out of sight above him. Careful not to make a sound, he lost count as he climbed, watching his feet. . . . Then, without warning, his head hit something hard.

It seemed to be a trapdoor. Harry stood there, massaging the top of his head, listening. He couldn't hear any sounds coming from above or below the edge.

He was in a cellar, which was full of wooden crates and boxes. Harry climbed out of the trapdoor and replaced it — it was a heavy door — to tell it was there. Harry crept slowly toward the wooden staircase that led upstairs. Now he could definitely hear voices. He heard the sound of a door shutting.

Wondering what he ought to do, he suddenly heard a door open much closer at hand; somebody was about to come. "And get another box of Jelly Slugs, dear, they've nearly cleaned us out —" said a woman's voice.

A pair of feet was coming down the staircase. Harry leapt behind an enormous crate and waited for the footsteps to pass. He might not get another chance —

Quickly and silently, Harry dodged out from his hiding place and climbed the stairs; looking back, he saw an enormous door at the top of the stairs, slipped through it, and found himself behind the counter of Honeydukes — he ducked under the counter. Honeydukes was so crowded with Hogwarts students that no one looked twice at Harry. He edged among them, looking for a place to hide. He read over Dudley's piggy face if he could see where Harry was now.

There were shelves upon shelves of the most succulent-looking sweets imaginable. Creamy chunks of nougat, shimmering

s of different kinds of chocolate in neat rows; there was a large barrel of Every Flavor Beans, and another of Fizzing Whizzbees. Along yet another wall were "Special Effects" sweets: Drooble's Best Blowing Gum (which filled a room with bluebell-scented Toothflossing Stringmints, tiny black Pepper Imps ("Breathe fire for your friends!"), Ice Mice ("Hear your teeth clatter realistically in the stomach!"), fragile sugar-spun quills, and exploding bonbons.

Harry squeezed himself through a crowd of sixth years and saw a sign hanging in the farthest corner of the shop (UNUSUSUAL FLAVORS) advertising a tray of blood-flavored lollipops. Harry sneaked up behind them.

"Ugh, no, Harry won't want one of those, they're for vampires, I expect," Hermione was saying.

"How about these?" said Ron, shoving a jar of Cockroach Clusters under Hermione's nose.

"Definitely not," said Harry.

Ron nearly dropped the jar.

"Harry!" squealed Hermione. "What are you doing here? How — how did you —?"

"Wow!" said Ron, looking very impressed, "you've learned to Apparate!"

"Course I haven't," said Harry. He dropped his voice so that none of the sixth years could hear him and told them all.

"How come Fred and George never gave it to me!" said Ron, outraged. "I'm their brother!"

"But Harry isn't going to keep it!" said Hermione, as though the idea were ludicrous. "He's going to hand it in to Professor McGonagall."

"No, I'm not!" said Harry.

"Are you mad?" said Ron, goggling at Hermione. "Hand in something that good?"

"If I hand it in, I'll have to say where I got it! Filch would know Fred and George had nicked it!"

"But what about Sirius Black?" Hermione hissed. "He could be using one of the passages on that map to get into the school."

"He can't be getting in through a passage," said Harry quickly. "There are seven secret tunnels on the map, right? Fred and George hid three of the other three — one of them's caved in, so no one can get through it. One of them's got the Whomping Willow passage."

"I just came through — well — it's really hard to see the entrance to it down in the cellar, so unless he knew it was there, he couldn't get in."

Harry hesitated. What if Black did know the passage was there? Ron, however, cleared his throat significantly, and pointed to the door.

—— BY ORDER OF ——

THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Customers are reminded that until further notice, dementors will be patrolling the streets of Hogsmeade every night. All Hogsmeade residents and will be lifted upon the recapture of Sirius Black. It is therefore advisable that you complete your shopping early. Merry Christmas!

"See?" said Ron quietly. "I'd like to see Black try and break into Honeydukes with dementors swarming all over the village. They'd be in for a k-in, wouldn't they? They live over the shop!"

"Yes, but — but —" Hermione seemed to be struggling to find another problem. "Look, Harry still shouldn't be coming here. He'll be in so much trouble! And it's not nightfall yet — what if Sirius Black turns up today? Now?"

"He'd have a job spotting Harry in this," said Ron, nodding through the mullioned windows at the thick, swirling snow. Hermione bit her lip, looking extremely worried.

"Are you going to report me?" Harry asked her, grinning.

"Oh — of course not — but honestly, Harry —"

"Seen the Fizzing Whizbees, Harry?" said Ron, grabbing him and leading him over to their barrel. "And the Jelly Slugs? They're brilliant — it burnt a hole right through my tongue. I remember Mum walloping him with her broomstick." Ron stared broodingly at the jar. "I wonder if I told him they were peanuts?"

When Ron and Hermione had paid for all their sweets, the three of them left Honeydukes for the blizzard outside.

Hogsmeade looked like a Christmas card; the little thatched cottages and shops were all covered in a layer of crisp snow. The windows were lit, and the candles hanging in the trees.

Harry shivered; unlike the other two, he didn't have his cloak. They headed up the street, heads bowed against the wind.

"That's the post office —"

"Zonko's is up there —"

"We could go up to the Shrieking Shack —"

"Tell you what," said Ron, his teeth chattering, "shall we go for a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks?"

Harry was more than willing; the wind was fierce and his hands were freezing, so they crossed the road, and in a few minutes they were in the Three Broomsticks. It was extremely crowded, noisy, warm, and smoky. A curvy sort of woman with a pretty face was serving a bunch of first years.

"That's Madam Rosmerta," said Ron. "I'll get the drinks, shall I?" he added, going slightly red.

Harry and Hermione made their way to the back of the room, where there was a small, vacant table between the windows.

Ron came back five minutes later, carrying three foaming tankards of hot butterbeer.

"Merry Christmas!" he said happily, raising his tankard.

Harry drank deeply. It was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted and seemed to heat every bit of him from the inside.

A sudden breeze ruffled his hair. The door of the Three Broomsticks had opened again. Harry looked over the rim of his tankard. Professors McGonagall and Flitwick had just entered the pub with a flurry of snowflakes, shortly followed by Hagrid, his dog, and a pinstriped cloak — Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic.

In an instant, Ron and Hermione had both placed hands on the top of Harry's head and forced him off his stool and out of the pub.

Harry clutched his empty tankard and watched the teachers' feet move toward the bar, pause, then turn back. Somewhere above him, Hermione whispered, "Mobilibus!"

The Christmas tree beside their table rose a few inches off the ground, drifted sideways, and landed with a soft thump through the dense lower branches, Harry saw four sets of chair legs move back from the table right beside theirs, then they sat down.

Next he saw another pair of feet, wearing sparkly turquoise high heels, and heard a woman's voice.

"A small gillywater —"

"Mine," said Professor McGonagall's voice.

"Four pints of mulled mead —"

"Ta, Rosmerta," said Hagrid.

"A cherry syrup and soda with ice and umbrella —"

"Mmm!" said Professor Flitwick, smacking his lips.

"So you'll be the red currant rum, Minister."

"Thank you, Rosmerta, m'dear," said Fudge's voice. "Lovely to see you again, I must say. Have one yourself, won't you?"

"Well, thank you very much, Minister."

Harry watched the glittering heels march away and back again. His heart was pounding uncomfortably in his throat. What about the teachers too? And how long were they going to sit there? He needed time to sneak back into Honeydukes to get a nervous twitch next to him.

"So, what brings you to this neck of the woods, Minister?" came Madam Rosmerta's voice.

Harry saw the lower part of Fudge's thick body twist in his chair as though he were checking for eavesdroppers. Then he said, "I daresay you heard what happened up at the school at Halloween?"

"I did hear a rumor," admitted Madam Rosmerta.

"Did you tell the whole pub, Hagrid?" said Professor McGonagall exasperatedly.

"Do you think Black's still in the area, Minister?" whispered Madam Rosmerta.

"I'm sure of it," said Fudge shortly.

"You know that the dementors have searched my pub twice?" said Madam Rosmerta, a slight edge to her voice. "Scandalous!"

"Rosmerta, m'dear, I don't like them any more than you do," said Fudge uncomfortably. "Necessary precaution . . . unfortunately they're in a fury against Dumbledore — he won't let them inside the castle grounds."

"I should think not," said Professor McGonagall sharply. "How are we supposed to teach with those horrors floating about?"

"Hear, hear!" squeaked tiny Professor Flitwick, whose feet were dangling a foot from the ground.

"All the same," demurred Fudge, "they are here to protect you all from something much worse. . . . We all know what it is."

"Do you know, I still have trouble believing it," said Madam Rosmerta thoughtfully. "Of all the people to go over to the Dark Side, I mean, I remember him when he was a boy at Hogwarts. If you'd told me then what he was going to become, I'd have been a laughing stock."

"You don't know the half of it, Rosmerta," said Fudge gruffly. "The worst he did isn't widely known."

"The worst?" said Madam Rosmerta, her voice alive with curiosity. "Worse than murdering all those poor people, you mean?"

"I certainly do," said Fudge.

"I can't believe that. What could possibly be worse?"

"You say you remember him at Hogwarts, Rosmerta," murmured Professor McGonagall. "Do you remember who his father was?"

"Naturally," said Madam Rosmerta, with a small laugh. "Never saw one without the other, did you? The number of times he pulled off a double act, Sirius Black and James Potter!"

Harry dropped his tankard with a loud clunk. Ron kicked him.

"Precisely," said Professor McGonagall. "Black and Potter. Ringleaders of their little gang. Both very bright, of course. It's a wonder either had such a pair of troublemakers —"

"I dunno," chuckled Hagrid. "Fred and George Weasley could give 'em a run for their money."

"You'd have thought Black and Potter were brothers!" chimed in Professor Flitwick. "Inseparable!"

"Of course they were," said Fudge. "Potter trusted Black beyond all his other friends. Nothing changed when they left school. He named him godfather to Harry. Harry has no idea, of course. You can imagine how the idea would torment him."

"Because Black turned out to be in league with You-Know-Who?" whispered Madam Rosmerta.

"Worse even than that, m'dear. . . ." Fudge dropped his voice and proceeded in a sort of low rumble. "Not many people know, but Dumbledore, who was of course working tirelessly against You-Know-Who, had a number of useful spies. One of them was a girl who used to go into hiding. Well, of course, You-Know-Who wasn't an easy person to hide from. Dumbledore told them that the girl was a spy, and they were to go and find her. They did, but they never found her. Not even if they had their noses pressed to the ground."

"How does that work?" said Madam Rosmerta, breathless with interest. Professor Flitwick cleared his throat.

"An immensely complex spell," he said squeakily, "involving the magical concealment of a secret inside a single, living person. The Secret-Keeper, and is henceforth impossible to find — unless, of course, the Secret-Keeper chooses to divulge it. As I remember, it was the village where Lily and James were staying for years and never find them, not even if he had his nose pressed to the ground."

"So Black was the Potters' Secret-Keeper?" whispered Madam Rosmerta.

"Naturally," said Professor McGonagall. "James Potter told Dumbledore that Black would die rather than tell where they were, and yet, Dumbledore remained worried. I remember him offering to be the Potters' Secret-Keeper himself."

"He suspected Black?" gasped Madam Rosmerta.

"He was sure that somebody close to the Potters had been keeping You-Know-Who informed of their movements," said Professor McGonagall. "That someone on our side had turned traitor and was passing a lot of information to You-Know-Who."

"But James Potter insisted on using Black?"

"He did," said Fudge heavily. "And then, barely a week after the Fidelius Charm had been performed —"

"Black betrayed them?" breathed Madam Rosmerta.

"He did indeed. Black was tired of his double-agent role, he was ready to declare his support openly for You-Know-Who's death. But, as we all know, You-Know-Who met his downfall in little Harry Potter. Powers gone, horribly weakened, his master had fallen at the very moment when he, Black, had shown his true colors as a traitor. He had no choice but to —"

"Filthy, stinkin' turncoat!" Hagrid said, so loudly that half the bar went quiet.

"Shh!" said Professor McGonagall.

"I met him!" growled Hagrid. "I musta bin the last ter see him before he killed all them people! It was me what rescued him, got him outta the ruins, poor little thing, with a great slash across his forehead, an' his parents dead . . . an' Sirius Black! Never occurred ter me what he was doin' there. I didn't know he'd bin Lily an' James's Secret-Keeper. Thought he'd just be a friend he could do. White an' shakin', he was. An' yeh know what I did? I COMFORTED THE MURDERIN' TRAITOR!" Hagrid roared.

"Hagrid, please!" said Professor McGonagall. "Keep your voice down!"

"How was I ter know he wasn't upset about Lily an' James? It was You-Know-Who he cared about! An' then he says, 'Give me the motorbike!' Ha! But I'd had me orders from Dumbledore, an' I told Black no, Dumbledore said Harry was ter go ter his aunt an' uncle on his motorbike ter get Harry there. 'I won't need it anymore,' he says.

"I shoulda known there was somethin' fishy goin' on then. He loved that motorbike, what was he givin' it ter me for? Vengeance. Dumbledore knew he'd bin the Potters' Secret-Keeper. Black knew he was goin' ter have ter run fer it that night, and he was right."

"But what if I'd given Harry to him, eh? I bet he'd've pitched him off the bike halfway out ter sea. His bes' friends' son! Nothin' and no one that matters to 'em anymore. . . ."

A long silence followed Hagrid's story. Then Madam Rosmerta said with some satisfaction, "But he didn't manage to do it, yeh?"

"Alas, if only we had," said Fudge bitterly. "It was not we who found him. It was little Peter Pettigrew — another of the traitors — that Black had been the Potters' Secret-Keeper, he went after Black himself."

"Pettigrew . . . that fat little boy who was always tagging around after them at Hogwarts?" said Madam Rosmerta.

"Hero-worshipped Black and Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "Never quite in their league, talent-wise. I was often told that. . . ." She sounded as though she had a sudden head cold.

"There, now, Minerva," said Fudge kindly, "Pettigrew died a hero's death. Eyewitnesses — Muggles, of course, we wip out — they say he was sobbing, 'Lily and James, Sirius! How could you?' And then he went for his wand. Well, of course, Black was there, Professor McGonagall blew her nose and said thickly, "Stupid boy . . . foolish boy . . . he was always hopeless at dueling."

"I tell yeh, if I'd got ter Black before little Pettigrew did, I wouldn't've messed around with wands — I'd've ripped him apart!"

"You don't know what you're talking about, Hagrid," said Fudge sharply. "Nobody but trained Hit Wizards from the Ministry could get Black once he was cornered. I was Junior Minister in the Department of Magical Catastrophes at the time, and I was one of the first to see — I will never forget it. I still dream about it sometimes. A crater in the middle of the street, so deep it had cracked the ground. Black standing there laughing, with what was left of Pettigrew in front of him . . . a heap of bloodstained robes and a broken wand. Fudge's voice stopped abruptly. There was the sound of five noses being blown.

"Well, there you have it, Rosmerta," said Fudge thickly. "Black was taken away by twenty members of the Magical Law Enforcement Class, which I think was some comfort to his poor mother. Black's been in Azkaban ever since."

Madam Rosmerta let out a long sigh.

"Is it true he's mad, Minister?"

"I wish I could say that he was," said Fudge slowly. "I certainly believe his master's defeat unhinged him for a while. That was the case of a cornered and desperate man — cruel . . . pointless. Yet I met Black on my last inspection of Azkaban. You know, he wasn't as dark; there's no sense in them . . . but I was shocked at how normal Black seemed. He spoke quite rationally to me. He said if I'd finished with my newspaper, cool as you please, said he missed doing the crossword. Yes, I was astounded at how calm he was one of the most heavily guarded in the place, you know. Dementors outside his door day and night."

"But what do you think he's broken out to do?" said Madam Rosmerta. "Good gracious, Minister, he isn't trying to reject the Ministry."

"I daresay that is his — er — eventual plan," said Fudge evasively. "But we hope to catch Black long before that. I mustn't give him back his most devoted servant, and I shudder to think how quickly he'll rise again. . . ."

There was a small chink of glass on wood. Someone had set down their glass.

"You know, Cornelius, if you're dining with the headmaster, we'd better head back up to the castle," said Professor McGonagall. One by one, the pairs of feet in front of Harry took the weight of their owners once more; hems of cloaks swung into the bar. The door of the Three Broomsticks opened again, there was another flurry of snow, and the teachers had disappeared.

"Harry?"

Ron's and Hermione's faces appeared under the table. They were both staring at him, lost for words.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FIREBOLT

Harry didn't have a very clear idea of how he had managed to get back into the Honeydukes cellar, through the tunnel, but the trip seemed to take no time at all, and that he hardly noticed what he was doing, because his head was still pounding.

Why had nobody ever told him? Dumbledore, Hagrid, Mr. Weasley, Cornelius Fudge . . . Why hadn't anyone ever mentioned that Sirius had betrayed them?

Ron and Hermione watched Harry nervously all through dinner, not daring to talk about what they'd overheard, because in the crowded common room, it was to find Fred and George had set off half a dozen Dungbombs in a fit of end-of-term hysteria. But when he'd reached Hogsmeade or not, sneaked quietly up to the empty dormitory and headed straight for his bedside cabinet, looking for — the leather-bound photo album Hagrid had given him two years ago, which was full of wizard pictures of him and his friends, and started turning the pages, searching, until . . .

He stopped on a picture of his parents' wedding day. There was his father waving up at him, beaming, the untidy blonde hair as his mother, alight with happiness, arm in arm with his dad. And there . . . that must be him. Their best man . . . Harry. If he hadn't known it was the same person, he would never have guessed it was Black in this old photograph. His father had already been working for Voldemort when this picture had been taken? Was he already planning the deaths of the two of them? Sirius Black, twelve years that would make him unrecognizable?

But the dementors don't affect him, Harry thought, staring into the handsome, laughing face. He doesn't have to hear them. Harry slammed the album shut, reached over and stuffed it back into his cabinet, took off his robe and glasses and got into bed. The dormitory door opened.

"Harry?" said Ron's voice uncertainly.

But Harry lay still, pretending to be asleep. He heard Ron leave again, and rolled over on his back, his eyes wide open. A hatred such as he had never known before was coursing through Harry like poison. He could see Black laughing at him from the album over his eyes. He watched, as though somebody was playing him a piece of film, Sirius Black blasting him apart in pieces. He could hear (though having no idea what Black's voice might sound like) a low, excited mutter. "It has happened. . . ." And then came another voice, laughing shrilly, the same laugh that Harry heard inside his head whenever the name came up.

"Harry, you — you look terrible."

Harry hadn't gotten to sleep until daybreak. He had awoken to find the dormitory deserted, dressed, and gone down to the Great Hall. He'd left a note for Ron, who was eating a Peppermint Toad and massaging his stomach, and Hermione, who had spread her hair out on the table. "Where is everyone?" said Harry.

"Gone! It's the first day of the holidays, remember?" said Ron, watching Harry closely. "It's nearly lunchtime; I was going to get you. Harry slumped into a chair next to the fire. Snow was still falling outside the windows. Crookshanks was spread out on the rug.

"You really don't look well, you know," Hermione said, peering anxiously into his face.

"I'm fine," said Harry.

"Harry, listen," said Hermione, exchanging a look with Ron, "you must be really upset about what we heard yesterday."

"Like what?" said Harry.

"Like trying to go after Black," said Ron sharply.

Harry could tell they had rehearsed this conversation while he had been asleep. He didn't say anything.

"You won't, will you, Harry?" said Hermione.

"Because Black's not worth dying for," said Ron.

Harry looked at them. They didn't seem to understand at all.

"D'you know what I see and hear every time a dementor gets too near me?" Ron and Hermione shook their heads, looking at him. "Voldemort. And if you'd heard your mum screaming like that, just about to be killed, you wouldn't forget it in a hurry. And she was betrayed her and sent Voldemort after her —"

"There's nothing you can do!" said Hermione, looking stricken. "The dementors will catch Black and he'll go back to Azkaban."

"You heard what Fudge said. Black isn't affected by Azkaban like normal people are. It's not a punishment for him like it is for others."

"So what are you saying?" said Ron, looking very tense. "You want to — to kill Black or something?"

"Don't be silly," said Hermione in a panicky voice. "Harry doesn't want to kill anyone, do you, Harry?"

Again, Harry didn't answer. He didn't know what he wanted to do. All he knew was that the idea of doing nothing, which was what he was doing, was wrong.

"Malfoy knows," he said abruptly. "Remember what he said to me in Potions? 'If it was me, I'd hunt him down myself.'"

"You're going to take Malfoy's advice instead of ours?" said Ron furiously. "Listen . . . you know what Pettigrew's mother did? She put the Order of Merlin, First Class, and Pettigrew's finger in a box. That was the biggest bit of him they could find. Black's father would have done the same."

"Malfoy's dad must have told him," said Harry, ignoring Ron. "He was right in Voldemort's inner circle —"

"Say You-Know-Who, will you?" interjected Ron angrily.

"— so obviously, the Malfoys knew Black was working for Voldemort —"

"— and Malfoy'd love to see you blown into about a million pieces, like Pettigrew! Get a grip. Malfoy's just hoping you'll be a hero."

"Harry, please," said Hermione, her eyes now shining with tears, "please be sensible. Black did a terrible, terrible thing. . . . Oh, Harry, you'd be playing right into Black's hands if you went looking for him. Your mum and dad wouldn't want you to do that. They were looking for Black!"

"I'll never know what they'd have wanted, because thanks to Black, I've never spoken to them," said Harry shortly.

There was a silence in which Crookshanks stretched luxuriously, flexing his claws. Ron's pocket quivered.

"Look," said Ron, obviously casting around for a change of subject, "it's the holidays! It's nearly Christmas! Let's — let's have a party!"

"No!" said Hermione quickly. "Harry isn't supposed to leave the castle, Ron —"

"Yeah, let's go," said Harry, sitting up, "and I can ask him how come he never mentioned Black when he told me all about him. Further discussion of Sirius Black plainly wasn't what Ron had had in mind.

"Or we could have a game of chess," he said hastily, "or Gobstones. Percy left a set —"

"No, let's visit Hagrid," said Harry firmly.

So they got their cloaks from their dormitories and set off through the portrait hole ("Stand and fight, you yellow-bellied cowards!" hooted the portrait) and out through the oak front doors.

They made their way slowly down the lawn, making a shallow trench in the glittering, powdery snow, their socks and shoes crunching. The trees looked as though it had been enchanted, each tree smattered with silver, and Hagrid's cabin looked like an iced cake.

Ron knocked, but there was no answer.

"He's not out, is he?" said Hermione, who was shivering under her cloak.

Ron had his ear to the door.

"There's a weird noise," he said. "Listen — is that Fang?"

Harry and Hermione put their ears to the door too. From inside the cabin came a series of low, throbbing moans.

"Think we'd better go and get someone?" said Ron nervously.

"Hagrid!" called Harry, thumping the door. "Hagrid, are you in there?"

There was a sound of heavy footsteps, then the door creaked open. Hagrid stood there with his eyes red and swollen.

"Yeh've heard?" he bellowed, and he flung himself onto Harry's neck.

Hagrid being at least twice the size of a normal man, this was no laughing matter. Harry, about to collapse under Hagrid's weight, was caught under an arm and heaved back into the cabin. Hagrid allowed himself to be steered into a chair and slumped into it, his head drooping, tears that dripped down into his tangled beard.

"Hagrid, what is it?" said Hermione, aghast.

Harry spotted an official-looking letter lying open on the table.

"What's this, Hagrid?"

Hagrid's sobs redoubled, but he shoved the letter toward Harry, who picked it up and read aloud:

Dear Mr. Hagrid,

Further to our inquiry into the attack by a hippogriff on a student in your class, we have accepted the assurances of the Ministry of Magic that this regrettable incident.

"Well, that's okay then, Hagrid!" said Ron, clapping Hagrid on the shoulder. But Hagrid continued to sob, and waved off Ron's attempt to comfort him. However, we must register our concern about the hippogriff in question. We have decided to uphold the official commission of inquiry into the matter to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The hearing will take place on April 20th, and we ask you to be present at the hearing in London on that date. In the meantime, the hippogriff should be kept tethered and isolated.

Yours in fellowship . . .

There followed a list of the school governors.

"Oh," said Ron. "But you said Buckbeak isn't a bad hippogriff, Hagrid. I bet he'll get off —"

"Yeh don' know them gargoyles at the Committee fer the Disposal o' Dangerous Creatures!" choked Hagrid, wiping his eyes.

A sudden sound from the corner of Hagrid's cabin made Harry, Ron, and Hermione whip around. Buckbeak the hippogriff was standing on the wood all over the floor.

"I couldn' leave him tied up out there in the snow!" choked Hagrid. "All on his own! At Christmas."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another. They had never seen eye to eye with Hagrid about what he called the "buckbeaks."

"On the other hand, there didn't seem to be any particular harm in Buckbeak. In fact, by Hagrid's usual standards, he was a very good creature."

"You'll have to put up a good strong defense, Hagrid," said Hermione, sitting down and laying a hand on Hagrid's arm.

"Won't make no difference!" sobbed Hagrid. "Them Disposal devils, they're all in Lucius Malfoy's pocket! Scared o' him!"

Hagrid drew his finger swiftly across his throat, then gave a great wail and lurched forward, his face buried in his arms.

"What about Dumbledore, Hagrid?" said Harry.

"He's done more'n enough fer me already," groaned Hagrid. "Got enough on his plate what with keepin' them demerits out of the school."

Ron and Hermione looked quickly at Harry, as though expecting him to start berating Hagrid for not telling him the truth.

Now that he saw Hagrid so miserable and scared.

"Listen, Hagrid," he said, "you can't give up. Hermione's right, you just need a good defense. You can call us as witnesses."

"I'm sure I've read about a case of hippogriff-baiting," said Hermione thoughtfully, "where the hippogriff got off. I'll look it up."

Hagrid howled still more loudly. Harry and Hermione looked at Ron to help them.

"Er — shall I make a cup of tea?" said Ron.

Harry stared at him.

"It's what my mum does whenever someone's upset," Ron muttered, shrugging.

At last, after many more assurances of help, with a steaming mug of tea in front of him, Hagrid blew his nose on a handkerchief and said:

"I can't afford to go ter pieces. Gotta pull meself together. . . ."

Fang the boarhound came timidly out from under the table and laid his head on Hagrid's knee.

"I've not bin meself lately," said Hagrid, stroking Fang with one hand and mopping his face with the other. "Worried about the hearing."

"We do like them!" lied Hermione at once.

"Yeah, they're great!" said Ron, crossing his fingers under the table. "Er — how are the flobberworms?"

"Dead," said Hagrid gloomily. "Too much lettuce."

"Oh no!" said Ron, his lip twitching.

"An' them dementors make me feel ruddy terrible an' all," said Hagrid, with a sudden shudder. "Gotta walk past 'em e back in Azkaban —"

He fell silent, gulping his tea. Harry, Ron, and Hermione watched him breathlessly. They had never heard Hagrid talk said timidly, "Is it awful in there, Hagrid?"

"Yeh've no idea," said Hagrid quietly. "Never bin anywhere like it. Thought I was goin' mad. Kep' goin' over horrible stu . day me dad died . . . day I had ter let Norbert go. . . ."

His eyes filled with tears. Norbert was the baby dragon Hagrid had once won in a game of cards.

"Yeh can' really remember who yeh are after a while. An' yeh can' see the point o' livin' at all. I used ter hope I'd jus' d ein' born again, ev'rythin' came floodin' back, it was the bes' feelin' in the world. Mind, the dementors weren't keen on

"But you were innocent!" said Hermione.

Hagrid snorted.

"Think that matters to them? They don' care. Long as they've got a couple o' hundred humans stuck there with 'em, s mn who's guilty an' who's not."

Hagrid went quiet for a moment, staring into his tea. Then he said quietly, "Thought o' jus' letting Buckbeak go . . . try hippogriff it's gotta go inter hidin'? An' — an' I'm scared o' breakin' the law. . . ." He looked up at them, tears leaking o zkaban."

The trip to Hagrid's, though far from fun, had nevertheless had the effect Ron and Hermione had hoped. Though Ha ly on revenge if he wanted to help Hagrid win his case against the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatur rned to the empty common room laden with books that might help prepare a defense for Buckbeak. The three of th volumes about famous cases of marauding beasts, speaking occasionally when they ran across something relevant.

"Here's something . . . there was a case in 1722 . . . but the hippogriff was convicted — ugh, look what they did to it, t

"This might help, look — a mantichore savaged someone in 1296, and they let the mantichore off — oh — no, that was

Meanwhile, in the rest of the castle, the usual magnificent Christmas decorations had been put up, despite the fact t eamers of holly and mistletoe were strung along the corridors, mysterious lights shone from inside every suit of arm trees, glittering with golden stars. A powerful and delicious smell of cooking pervaded the corridors, and by Christm e out of the shelter of Ron's pocket to sniff hopefully at the air.

On Christmas morning, Harry was woken by Ron throwing his pillow at him.

"Oi! Presents!"

Harry reached for his glasses and put them on, squinting through the semi-darkness to the foot of his bed, where a s per off his own presents.

"Another sweater from Mum . . . maroon again . . . see if you've got one."

Harry had. Mrs. Weasley had sent him a scarlet sweater with the Gryffindor lion knitted on the front; also a dozen ho le. As he moved all these things aside, he saw a long, thin package lying underneath.

"What's that?" said Ron, looking over, a freshly unwrapped pair of maroon socks in his hand.

"Dunno . . ."

Harry ripped the parcel open and gasped as a magnificent, gleaming broomstick rolled out onto his bedspread. Ron

"I don't believe it," he said hoarsely.

It was a Firebolt, identical to the dream broom Harry had gone to see every day in Diagon Alley. Its handle glittered a ung in midair, unsupported, at exactly the right height for him to mount it. His eyes moved from the golden registrat smooth, streamlined birch twigs that made up the tail.

"Who sent it to you?" said Ron in a hushed voice.

"Look and see if there's a card," said Harry.

Ron ripped apart the Firebolt's wrappings.

"Nothing! Blimey, who'd spend that much on you?"

"Well," said Harry, feeling stunned, "I'm betting it wasn't the Dursleys."

"I bet it was Dumbledore," said Ron, now walking around and around the Firebolt, taking in every glorious inch. "He s

"That was my dad's, though," said Harry. "Dumbledore was just passing it on to me. He wouldn't spend hundreds of c

"That's why he wouldn't say it was from him!" said Ron. "In case some git like Malfoy said it was favoritism. Hey, Harry e sees you on this! He'll be sick as a pig! This is an international standard broom, this is!"

"I can't believe this," Harry muttered, running a hand along the Firebolt, while Ron sank onto Harry's bed, laughing hi

"I know," said Ron, controlling himself, "I know who it could've been — Lupin!"

"What?" said Harry, now starting to laugh himself. "Lupin? Listen, if he had this much gold, he'd be able to buy himsel

"Yeah, but he likes you," said Ron. "And he was away when your Nimbus got smashed, and he might've heard about t

"What d'you mean, he was away?" said Harry. "He was ill when I was playing in that match."

"Well, he wasn't in the hospital wing," said Ron. "I was there, cleaning out the bedpans on that detention from Snape, Harry frowned at Ron.

"I can't see Lupin affording something like this."

"What're you two laughing about?"

Hermione had just come in, wearing her dressing gown and carrying Crookshanks, who was looking very grumpy, wi

"Don't bring him in here!" said Ron, hurriedly snatching Scabbers from the depths of his bed and stowing him in his pants onto Seamus's empty bed and stared, open-mouthed, at the Firebolt.

"Oh, Harry! Who sent you that?"

"No idea," said Harry. "There wasn't a card or anything with it."

To his great surprise, Hermione did not appear either excited or intrigued by the news. On the contrary, her face fell.

"What's the matter with you?" said Ron.

"I don't know," said Hermione slowly, "but it's a bit odd, isn't it? I mean, this is supposed to be quite a good broom, isn't it?"

Ron sighed exasperatedly.

"It's the best broom there is, Hermione," he said.

"So it must've been really expensive. . . ."

"Probably cost more than all the Slytherins' brooms put together," said Ron happily.

"Well . . . who'd send Harry something as expensive as that, and not even tell him they'd sent it?" said Hermione.

"Who cares?" said Ron impatiently. "Listen, Harry, can I have a go on it? Can I?"

"I don't think anyone should ride that broom just yet!" said Hermione shrilly.

Harry and Ron looked at her.

"What d'you think Harry's going to do with it — sweep the floor?" said Ron.

But before Hermione could answer, Crookshanks sprang from Seamus's bed, right at Ron's chest.

"GET — HIM — OUT — OF — HERE!" Ron bellowed as Crookshanks's claws ripped his pajamas and Scabbers attempted a misjudged kick at Crookshanks that hit the trunk at the end of Harry's bed, knocking it over and causing Ron to fall. Crookshanks's fur suddenly stood on end. A shrill, tinny whistling was filling the room. The Pocket Sneakoscope had fallen and gleaming on the floor.

"I forgot about that!" Harry said, bending down and picking up the Sneakoscope. "I never wear those socks if I can help it." The Sneakoscope whirled and whistled in his palm. Crookshanks was hissing and spitting at it.

"You'd better take that cat out of here, Hermione," said Ron furiously, sitting on Harry's bed nursing his toe. "Can't you get it out of the room, Crookshanks's yellow eyes still fixed maliciously on Ron.

Harry stuffed the Sneakoscope back inside the socks and threw it back into his trunk. All that could be heard now was the sound of Ron's hands. It had been a while since Harry had seen him out of Ron's pocket, and he was unpleasantly surprised to find that Crookshanks seemed to have fallen out too.

"He's not looking too good, is he?" Harry said.

"It's stress!" said Ron. "He'd be fine if that big stupid furball left him alone!"

But Harry, remembering what the woman at the Magical Menagerie had said about rats living only three years, could only think that, if true, Crookshanks was ed, he was reaching the end of his life. And despite Ron's frequent complaints that Scabbers was both boring and useless, the Christmas spirit was definitely thin on the ground in the Gryffindor common room that morning. Hermione had shut the door and kicked him; Ron was still fuming about Crookshanks's fresh attempt to eat Scabbers. Harry gave up trying to make them stop, which he had brought down to the common room with him. For some reason this seemed to annoy Hermione as well as Harry, though it too had been criticizing her cat.

At lunchtime they went down to the Great Hall, to find that the House tables had been moved against the walls again, leaving the room. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Sprout, and Flitwick were there, along with Filch, the caretaker, in his old and rather moldy-looking tailcoat. There were only three other students, two extremely nervous-looking first years.

"Merry Christmas!" said Dumbledore as Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached the table. "As there are so few of us, we shall have a special toast."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down side by side at the end of the table.

"Crackers!" said Dumbledore enthusiastically, offering the end of a large silver noisemaker to Snape, who took it reluctantly and pulled it apart to reveal a large, pointed witch's hat topped with a stuffed vulture.

Harry, remembering the boggart, caught Ron's eye and they both grinned; Snape's mouth thinned and he pushed them away.

"Dig in!" he advised the table, beaming around.

As Harry was helping himself to roast potatoes, the doors of the Great Hall opened again. It was Professor Trelawney, in her sequined dress in honor of the occasion, making her look more than ever like a glittering, oversized dragonfly.

"Sybill, this is a pleasant surprise!" said Dumbledore, standing up.

"I have been crystal gazing, Headmaster," said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest, most faraway voice, "and to my amazement, I am going to join you. Who am I to refuse the promptings of fate? I at once hastened from my tower, and I do beg you to forgive me."

"Certainly, certainly," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Let me draw you up a chair —"

And he did indeed draw a chair in midair with his wand, which revolved for a few seconds before falling with a thud. Trelawney, however, did not sit down; her enormous eyes had been roving around the table, and she suddenly uttered a kind of soft gasp.

"I dare not, Headmaster! If I join the table, we shall be thirteen! Nothing could be more unlucky! Never forget that thirteen is a very unlucky number to die!"

"We'll risk it, Sybill," said Professor McGonagall impatiently. "Do sit down, the turkey's getting stone cold."

Professor Trelawney hesitated, then lowered herself into the empty chair, eyes shut and mouth clenched tight, as though in pain.

I poked a large spoon into the nearest tureen.

"Tripe, Sybill?"

Professor Trelawney ignored her. Eyes open again, she looked around once more and said, "But where is dear Professor McGonagall?"

"I'm afraid the poor fellow is ill again," said Dumbledore, indicating that everybody should start serving themselves. "But surely you already knew that, Sybill?" said Professor McGonagall, her eyebrows raised.

Professor Trelawney gave Professor McGonagall a very cold look.

"Certainly I knew, Minerva," she said quietly. "But one does not parade the fact that one is All-Knowing. I frequently avoid it to make others nervous."

"That explains a great deal," said Professor McGonagall tartly.

Professor Trelawney's voice suddenly became a good deal less misty.

"If you must know, Minerva, I have seen that poor Professor Lupin will not be with us for very long. He seems aware, and I have tried to crystal gaze for him —"

"Imagine that," said Professor McGonagall dryly.

"I doubt," said Dumbledore, in a cheerful but slightly raised voice, which put an end to Professor McGonagall and Professor Trelawney's conversation.

"Immediate danger. Severus, you've made the potion for him again?"

"Yes, Headmaster," said Snape.

"Good," said Dumbledore. "Then he should be up and about in no time. . . . Derek, have you had any of these chipolatas?"

The first-year boy went furiously red on being addressed directly by Dumbledore, and took the platter of sausages with a grateful air.

Professor Trelawney behaved almost normally until the very end of Christmas dinner, two hours later. Full to bursting, she and Ron got up first from the table and she shrieked loudly.

"My dears! Which of you left his seat first? Which?"

"Dunno," said Ron, looking uneasily at Harry.

"I doubt it will make much difference," said Professor McGonagall coldly, "unless a mad axe-man is waiting outside the door."

Even Ron laughed. Professor Trelawney looked highly affronted.

"Coming?" Harry said to Hermione.

"No," Hermione muttered, "I want a quick word with Professor McGonagall."

"Probably trying to see if she can take any more classes," yawned Ron as they made their way into the entrance hall.

When they reached the portrait hole, they found Sir Cadogan enjoying a Christmas party with a couple of monks, serving them.

Up he came, up to his visor and toasted them with a flagon of mead.

"Merry — hic — Christmas! Password?"

"Scurvy cur," said Ron.

"And the same to you, sir!" roared Sir Cadogan as the painting swung forward to admit them.

Harry went straight up to the dormitory, collected the Firebolt and the Broomstick Servicing Kit Hermione had given him.

Something to do to the Firebolt; however, there were no bent twigs to clip, and the handle was so shiny already it seemed to gleam from every angle until the portrait hole opened, and Hermione came in, accompanied by Professor McGonagall.

Though Professor McGonagall was head of Gryffindor House, Harry had seen her in the common room only once before.

She had been red at her, both holding the Firebolt. Hermione walked around them, sat down, picked up the nearest book, and hid her face.

"So that's it, is it?" said Professor McGonagall beadily, walking over to the fireside and staring at the Firebolt. "Miss Granger, the Firebolt is a broomstick, Potter."

Harry and Ron looked around at Hermione. They could see her forehead reddening over the top of her book, which she was holding.

"May I?" said Professor McGonagall, but she didn't wait for an answer before pulling the Firebolt out of their hands. She looked at it.

There was no note at all, Potter? No card? No message of any kind?"

"No," said Harry blankly.

"I see . . .," said Professor McGonagall. "Well, I'm afraid I will have to take this, Potter."

"W-what?" said Harry, scrambling to his feet. "Why?"

"It will need to be checked for jinxes," said Professor McGonagall. "Of course, I'm no expert, but I daresay Madam Hooch would be able to tell you."

"Strip it down?" repeated Ron, as though Professor McGonagall was mad.

"It shouldn't take more than a few weeks," said Professor McGonagall. "You will have it back if we are sure it is jinx-free."

"There's nothing wrong with it!" said Harry, his voice shaking slightly. "Honestly, Professor —"

"You can't know that, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, quite kindly, "not until you've flown it, at any rate, and I'm afraid I can't let you do that until it has not been tampered with. I shall keep you informed."

Professor McGonagall turned on her heel and carried the Firebolt out of the portrait hole, which closed behind her. Harry and Ron were left.

Harry clutched in his hands. Ron, however, rounded on Hermione.

"What did you go running to McGonagall for?"

Hermione threw her book aside. She was still pink in the face, but stood up and faced Ron defiantly.

"Because I thought — and Professor McGonagall agrees with me — that that broom was probably sent to Harry by Sirius."

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE PATRONUS

Harry knew that Hermione had meant well, but that didn't stop him from being angry with her. He had been the owner of the Firebolt for a long time, and because of her interference, he didn't know whether he would ever see it again. He was positive that there was nothing wrong with it, and he was sure it had been subjected to all sorts of anti-jinx tests?

Ron was furious with Hermione too. As far as he was concerned, the stripping-down of a brand-new Firebolt was not what she had acted for the best, started avoiding the common room. Harry and Ron supposed she had taken refuge in the library. They were glad when the rest of the school returned shortly after New Year, and Gryffindor Tower became crowded again. Wood sought Harry out on the night before term started.

"Had a good Christmas?" he said, and then, without waiting for an answer, he sat down, lowered his voice, and said, "I had a fast match, you know. If the dementors come to the next one . . . I mean . . . we can't afford you to — well —" Wood broke off, looking awkward.

"I'm working on it," said Harry quickly. "Professor Lupin said he'd train me to ward off the dementors. We should be safe."

"Ah," said Wood, his expression clearing. "Well, in that case — I really didn't want to lose you as Seeker, Harry. And happy Christmas."

"No," said Harry.

"What! You'd better get a move on, you know — you can't ride that Shooting Star against Ravenclaw!"

"He got a Firebolt for Christmas," said Ron.

"A Firebolt? No! Seriously? A — a real Firebolt?"

"Don't get excited, Oliver," said Harry gloomily. "I haven't got it anymore. It was confiscated." And he explained all about the incident.

"Jinxed? How could it be jinxed?"

"Sirius Black," Harry said wearily. "He's supposed to be after me. So McGonagall reckons he might have sent it."

Waving aside the information that a famous murderer was after his Seeker, Wood said, "But Black couldn't have bought a Firebolt for him! How could he just walk into Quality Quidditch Supplies and buy a broomstick?"

"I know," said Harry, "but McGonagall still wants to strip it down —"

Wood went pale.

"I'll go and talk to her, Harry," he promised. "I'll make her see reason. . . . A Firebolt . . . a real Firebolt, on our team . . . I'll make her see sense. A Firebolt . . ."

Classes started again the next day. The last thing anyone felt like doing was spending two hours on the grounds on a cold day, collecting dry wood and leaves to keep the fire burning. The first Divination lesson of the new term was much less fun; Professor Trelawney warned Harry that he had the shortest life line she had ever seen.

It was Defense Against the Dark Arts that Harry was keen to get to; after his conversation with Wood, he wanted to get on with it.

"Ah yes," said Lupin, when Harry reminded him of his promise at the end of class. "Let me see . . . how about eight o'clock? It should be large enough. . . . I'll have to think carefully about how we're going to do this. . . . We can't bring a real dementor in."

"Still looks ill, doesn't he?" said Ron as they walked down the corridor, heading to dinner. "What d'you reckon's the matter with him?" There was a loud and impatient "tuh" from behind them. It was Hermione, who had been sitting at the feet of a suit of armor. She was t close.

"And what are you tutting at us for?" said Ron irritably.

"Nothing," said Hermione in a lofty voice, heaving her bag back over her shoulder.

"Yes, you were," said Ron. "I said I wonder what's wrong with Lupin, and you —"

"Well, isn't it obvious?" said Hermione, with a look of maddening superiority.

"If you don't want to tell us, don't," snapped Ron.

"Fine," said Hermione haughtily, and she marched off.

"She doesn't know," said Ron, staring resentfully after Hermione. "She's just trying to get us to talk to her again."

At eight o'clock on Thursday evening, Harry left Gryffindor Tower for the History of Magic classroom. It was dark and cold. He had waited only five minutes when Professor Lupin turned up, carrying a large packing case, which he heaved onto the floor.

"What's that?" said Harry.

"Another boggart," said Lupin, stripping off his cloak. "I've been combing the castle ever since Tuesday, and very lucky I found it. It's the nearest we'll get to a real dementor. The boggart will turn into a dementor when he sees you, so we'll be able to use him; there's a cupboard under my desk he'll like."

"Okay," said Harry, trying to sound as though he wasn't apprehensive at all and merely glad that Lupin had found something.

"So . . ." Professor Lupin had taken out his own wand, and indicated that Harry should do the same. "The spell I am going to teach you is beyond Ordinary Wizarding Level. It is called the Patronus Charm."

"How does it work?" said Harry nervously.

"Well, when it works correctly, it conjures up a Patronus," said Lupin, "which is a kind of anti-dementor — a guardian spirit. Harry had a sudden vision of himself crouching behind a Hagrid-sized figure holding a large club. Professor Lupin could tell him of the very things that the dementor feeds upon — hope, happiness, the desire to survive — but it cannot feel despair. He warned him, Harry, that the charm might be too advanced for you. Many qualified wizards have difficulty with it."

"What does a Patronus look like?" said Harry curiously.

"Each one is unique to the wizard who conjures it."

"And how do you conjure it?"

"With an incantation, which will work only if you are concentrating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory. Harry cast his mind about for a happy memory. Certainly, nothing that had happened to him at the Dursleys' was going to do it. He thought of a broomstick.

"Right," he said, trying to recall as exactly as possible the wonderful, soaring sensation of his stomach.

"The incantation is this —" Lupin cleared his throat. "Expecto Patronum!"

"Expecto Patronum," Harry repeated under his breath, "Expecto Patronum."

"Concentrating hard on your happy memory?"

"Oh — yeah —" said Harry, quickly forcing his thoughts back to that first broom ride. "Expecto Patrono — no, Patronum."

Something whooshed suddenly out of the end of his wand; it looked like a wisp of silvery gas.

"Did you see that?" said Harry excitedly. "Something happened!"

"Very good," said Lupin, smiling. "Right, then — ready to try it on a dementor?"

"Yes," Harry said, gripping his wand very tightly, and moving into the middle of the deserted classroom. He tried to keep his eyes closed. . . . Any second now, he might hear his mother again . . . but he shouldn't think that, or he would hear her again, and he would be in trouble.

Lupin grasped the lid of the packing case and pulled. A dementor rose slowly from the box, its hooded face turned toward Harry, one glistening, scabbed hand gripping it.

The dementor stepped from the box and started to sweep silently toward Harry, drawing a deep, rattling breath. A wave of cold, numbing fear washed over Harry. "Expecto Patronum!" Harry yelled. "Expecto Patronum! Expecto —"

But the classroom and the dementor were dissolving. . . . Harry was falling again through thick white fog, and his mother's face was in front of him. "Not Harry! Not Harry! Please — I'll do anything —"

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

"Harry!"

Harry jerked back to life. He was lying flat on his back on the floor. The classroom lamps were alight again. He didn't know where he was.

"Sorry," he muttered, sitting up and feeling cold sweat trickling down behind his glasses.

"Are you all right?" said Lupin.

"Yes . . ." Harry pulled himself up on one of the desks and leaned against it.

"Here —" Lupin handed him a Chocolate Frog. "Eat this before we try again. I didn't expect you to do it your first time."

"It's getting worse," Harry muttered, biting off the Frog's head. "I could hear her louder that time — and him — Voldemort!"

Lupin looked paler than usual.

"Harry, if you don't want to continue, I will more than understand —"

"I do!" said Harry fiercely, stuffing the rest of the Chocolate Frog into his mouth. "I've got to! What if the dementors turn up again? If we lose this game we've lost the Quidditch Cup!"

"All right then . . .," said Lupin. "You might want to select another memory, a happy memory, I mean, to concentrate on."

Harry thought hard and decided his feelings when Gryffindor had won the House Championship last year had definitely been a happy memory.

He stood up and looked at his position in the middle of the classroom.

"Ready?" said Lupin, gripping the box lid.

"Ready," said Harry, trying hard to fill his head with happy thoughts about Gryffindor winning, and not dark thoughts about Voldemort.

"Go!" said Lupin, pulling off the lid. The room went icily cold and dark once more. The dementor glided forward, drawing Harry into its cold, numbing embrace.

"Expecto Patronum!" Harry yelled. "Expecto Patronum! Expecto Patronum!"

White fog obscured his senses . . . big, blurred shapes were moving around him . . . then came a new voice, a man's voice, a voice he had never heard before.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off —"

The sounds of someone stumbling from a room — a door bursting open — a cackle of high-pitched laughter —

"Harry! Harry . . . wake up. . . ."

Lupin was tapping Harry hard on the face. This time it was a minute before Harry understood why he was lying on a cold, hard floor.

"I heard my dad," Harry mumbled. "That's the first time I've ever heard him — he tried to take on Voldemort himself, didn't he?"

Harry suddenly realized that there were tears on his face mingling with the sweat. He bent his face as low as possible, so that Lupin wouldn't see.

"You heard James?" said Lupin in a strange voice.

"Yeah . . ." Face dry, Harry looked up. "Why — you didn't know my dad, did you?"

"I — I did, as a matter of fact," said Lupin. "We were friends at Hogwarts. Listen, Harry — perhaps we should leave it at that. . . ."

"No!" said Harry. He got up again. "I'll have one more go! I'm not thinking of happy enough things, that's what it is. . . ."

He racked his brains. A really, really happy memory . . . one that he could turn into a good, strong Patronus . . .

The moment when he'd first found out he was a wizard, and would be leaving the Dursleys for Hogwarts! If that was the memory, it was perfect.

Harry got to his feet and faced the packing case. "Ready?" said Lupin, who looked as though he were doing this against his better judgment.

"Concentrating hard? All right. . . ."

He pulled off the lid of the case for the third time, and the dementor rose out of it; the room fell cold and dark —

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry bellowed. "EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The screaming inside Harry's head had started again — except this time, it sounded as though it were coming from a distance. . . .

He could still see the dementor — it had halted — and then a huge, silver shadow came bursting out of the end of Harry's wand.

It was a Patronus, a strong, happy Patronus. . . . Harry felt like water, he was still on his feet — though for how much longer, he wasn't sure —

"Riddikulus!" roared Lupin, springing forward.

There was a loud crack, and Harry's cloudy Patronus vanished along with the dementor; he sank into a chair, feeling exhausted.

g. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Professor Lupin forcing the boggart back into the packing case with his wand; the boggart was screaming.

"What's under a dementor's hood?"

Professor Lupin lowered his bottle thoughtfully.

"Hmmm . . . well, the only people who really know are in no condition to tell us. You see, the dementor lowers its hood

"What's that?"

"They call it the Dementor's Kiss," said Lupin, with a slightly twisted smile. "It's what dementors do to those they wish to suck the life out of you, because they clamp their jaws upon the mouth of the victim and — and suck out his soul."

Harry accidentally spat out a bit of butterbeer.

"What — they kill — ?"

"Oh no," said Lupin. "Much worse than that. You can exist without your soul, you know, as long as your brain and heart are still working. No memory, no . . . anything. There's no chance at all of recovery. You'll just — exist. As an empty shell. And your soul

Lupin drank a little more butterbeer, then said, "It's the fate that awaits Sirius Black. It was in the Daily Prophet this morning that they said he was going to perform it if they find him."

Harry sat stunned for a moment at the idea of someone having their soul sucked out through their mouth. But then he remembered Sirius.

"He deserves it," he said suddenly.

"You think so?" said Lupin lightly. "Do you really think anyone deserves that?"

"Yes," said Harry defiantly. "For . . . for some things . . ."

He would have liked to have told Lupin about the conversation he'd overheard about Black in the Three Broomsticks, but he didn't want to reveal that he'd gone to Hogsmeade without permission, and he knew Lupin wouldn't be very impressed by his lack of discretion in the Gryffindor common room.

Harry half wished that he hadn't asked what was under a dementor's hood, the answer had been so horrible, and he knew that if he had, he would have walked headlong into Professor McGonagall halfway up the stairs.

"Do watch where you're going, Potter!"

"Sorry, Professor —"

"I've just been looking for you in the Gryffindor common room. Well, here it is, we've done everything we could think of to find you."

You've got a very good friend somewhere, Potter. . . ."

Harry's jaw dropped. She was holding out his Firebolt, and it looked as magnificent as ever.

"I can have it back?" Harry said weakly. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," said Professor McGonagall, and she was actually smiling. "I daresay you'll need to get the feel of it before you can use it properly. But yes, you can have it back. Don't you? Or we'll be out of the running for the eighth year in a row, as Professor Snape was kind enough to remind me. Speechless, Harry carried the Firebolt back upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower. As he turned a corner, he saw Ron dash toward him.

"She gave it to you? Excellent! Listen, can I still have a go on it? Tomorrow?"

"Yeah . . . anything . . .," said Harry, his heart lighter than it had been in a month. "You know what — we should make a go of it."

"Yeah, all right," said Ron. "She's in the common room now — working, for a change —"

They turned into the corridor to Gryffindor Tower and saw Neville Longbottom, pleading with Sir Cadogan, who seemed to be holding him back.

"I wrote them down!" Neville was saying tearfully. "But I must've dropped them somewhere!"

"A likely tale!" roared Sir Cadogan. Then, spotting Harry and Ron: "Good even, my fine young yeomen! Come clap this one on the back!"

"Oh, shut up," said Ron as he and Harry drew level with Neville.

"I've lost the passwords!" Neville told them miserably. "I made him tell me what passwords he was going to use this year. I've done with them!"

"Oddsbodikins," said Harry to Sir Cadogan, who looked extremely disappointed and reluctantly swung forward to let them pass. Every head turned and the next moment, Harry was surrounded by people exclaiming over his Firebolt.

"Where'd you get it, Harry?"

"Will you let me have a go?"

"Have you ridden it yet, Harry?"

"Ravenclaw'll have no chance, they're all on Cleansweep Sevens!"

"Can I just hold it, Harry?"

After ten minutes or so, during which the Firebolt was passed around and admired from every angle, the crowd dispersed. Hermione, who hadn't rushed over to them, bent over her work and carefully avoiding their eyes. Harry and Ron approached her.

"I got it back," said Harry, grinning at her and holding up the Firebolt.

"See, Hermione? There wasn't anything wrong with it!" said Ron.

"Well — there might have been!" said Hermione. "I mean, at least you know now that it's safe!"

"Yeah, I suppose so," said Harry. "I'd better put it upstairs —"

"I'll take it!" said Ron eagerly. "I've got to give Scabbers his rat tonic."

He took the Firebolt and, holding it as if it were made of glass, carried it away up the boys' staircase.

"Can I sit down, then?" Harry asked Hermione.

"I suppose so," said Hermione, moving a great stack of parchment off a chair.

Harry looked around at the cluttered table, at the long Arithmancy essay on which the ink was still glistening, at the empty bottle of rat tonic (labeled "Scabbers' Special"), and at the rune translation Hermione was now poring over.

"How are you getting through all this stuff?" Harry asked her.

"Yeah," said Harry, thinking of his feeble Patronus and wishing it were stronger.

"The dementors won't turn up again, Oliver. Dumbledore'd go ballistic," said Fred confidently.

"Well, let's hope not," said Wood. "Anyway — good work, everyone. Let's get back to the tower . . . turn in early —"

"I'm staying out for a bit; Ron wants a go on the Firebolt," Harry told Wood, and while the rest of the team headed off, he crossed the barrier to the stands and came to meet him. Madam Hooch had fallen asleep in her seat.

"Here you go," said Harry, handing Ron the Firebolt.

Ron, an expression of ecstasy on his face, mounted the broom and zoomed off into the gathering darkness while Harry had not even been before Madam Hooch awoke with a start, told Harry and Ron off for not waking her, and insisted that they go back to the dormitory. Harry shouldered the Firebolt and he and Ron walked out of the shadowy stadium, discussing the Firebolt's superbly smooth flying. They were halfway toward the castle when Harry, glancing to his left, saw something that made his heart turn over. He stopped dead, his heart banging against his ribs.

"What's the matter?" said Ron.

Harry pointed. Ron pulled out his wand and muttered, "Lumos!"

A beam of light fell across the grass, hit the bottom of a tree, and illuminated its branches; there, crouching among the roots, was a large, scaly, silver creature. "Get out of here!" Ron roared, and he stooped down and seized a stone lying on the grass, but before he could do anything, the creature was gone. "Inger tail."

"See?" Ron said furiously, chucking the stone down again. "She's still letting him wander about wherever he wants —" Harry didn't say anything. He took a deep breath as relief seeped through him; he had been sure for a moment that he would be expelled. Slightly ashamed of his moment of panic, Harry didn't say anything to Ron — nor did he look left or right until they were back in the dormitory. Harry went down to breakfast the next morning with the rest of the boys in his dormitory, all of whom seemed to think that the Firebolt was a miracle. In the Great Hall, heads turned in the direction of the Firebolt, and there was a good deal of excited muttering. Harry was all looking thunderstruck.

"Did you see his face?" said Ron gleefully, looking back at Malfoy. "He can't believe it! This is brilliant!"

Wood, too, was basking in the reflected glory of the Firebolt.

"Put it here, Harry," he said, laying the broom in the middle of the table and carefully turning it so that its name faced the wall. "The teachers are soon coming over to look. Cedric Diggory came over to congratulate Harry on having acquired such a superb replacement broom. Fleur Weasley, asked if she could actually hold the Firebolt."

"Now, now, Penny, no sabotage!" said Percy heartily as she examined the Firebolt closely. "Penelope and I have got a lot to say about this broom!"

Penelope put the Firebolt down again, thanked Harry, and went back to her table.

"Harry — make sure you win," said Percy, in an urgent whisper. "I haven't got ten Galleons. Yes, I'm coming, Penny!" A

"Sure you can manage that broom, Potter?" said a cold, drawling voice.

Draco Malfoy had arrived for a closer look, Crabbe and Goyle right behind him.

"Yeah, reckon so," said Harry casually.

"Got plenty of special features, hasn't it?" said Malfoy, eyes glittering maliciously. "Shame it doesn't come with a parachute. Crabbe and Goyle sniggered."

"Pity you can't attach an extra arm to yours, Malfoy," said Harry. "Then it could catch the Snitch for you."

The Gryffindor team laughed loudly. Malfoy's pale eyes narrowed, and he stalked away. They watched him rejoin the Slytherins, asking Malfoy whether Harry's broom really was a Firebolt.

At a quarter to eleven, the Gryffindor team set off for the locker rooms. The weather couldn't have been more different. It was a very light breeze; there would be no visibility problems this time, and Harry, though nervous, was starting to feel better. He could hear the rest of the school moving into the stadium beyond. Harry took off his black school robes, removed his white shirt, and put on his Quidditch robes. He only hoped he wouldn't need it. He wondered suddenly whether Professor McGonagall would be there.

"You know what we've got to do," said Wood as they prepared to leave the locker rooms. "If we lose this match, we're out of the tournament, and we'll be okay!"

They walked out onto the field to tumultuous applause. The Ravenclaw team, dressed in blue, were already standing in a line. Hermione was on their team. She was shorter than Harry by about a head, and Harry couldn't help noticing, nervous as he was, that she was looking at him. They stood in a line, each other behind their captains, and he felt a slight lurch in the region of his stomach that he didn't think had anything to do with the match.

"Wood, Davies, shake hands," Madam Hooch said briskly, and Wood shook hands with the Ravenclaw Captain.

"Mount your brooms . . . on my whistle . . . three — two — one —"

Harry kicked off into the air and the Firebolt zoomed higher and faster than any other broom; he soared around the stadium while the commentary, which was being provided by the Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan, continued.

"They're off, and the big excitement this match is the Firebolt that Harry Potter is flying for Gryffindor. According to the commentary, the Firebolt is the best broom for the national teams at this year's World Championship —"

"Jordan, would you mind telling us what's going on in the match?" interrupted Professor McGonagall's voice.

"Right you are, Professor — just giving a bit of background information — the Firebolt, incidentally, has a built-in autopilot. It's a brilliant piece of wizardry. Jordan!"

"Okay, okay, Gryffindor in possession, Katie Bell of Gryffindor heading for goal . . ."

Harry streaked past Katie in the opposite direction, gazing around for a glint of gold and noticing that Cho Chang was looking at him. He kept cutting across him, forcing him to change direction.

"Show her your acceleration, Harry!" Fred yelled as he whooshed past in pursuit of a Bludger that was aiming for Alicia. Harry urged the Firebolt forward as they rounded the Ravenclaw goalposts and Cho fell behind. Just as Katie succeeded, the other side of the field went wild, he saw it — the Snitch was close to the ground, flitting near one of the barriers. Harry dived; Cho saw what he was doing and tore after him — Harry was speeding up, excitement flooding him; dive after dive. Then a Bludger, hit by one of the Ravenclaw Beaters, came pelting out of nowhere; Harry veered off course, avoiding it. The Bludger vanished.

There was a great "Ooooooh" of disappointment from the Gryffindor supporters, but much applause for their Beaters. The second Bludger directly at the offending Beater, who was forced to roll right over in midair to avoid it.

"Gryffindor leads by eighty points to zero, and look at that Firebolt go! Potter's really putting it through its paces now. The Firebolt's precision-balance is really noticeable in these long —"

"JORDAN! ARE YOU BEING PAID TO ADVERTISE FIREBOLTS? GET ON WITH THE COMMENTARY!"

Ravenclaw was pulling back; they had now scored three goals, which put Gryffindor only fifty points ahead — if Cho was right. Cho, narrowly avoiding a Ravenclaw Chaser, scanning the field frantically — a glint of gold, a flutter of tiny wings — the Snitch was there. Harry accelerated, eyes fixed on the speck of gold ahead — but just then, Cho appeared out of thin air, blocking him.

"HARRY, THIS IS NO TIME TO BE A GENTLEMAN!" Wood roared as Harry swerved to avoid a collision. "KNOCK HER OFF!" Harry turned and caught sight of Cho; she was grinning. The Snitch had vanished again. Harry turned his Firebolt up to see Cho in his eye, he saw Cho following him. . . . She'd decided to mark him rather than search for the Snitch herself. . . . All right, he'd have to make the consequences. . . .

He dived again, and Cho, thinking he'd seen the Snitch, tried to follow; Harry pulled out of the dive very sharply; she was too late. She didn't see it, for the third time — the Snitch was glittering way above the field at the Ravenclaw end.

He accelerated; so, many feet below, did Cho. He was winning, gaining on the Snitch with every second — then — "Oh!" screamed Cho, pointing.

Distracted, Harry looked down. Three dementors, three tall, black, hooded dementors, were looking up at him.

He didn't stop to think. Plunging a hand down the neck of his robes, he whipped out his wand and roared, "Expecto Patronum!" Something silver-white, something enormous, erupted from the end of his wand. He knew it had shot directly at the dementors. He looked ahead — he was nearly there. He stretched out the hand still grasping his wand and just managed to touch the ground. Madam Hooch's whistle sounded. Harry turned around in midair and saw six scarlet blurs bearing down on him; next moment he was off his broom. Down below he could hear the roars of the Gryffindors in the crowd.

"That's my boy!" Wood kept yelling. Alicia, Angelina, and Katie had all kissed Harry; Fred had him in a grip so tight Harry couldn't breathe. The team managed to make its way back to the ground. Harry got off his broom and looked up to see a gaggle of people. Before he knew it, he had been engulfed by the cheering crowd.

"Yes!" Ron yelled, yanking Harry's arm into the air. "Yes! Yes!"

"Well done, Harry!" said Percy, looking delighted. "Ten Galleons to me! Must find Penelope, excuse me —"

"Good for you, Harry!" roared Seamus Finnigan.

"Ruddy brilliant!" boomed Hagrid over the heads of the milling Gryffindors.

"That was quite some Patronus," said a voice in Harry's ear.

Harry turned around to see Professor Lupin, who looked both shaken and pleased.

"The dementors didn't affect me at all!" Harry said excitedly. "I didn't feel a thing!"

"That would be because they — er — weren't dementors," said Professor Lupin. "Come and see —"

He led Harry out of the crowd until they were able to see the edge of the field.

"You gave Mr. Malfoy quite a fright," said Lupin.

Harry stared. Lying in a crumpled heap on the ground were Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Marcus Flint, the Slytherin team. They were wearing their hooded robes. It looked as though Malfoy had been standing on Goyle's shoulders. Standing over them, with an expression of triumph, was Hermione. "An unworthy trick!" she was shouting. "A low and cowardly attempt to sabotage the Gryffindor Seeker! Detention for all of you! Go to Professor Dumbledore about this, make no mistake! Ah, here he comes now!"

If anything could have set the seal on Gryffindor's victory, it was this. Ron, who had fought his way through to Harry's side, was now helping him to extricate himself from the robe, Goyle's head still stuck inside it.

"Come on, Harry!" said George, fighting his way over. "Party! Gryffindor common room, now!"

"Right," said Harry, and feeling happier than he had in ages, he and the rest of the team led the way, still in their scarlet robes. It felt as though they had already won the Quidditch Cup; the party went on all day and well into the night. Fred and George were passing out armfuls of bottles of butterbeer, pumpkin fizz, and several bags full of Honeydukes sweets.

"How did you do that?" squealed Angelina Johnson as George started throwing Peppermint Toads into the crowd.

"With a little help from Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," Fred muttered in Harry's ear.

Only one person wasn't joining in the festivities. Hermione, incredibly, was sitting in a corner, attempting to read an old book. "Muggles. Harry broke away from the table where Fred and George had started juggling butterbeer bottles and went to find her. "Did you even come to the match?" he asked her.

"Of course I did," said Hermione in a strangely high-pitched voice, not looking up. "And I'm very glad we won, and I thank you very much. "Come on, Hermione, come and have some food," Harry said, looking over at Ron and wondering whether he was in any better luck. "I can't, Harry. I've still got four hundred and twenty-two pages to read!" said Hermione, now sounding slightly hysterical.

want me to join in."

There was no arguing with this, as Ron chose that moment to say loudly, "If Scabbers hadn't just been eaten, he could —"

Hermione burst into tears. Before Harry could say or do anything, she tucked the enormous book under her arm, and ran out of sight.

"Can't you give her a break?" Harry asked Ron quietly.

"No," said Ron flatly. "If she just acted like she was sorry — but she'll never admit she's wrong, Hermione. She's still a

The Gryffindor party ended only when Professor McGonagall turned up in her tartan dressing gown and hair net at the door. She climbed the stairs to their dormitory, still discussing the match. At last, exhausted, Harry climbed into bed, twitched the blanket over his head, switched the light off, lay back, and felt himself almost instantly drifting off to sleep. . . .

He had a very strange dream. He was walking through a forest, his Firebolt over his shoulder, following something silver. He could only catch glimpses of it between the leaves. Anxious to catch up with it, he sped up, but as he moved faster the glimpses gathered speed. Now he was running flat out, and ahead he could hear galloping. Then he turned a corner and

"AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGHHHHH! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Harry woke as suddenly as though he'd been hit in the face. Disoriented in the total darkness, he fumbled with his hand for his wand. He heard a voice from the other side of the room: "What's going on?"

Harry thought he heard the dormitory door slam. At last finding the divide in his curtains, he ripped them back, and there was Ron sitting up in bed, the hangings torn from one side, a look of utmost terror on his face.

"Black! Sirius Black! With a knife!"

"What?"

"Here! Just now! Slashed the curtains! Woke me up!"

"You sure you weren't dreaming, Ron?" said Dean.

"Look at the curtains! I tell you, he was here!"

They all scrambled out of bed; Harry reached the dormitory door first, and they sprinted back down the staircase. Down

"Who shouted?"

"What're you doing?"

The common room was lit with the glow of the dying fire, still littered with the debris from the party. It was deserted.

"Are you sure you weren't dreaming, Ron?"

"I'm telling you, I saw him!"

"What's all the noise?"

"Professor McGonagall told us to go to bed!"

A few of the girls had come down their staircase, pulling on dressing gowns and yawning. Boys, too, were reappearing in the common room.

"Excellent, are we carrying on?" said Fred Weasley brightly.

"Everyone back upstairs!" said Percy, hurrying into the common room and pinning his Head Boy badge to his pajama top.

"Perce — Sirius Black!" said Ron faintly. "In our dormitory! With a knife! Woke me up!"

The common room went very still.

"Nonsense!" said Percy, looking startled. "You had too much to eat, Ron — had a nightmare —"

"I'm telling you —"

"Now, really, enough's enough!"

Professor McGonagall was back. She slammed the portrait behind her as she entered the common room and stared at the boys.

"I am delighted that Gryffindor won the match, but this is getting ridiculous! Percy, I expected better of you!"

"I certainly didn't authorize this, Professor!" said Percy, puffing himself up indignantly. "I was just telling them all to go to bed!"

"IT WASN'T A NIGHTMARE!" Ron yelled. "PROFESSOR, I WOKE UP, AND SIRIUS BLACK WAS STANDING OVER ME, HOLDING A KNIFE!"

Professor McGonagall stared at him.

"Don't be ridiculous, Weasley, how could he possibly have gotten through the portrait hole?"

"Ask him!" said Ron, pointing a shaking finger at the back of Sir Cadogan's picture. "Ask him if he saw —"

Glaring suspiciously at Ron, Professor McGonagall pushed the portrait back open and went outside. The whole common room

"Sir Cadogan, did you just let a man enter Gryffindor Tower?"

"Certainly, good lady!" cried Sir Cadogan.

There was a stunned silence, both inside and outside the common room.

"You — you did?" said Professor McGonagall. "But — but the password!"

"He had 'em!" said Sir Cadogan proudly. "Had the whole week's, my lady! Read 'em off a little piece of paper!"

Professor McGonagall pulled herself back through the portrait hole to face the stunned crowd. She was white as chalk.

"Which person," she said, her voice shaking, "which abysmally foolish person wrote down this week's passwords and the names of the people who wrote them?"

There was utter silence, broken by the smallest of terrified squeaks. Neville Longbottom, trembling from head to foot,

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SNAPE'S GRUDGE

No one in Gryffindor Tower slept that night. They knew that the castle was being searched again, and the whole House of Gryffindor had been caught. Professor McGonagall came back at dawn, to tell them that he had again escaped.

Throughout the day, everywhere they went they saw signs of tighter security; Professor Flitwick could be seen teaching Filch was suddenly bustling up and down the corridors, boarding up everything from tiny cracks in the walls to mouse holes. The Fat Lady was back on condition that she was given extra protection. A bunch of surly security trolls had been hired to guard her. They were comparing the size of their clubs.

Harry couldn't help noticing that the statue of the one-eyed witch on the third floor remained unguarded and unblinking. It was still there — and now Harry, Ron, and Hermione — were the only ones who knew about the hidden passageway within it. "D'you reckon we should tell someone?" Harry asked Ron.

"We know he's not coming in through Honeydukes," said Ron dismissively. "We'd've heard if the shop had been broken into." Harry was glad Ron took this view. If the one-eyed witch was boarded up too, he would never be able to go into Hogsmeade. Ron had become an instant celebrity. For the first time in his life, people were paying more attention to him than to Hermione. Though still severely shaken by the night's events, he was happy to tell anyone who asked what had happened. ". . . I was asleep, and I heard this ripping noise, and I thought it was in my dream, you know? But then there was this noise, and I had been pulled down. . . . I rolled over . . . and I saw him standing over me . . . like a skeleton, with loads of filthy hair on his face. . . . He was about twelve inches . . . and he looked at me, and I looked at him, and then I yelled, and he scampered."

"Why, though?" Ron added to Harry as the group of second-year girls who had been listening to his chilling tale departed. Harry had been wondering the same thing. Why had Black, having got the wrong bed, not silenced Ron and proceeded to silence the other innocent people, and this time he had been facing five unarmed boys, four of whom were asleep.

"He must've known he'd have a job getting back out of the castle once you'd yelled and woken people up," said Harry. "He could have gone through the portrait hole . . . then he would've met the teachers. . . ."

Neville was in total disgrace. Professor McGonagall was so furious with him she had banned him from all future Hogsmeade visits. She had even taken away his password into the tower. Poor Neville was forced to wait outside the common room every night for somebody to let him in. None of these punishments, however, came close to matching the one his grandmother had in store for him. Two Hogwarts students could receive over breakfast — a Howler.

The school owls swooped into the Great Hall carrying the mail as usual, and Neville choked as a huge barn owl landed on his lap. Ron, who were sitting opposite him, recognized the letter as a Howler at once — Ron had got one from his mother.

"Run for it, Neville," Ron advised.

Neville didn't need telling twice. He seized the envelope, and holding it before him like a bomb, sprinted out of the hall. He was out of sight of him. They heard the Howler go off in the entrance hall — Neville's grandmother's voice, magically magnified to fill the hall, brought shame on the whole family.

Harry was too busy feeling sorry for Neville to notice immediately that he had a letter too. Hedwig got his attention by chirping. "Ouch! Oh — thanks, Hedwig."

Harry tore open the envelope while Hedwig helped herself to some of Neville's cornflakes. The note inside said:

Dear Harry and Ron,

How about having tea with me this afternoon 'round six?

I'll come and collect you from the castle.

WAIT FOR ME IN THE ENTRANCE HALL; YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED OUT ON YOUR OWN.

Cheers,

Hagrid

"He probably wants to hear all about Black!" said Ron.

So at six o'clock that afternoon, Harry and Ron left Gryffindor Tower, passed the security trolls at a run, and headed for Hagrid's cabin. Hagrid was already waiting for them.

"All right, Hagrid!" said Ron. "S'pose you want to hear about Saturday night, do you?"

"I've already heard all about it," said Hagrid, opening the front doors and leading them outside.

"Oh," said Ron, looking slightly put out.

The first thing they saw on entering Hagrid's cabin was Buckbeak, who was stretched out on top of Hagrid's patchwork quilt. He was looking at a large plate of dead ferrets. Averting his eyes from this unpleasant sight, Harry saw a gigantic, hairy brown suit and a valise standing next to Hagrid's wardrobe door.

"What are they for, Hagrid?" said Harry.

"Buckbeak's case against the Committee fer the Disposal o' Dangerous Creatures," said Hagrid. "This Friday. Him an' me. We're goin' to the Knight Bus. . . ."

Harry felt a nasty pang of guilt. He had completely forgotten that Buckbeak's trial was so near, and judging by the unicorn's promise about helping him prepare Buckbeak's defense; the arrival of the Firebolt had driven it clean out of their minds. Hagrid poured them tea and offered them a plate of Bath buns, but they knew better than to accept; they had had to eat them before.

"I got somethin' ter discuss with you two," said Hagrid, sitting himself between them and looking uncharacteristically serious.

"What?" said Harry.

"Hermione," said Hagrid.

"What about her?" said Ron.

"She's in a righ' state, that's what. She's bin comin' down ter visit me a lot since Chris'mas. Bin feelin' lonely. Firs' yeh wouldn't talkin' to her because her cat —"

"— ate Scabbers!" Ron interjected angrily.

"Because her cat acted like all cats do," Hagrid continued doggedly. "She's cried a fair few times, yeh know. Goin' thro' w, if yeh ask me, all the work she's tryin' ter do. Still found time ter help me with Buckbeak's case, mind. . . . She's found a good chance now. . . ."

"Hagrid, we should've helped as well — sorry —" Harry began awkwardly.

"I'm not blamin' yeh!" said Hagrid, waving Harry's apology aside. "Gawd knows yeh've had enough ter be gettin' on with this night — but I gotta tell yeh, I thought you two'd value yer friend more'n broomsticks or rats. Tha's all."

Harry and Ron exchanged uncomfortable looks.

"Really upset, she was, when Black nearly stabbed yeh, Ron. She's got her heart in the right place, Hermione has, and"

"If she'd just get rid of that cat, I'd speak to her again!" Ron said angrily. "But she's still sticking up for it! It's a maniac, and"

"Ah, well, people can be a bit stupid about their pets," said Hagrid wisely. Behind him, Buckbeak spat a few ferret bones.

They spent the rest of their visit discussing Gryffindor's improved chances for the Quidditch Cup. At nine o'clock, Hagrid

A large group of people was bunched around the bulletin board when they returned to the common room.

"Hogsmeade, next weekend!" said Ron, craning over the heads to read the new notice. "What d'you reckon?" he added.

"Well, Filch hasn't done anything about the passage into Honeydukes. . . ." Harry said, even more quietly.

"Harry!" said a voice in his right ear. Harry started and looked around at Hermione, who was sitting at the table right where he'd been hiding her.

"Harry, if you go into Hogsmeade again . . . I'll tell Professor McGonagall about that map!" said Hermione.

"Can you hear someone talking, Harry?" growled Ron, not looking at Hermione.

"Ron, how can you let him go with you? After what Sirius Black nearly did to you! I mean it, I'll tell —"

"So now you're trying to get Harry expelled!" said Ron furiously. "Haven't you done enough damage this year?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but with a soft hiss, Crookshanks leapt onto her lap. Hermione took one foot and hurried away toward the girls' dormitories.

"So how about it?" Ron said to Harry as though there had been no interruption. "Come on, last time we went you did it. Harry looked around to check that Hermione was well out of earshot.

"Okay," he said. "But I'm taking the Invisibility Cloak this time."

On Saturday morning, Harry packed his Invisibility Cloak in his bag, slipped the Marauder's Map into his pocket, and slipped out. He saw suspicious looks down the table at him, but he avoided her eye and was careful to let her see him walking back up the stairs. He ended to the front doors.

"Bye!" Harry called to Ron. "See you when you get back!"

Ron grinned and winked.

Harry hurried up to the third floor, slipping the Marauder's Map out of his pocket as he went. Crouching behind the statue, he looked in the direction. Harry squinted at it. The minuscule writing next to it read Neville Longbottom.

Harry quickly pulled out his wand, muttered, "Dissendium!" and shoved his bag into the statue, but before he could do so,

"Harry! I forgot you weren't going to Hogsmeade either!"

"Hi, Neville," said Harry, moving swiftly away from the statue and pushing the map back into his pocket. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," shrugged Neville. "Want a game of Exploding Snap?"

"Er — not now — I was going to go to the library and do that vampire essay for Lupin —"

"I'll come with you!" said Neville brightly. "I haven't done it either!"

"Er — hang on — yeah, I forgot, I finished it last night!"

"Great, you can help me!" said Neville, his round face anxious. "I don't understand that thing about the garlic at all —" He broke off with a small gasp, looking over Harry's shoulder.

It was Snape. Neville took a quick step behind Harry.

"And what are you two doing here?" said Snape, coming to a halt and looking from one to the other. "An odd place to be. To Harry's immense disquiet, Snape's black eyes flicked to the doorways on either side of them, and then to the one between them.

"We're not — meeting here," said Harry. "We just — met here."

"Indeed?" said Snape. "You have a habit of turning up in unexpected places, Potter, and you are very rarely there for no reason. The Tower, where you belong."

Harry and Neville set off without another word. As they turned the corner, Harry looked back. Snape was running on ahead.

Harry managed to shake Neville off at the Fat Lady by telling him the password, then pretending he'd left his vampire essay. To avoid the security trolls, he pulled out the map again and held it close to his nose.

The third-floor corridor seemed to be deserted. Harry scanned the map carefully and saw, with a leap of relief, that the map was right. He sprinted back to the one-eyed witch, opened her hump, heaved himself inside, and slid down to meet his bag at the bottom. He then set off at a run.

Harry, completely hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, emerged into the sunlight outside Honeydukes and prodded the door. "It's me," he muttered.

"What kept you?" Ron hissed.

"Snape was hanging around. . . ."

They set off up the High Street.

"Where are you?" Ron kept muttering out of the corner of his mouth. "Are you still there? This feels weird. . . ."

They went to the post office; Ron pretended to be checking the price of an owl to Bill in Egypt so that Harry could have at least three hundred of them; from Great Grays right down to tiny little Scops owls ("Local Deliveries Only"), which

Then they visited Zonko's, which was so packed with students Harry had to exercise great care not to tread on anyone's red's and George's wildest dreams; Harry gave Ron whispered orders and passed him some gold from under the Cloak. They had been on entering, but their pockets bulging with Dungbombs, Hiccup Sweets, Frog Spawn Soap, and a Nose. The day was fine and breezy, and neither of them felt like staying indoors, so they walked past the Three Broomsticks, the best dwelling in Britain. It stood a little way above the rest of the village, and even in daylight was slightly creepy, with "Even the Hogwarts ghosts avoid it," said Ron as they leaned on the fence, looking up at it. "I asked Nearly Headless Nick if one can get in. Fred and George tried, obviously, but all the entrances are sealed shut. . . ."

Harry, feeling hot from their climb, was just considering taking off the Cloak for a few minutes when they heard voices on the side of the hill; moments later, Malfoy had appeared, followed closely by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy was speaking. ". . . should have an owl from Father any time now. He had to go to the hearing to tell them about my arm . . . about Crabbe and Goyle sniggered.

"I really wish I could hear that great hairy moron trying to defend himself . . . 'There's no 'arm in 'im, 'onest —' . . . that Malfoy suddenly caught sight of Ron. His pale face split in a malevolent grin.

"What are you doing, Weasley?"

Malfoy looked up at the crumbling house behind Ron.

"Suppose you'd love to live here, wouldn't you, Weasley? Dreaming about having your own bedroom? I heard your father Harry seized the back of Ron's robes to stop him from leaping on Malfoy.

"Leave him to me," he hissed in Ron's ear.

The opportunity was too perfect to miss. Harry crept silently around behind Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, bent down, and said "We were just discussing your friend Hagrid," Malfoy said to Ron. "Just trying to imagine what he's saying to the Com. I cry when they cut off his hippogriff's —"

SPLAT.

Malfoy's head jerked forward as the mud hit him; his silver-blond hair was suddenly dripping in muck.

"What the — ?"

Ron had to hold onto the fence to keep himself standing, he was laughing so hard. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle spun so fast their hair was clean.

"What was that? Who did that?"

"Very haunted up here, isn't it?" said Ron, with the air of one commenting on the weather.

Crabbe and Goyle were looking scared. Their bulging muscles were no use against ghosts. Malfoy was staring madly at Harry. Harry sneaked along the path, where a particularly sloppy puddle yielded some foul-smelling, green sludge.

SPLATTER.

Crabbe and Goyle caught some this time. Goyle hopped furiously on the spot, trying to rub it out of his small, dull eyes.

"It came from over there!" said Malfoy, wiping his face, and staring at a spot some six feet to the left of Harry.

Crabbe blundered forward, his long arms outstretched like a zombie. Harry dodged around him, picked up a stick, and as Crabbe did a kind of pirouette in midair, trying to see who had thrown it. As Ron was the only person Crabbe could see. Crabbe stumbled — and his huge, flat foot caught the hem of Harry's Cloak. Harry felt a great tug, then the Cloak slipped. For a split second, Malfoy stared at him.

"AAARGH!" he yelled, pointing at Harry's head. Then he turned tail and ran, at breakneck speed, back down the hill, Crabbe and Goyle following. Harry tugged the Cloak up again, but the damage was done.

"Harry!" Ron said, stumbling forward and staring hopelessly at the point where Harry had disappeared, "you'd better get out of the castle, quick —"

"See you later," said Harry, and without another word, he tore back down the path toward Hogsmeade.

Would Malfoy believe what he had seen? Would anyone believe Malfoy? Nobody knew about the Invisibility Cloak — Harry would know exactly what had happened, if Malfoy said anything —

Back into Honeydukes, back down the cellar steps, across the stone floor, through the trapdoor — Harry pulled off the Cloak. . . . Malfoy would get back first . . . how long would it take him to find a teacher? Panting, a sharp pain in his side. He would have to leave the Cloak where it was, it was too much of a giveaway in case Malfoy had tipped off a teacher. As he could, his sweaty hands slipping on the sides of the chute. He reached the inside of the witch's hump, tapped the hump; the hump closed, and just as Harry jumped out from behind the statue, he heard quick footsteps approaching. It was Snape. He approached Harry at a swift walk, his black robes swishing, then stopped in front of him.

"So," he said.

There was a look of suppressed triumph about him. Harry tried to look innocent, all too aware of his sweaty face and

"Come with me, Potter," said Snape.

Harry followed him downstairs, trying to wipe his hands clean on the inside of his robes without Snape noticing. They went to the kitchen.

Harry had been in here only once before, and he had been in very serious trouble then too. Snape had acquired a few

on shelves behind his desk, glinting in the firelight and adding to the threatening atmosphere.

"Sit," said Snape.

Harry sat. Snape, however, remained standing.

"Mr. Malfoy has just been to see me with a strange story, Potter," said Snape.

Harry didn't say anything.

"He tells me that he was up by the Shrieking Shack when he ran into Weasley — apparently alone."

Still, Harry didn't speak.

"Mr. Malfoy states that he was standing talking to Weasley, when a large amount of mud hit him in the back of the head."

Harry tried to look mildly surprised.

"I don't know, Professor."

Snape's eyes were boring into Harry's. It was exactly like trying to stare down a hippogriff. Harry tried hard not to blink.

"Mr. Malfoy then saw an extraordinary apparition. Can you imagine what it might have been, Potter?"

"No," said Harry, now trying to sound innocently curious.

"It was your head, Potter. Floating in midair."

There was a long silence.

"Maybe he'd better go to Madam Pomfrey," said Harry. "If he's seeing things like —"

"What would your head have been doing in Hogsmeade, Potter?" said Snape softly. "Your head is not allowed in Hogsmeade."

"I know that," said Harry, striving to keep his face free of guilt or fear. "It sounds like Malfoy's having hallucinations —"

"Malfoy is not having hallucinations," snarled Snape, and he bent down, a hand on each arm of Harry's chair, so that he was looking directly at Harry.

"I've been up in Gryffindor Tower," said Harry. "Like you told —"

"Can anyone confirm that?"

Harry didn't say anything. Snape's thin mouth curled into a horrible smile.

"So," he said, straightening up again. "Everyone from the Minister of Magic downward has been trying to keep famous Harry Potter under a law unto himself. Let the ordinary people worry about his safety! Famous Harry Potter goes where he wants to, with no restrictions."

Harry stayed silent. Snape was trying to provoke him into telling the truth. He wasn't going to do it. Snape had no power over him.

"How extraordinarily like your father you are, Potter," Snape said suddenly, his eyes glinting. "He too was exceedingly arrogant. He thought he was a cut above the rest of us too. Strutting around the place with his friends and admirers . . . The rest of us were just there to watch him."

"My dad didn't strut," said Harry, before he could stop himself. "And neither do I."

"Your father didn't set much store by rules either," Snape went on, pressing his advantage, his thin face full of malice. "He was a rule-breaker. His head was so swollen —"

"SHUT UP!"

Harry was suddenly on his feet. Rage such as he had not felt since his last night in Privet Drive was coursing through him. His eyes flashed dangerously.

"What did you say to me, Potter?"

"I told you to shut up about my dad!" Harry yelled. "I know the truth, all right? He saved your life! Dumbledore told me so. Your head was so swollen it was like a watermelon. Snape's sallow skin had gone the color of sour milk."

"And did the headmaster tell you the circumstances in which your father saved my life?" he whispered. "Or did he come up with that story to get you off?"

Harry bit his lip. He didn't know what had happened and didn't want to admit it — but Snape seemed to have guessed. "I would hate for you to run away with a false idea of your father, Potter," he said, a terrible grin twisting his face. "He was a rule-breaker. He let me correct you — your saintly father and his friends played a highly amusing joke on me that would have resulted in his death. There was nothing brave about what he did. He was saving his own skin as much as mine. Had their joke succeeded, my skin would have been in a worse state than yours is now."

Snape's uneven, yellowish teeth were bared.

"Turn out your pockets, Potter!" he spat suddenly.

Harry didn't move. There was a pounding in his ears.

"Turn out your pockets, or we go straight to the headmaster! Pull them out, Potter!"

Cold with dread, Harry slowly pulled out the bag of Zonko's tricks and the Marauder's Map.

Snape picked up the Zonko's bag.

"Ron gave them to me," said Harry, praying he'd get a chance to tip Ron off before Snape saw him. "He — brought them to me. I've been carrying them around ever since. How very touching . . . and what is this?"

Snape had picked up the map. Harry tried with all his might to keep his face impassive.

"Spare bit of parchment," he said with a shrug.

Snape turned it over, his eyes on Harry.

"Surely you don't need such a very old piece of parchment?" he said. "Why don't I just — throw this away?"

His hand moved toward the fire.

"No!" Harry said quickly.

"So!" said Snape, his long nostrils quivering. "Is this another treasured gift from Mr. Weasley? Or is it — something else? A map that tells you how to get into Hogsmeade without passing the dementors?"

Harry blinked. Snape's eyes gleamed.

"Let me see, let me see . . . ," he muttered, taking out his wand and smoothing the map out on his desk. "Reveal yourself!" Nothing happened. Harry clenched his hands to stop them from shaking.

"Show yourself!" Snape said, tapping the map sharply.

It stayed blank. Harry was taking deep, calming breaths.

"Professor Severus Snape, master of this school, commands you to yield the information you conceal!" Snape said, his voice cold.

As though an invisible hand were writing upon it, words appeared on the smooth surface of the map.

"Mr. Moony presents his compliments to Professor Snape, and begs him to keep his abnormally large nose out of other people's business." Snape froze. Harry stared, dumbstruck, at the message. But the map didn't stop there. More writing was appearing below.

"Mr. Prongs agrees with Mr. Moony, and would like to add that Professor Snape is an ugly git."

It would have been very funny if the situation hadn't been so serious. And there was more. . . .

"Mr. Padfoot would like to register his astonishment that an idiot like that ever became a professor."

Harry closed his eyes in horror. When he'd opened them, the map had had its last word.

"Mr. Wormtail bids Professor Snape good day, and advises him to wash his hair, the slimeball."

Harry waited for the blow to fall.

"So . . . ," said Snape softly. "We'll see about this. . . ."

He strode across to his fire, seized a fistful of glittering powder from a jar on the fireplace, and threw it into the flames.

"Lupin!" Snape called into the fire. "I want a word!"

Utterly bewildered, Harry stared at the fire. A large shape had appeared in it, revolving very fast. Seconds later, Professor Lupin stepped out, shaking off his shabby robes.

"You called, Severus?" said Lupin mildly.

"I certainly did," said Snape, his face contorted with fury as he strode back to his desk. "I have just asked Potter to explain this." Snape pointed at the parchment, on which the words of Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs were still shimmering.

"Well?" said Snape.

Lupin continued to stare at the map. Harry had the impression that Lupin was doing some very quick thinking.

"Well?" said Snape again. "This parchment is plainly full of Dark Magic. This is supposed to be your area of expertise, Lupin. You look at this and say nothing?"

Lupin looked up and, by the merest half-glance in Harry's direction, warned him not to interrupt.

"Full of Dark Magic?" he repeated mildly. "Do you really think so, Severus? It looks to me as though it is merely a piece of parchment, but surely not dangerous? I imagine Harry got it from a joke shop —"

"Indeed?" said Snape. His jaw had gone rigid with anger. "You think a joke shop could supply him with such a thing? You think the manufacturers?"

Harry didn't understand what Snape was talking about. Nor, apparently, did Lupin.

"You mean, by Mr. Wormtail or one of these people?" he said. "Harry, do you know any of these men?"

"No," said Harry quickly.

"You see, Severus?" said Lupin, turning back to Snape. "It looks like a Zonko product to me —"

Right on cue, Ron came bursting into the office. He was completely out of breath, and stopped just short of Snape's desk.

"I — gave — Harry — that — stuff," he choked. "Bought — it . . . in Zonko's . . . ages — ago . . ."

"Well!" said Lupin, clapping his hands together and looking around cheerfully. "That seems to clear that up! Severus, you can go back to work now. I'll be inside his robes. "Harry, Ron, come with me, I need a word about my vampire essay — excuse us, Severus —"

Harry didn't dare look at Snape as they left his office. He, Ron, and Lupin walked all the way back into the entrance hall.

"Professor, I —"

"I don't want to hear explanations," said Lupin shortly. He glanced around the empty entrance hall and lowered his voice. "I know this map. It's the same as the one I had many years ago. Yes, I know it's a map," he said as Harry and Ron looked amazed. "I don't want to know how it fell into your hands, and it in. Particularly after what happened the last time a student left information about the castle lying around. And now you tell me Harry had expected that, and was too keen for explanations to protest."

"Why did Snape think I'd got it from the manufacturers?"

"Because . . . ," Lupin hesitated, "because these mapmakers would have wanted to lure you out of school. They'd think you'd be the only one to get it."

"Do you know them?" said Harry, impressed.

"We've met," he said shortly. He was looking at Harry more seriously than ever before.

"Don't expect me to cover up for you again, Harry. I cannot make you take Sirius Black seriously. But I would have thought you would have had more of an effect on you. Your parents gave their lives to keep you alive, Harry. A poor way to repay them, but it was the only way. He walked away, leaving Harry feeling worse by far than he had at any point in Snape's office. Slowly, he and Ron moved on. They remembered the Invisibility Cloak — it was still down there, but he didn't dare go and get it.

"It's my fault," said Ron abruptly. "I persuaded you to go. Lupin's right, it was stupid, we shouldn't've done it —"

He broke off; they reached the corridor where the security trolls were pacing, and Hermione was walking toward them. "What happened. His heart plummeted — had she told Professor McGonagall?"

"Come to have a good gloat?" said Ron savagely as she stopped in front of them. "Or have you just been to tell on us?"

"No," said Hermione. She was holding a letter in her hands and her lip was trembling. "I just thought you ought to know that Sirius Black is still alive."

THE QUIDDITCH FINAL

He — he sent me this,” Hermione said, holding out the letter.

Harry took it. The parchment was damp, and enormous teardrops had smudged the ink so badly in places that it was illegible.

Dear Hermione,

We lost. I'm allowed to bring him back to Hogwarts.

Execution date to be fixed.

Beaky has enjoyed London.

I won't forget all the help you gave us.

Hagrid

“They can't do this,” said Harry. “They can't. Buckbeak isn't dangerous.”

“Malfoy's dad's frightened the Committee into it,” said Hermione, wiping her eyes. “You know what he's like. They're afraid of him. But there's always an appeal, though, there always is. Only I can't see any hope. . . . Nothing will have changed.”

“Yeah, it will,” said Ron fiercely. “You won't have to do all the work alone this time, Hermione. I'll help.”

“Oh, Ron!”

Hermione flung her arms around Ron's neck and broke down completely. Ron, looking quite terrified, patted her very gently.

“Ron, I'm really, really sorry about Scabbers . . .,” she sobbed.

“Oh — well — he was old,” said Ron, looking thoroughly relieved that she had let go of him. “And he was a bit useless.”

The safety measures imposed on the students since Black's second break-in made it impossible for Harry, Ron, and Hermione to go to the castle for talking to him was during Care of Magical Creatures lessons.

He seemed numb with shock at the verdict.

“S'all my fault. Got all tongue-tied. They was all sittin' there in black robes an' I kep' droppin' me notes and forgettin' a few. . . .”

“There's still the appeal!” said Ron fiercely. “Don't give up yet, we're working on it!”

They were walking back up to the castle with the rest of the class. Ahead they could see Malfoy, who was walking with Crabbe and Goyle.

“S'no good, Ron,” said Hagrid sadly as they reached the castle steps. “That Committee's in Lucius Malfoy's pocket. I'm afraid he's ever had. I owe him that. . . .”

Hagrid turned around and hurried back toward his cabin, his face buried in his handkerchief.

“Look at him blubber!”

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had been standing just inside the castle doors, listening.

“Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?” said Malfoy. “And he's supposed to be our teacher!”

Harry and Ron both made furious moves toward Malfoy, but Hermione got there first — SMACK!

She had slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster. Malfoy staggered. Harry, Ron, Crabbe, and Goyle all stared after him.

“Don't you dare call Hagrid pathetic, you foul — you evil —”

“Hermione!” said Ron weakly, and he tried to grab her hand as she swung it back.

“Get off, Ron!”

Hermione pulled out her wand. Malfoy stepped backward. Crabbe and Goyle looked at him for instructions, thoroughly confused.

“C'mon,” Malfoy muttered, and in a moment, all three of them had disappeared into the passageway to the dungeons.

“Hermione!” Ron said again, sounding both stunned and impressed.

“Harry, you'd better beat him in the Quidditch final!” Hermione said shrilly. “You just better had, because I can't stand him!”

“We're due in Charms,” said Ron, still goggling at Hermione. “We'd better go.”

They hurried up the marble staircase toward Professor Flitwick's classroom.

“You're late, boys!” said Professor Flitwick reprovingly as Harry opened the classroom door. “Come along, quickly, we've already divided into pairs —”

Harry and Ron hurried to a desk at the back and opened their bags. Ron looked behind him.

“Where's Hermione gone?”

Harry looked around too. Hermione hadn't entered the classroom, yet Harry knew she had been right next to him when he came in.

“That's weird,” said Harry, staring at Ron. “Maybe — maybe she went to the bathroom or something?”

But Hermione didn't turn up all lesson.

“She could've done with a Cheering Charm on her too,” said Ron as the class left for lunch, all grinning broadly — the only ones who were.

Hermione wasn't at lunch either. By the time they had finished their apple pie, the after-effects of the Cheering Charm were making them all feel a bit worried.

“You don't think Malfoy did something to her?” Ron said anxiously as they hurried upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower.

They passed the security trolls, gave the Fat Lady the password (“Flibbertigibbet”), and scrambled through the portrait.

Hermione was sitting at a table, fast asleep, her head resting on an open Arithmancy book. They went to sit down on the other side.

“W-what?” said Hermione, waking with a start and staring wildly around. “Is it time to go? W-which lesson have we got?”

“Divination, but it's not for another twenty minutes,” said Harry. “Hermione, why didn't you come to Charms?”

“What? Oh no!” Hermione squeaked. “I forgot to go to Charms!”

“But how could you forget?” said Harry. “You were with us till we were right outside the classroom!”

“I don't believe it!” Hermione wailed. “Was Professor Flitwick angry? Oh, it was Malfoy, I was thinking about him and I forgot!”

"You know what, Hermione?" said Ron, looking down at the enormous Arithmancy book Hermione had been using as a bag. "No, I'm not!" said Hermione, brushing her hair out of her eyes and staring hopelessly around for her bag. "I just made a mistake and say sorry. . . . I'll see you in Divination!"

Hermione joined them at the foot of the ladder to Professor Trelawney's classroom twenty minutes later, looking exhausted. "I can't believe I missed Cheering Charms! And I bet they come up in our exams; Professor Flitwick hinted they might." Together they climbed the ladder into the dim, stifling tower room. Glowing on every little table was a crystal ball full of smoke, gathered together at the same rickety table.

"I thought we weren't starting crystal balls until next term," Ron muttered, casting a wary eye around for Professor Trelawney. "Don't complain, this means we've finished palmistry," Harry muttered back. "I was getting sick of her flinching every time she saw me." "Good day to you!" said the familiar, misty voice, and Professor Trelawney made her usual dramatic entrance out of the shadows. Her faces lit by the milky glow of their crystal ball.

"I have decided to introduce the crystal ball a little earlier than I had planned," said Professor Trelawney, sitting with them. "It is formed me that your examination in June will concern the Orb, and I am anxious to give you sufficient practice." Hermione snorted.

"Well, honestly . . . 'the fates have informed her' . . . who sets the exam? She does! What an amazing prediction!" she said, and they all burst out laughing.

It was hard to tell whether Professor Trelawney had heard them, as her face was hidden in shadow. She continued, "Crystal gazing is a particularly refined art," she said dreamily. "I do not expect any of you to See when first you peer into the crystal ball, but by relaxing the conscious mind and external eyes" — Ron began to snigger uncontrollably and had to stuff his fist in his mouth to keep from laughing. "the superconscious. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some of you will See before the end of the class."

And so they began. Harry, at least, felt extremely foolish, staring blankly at the crystal ball, trying to keep his mind empty. It didn't help that Ron kept breaking into silent giggles and Hermione kept tutting.

"Seen anything yet?" Harry asked them after a quarter of an hour's quiet crystal gazing.

"Yeah, there's a burn on this table," said Ron, pointing. "Someone's spilled their candle."

"This is such a waste of time," Hermione hissed. "I could be practicing something useful. I could be catching up on Charms." Professor Trelawney rustled past.

"Would anyone like me to help them interpret the shadowy portents within their Orb?" she murmured over the clink of the crystal balls.

"I don't need help," Ron whispered. "It's obvious what this means. There's going to be loads of fog tonight."

Both Harry and Hermione burst out laughing.

"Now, really!" said Professor Trelawney as everyone's heads turned in their direction. Parvati and Lavender were looking at her.

"She approached their table and peered into their crystal ball. Harry felt his heart sinking. He was sure he knew what she was going to say."

"There is something here!" Professor Trelawney whispered, lowering her face to the ball, so that it was reflected twice in the crystal.

Harry was prepared to bet everything he owned, including his Firebolt, that it wasn't good news, whatever it was. And he was sure he knew what she was going to say.

"My dear . . .," Professor Trelawney breathed, gazing up at Harry. "It is here, plainer than ever before . . . my dear, stay calm."

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" said Hermione loudly. "Not that ridiculous Grim again!"

Professor Trelawney raised her enormous eyes to Hermione's face. Parvati whispered something to Lavender, and then she turned back to the crystal ball, looking at Hermione with unmistakable anger.

"I am sorry to say that from the moment you have arrived in this class, my dear, it has been apparent that you do not have the gift of Seeing. You do not remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly mundane."

There was a moment's silence. Then —

"Fine!" said Hermione suddenly, getting up and cramming Unfogging the Future back into her bag. "Fine!" she repeated, and she walked out of the room. "I give up! I'm leaving!"

And to the whole class's amazement, Hermione strode over to the trapdoor, kicked it open, and climbed down the ladder. It took a few minutes for the class to settle down again. Professor Trelawney seemed to have forgotten all about the accident, rather heavily as she tugged her gauzy shawl more closely to her.

"Oooooo!" said Lavender suddenly, making everyone start. "Oooooo, Professor Trelawney, I've just remembered! You said one of our number will leave us forever! You said it ages ago, Professor!"

Professor Trelawney gave her a dewy smile.

"Yes, my dear, I did indeed know that Miss Granger would be leaving us. One hopes, however, that one might have remembered sooner. . . ."

Lavender and Parvati looked deeply impressed, and moved over so that Professor Trelawney could join their table in the corner.

"Some day Hermione's having, eh?" Ron muttered to Harry, looking awed.

"Yeah . . ."

Harry glanced into the crystal ball but saw nothing but swirling white mist. Had Professor Trelawney really seen the Grim, the fatal accident, with the Quidditch final drawing ever nearer?

The Easter holidays were not exactly relaxing. The third years had never had so much homework. Neville Longbottom was the only one who seemed to be enjoying it.

"Call this a holiday!" Seamus Finnigan roared at the common room one afternoon. "The exams are ages away, what're you complaining about?"

But nobody had as much to do as Hermione. Even without Divination, she was taking more subjects than anybody else. She had to arrive at the library the next morning; she had shadows like Lupin's under her eyes, and seemed constantly close to tears.

Ron had taken over responsibility for Buckbeak's appeal. When he wasn't doing his own work, he was poring over the

ychology and Fowl or Foul? A Study of Hippogriff Brutality. He was so absorbed, he even forgot to be horrible to Crookshanks. Harry, meanwhile, had to fit in his homework around Quidditch practice every day, not to mention endless discussions in the Great Hall place on the first Saturday after the Easter holidays. Slytherin was leading the tournament by exactly two hundred points. They needed to win the match by more than that amount to win the Cup. It also meant that the burden of winning fell largely on Harry and fifty points.

"So you must catch it only if we're more than fifty points up," Wood told Harry constantly. "Only if we're more than fifty points up, you've got that, haven't you? You must catch the Snitch only if we're —"

"I KNOW, OLIVER!" Harry yelled.

The whole of Gryffindor House was obsessed with the coming match. Gryffindor hadn't won the Quidditch Cup since the last time they'd won the Seeker. But Harry doubted whether any of them, even Wood, wanted to win as much as he did. The enmity between Gryffindor and Slytherin about the mud-throwing incident in Hogsmeade and was even more furious that Harry had somehow wormed his way into the match against Ravenclaw, but it was the matter of Buckbeak that made him most determined to beat Malfoy. Never, in anyone's memory, had a match approached in such a highly charged atmosphere. By the time the holidays ended, the breaking point. A number of small scuffles broke out in the corridors, culminating in a nasty incident in which a Gryffindor student was hospitalized with leeks sprouting out of their ears.

Harry was having a particularly bad time of it. He couldn't walk to class without Slytherins sticking out their legs and tripping him. Every time he went, and slouching away looking disappointed when they saw him surrounded by people. Wood had given him a lot of advice. Slytherins tried to put him out of action. The whole of Gryffindor House took up the challenge enthusiastically, so that Harry was surrounded by a vast, chattering crowd. Harry was more concerned for his Firebolt's safety than his own. When he was out, he usually dashed back up to Gryffindor Tower at break times to check that it was still there.

All usual pursuits were abandoned in the Gryffindor common room the night before the match. Even Hermione had stopped studying. "I can't work, I can't concentrate," she said nervously.

There was a great deal of noise. Fred and George Weasley were dealing with the pressure by being louder and more boisterous. They were in the Quidditch field in the corner, prodding little figures across it with their wands and muttering to themselves. Angelina, Alicia, and Andromeda were sitting with Ron and Hermione, removed from the center of things, trying not to think about the next day, because they knew that the next day was very large was fighting to get out of his stomach.

"You're going to be fine," Hermione told him, though she looked positively terrified.

"You've got a Firebolt!" said Ron.

"Yeah . . .," said Harry, his stomach writhing.

It came as a relief when Wood suddenly stood up and yelled, "Team! Bed!"

Harry slept badly. First he dreamed that he had overslept, and that Wood was yelling, "Where were you? We had to wait for you!" Then he dreamed the Slytherin team arrived for the match riding dragons. He was flying at breakneck speed, trying to avoid a spurt of flames that might burn his Firebolt. He fell through the air and woke with a start.

It was a few seconds before Harry remembered that the match hadn't taken place yet, that he was safe in bed, and that he was safe in bed, and that he was safe in bed. He was feeling very thirsty. Quietly as he could, he got out of his four-poster and went to pour himself some water. The grounds were still and quiet. No breath of wind disturbed the treetops in the Forbidden Forest; the Whomping Willows were still. The conditions for the match would be perfect.

Harry set down his goblet and was about to turn back to his bed when something caught his eye. An animal of some kind was skirting the edge of the grounds. Harry dashed to his bedside table, snatched up his glasses, and put them on, then hurried back to the window. It couldn't be a cat. He peered out at the grounds again and, after a minute's frantic searching, spotted it. It was skirting the edge of the grounds. . . . Harry clutched the window ledge in relief as he recognized the bottlebrush tail. It was only Crookshanks. . . .

Or was it only Crookshanks? Harry squinted, pressing his nose flat against the glass. Crookshanks seemed to have come from the shadow of the trees too.

And just then, it emerged — a gigantic, shaggy black dog, moving stealthily across the lawn, Crookshanks trotting at its heels. How could he see the dog as well, how could it be an omen of Harry's death?

"Ron!" Harry hissed. "Ron! Wake up!"

"Huh?"

"I need you to tell me if you can see something!"

"S'all dark, Harry," Ron muttered thickly. "What're you on about?"

"Down here —"

Harry looked quickly back out of the window.

Crookshanks and the dog had vanished. Harry climbed onto the windowsill to look right down into the shadows of the grounds. A loud snore told him Ron had fallen asleep again.

Harry and the rest of the Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall the next day to enormous applause. Harry couldn't see the Slytherin table. The Slytherin table hissed loudly as they passed. Harry noticed that Malfoy looked angry. Wood spent the whole of breakfast urging his team to eat, while touching nothing himself. Then he hurried them off to the Quidditch field. Harry had no idea of the conditions. As they left the Great Hall, everyone applauded again.

"Good luck, Harry!" called Cho. Harry felt himself blushing.

"Okay — no wind to speak of — sun's a bit bright, that could impair your vision, watch out for it — ground's fairly hard." Wood paced the field, staring around with the team behind him. Finally, they saw the front doors of the castle open.

“Locker rooms,” said Wood tersely.

None of them spoke as they changed into their scarlet robes. Harry wondered if they were feeling like he was: as though time seemed like no time at all, Wood was saying, “Okay, it’s time, let’s go —”

They walked out onto the field to a tidal wave of noise. Three-quarters of the crowd were wearing scarlet rosettes, waving banners with slogans like “GO GRYFFINDOR!” and “LIONS FOR THE CUP!” Behind the Slytherin goalposts, however, the Slytherin glittered on their flags, and Professor Snape sat in the very front row, wearing green like everyone else, and a voice boomed, “And here are the Gryffindors!” yelled Lee Jordan, who was acting as commentator as usual. “Potter, Bell, Johnson, Spence — the best team Hogwarts has seen in a good few years —”

Lee’s comments were drowned by a tide of “boos” from the Slytherin end.

“And here come the Slytherin team, led by Captain Flint. He’s made some changes in the lineup and seems to be going for it. More boos from the Slytherin crowd. Harry, however, thought Lee had a point. Malfoy was easily the smallest person to captain a team. “Captains, shake hands!” said Madam Hooch.

Flint and Wood approached each other and grasped each other’s hand very tightly; it looked as though each was trying to break the other’s arm. “Mount your brooms!” said Madam Hooch. “Three . . . two . . . one . . .”

The sound of her whistle was lost in the roar from the crowd as fourteen brooms rose into the air. Harry felt his hair rise at the flight; he glanced around, saw Malfoy on his tail, and sped off in search of the Snitch.

“And it’s Gryffindor in possession, Alicia Spinnet of Gryffindor with the Quaffle, heading straight for the Slytherin goalposts — by Warrington, Warrington of Slytherin tearing up the field — WHAM! — nice Bludger work there by George Weasley — back in possession, come on, Angelina — nice swerve around Montague — duck, Angelina, that’s a Bludger! — SHE’S BACK! — Angelina punched the air as she soared around the end of the field; the sea of scarlet below was screaming its delight. “OUCH!”

Angelina was nearly thrown from her broom as Marcus Flint went smashing into her.

“Sorry!” said Flint as the crowd below booed. “Sorry, didn’t see her!”

A moment later, Fred Weasley chucked his Beater’s club at the back of Flint’s head. Flint’s nose smashed into the handle. “That will do!” shrieked Madam Hooch, zooming between them. “Penalty shot to Gryffindor for an unprovoked attack on their Chaser!”

“Come off it, miss!” howled Fred, but Madam Hooch blew her whistle and Alicia flew forward to take the penalty.

“Come on, Alicia!” yelled Lee into the silence that had descended on the crowd. “YES! SHE’S BEATEN THE KEEPER! TWENTY-THREE TO TWENTY-TWO!”

Harry turned the Firebolt sharply to watch Flint, still bleeding freely, fly forward to take the Slytherin penalty. Wood watched him lurch. “OUCH!”

“Course, Wood’s a superb Keeper!” Lee Jordan told the crowd as Flint waited for Madam Hooch’s whistle. “Superb! Very good! HE’D SAVED IT! HE’S SAVED IT!”

Relieved, Harry zoomed away, gazing around for the Snitch, but still making sure he caught every word of Lee’s commentary. Gryffindor was more than fifty points up —

“Gryffindor in possession, no, Slytherin in possession — no! — Gryffindor back in possession and it’s Katie Bell, Katie Bell of Gryffindor with the Quaffle — THAT WAS DELIBERATE!”

Montague, a Slytherin Chaser, had swerved in front of Katie, and instead of seizing the Quaffle had grabbed her head. “OUCH!” — dropped the Quaffle.

Madam Hooch’s whistle rang out again as she soared over to Montague and began shouting at him. A minute later, she boomed, “THIRTY-ZERO! TAKE THAT, YOU DIRTY, CHEATING —”

“Jordan, if you can’t commentate in an unbiased way — !”

“I’m telling it like it is, Professor!”

Harry felt a huge jolt of excitement. He had seen the Snitch — it was shimmering at the foot of one of the Gryffindor goalposts —

Faking a look of sudden concentration, Harry pulled his Firebolt around and sped off toward the Slytherin end — it was there, between the Snitch there. . . .

WHOOSH.

One of the Bludgers came streaking past Harry’s right ear, hit by the gigantic Slytherin Beater, Derrick. Then again — WHOOSH.

The second Bludger grazed Harry’s elbow. The other Beater, Bole, was closing in.

Harry had a fleeting glimpse of Bole and Derrick zooming toward him, clubs raised —

He turned the Firebolt upward at the last second, and Bole and Derrick collided with a sickening crunch.

“Ha haaa!” yelled Lee Jordan as the Slytherin Beaters lurched away from each other, clutching their heads. “Too bad, too bad! And it’s Gryffindor in possession again, as Johnson takes the Quaffle — Flint alongside her — poke him in the eye, Alicia! — Gryffindor in possession, Flint flying toward the Gryffindor goalposts, come on now, Wood, save — !”

But Flint had scored; there was an eruption of cheers from the Slytherin end, and Lee swore so badly that Professor Snape glared at him.

“Sorry, Professor, sorry! Won’t happen again! So, Gryffindor in the lead, thirty points to ten, and Gryffindor in possession — It was turning into the dirtiest game Harry had ever played in. Enraged that Gryffindor had taken such an early lead, George Weasley elbowed Bole in the back.

Quaffle. Bole hit Alicia with his club and tried to say he’d thought she was a Bludger. George Weasley elbowed Bole in the back.

The Snitch had disappeared again. Malfoy was still keeping close to Harry as he soared over the match, looking around for the Snitch. Katie scored. Fifty-ten. Fred and George Weasley were swooping around her, clubs raised, in case any of the Slytherin players would try to aim both Bludgers at Wood; they caught him in the stomach, one after the other, and Madam Hooch was beside herself.

The Gryffindor crowd below was screaming itself hoarse — Gryffindor was sixty points in the lead, and if Harry caught hundreds of eyes following him as he soared around the field, high above the rest of the game, with Malfoy speeding along. And then he saw it. The Snitch was sparkling twenty feet above him.

Harry was angry enough to hit Malfoy, but couldn't reach — Malfoy was panting with the effort of holding onto the F what he'd wanted to do — the Snitch had disappeared again.

"Slytherin in possession, Slytherin heading for goal — Montague scores —" Lee groaned. "Seventy-twenty to Gryffindor!" Harry was now marking Malfoy so closely their knees kept hitting each other. Harry wasn't going to let Malfoy anywhere near the goal. "Get out of it, Potter!" Malfoy yelled in frustration as he tried to turn and found Harry blocking him.

Harry looked around. Every single Slytherin player apart from Malfoy was streaking up the pitch toward Angelina, and Harry wheeled the Firebolt around, bent so low he was lying flat along the handle, and kicked it forward. Like a bullet.

They scattered as the Firebolt zoomed toward them; Angelina's way was clear.

Harry, who had almost pelted headlong into the stands, skidded to a halt in midair, reversed, and zoomed back into the crowd. And then he saw something to make his heart stand still. Malfoy was diving, a look of triumph on his face — there, a few feet from the ground, Harry urged the Firebolt downward, but Malfoy was miles ahead —

Harry threw himself forward, taking both hands off his broom. He knocked Malfoy's arm out of the way and — "YES!"

Then Wood was speeding toward him, half-blinded by tears; he seized Harry around the neck and sobbed unrestrainedly; he hit them; then Angelina's, Alicia's, and Katie's voices, "We've won the Cup! We've won the Cup!" Tangled together in a mass, they fell back to earth.

If only there had been a dementor around. . . . As a sobbing Wood passed Harry the Cup, as he lifted it into the air, H

PROFESSOR TRELAWNEY'S PREDICTION

But they couldn't. Exams were nearly upon them, and instead of lazing around outside, the students were forced to sit at their desks while enticing wafts of summer air drifted in through the windows. Even Fred and George Weasley had been studying hard (and, of course, cheating). Percy was getting ready to take his N.E.W.T.s (Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests), the highest qualification in Magic, he needed top grades. He was becoming increasingly edgy, and gave very severe punishments to anybody who annoyed him. The only person who seemed more anxious than Percy was Hermione.

Harry and Ron had given up asking her how she was managing to attend several classes at once, but they couldn't re

for herself. The first column read:

Monday

9 o'clock, Arithmancy

9 o'clock, Transfiguration

Lunch

1 o'clock, Charms

1 o'clock, Ancient Runes

"Hermione?" Ron said cautiously, because she was liable to explode when interrupted these days. "Er — are you sure?"

"What?" snapped Hermione, picking up the exam schedule and examining it. "Yes, of course I have."

"Is there any point asking how you're going to sit for two exams at once?" said Harry.

"No," said Hermione shortly. "Have either of you seen my copy of Numerology and Grammatica?"

"Oh, yeah, I borrowed it for a bit of bedtime reading," said Ron, but very quietly. Hermione started shifting heaps of papers, and there was a rustle at the window and Hedwig fluttered through it, a note clutched tight in her beak.

"It's from Hagrid," said Harry, ripping the note open. "Buckbeak's appeal — it's set for the sixth."

"That's the day we finish our exams," said Hermione, still looking everywhere for her Arithmancy book.

"And they're coming up here to do it," said Harry, still reading from the letter. "Someone from the Ministry of Magic and a wizard. Hermione looked up, startled.

"They're bringing the executioner to the appeal! But that sounds as though they've already decided!"

"Yeah, it does," said Harry slowly.

"They can't!" Ron howled. "I've spent ages reading up on stuff for him; they can't just ignore it all!"

But Harry had a horrible feeling that the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures had had its mind made up. He remembered how, after the victory over the Basilisk, the Gryffindor's triumph in the Quidditch final, seemed to regain some of his old swagger over the next few days. From the moment he was going to be killed, and seemed thoroughly pleased with himself for bringing it about. It was all Harry could do to keep his head down on these occasions. And the worst thing of all was that they had no time or opportunity to go and see Hagrid, because he didn't dare retrieve his Invisibility Cloak from below the one-eyed witch.

Exam week began and an unnatural hush fell over the castle. The third years emerged from Transfiguration at lunch, looking exhausted by the difficulty of the tasks they had been set, which had included turning a teapot into a tortoise. Hermione irritated by the comparison to a turtle, which was the least of everyone else's worries.

"Mine still had a spout for a tail, what a nightmare. . . ."

"Were the tortoises supposed to breathe steam?"

"It still had a willow-patterned shell, d'you think that'll count against me?"

Then, after a hasty lunch, it was straight back upstairs for the Charms exam. Hermione had been right; Professor Flitwick did his best out of nerves and Ron, who was partnering him, ended up in fits of hysterical laughter and had to be led away to calm himself. After dinner, the students hurried back to their common rooms, not to relax, but to start studying for the next exam. Hagrid presided over the Care of Magical Creatures exam the following morning with a very preoccupied air indeed; he had a tub of fresh flobberworms for the class, and told them that to pass the test, their flobberworm had to still be alive at the end of the exam. To their own devices, it was the easiest exam any of them had ever taken, and also gave Harry, Ron, and Hermione plenty of time to talk. "Beaky's gettin' a bit depressed," Hagrid told them, bending low on the pretense of checking that Harry's flobberworm was still alive. "I know day after tomorrow — one way or the other —"

They had Potions that afternoon, which was an unqualified disaster. Try as Harry might, he couldn't get his Confusing Charm to work. In vindictive pleasure, scribbled something that looked suspiciously like a zero onto his notes before moving away.

Then came Astronomy at midnight, up on the tallest tower; History of Magic on Wednesday morning, in which Harry had to listen to a lecture on witch-hunts, while wishing he could have had one of Fortescue's choco-nut sundaes with him in the stifling classroom. Then a baking-hot sun; then back to the common room once more, with sunburnt necks, thinking longingly of this time next year. Their second to last exam, on Thursday morning, was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Lupin had compiled the exam course outside in the sun, where they had to wade across a deep paddling pool containing a grindylow, cross a series of stepping stones over a marsh while ignoring misleading directions from a hinkypunk, then climb into an old trunk and battle with a new bogie. "Excellent, Harry," Lupin muttered as Harry climbed out of the trunk, grinning. "Full marks."

Flushed with his success, Harry hung around to watch Ron and Hermione. Ron did very well until he reached the hinkypunk, where he fell into the quagmire. Hermione did everything perfectly until she reached the trunk with the bogie in it. After about a minute, she was back.

"Hermione!" said Lupin, startled. "What's the matter?"

"P-P-Professor McGonagall!" Hermione gasped, pointing into the trunk. "Sh-she said I'd failed everything!"

It took a little while to calm Hermione down. When at last she had regained a grip on herself, she, Harry, and Ron went back to the exam at Hermione's boggart, but an argument was averted by the sight that met them on the top of the steps.

Cornelius Fudge, sweating slightly in his pinstriped cloak, was standing there staring out at the grounds. He started at the sight of the three students. "Hello there, Harry!" he said. "Just had an exam, I expect? Nearly finished?"

"Yes," said Harry. Hermione and Ron, not being on speaking terms with the Minister of Magic, hovered awkwardly in the background.

"Lovely day," said Fudge, casting an eye over the lake. "Pity . . . pity . . ."

He sighed deeply and looked down at Harry.

"I'm here on an unpleasant mission, Harry. The Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures required a witness."

ts to check on the Black situation, I was asked to step in."

"Does that mean the appeal's already happened?" Ron interrupted, stepping forward.

"No, no, it's scheduled for this afternoon," said Fudge, looking curiously at Ron.

"Then you might not have to witness an execution at all!" said Ron stoutly. "The hippogriff might get off!"

Before Fudge could answer, two wizards came through the castle doors behind him. One was so ancient he appeared to be a ghost, with a thin black mustache. Harry gathered that they were representatives of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Wizards. The black-mustached man said in a feeble voice, "Dear, dear, I'm getting too old for this. . . . Two o'clock, isn't it, Fudge?"

The black-mustached man was fingering something in his belt; Harry looked and saw that he was running one broad finger over something, but Hermione nudged him hard in the ribs and jerked her head toward the entrance hall.

"Why'd you stop me?" said Ron angrily as they entered the Great Hall for lunch. "Did you see them? They've even got the Minister's portrait!"

"Ron, your dad works for the Ministry, you can't go saying things like that to his boss!" said Hermione, but she too looked nervous. "If they don't properly, they can't possibly execute Buckbeak. . . ."

But Harry could tell Hermione didn't really believe what she was saying. All around them, people were talking excitedly about the exams that afternoon, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione, lost in worry about Hagrid and Buckbeak, didn't join in.

Harry's and Ron's last exam was Divination; Hermione's, Muggle Studies. They walked up the marble staircase together. They reached all the way up to the seventh, where many of their class were sitting on the spiral staircase to Professor Trelawney's classroom.

"She's seeing us all separately," Neville informed them as they went to sit down next to him. He had his copy of Unforgotten Spells open, gazing. "Have either of you ever seen anything in a crystal ball?" he asked them unhappily.

"Nope," said Ron in an offhand voice. He kept checking his watch; Harry knew that he was counting down the time until the end of the lesson.

The line of people outside the classroom shortened very slowly. As each person climbed back down the silver ladder, they looked back up at the classroom. But they all refused to say.

"She says the crystal ball's told her that if I tell you, I'll have a horrible accident!" squeaked Neville as he clambered back down the stairs. "I checked the landing."

"That's convenient," snorted Ron. "You know, I'm starting to think Hermione was right about her" — he jabbed his thumb at her — "about the crystal ball." "Yeah," said Harry, looking at his own watch. It was now two o'clock. "Wish she'd hurry up . . ."

Parvati came back down the ladder glowing with pride.

"She says I've got all the makings of a true Seer," she informed Harry and Ron. "I saw loads of stuff. . . . Well, good luck to you all." She hurried off down the spiral staircase toward Lavender.

"Ronald Weasley," said the familiar, misty voice from over their heads. Ron grimaced at Harry and climbed the silver ladder. He settled himself on the floor with his back against the wall, listening to a fly buzzing in the sunny window, his eyes closed. Finally, after about twenty minutes, Ron's large feet reappeared on the ladder.

"How'd it go?" Harry asked him, standing up.

"Rubbish," said Ron. "Couldn't see a thing, so I made some stuff up. Don't think she was convinced, though. . . ."

"Meet you in the common room," Harry muttered as Professor Trelawney's voice called, "Harry Potter!"

The tower room was hotter than ever before; the curtains were closed, the fire was alight, and the usual sickly scent of old parchment and tables to where Professor Trelawney sat waiting for him before a large crystal ball.

"Good day, my dear," she said softly. "If you would kindly gaze into the Orb. . . . Take your time, now . . . then tell me what you see." Harry bent over the crystal ball and stared, stared as hard as he could, willing it to show him something other than a reflection of himself.

"Well?" Professor Trelawney prompted delicately. "What do you see?"

The heat was overpowering and his nostrils were stinging with the perfumed smoke wafting from the fire beside the crystal ball. "Er —" said Harry, "a dark shape . . . um . . ."

"What does it resemble?" whispered Professor Trelawney. "Think, now . . ."

Harry cast his mind around and it landed on Buckbeak.

"A hippogriff," he said firmly.

"Indeed!" whispered Professor Trelawney, scribbling keenly on the parchment perched upon her knees. "My boy, you are a natural! Ministry of Magic! Look closer. . . . Does the hippogriff appear to . . . have its head?"

"Yes," said Harry firmly.

"Are you sure?" Professor Trelawney urged him. "Are you quite sure, dear? You don't see it writhing on the ground, pining for freedom?"

"No!" said Harry, starting to feel slightly sick.

"No blood? No weeping Hagrid?"

"No!" said Harry again, wanting more than ever to leave the room and the heat. "It looks fine, it's — flying away. . . ."

Professor Trelawney sighed.

"Well, dear, I think we'll leave it there. . . . A little disappointing . . . but I'm sure you did your best."

Relieved, Harry got up, picked up his bag and turned to go, but then a loud, harsh voice spoke behind him.

"IT WILL HAPPEN TONIGHT."

Harry wheeled around. Professor Trelawney had gone rigid in her armchair; her eyes were unfocused and her mouth open.

"S-sorry?" said Harry.

But Professor Trelawney didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes started to roll. Harry stood there in a panic. She looked at him, dazed, thinking of running to the hospital wing — and then Professor Trelawney spoke again, in the same harsh voice, quavering slightly.

"THE DARK LORD LIES ALONE AND FRIENDLESS, ABANDONED BY HIS FOLLOWERS. HIS SERVANT HAS BEEN CHAINED TO HIS BED."

SET OUT TO REJOIN HIS MASTER. THE DARK LORD WILL RISE AGAIN WITH HIS SERVANT'S AID, GREATER AND MORE T
. WILL SET OUT . . . TO REJOIN . . . HIS MASTER. . . ."

Professor Trelawney's head fell forward onto her chest. She made a grunting sort of noise. Then, quite suddenly, Pro
"I'm so sorry, dear boy," she said dreamily, "the heat of the day, you know . . . I drifted off for a moment. . . ."

Harry stood there, still staring.

"Is there anything wrong, my dear?"

"You — you just told me that the — the Dark Lord's going to rise again . . . that his servant's going to go back to him."

Professor Trelawney looked thoroughly startled.

"The Dark Lord? He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? My dear boy, that's hardly something to joke about. . . . Rise again, in

"But you just said it! You said the Dark Lord —"

"I think you must have dozed off too, dear!" said Professor Trelawney. "I would certainly not presume to predict anyt

Harry climbed back down the ladder and the spiral staircase, wondering . . . had he just heard Professor Trelawney r
end to the test?

Five minutes later he was dashing past the security trolls outside the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, Professor Trelaw
ast him in the opposite direction, laughing and joking, heading for the grounds and a bit of long-awaited freedom; by
n room, it was almost deserted. Over in the corner, however, sat Ron and Hermione.

"Professor Trelawney," Harry panted, "just told me —"

But he stopped abruptly at the sight of their faces.

"Buckbeak lost," said Ron weakly. "Hagrid's just sent this."

Hagrid's note was dry this time, no tears had splattered it, yet his hand seemed to have shaken so much as he wrote
Lost appeal. They're going to execute at sunset. Nothing you can do. Don't come down. I don't want you to see it.

Hagrid

"We've got to go," said Harry at once. "He can't just sit there on his own, waiting for the executioner!"

"Sunset, though," said Ron, who was staring out the window in a glazed sort of way. "We'd never be allowed . . . 'spec

Harry sank his head into his hands, thinking.

"If we only had the Invisibility Cloak. . . ."

"Where is it?" said Hermione.

Harry told her about leaving it in the passageway under the one-eyed witch.

". . . if Snape sees me anywhere near there again, I'm in serious trouble," he finished.

"That's true," said Hermione, getting to her feet. "If he sees you. . . . How do you open the witch's hump again?"

"You — you tap it and say, 'Dissendium,'" said Harry. "But —"

Hermione didn't wait for the rest of his sentence; she strode across the room, pushed open the Fat Lady's portrait and
"She hasn't gone to get it?" Ron said, staring after her.

She had. Hermione returned a quarter of an hour later with the silvery Cloak folded carefully under her robes.

"Hermione, I don't know what's gotten into you lately!" said Ron, astounded. "First you hit Malfoy, then you walk out o

Hermione looked rather flattered.

They went down to dinner with everybody else, but did not return to Gryffindor Tower afterward. Harry had the Cloa
d to hide the lump. They skulked in an empty chamber off the entrance hall, listening, until they were sure it was des
l and a door slamming. Hermione poked her head around the door.

"Okay," she whispered, "no one there — Cloak on —"

Walking very close together so that nobody would see them, they crossed the hall on tiptoe beneath the Cloak, then
ready sinking behind the Forbidden Forest, gilding the top branches of the trees.

They reached Hagrid's cabin and knocked. He was a minute in answering, and when he did, he looked all around for
"It's us," Harry hissed. "We're wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off."

"Yeh shouldn've come!" Hagrid whispered, but he stood back, and they stepped inside. Hagrid shut the door quickly
Hagrid was not crying, nor did he throw himself upon their necks. He looked like a man who did not know where he
"Wan' some tea?" he said. His great hands were shaking as he reached for the kettle.

"Where's Buckbeak, Hagrid?" said Hermione hesitantly.

"I — I took him outside," said Hagrid, spilling milk all over the table as he filled up the jug. "He's tethered in me pump
fresh air — before —"

Hagrid's hand trembled so violently that the milk jug slipped from his grasp and shattered all over the floor.

"I'll do it, Hagrid," said Hermione quickly, hurrying over and starting to clean up the mess.

"There's another one in the cupboard," Hagrid said, sitting down and wiping his forehead on his sleeve. Harry glance

"Isn't there anything anyone can do, Hagrid?" Harry asked fiercely, sitting down next to him. "Dumbledore —"

"He's tried," said Hagrid. "He's got no power ter overrule the Committee. He told 'em Buckbeak's all right, but they're
ened 'em, I expect . . . an' the executioner, Macnair, he's an old pal o' Malfoy's . . . but it'll be quick an' clean . . . an' I'll l

Hagrid swallowed. His eyes were darting all over the cabin as though looking for some shred of hope or comfort.

"Dumbledore's gonna come down while it — while it happens. Wrote me this mornin'. Said he wants ter — ter be wit

Hermione, who had been rummaging in Hagrid's cupboard for another milk jug, let out a small, quickly stifled sob. S
ars.

"We'll stay with you too, Hagrid," she began, but Hagrid shook his shaggy head.

"Yeh're ter go back up ter the castle. I told yeh, I don' wan' yeh watchin'. An' yeh shouldn' be down here anyway. . . . If yeh stay, yeh'll be in big trouble."

Silent tears were now streaming down Hermione's face, but she hid them from Hagrid, bustling around making tea. She suddenly let out a shriek.

"Ron! I — I don't believe it — it's Scabbers!"

Ron gaped at her.

"What are you talking about?"

Hermione carried the milk jug over to the table and turned it upside down. With a frantic squeak, and much scrambling, the rat fell from the table.

"Scabbers!" said Ron blankly. "Scabbers, what are you doing here?"

He grabbed the struggling rat and held him up to the light. Scabbers looked dreadful. He was thinner than ever; large, wiry, and writhed in Ron's hands as though desperate to free himself.

"It's okay, Scabbers!" said Ron. "No cats! There's nothing here to hurt you!"

Hagrid suddenly stood up, his eyes fixed on the window. His normally ruddy face had gone the color of parchment.

"They're comin'. . . ."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione whipped around. A group of men was walking down the distant castle steps. In front was a man who trotted Cornelius Fudge. Behind them came the feeble old Committee member and the executioner, Macnair.

"Yeh gotta go," said Hagrid. Every inch of him was trembling. "They mustn' find yeh here. . . . Go now. . . ."

Ron stuffed Scabbers into his pocket and Hermione picked up the Cloak.

"I'll let yeh out the back way," said Hagrid.

They followed him to the door into his back garden. Harry felt strangely unreal, and even more so when he saw Buckbeak. Buckbeak seemed to know something was happening. He turned his sharp head from side to side and pawed the ground.

"It's okay, Beaky," said Hagrid softly. "It's okay. . . ." He turned to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Go on," he said. "Get going. But they didn't move.

"Hagrid, we can't —"

"We'll tell them what really happened —"

"They can't kill him —"

"Go!" said Hagrid fiercely. "It's bad enough without you lot in trouble an' all!"

They had no choice. As Hermione threw the Cloak over Harry and Ron, they heard voices at the front of the cabin. Harry and Ron looked back.

"Go quick," he said hoarsely. "Don' listen. . . ."

And he strode back into his cabin as someone knocked at the front door.

Slowly, in a kind of horrified trance, Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off silently around Hagrid's house. As they reached the back garden, they heard a door open.

"Please, let's hurry," Hermione whispered. "I can't stand it, I can't bear it. . . ."

They started up the sloping lawn toward the castle. The sun was sinking fast now; the sky had turned to a clear, purple. Ron stopped dead.

"Oh, please, Ron," Hermione began.

"It's Scabbers — he won't — stay put —"

Ron was bent over, trying to keep Scabbers in his pocket, but the rat was going berserk; squeaking madly, twisting and turning.

"Scabbers, it's me, you idiot, it's Ron," Ron hissed.

They heard a door open behind them and men's voices.

"Oh, Ron, please let's move, they're going to do it!" Hermione breathed.

"Okay — Scabbers, stay put —"

They walked forward; Harry, like Hermione, was trying not to listen to the rumble of voices behind them. Ron stopped.

"I can't hold him — Scabbers, shut up, everyone'll hear us —"

The rat was squealing wildly, but not loudly enough to cover up the sounds drifting from Hagrid's garden. There was a faint warning, the unmistakable swish and thud of an axe.

Hermione swayed on the spot.

"They did it!" she whispered to Harry. "I d-don't believe it — they did it!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CAT, RAT, AND DOG

Harry's mind had gone blank with shock. The three of them stood transfixed with horror under the Invisibility Cloak. They waited for a moment, then they moved forward, creeping over the long-shadowed grounds. Then, behind them, they heard a wild howling.

"Hagrid," Harry muttered. Without thinking about what he was doing, he made to turn back, but both Ron and Hermione grabbed him.

"We can't," said Ron, who was paper-white. "He'll be in worse trouble if they know we've been to see him. . . ."

Hermione's breathing was shallow and uneven.

"How — could — they?" she choked. "How could they?"

"Come on," said Ron, whose teeth seemed to be chattering.

They set off back toward the castle, walking slowly to keep themselves hidden under the Cloak. The light was fading.

ling like a spell around them.

"Scabbers, keep still," Ron hissed, clamping his hand over his chest. The rat was wriggling madly. Ron came to a sudden stop. "What's the matter with you, you stupid rat? Stay still — OUCH! He bit me!"

"Ron, be quiet!" Hermione whispered urgently. "Fudge'll be out here in a minute —"

"He won't — stay — put —"

Scabbers was plainly terrified. He was writhing with all his might, trying to break free of Ron's grip.

"What's the matter with him?"

But Harry had just seen — slinking toward them, his body low to the ground, wide yellow eyes glinting eerily in the darkness. He couldn't hear the sound of Scabbers's squeaks, Harry couldn't tell.

"Crookshanks!" Hermione moaned. "No, go away, Crookshanks! Go away!"

But the cat was getting nearer —

"Scabbers — NO!"

Too late — the rat had slipped between Ron's clutching fingers, hit the ground, and scampered away. In one bound, it was gone. Ron had thrown the Invisibility Cloak off himself and pelted away into the darkness.

"Ron!" Hermione moaned.

She and Harry looked at each other, then followed at a sprint; it was impossible to run full out under the Cloak; they were being pulled back. They hurtled after Ron; they could hear his feet thundering along ahead and his shouts at Crookshanks.

"Get away from him — get away — Scabbers, come here —"

There was a loud thud.

"Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat —"

Harry and Hermione almost fell over Ron; they skidded to a stop right in front of him. He was sprawled on the ground, his head over the quivering lump.

"Ron — come on — back under the cloak —" Hermione panted. "Dumbledore — the Minister — they'll be coming back any minute —"

But before they could cover themselves again, before they could even catch their breath, they heard the soft pounding of feet on the ground — an enormous, pale-eyed, jet-black dog.

Harry reached for his wand, but too late — the dog had made an enormous leap and the front paws hit him on the chest. He felt a sharp pain, saw inch-long teeth —

But the force of its leap had carried it too far; it rolled off him. Dazed, feeling as though his ribs were broken, Harry tried to get up, but the dog was already around for a new attack.

Ron was on his feet. As the dog sprang back toward them he pushed Harry aside; the dog's jaws fastened instead around Ron's leg. It was a terrible sight, but it was dragging Ron away as easily as though he were a rag doll —

Then, out of nowhere, something hit Harry so hard across the face he was knocked off his feet again. He heard Hermione shout. He groped for his wand, blinking blood out of his eyes —

"Lumos!" he whispered.

The wandlight showed him the trunk of a thick tree; they had chased Scabbers into the shadow of the Whomping Willow. The dog was dragging Ron backward and forward to stop them going nearer.

And there, at the base of the trunk, was the dog, dragging Ron backward into a large gap in the roots — Ron was fighting it —

"Ron!" Harry shouted, trying to follow, but a heavy branch whipped lethally through the air and he was forced backward. All they could see now was one of Ron's legs, which he had hooked around a root in an effort to stop the dog from pulling him away.

Like a gunshot; Ron's leg had broken, and a moment later, his foot vanished from sight.

"Harry — we've got to go for help —" Hermione gasped; she was bleeding too; the Willow had cut her across the shoulder.

"No! That thing's big enough to eat him; we haven't got time —"

"We're never going to get through without help —"

Another branch whipped down at them, twigs clenched like knuckles.

"If that dog can get in, we can," Harry panted, darting here and there, trying to find a way through the vicious, swishing branches. He was trying to get into the gap in the roots without being in range of the tree's blows.

"Oh, help, help," Hermione whispered frantically, dancing uncertainly on the spot, "please . . ."

Crookshanks darted forward. He slithered between the battering branches like a snake and placed his front paws up against the trunk. Abruptly, as though the tree had been turned to marble, it stopped moving. Not a leaf twitched or shook.

"Crookshanks!" Hermione whispered uncertainly. She now grasped Harry's arm painfully hard. "How did he know —"

"He's friends with that dog," said Harry grimly. "I've seen them together. Come on — and keep your wand out —"

They covered the distance to the trunk in seconds, but before they had reached the gap in the roots, Crookshanks had disappeared. He crawled forward, headfirst, and slid down an earthy slope to the bottom of a very low tunnel. Crookshanks was waiting for them. Seconds later, Hermione slithered down beside him.

"Where's Ron?" she whispered in a terrified voice.

"This way," said Harry, setting off, bent-backed, after Crookshanks.

"Where does this tunnel come out?" Hermione asked breathlessly from behind him.

"I don't know. . . . It's marked on the Marauder's Map but Fred and George said no one's ever gotten into it. . . . It goes to Hogsmeade. . . ."

They moved as fast as they could, bent almost double; ahead of them, Crookshanks's tail bobbed in and out of view. Honeydukes. . . . All Harry could think of was Ron and what the enormous dog might be doing to him. . . . He was drawn into the tunnel. And then the tunnel began to rise; moments later it twisted, and Crookshanks had gone. Instead, Harry could see a passage. He and Hermione paused, gasping for breath, edging forward. Both raised their wands to see what lay beyond. It was a room, a very disordered, dusty room. Paper was peeling from the walls; there were stains all over the floor; the windows were boarded up. Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked very frightened but nodded. Harry pulled himself out of the hole, staring around. The room was deserted, but a door to their right stood open, leading to another room again. Her wide eyes were traveling around the boarded windows. "Harry," she whispered, "I think we're in the Shrieking Shack." Harry looked around. His eyes fell on a wooden chair near them. Large chunks had been torn out of it; one of the legs was missing. "Ghosts didn't do that," he said slowly. At that moment, there was a creak overhead. Something had moved upstairs. Both of them looked up at the ceiling. Harry moved his fingers. He raised his eyebrows at her; she nodded again and let go. Quietly as they could, they crept out into the hall and up the crumbling staircase. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust, as if it had been made by something being dragged upstairs. They reached the dark landing. "Nox," they whispered together, and the lights at the end of their wands went out. Only one door was open. As they approached, they heard and then a deep, loud purring. They exchanged a last look, a last nod. Wand held tightly before him, Harry kicked the door wide open. On a magnificent four-poster bed with dusty hangings lay Crookshanks, purring loudly at the sight of them. On the floor beside the bed, in a single, was Ron. Harry and Hermione dashed across to him. "Ron — are you okay?" "Where's the dog?" "Not a dog," Ron moaned. His teeth were gritted with pain. "Harry, it's a trap —" "What —" "He's the dog . . . he's an Animagus. . . ." Ron was staring over Harry's shoulder. Harry wheeled around. With a snap, the man in the shadows closed the door. A mass of filthy, matted hair hung to his elbows. If eyes hadn't been shining out of the deep, dark sockets, he might have been a skull. The bones of his face, it looked like a skull. His yellow teeth were bared in a grin. It was Sirius Black. "Expelliarmus!" he croaked, pointing Ron's wand at them. Harry's and Hermione's wands shot out of their hands, high in the air, and Black caught them. Then he took a step closer. "I thought you'd come and help your friend," he said hoarsely. His voice sounded as though he had long since lost touch with reality. . . . Brave of you, not to run for a teacher. I'm grateful . . . it will make everything much easier. . . . The taunt about his father rang in Harry's ears as though Black had bellowed it. A boiling hate erupted in Harry's chest. He wanted his wand back in his hand, not to defend himself, but to attack . . . to kill. Without knowing what he was doing, he moved toward the other side of him and two pairs of hands grabbed him and held him back. . . . "No, Harry!" Hermione gasped in a petrified voice. "If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us too!" he said fiercely, though the effort of standing upright was draining him. He gave a little poke. Something flickered in Black's shadowed eyes. "Lie down," he said quietly to Ron. "You will damage that leg even more." "Did you hear me?" Ron said weakly, though he was clinging painfully to Harry to stay upright. "You'll have to kill all three of us." "There'll be only one murder here tonight," said Black, and his grin widened. "Why's that?" Harry spat, trying to wrench himself free of Ron and Hermione. "Didn't care last time, did you? Didn't matter then. What's the matter, gone soft in Azkaban?" "Harry!" Hermione whimpered. "Be quiet!" "HE KILLED MY MUM AND DAD!" Harry roared, and with a huge effort he broke free of Hermione's and Ron's restraining hands. He had forgotten about magic — he had forgotten that he was short and skinny and thirteen, whereas Black was a tall, powerful man. He fought as badly as he could and that he didn't care how much he got hurt in return — Perhaps it was the shock of Harry doing something so stupid, but Black didn't raise the wands in time — one of Harry's hands slipped; the knuckles of Harry's other hand collided with the side of Black's head and they fell, backward, into the wall — Hermione was screaming; Ron was yelling; there was a blinding flash as the wands in Black's hand sent a jet of sparks flying. Black's shrunk arm under his fingers twisting madly, but he clung on, his other hand punching every part of Black it could reach. But Black's free hand had found Harry's throat — "No," he hissed, "I've waited too long —" The fingers tightened, Harry choked, his glasses askew. Then he saw Hermione's foot swing out of nowhere. Black let go of Harry with a grunt of pain; Ron had thrown himself at him. He fought free of the tangle of bodies and saw his own wand rolling across the floor; he threw himself toward it but — "Argh!"

Crookshanks had joined the fray; both sets of front claws had sunk themselves deep into Harry's arm; Harry threw his head back and

"NO YOU DON'T!" roared Harry, and he aimed a kick at Crookshanks that made the cat leap aside, spitting; Harry snarled

"Get out of the way!" he shouted at Ron and Hermione.

They didn't need telling twice. Hermione, gasping for breath, her lip bleeding, scrambled aside, snatching up her wand and

it, panting, his white face now tinged with green, both hands clutching his broken leg.

Black was sprawled at the bottom of the wall. His thin chest rose and fell rapidly as he watched Harry walking slowly

"Going to kill me, Harry?" he whispered.

Harry stopped right above him, his wand still pointing at Black's chest, looking down at him. A livid bruise was rising

"You killed my parents," said Harry, his voice shaking slightly, but his wand hand quite steady.

Black stared up at him out of those sunken eyes.

"I don't deny it," he said very quietly. "But if you knew the whole story —"

"The whole story?" Harry repeated, a furious pounding in his ears. "You sold them to Voldemort. That's all I need to know."

"You've got to listen to me," Black said, and there was a note of urgency in his voice now. "You'll regret it if you don't."

"I understand a lot better than you think," said Harry, and his voice shook more than ever. "You never heard her, did you? You did that . . . you did it. . . ."

Before either of them could say another word, something ginger streaked past Harry; Crookshanks leapt onto Black's back,

linked and looked down at the cat.

"Get off," he murmured, trying to push Crookshanks off him.

But Crookshanks sank his claws into Black's robes and wouldn't shift. He turned his ugly, squashed face to Harry and

Hermione gave a dry sob.

Harry stared down at Black and Crookshanks, his grip tightening on the wand. So what if he had to kill the cat too? It was

ing to protect Black, that wasn't Harry's business. . . . If Black wanted to save it, that only proved he cared more for Crookshanks

Harry raised the wand. Now was the moment to do it. Now was the moment to avenge his mother and father. He waited

The seconds lengthened. And still Harry stood frozen there, wand poised, Black staring up at him, Crookshanks on his back

ite silent.

And then came a new sound —

Muffled footsteps were echoing up through the floor — someone was moving downstairs.

"WE'RE UP HERE!" Hermione screamed suddenly. "WE'RE UP HERE — SIRIUS BLACK — QUICK!"

Black made a startled movement that almost dislodged Crookshanks; Harry gripped his wand convulsively — Do it now!

e stairs and Harry still hadn't done it.

The door of the room burst open in a shower of red sparks and Harry wheeled around as Professor Lupin came hurtling

eyes flickered over Ron, lying on the floor, over Hermione, cowering next to the door, to Harry, standing there with his wand

d bleeding at Harry's feet.

"Expelliarmus!" Lupin shouted.

Harry's wand flew once more out of his hand; so did the two Hermione was holding. Lupin caught them all deftly, the

lying protectively across his chest.

Harry stood there, feeling suddenly empty. He hadn't done it. His nerve had failed him. Black was going to be handed over

Then Lupin spoke in an odd voice, a voice that shook with some suppressed emotion.

"Where is he, Sirius?"

Harry looked quickly at Lupin. He didn't understand what Lupin meant. Who was Lupin talking about? He turned to look

Black's face was quite expressionless. For a few seconds, he didn't move at all. Then, very slowly, he raised his empty

round at Ron, who looked bewildered.

"But then . . ." Lupin muttered, staring at Black so intently it seemed he was trying to read his mind, ". . . why hasn't he

nly widened, as though he was seeing something beyond Black, something none of the rest could see — "unless he was

Very slowly, his sunken gaze never leaving Lupin's face, Black nodded.

"Professor," Harry interrupted loudly, "what's going on — ?"

But he never finished the question, because what he saw made his voice die in his throat. Lupin was lowering his wand

seized his hand, pulled him to his feet so that Crookshanks fell to the floor, and embraced Black like a brother.

Harry felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach.

"I DON'T BELIEVE IT!" Hermione screamed.

Lupin let go of Black and turned to her. She had raised herself off the floor and was pointing at Lupin, wild-eyed. "You

"Hermione —"

"— you and him!"

"Hermione, calm down —"

"I didn't tell anyone!" Hermione shrieked. "I've been covering up for you —"

"Hermione, listen to me, please!" Lupin shouted. "I can explain —"

Harry could feel himself shaking, not with fear, but with a fresh wave of fury.

"I trusted you," he shouted at Lupin, his voice wavering out of control, "and all the time you've been his friend!"

"You're wrong," said Lupin. "I haven't been Sirius's friend, but I am now — Let me explain. . . ."

"NO!" Hermione screamed. "Harry, don't trust him, he's been helping Black get into the castle, he wants you dead too

There was a ringing silence. Everyone's eyes were now on Lupin, who looked remarkably calm, though rather pale. "Not at all up to your usual standard, Hermione," he said. "Only one out of three, I'm afraid. I have not been helping S ad. . . ." An odd shiver passed over his face. "But I won't deny that I am a werewolf."

Ron made a valiant effort to get up again but fell back with a whimper of pain. Lupin made toward him, looking conc "Get away from me, werewolf!"

Lupin stopped dead. Then, with an obvious effort, he turned to Hermione and said, "How long have you known?"

"Ages," Hermione whispered. "Since I did Professor Snape's essay. . . ."

"He'll be delighted," said Lupin coolly. "He assigned that essay hoping someone would realize what my symptoms me ys ill at the full moon? Or did you realize that the boggart changed into the moon when it saw me?"

"Both," Hermione said quietly.

Lupin forced a laugh.

"You're the cleverest witch of your age I've ever met, Hermione."

"I'm not," Hermione whispered. "If I'd been a bit cleverer, I'd have told everyone what you are!"

"But they already know," said Lupin. "At least, the staff do."

"Dumbledore hired you when he knew you were a werewolf?" Ron gasped. "Is he mad?"

"Some of the staff thought so," said Lupin. "He had to work very hard to convince certain teachers that I'm trustworthy."

"AND HE WAS WRONG!" Harry yelled. "YOU'VE BEEN HELPING HIM ALL THE TIME!" He was pointing at Black, who sud one shaking hand. Crookshanks leapt up beside him and stepped onto his lap, purring. Ron edged away from both o

"I have not been helping Sirius," said Lupin. "If you'll give me a chance, I'll explain. Look —"

He separated Harry's, Ron's, and Hermione's wands and threw each back to its owner; Harry caught his, stunned.

"There," said Lupin, sticking his own wand back into his belt. "You're armed, we're not. Now will you listen?"

Harry didn't know what to think. Was it a trick?

"If you haven't been helping him," he said, with a furious glance at Black, "how did you know he was here?"

"The map," said Lupin. "The Marauder's Map. I was in my office examining it —"

"You know how to work it?" Harry said suspiciously.

"Of course I know how to work it," said Lupin, waving his hand impatiently. "I helped write it. I'm Moony — that was m

"You wrote —?"

"The important thing is, I was watching it carefully this evening, because I had an idea that you, Ron, and Hermione n hippogriff was executed. And I was right, wasn't I?"

He had started to pace up and down, looking at them. Little patches of dust rose at his feet.

"You might have been wearing your father's old Cloak, Harry —"

"How d'you know about the Cloak?"

"The number of times I saw James disappearing under it . . .," said Lupin, waving an impatient hand again. "The poin ow up on the Marauder's Map. I watched you cross the grounds and enter Hagrid's hut. Twenty minutes later, you le mpanied by somebody else."

"What?" said Harry. "No, we weren't!"

"I couldn't believe my eyes," said Lupin, still pacing, and ignoring Harry's interruption. "I thought the map must be ma

"No one was with us!" said Harry.

"And then I saw another dot, moving fast toward you, labeled Sirius Black. . . . I saw him collide with you; I watched a

"One of us!" Ron said angrily.

"No, Ron," said Lupin. "Two of you."

He had stopped his pacing, his eyes moving over Ron.

"Do you think I could have a look at the rat?" he said evenly.

"What?" said Ron. "What's Scabbers got to do with it?"

"Everything," said Lupin. "Could I see him, please?"

Ron hesitated, then put a hand inside his robes. Scabbers emerged, thrashing desperately; Ron had to seize his long eg and made a soft hissing noise.

Lupin moved closer to Ron. He seemed to be holding his breath as he gazed intently at Scabbers.

"What?" Ron said again, holding Scabbers close to him, looking scared. "What's my rat got to do with anything?"

"That's not a rat," croaked Sirius Black suddenly.

"What d'you mean — of course he's a rat —"

"No, he's not," said Lupin quietly. "He's a wizard."

"An Animagus," said Black, "by the name of Peter Pettigrew."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MOONY, WORMTAIL, PADFOOT, AND PRONGS

It took a few seconds for the absurdity of this statement to sink in. Then Ron voiced what Harry was thinking.

"You're both mental."

"Ridiculous!" said Hermione faintly.

"Peter Pettigrew's dead!" said Harry. "He killed him twelve years ago!" He pointed at Black, whose face twitched conv

"I meant to," he growled, his yellow teeth bared, "but little Peter got the better of me ... not this time, though!" And Crookshanks was thrown to the floor as Black lunged at Scabbers; Ron yelled with pain as Black's weight fell on him. "Sirius, NO!" Lupin yelled, launching himself forwards and dragging Black away from Ron again. "WAIT! You can't do it!"

"We can explain afterwards!" snarled Black, trying to throw Lupin off. One hand was still clawing the air as it tried to reach Ron's face and neck as he tried to escape.

"They've — got — a — right — to — know — everything!" Lupin panted, still trying to restrain Black. "Ron's kept him a secret — you owe Harry the truth, Sirius!"

Black stopped struggling, though his hollowed eyes were still fixed on Scabbers, who was clamped tightly under Ron's arm.

"All right, then," Black said, without taking his eyes off the rat. "Tell them whatever you like. But make it quick, Remus."

"You're nutters, both of you," said Ron shakily, looking round at Harry and Hermione for support. "I've had enough of this!"

He tried to heave himself up on his good leg, but Lupin raised his wand again, pointing it at Scabbers.

"You're going to hear me out, Ron," he said quietly. "Just keep a tight hold on Peter while you listen."

"HE'S NOT PETER, HE'S SCABBERS!" Ron yelled, trying to force the rat back into his front pocket, but Scabbers was fighting him and pushed him back down to the bed. Then, ignoring Black, Harry turned to Lupin.

"There were witnesses who saw Pettigrew die," he said. "A whole street full of them . . ."

"They didn't see what they thought they saw!" said Black savagely, still watching Scabbers struggling in Ron's hands.

"Everyone thought Sirius killed Peter," said Lupin, nodding. "I believed it myself — until I saw the map tonight. Because of the way he was holding him, Harry."

Harry looked down at Ron, and as their eyes met, they agreed, silently: Black and Lupin were both out of their minds. How could they let Pettigrew escape? Azkaban must have unhinged Black after all — but why was Lupin playing along with him?

Then Hermione spoke, in a trembling, would-be calm sort of voice, as though trying to will Professor Lupin to talk sense.

"But Professor Lupin . . . Scabbers can't be Pettigrew . . . it just can't be true, you know it can't . . ."

"Why can't it be true?" Lupin said calmly, as though they were in class, and Hermione had simply spotted a problem in her homework.

"Because . . . because people would know if Peter Pettigrew had been an Animagus. We did Animagi in class with Professor McGonagall. The Ministry of Magic keeps tabs on witches and wizards who can become animals; there's a register showing what animal they turn into."

Harry looked at Professor McGonagall up on the register, and there have been only seven Animagi this century, and Pettigrew was one of them.

Harry had barely had time to marvel inwardly at the effort Hermione put into her homework, when Lupin started to speak.

"Right again, Hermione!" he said. "But the Ministry never knew that there used to be three unregistered Animagi running around."

"If you're going to tell them the story, get a move on, Remus," snarled Black, who was still watching Scabbers's every move.

"All right . . . but you'll need to help me, Sirius," said Lupin, "I only know how it began . . ."

Lupin broke off. There had been a loud creak behind him. The bedroom door had opened of its own accord. All five of them looked at the door.

"No one there . . ."

"This place is haunted!" said Ron.

"It's not," said Lupin, still looking at the door in a puzzled way. "The Shrieking Shack was never haunted. . . . The screams were just my own."

He pushed his graying hair out of his eyes, thought for a moment, then said, "That's where all of this starts — with me. I was bitten. I didn't know it. I didn't even know I was a werewolf. . . ."

He looked sober and tired. Ron started to interrupt, but Hermione said, "Shh!" She was watching Lupin very intently.

"I was a very small boy when I received the bite. My parents tried everything, but in those days there was no cure. That's why I was so afraid. . . ."

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were, because the Animagus transformation can go horribly wrong — one reason the Ministry keeps a close watch on James and Sirius. Finally, in our fifth year, they managed it. They could each turn into a different animal at will.”

“But how did that help you?” said Hermione, sounding puzzled.

“They couldn’t keep me company as humans, so they kept me company as animals,” said Lupin. “A werewolf is only a James’s Invisibility Cloak. They transformed . . . Peter, as the smallest, could slip beneath the Willow’s attacking branches down the tunnel and join me. Under their influence, I became less dangerous. My body was still wolfish, but my mind was human.”

“Hurry up, Remus,” snarled Black, who was still watching Scabbers with a horrible sort of hunger on his face.

“I’m getting there, Sirius, I’m getting there . . . well, highly exciting possibilities were open to us now that we could all be roaming the school grounds and the village by night. Sirius and James transformed into such large animals, they were the first students ever found out more about the Hogwarts grounds and Hogsmeade than we did. . . . And that’s how we came to catch the Padfoot. Peter is Wormtail. James was Prongs.”

“What sort of animal — ?” Harry began, but Hermione cut him off.

“That was still really dangerous! Running around in the dark with a werewolf! What if you’d given the others the slip, Harry?”

“A thought that still haunts me,” said Lupin heavily. “And there were near misses, many of them. We laughed about them at the time, but not our own cleverness.”

“I sometimes felt guilty about betraying Dumbledore’s trust, of course . . . he had admitted me to Hogwarts when not knowing the rules he had set down for my own and others’ safety. He never knew I had led three fellow students into trouble by my feelings every time we sat down to plan our next month’s adventure. And I haven’t changed. . . .”

Lupin’s face had hardened, and there was self-disgust in his voice. “All this year, I have been battling with myself, wondering if I should become an Animagus. But I didn’t do it. Why? Because I was too cowardly. It would have meant admitting that I’d betrayed his trust in me . . . and Dumbledore’s trust has meant everything to me. He let me into Hogwarts as a boy, and he gave me a job to do because of what I am. And so I convinced myself that Sirius was getting into the school using Dark Arts he learned from his father. . . . So, in a way, Snape’s been right about me all along.”

“Snape?” said Black harshly, taking his eyes off Scabbers for the first time in minutes and looking up at Lupin. “What’s he doing here?”

“He’s here, Sirius,” said Lupin heavily. “He’s teaching here as well.” He looked up at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

“Professor Snape was at school with us. He fought very hard against my appointment to the Defense Against the Dark Arts position. He can be trusted. He has his reasons . . . you see, Sirius here played a trick on him which nearly killed him, a trick which involved a werewolf. . . .”

Black made a derisive noise.

“It served him right,” he sneered. “Sneaking around, trying to find out what we were up to . . . hoping he could get us into trouble.”

“Severus was very interested in where I went every month,” Lupin told Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “We were in the same place every month. He especially disliked James. Jealous, I think, of James’s talent on the Quidditch field . . . anyway, Snape had seen me transform. He wanted to lead me toward the Whomping Willow to transform. Sirius thought it would be — er — amusing, to tell Snape all he had to do was wait. He’d be able to get in after me. Well, of course, Snape tried it — if he’d got as far as this house, he’d have met a fully grown werewolf. . . . He had done, went after Snape and pulled him back, at great risk to his life . . . Snape glimpsed me, though, at the end of the tunnel. . . . From that time on he knew what I was. . . .”

“So that’s why Snape doesn’t like you,” said Harry slowly, “because he thought you were in on the joke?”

“That’s right,” sneered a cold voice from the wall behind Lupin.

Severus Snape was pulling off the Invisibility Cloak, his wand pointing directly at Lupin.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SERVANT OF LORD VOLDEMORT

Hermione screamed. Black leapt to his feet. Harry jumped as though he’d received a huge electric shock.

“I found this at the base of the Whomping Willow,” said Snape, throwing the Cloak aside, careful to keep his wand pointed at the ground. . . .”

Snape was slightly breathless, but his face was full of suppressed triumph. “You’re wondering, perhaps, how I knew you were in the office, Lupin. You forgot to take your potion tonight, so I took a gobletful along. And very lucky I did . . . lucky for you. . . . The chance at it told me all I needed to know. I saw you running along this passageway and out of sight.”

“Severus —” Lupin began, but Snape overrode him.

“I’ve told the headmaster again and again that you’re helping your old friend Black into the castle, Lupin, and here’s the proof. . . . This old place as your hideout —”

“Severus, you’re making a mistake,” said Lupin urgently. “You haven’t heard everything — I can explain — Sirius is not a werewolf. . . .”

“Two more for Azkaban tonight,” said Snape, his eyes now gleaming fanatically. “I shall be interested to see how Dumbledore reacts, you know, Lupin . . . a tame werewolf —”

“You fool,” said Lupin softly. “Is a schoolboy grudge worth putting an innocent man back inside Azkaban?”

BANG! Thin, snakelike cords burst from the end of Snape’s wand and twisted themselves around Lupin’s mouth, wrists, and ankles. . . . With a roar of rage, Black started toward Snape, but Snape pointed his wand straight between Black’s eyes.

“Give me a reason,” he whispered. “Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will.”

Black stopped dead. It would have been impossible to say which face showed more hatred.

Harry stood there, paralyzed, not knowing what to do or whom to believe. He glanced around at Ron and Hermione. . . . The struggling Scabbers. Hermione, however, took an uncertain step toward Snape and said, in a very breathless voice,

got to say, w-would it?"

"Miss Granger, you are already facing suspension from this school," Snape spat. "You, Potter, and Weasley are out-of-control or once in your life, hold your tongue."

"But if — if there was a mistake —"

"KEEP QUIET, YOU STUPID GIRL!" Snape shouted, looking suddenly quite deranged. "DON'T TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE DOING!" He still pointed at Black's face. Hermione fell silent.

"Vengeance is very sweet," Snape breathed at Black. "How I hoped I would be the one to catch you. . . ."

"The joke's on you again, Severus," Black snarled. "As long as this boy brings his rat up to the castle" — he jerked his head toward the door.

"Up to the castle?" said Snape silkily. "I don't think we need to go that far. All I have to do is call the dementors once we get you, Black . . . pleased enough to give you a little Kiss, I daresay. . . ."

What little color there was in Black's face left it.

"You — you've got to hear me out," he croaked. "The rat — look at the rat —"

But there was a mad glint in Snape's eyes that Harry had never seen before. He seemed beyond reason.

"Come on, all of you," he said. He clicked his fingers, and the ends of the cords that bound Lupin flew to his hands. "I'll free you for him too —"

Before he knew what he was doing, Harry had crossed the room in three strides and blocked the door.

"Get out of the way, Potter, you're in enough trouble already," snarled Snape. "If I hadn't been here to save your skin —"

"Professor Lupin could have killed me about a hundred times this year," Harry said. "I've been alone with him loads of times. Helping Black, why didn't he just finish me off then?"

"Don't ask me to fathom the way a werewolf's mind works," hissed Snape. "Get out of the way, Potter."

"YOU'RE PATHETIC!" Harry yelled. "JUST BECAUSE THEY MADE A FOOL OF YOU AT SCHOOL YOU WON'T EVEN LISTEN TO ME!"

"SILENCE! I WILL NOT BE SPOKEN TO LIKE THAT!" Snape shrieked, looking madder than ever. "Like father, like son, Potter. You should have knelt! You would have been well served if he'd killed you! You'd have died like your father, too arrogant to believe in your own power. GET OUT OF THE WAY, POTTER!"

Harry made up his mind in a split second. Before Snape could take even one step toward him, he had raised his wand. "Expelliarmus!" he yelled — except that his wasn't the only voice that shouted. There was a blast that made the door fly into the wall, then slid down it to the floor, a trickle of blood oozing from under his hair. He had been knocked out.

Harry looked around. Both Ron and Hermione had tried to Disarm Snape at exactly the same moment. Snape's wand was in the air.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Black, looking at Harry. "You should have left him to me. . . ."

Harry avoided Black's eyes. He wasn't sure, even now, that he'd done the right thing.

"We attacked a teacher. . . . We attacked a teacher . . .," Hermione whimpered, staring at the lifeless Snape with fright. Lupin was struggling against his bonds. Black bent down quickly and untied him. Lupin straightened up, rubbing his head.

"Thank you, Harry," he said.

"I'm still not saying I believe you," Harry retorted.

"Then it's time we offered you some proof," said Black. "You, boy — give me Peter. Now."

Ron clutched Scabbers closer to his chest.

"Come off it," he said weakly. "Are you trying to say he broke out of Azkaban just to get his hands on Scabbers? I mean, even if Pettigrew could turn into a rat — there are millions of rats — how's he supposed to know which one he's after if he can't see it?"

"You know, Sirius, that's a fair question," said Lupin, turning to Black and frowning slightly. "How did you find out where he was?"

Black put one of his clawlike hands inside his robes and took out a crumpled piece of paper, which he smoothed flat. It was the photograph of Ron and his family that had appeared in the Daily Prophet the previous summer, and there was a small, dark mark on the bottom right corner.

"How did you get this?" Lupin asked Black, thunderstruck.

"Fudge," said Black. "When he came to inspect Azkaban last year, he gave me his paper. And there was Peter, on the bottom right corner. . . . how many times had I seen him transform? And the caption said the boy would be going back to Hogwarts . . . to be a teacher."

"My God," said Lupin softly, staring from Scabbers to the picture in the paper and back again. "His front paw . . ."

"What about it?" said Ron defiantly.

"He's got a toe missing," said Black.

"Of course," Lupin breathed. "So simple . . . so brilliant . . . he cut it off himself?"

"Just before he transformed," said Black. "When I cornered him, he yelled for the whole street to hear that I'd betrayed him. He held the wand behind his back, killed everyone within twenty feet of himself — and sped down into the street with the wand behind his back, killed everyone within twenty feet of himself — and sped down into the street with the wand behind his back."

"Didn't you ever hear, Ron?" said Lupin. "The biggest bit of Peter they found was his finger."

"Look, Scabbers probably had a fight with another rat or something! He's been in my family for ages, right —"

"Twelve years, in fact," said Lupin. "Didn't you ever wonder why he was living so long?"

"We — we've been taking good care of him!" said Ron.

"Not looking too good at the moment, though, is he?" said Lupin. "I'd guess he's been losing weight ever since he heard about Sirius."

"He's been scared of that mad cat!" said Ron, nodding toward Crookshanks, who was still purring on the bed.

But that wasn't right, Harry thought suddenly. . . . Scabbers had been looking ill before he met Crookshanks . . . ever since he had escaped. . . .

"This cat isn't mad," said Black hoarsely. He reached out a bony hand and stroked Crookshanks's fluffy head. "He's terrified of what he was right away. And when he met me, he knew I was no dog. It was a while before he trusted me. . . ."

s been helping me. . . ."

"What do you mean?" breathed Hermione.

"He tried to bring Peter to me, but couldn't . . . so he stole the passwords into Gryffindor Tower for me. . . . As I understood Harry's brain seemed to be sagging under the weight of what he was hearing. It was absurd . . . and yet . . .

"But Peter got wind of what was going on and ran for it. . . ." croaked Black. "This cat — Crookshanks, did you call him? — sed he bit himself. . . . Well, faking his own death had worked once. . . ."

These words jolted Harry to his senses.

"And why did he fake his death?" he said furiously. "Because he knew you were about to kill him like you killed my pa

"No," said Lupin, "Harry —"

"And now you've come to finish him off!"

"Yes, I have," said Black, with an evil look at Scabbers.

"Then I should've let Snape take you!" Harry shouted.

"Harry," said Lupin hurriedly, "don't you see? All this time we've thought Sirius betrayed your parents, and Peter track Peter betrayed your mother and father — Sirius tracked Peter down —"

"THAT'S NOT TRUE!" Harry yelled. "HE WAS THEIR SECRET-KEEPER! HE SAID SO BEFORE YOU TURNED UP. HE SAID HE HE was pointing at Black, who shook his head slowly; the sunken eyes were suddenly overbright.

"Harry . . . I as good as killed them," he croaked. "I persuaded Lily and James to change to Peter at the last moment, p . . . I'm to blame, I know it. . . . The night they died, I'd arranged to check on Peter, make sure he was still safe, but when o sign of a struggle. It didn't feel right. I was scared. I set out for your parents' house straightaway. And when I saw th at Peter must've done . . . what I'd done. . . ."

His voice broke. He turned away.

"Enough of this," said Lupin, and there was a steely note in his voice Harry had never heard before. "There's one cert

"What are you going to do with him if I give him to you?" Ron asked Lupin tensely.

"Force him to show himself," said Lupin. "If he really is a rat, it won't hurt him."

Ron hesitated. Then at long last, he held out Scabbers and Lupin took him. Scabbers began to squeak without stoppi

"Ready, Sirius?" said Lupin.

Black had already retrieved Snape's wand from the bed. He approached Lupin and the struggling rat, and his wet eye

"Together?" he said quietly.

"I think so," said Lupin, holding Scabbers tightly in one hand and his wand in the other. "On the count of three. One —

A flash of blue-white light erupted from both wands; for a moment, Scabbers was frozen in midair, his small gray for here was another blinding flash of light and then —

It was like watching a speeded-up film of a growing tree. A head was shooting upward from the ground; limbs were s n, cringing and wringing his hands. Crookshanks was spitting and snarling on the bed; the hair on his back was stand

He was a very short man, hardly taller than Harry and Hermione. His thin, colorless hair was unkempt and there was mp man who has lost a lot of weight in a short time. His skin looked grubby, almost like Scabbers's fur, and something , watery eyes. He looked around at them all, his breathing fast and shallow. Harry saw his eyes dart to the door and l

"Well, hello, Peter," said Lupin pleasantly, as though rats frequently erupted into old school friends around him. "Lon

"S-Sirius . . . R-Remus . . ." Even Pettigrew's voice was squeaky. Again, his eyes darted toward the door. "My friends . .

Black's wand arm rose, but Lupin seized him around the wrist, gave him a warning look, then turned again to Pettigrew

"We've been having a little chat, Peter, about what happened the night Lily and James died. You might have missed th bed —"

"Remus," gasped Pettigrew, and Harry could see beads of sweat breaking out over his pasty face, "you don't believe h

"So we've heard," said Lupin, more coldly. "I'd like to clear up one or two little matters with you, Peter, if you'd be so —

"He's come to try and kill me again!" Pettigrew squeaked suddenly, pointing at Black, and Harry saw that he used his d James and now he's going to kill me too. . . . You've got to help me, Remus. . . ."

Black's face looked more skull-like than ever as he stared at Pettigrew with his fathomless eyes.

"No one's going to try and kill you until we've sorted a few things out," said Lupin.

"Sorted things out?" squealed Pettigrew, looking wildly about him once more, eyes taking in the boarded windows ar back for me! I've been waiting for this for twelve years!"

"You knew Sirius was going to break out of Azkaban?" said Lupin, his brow furrowed. "When nobody has ever done it

"He's got Dark powers the rest of us can only dream of!" Pettigrew shouted shrilly. "How else did he get out of there?"

Black started to laugh, a horrible, mirthless laugh that filled the whole room.

"Voldemort, teach me tricks?" he said.

Pettigrew flinched as though Black had brandished a whip at him.

"What, scared to hear your old master's name?" said Black. "I don't blame you, Peter. His lot aren't very happy with yo

"Don't know what you mean, Sirius —" muttered Pettigrew, his breathing faster than ever. His whole face was shining

"You haven't been hiding from me for twelve years," said Black. "You've been hiding from Voldemort's old supporters ad, or you'd have to answer to them. . . . I've heard them screaming all sorts of things in their sleep. Sounds like they t to the Potters' on your information . . . and Voldemort met his downfall there. And not all Voldemort's supporters e biding their time, pretending they've seen the error of their ways. . . . If they ever got wind that you were still alive, Pe

"Don't know . . . what you're talking about . . .," said Pettigrew again, more shrilly than ever. He wiped his face on his hand, as if to wipe away this madness, Remus —"

"I must admit, Peter, I have difficulty in understanding why an innocent man would want to spend twelve years as a prisoner of war. Innocent, but scared!" squealed Pettigrew. "If Voldemort's supporters were after me, it was because I put one of the faces of the Black's face contorted.

"How dare you," he growled, sounding suddenly like the bear-sized dog he had been. "I, a spy for Voldemort? When could I have been? I can't see you were the spy from the start. You always liked me and Remus . . . and James. . . ."

Pettigrew wiped his face again; he was almost panting for breath.

"Me, a spy . . . must be out of your mind . . . never . . . don't know how you can say such a —"

"Lily and James only made you Secret-Keeper because I suggested it," Black hissed, so venomously that Pettigrew took a step back. "Voldemort would be sure to come after me, would never dream they'd use a weak, talentless thing like you. . . . I was telling Voldemort you could hand him the Potters."

Pettigrew was muttering distractedly; Harry caught words like "far-fetched" and "lunacy," but he couldn't help paying attention. His eyes continued to dart toward the windows and door.

"Professor Lupin?" said Hermione timidly. "Can — can I say something?"

"Certainly, Hermione," said Lupin courteously.

"Well — Scabbers — I mean, this — this man — he's been sleeping in Harry's dormitory for three years. If he's working now?"

"There!" said Pettigrew shrilly, pointing at Ron with his maimed hand. "Thank you! You see, Remus? I have never hurt anyone."

"I'll tell you why," said Black. "Because you never did anything for anyone unless you could see what was in it for you. You were half dead. You weren't about to commit murder right under Albus Dumbledore's nose, for a wreck of a wizard who'd lost his mind. You were the biggest bully in the playground before you went back to him, wouldn't you? Why else did you find a wizard family? Just in case your old protector regained strength, and it was safe to rejoin him. . . ."

Pettigrew opened his mouth and closed it several times. He seemed to have lost the ability to talk.

"Er — Mr. Black — Sirius?" said Hermione.

Black jumped at being addressed like this and stared at Hermione as though being spoken to politely was something new.

"If you don't mind me asking, how — how did you get out of Azkaban, if you didn't use Dark Magic?"

"Thank you!" gasped Pettigrew, nodding frantically at her. "Exactly! Precisely what I —"

But Lupin silenced him with a look. Black was frowning slightly at Hermione, but not as though he were annoyed with her.

"I don't know how I did it," he said slowly. "I think the only reason I never lost my mind is that I knew I was innocent. That I was innocent. . . . It kept me sane and knowing who I am . . . helped me keep my powers . . . so when it all became too much, I became a dog. Dementors can't see, you know. . . ." He swallowed. "They feel their way toward people by sensing their emotions. I was a simple man, less complex when I was a dog . . . but they thought, of course, that I was losing my mind like everyone else in the prison. I had no hope of driving them away from me without a wand. . . ."

"But then I saw Peter in that picture . . . I realized he was at Hogwarts with Harry . . . perfectly positioned to act, if only he had his strength again. . . ."

Pettigrew was shaking his head, mouthing noiselessly, but staring all the while at Black as though hypnotized.

"I was ready to strike at the moment he could be sure of allies . . . and to deliver the last Potter to them. If he gave them the chance, he'd be welcomed back with honors. . . ."

"So you see, I had to do something. I was the only one who knew Peter was still alive. . . ."

Harry remembered what Mr. Weasley had told Mrs. Weasley. "The guards say he's been talking in his sleep . . . always saying the same thing. . . ."

"It was as if someone had lit a fire in my head, and the dementors couldn't destroy it. . . . It wasn't a happy feeling . . . I lost my mind. So, one night when they opened my door to bring food, I slipped past them as a dog. . . . It's so much easier. . . . I was thin, very thin . . . thin enough to slip through the bars. . . . I swam as a dog back to the mainland. . . . I joined the Order as a dog. I've been living in the forest ever since, except when I came to watch the Quidditch, of course. You fly as well as I do. . . ."

He looked at Harry, who did not look away.

"Believe me," croaked Black. "Believe me, Harry. I never betrayed James and Lily. I would have died before I betrayed them."

And at long last, Harry believed him. Throat too tight to speak, he nodded.

"No!"

Pettigrew had fallen to his knees as though Harry's nod had been his own death sentence. He shuffled forward on his hands and knees, crying.

"Sirius — it's me . . . it's Peter . . . your friend . . . you wouldn't . . ."

Black kicked out and Pettigrew recoiled.

"There's enough filth on my robes without you touching them," said Black.

"Remus!" Pettigrew squeaked, turning to Lupin instead, writhing imploringly in front of him. "You don't believe this. . . ."

"Not if he thought I was the spy, Peter," said Lupin. "I assume that's why you didn't tell me, Sirius?" he said casually over his shoulder.

"Forgive me, Remus," said Black.

"Not at all, Padfoot, old friend," said Lupin, who was now rolling up his sleeves. "And will you, in turn, forgive me for being a dog?"

"Of course," said Black, and the ghost of a grin flitted across his gaunt face. He, too, began rolling up his sleeves. "Shall we?"

"Yes, I think so," said Lupin grimly.

"You wouldn't . . . you won't . . .," gasped Pettigrew. And he scrambled around to Ron.

"Ron . . . haven't I been a good friend . . . a good pet? You won't let them kill me, Ron, will you . . . you're on my side, a

But Ron was staring at Pettigrew with the utmost revulsion.

"I let you sleep in my bed!" he said.

"Kind boy . . . kind master . . ." Pettigrew crawled toward Ron, "you won't let them do it. . . I was your rat. . . I was a g

"If you made a better rat than a human, it's not much to boast about, Peter," said Black harshly. Ron, going still paler, Pettigrew turned on his knees, staggered forward, and seized the hem of Hermione's robes.

"Sweet girl . . . clever girl . . . you — you won't let them. . . Help me. . ."

Hermione pulled her robes out of Pettigrew's clutching hands and backed away against the wall, looking horrified.

Pettigrew knelt, trembling uncontrollably, and turned his head slowly toward Harry.

"Harry . . . Harry . . . you look just like your father . . . just like him. . ."

"HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO HARRY?" roared Black. "HOW DARE YOU FACE HIM? HOW DARE YOU TALK ABOUT JAMES

"Harry," whispered Pettigrew, shuffling toward him, hands outstretched. "Harry, James wouldn't have wanted me kill

own me mercy. . ."

Both Black and Lupin strode forward, seized Pettigrew's shoulders, and threw him backward onto the floor. He sat th

"You sold Lily and James to Voldemort," said Black, who was shaking too. "Do you deny it?"

Pettigrew burst into tears. It was horrible to watch: He looked like an oversized, balding baby, cowering on the floor.

"Sirius, Sirius, what could I have done? The Dark Lord . . . you have no idea . . . he has weapons you can't imagine. . . s and James. I never meant it to happen. . . He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named forced me —"

"DON'T LIE!" bellowed Black. "YOU'D BEEN PASSING INFORMATION TO HIM FOR A YEAR BEFORE LILY AND JAMES DIED

"He — he was taking over everywhere!" gasped Pettigrew. "W-what was there to be gained by refusing him?"

"What was there to be gained by fighting the most evil wizard who has ever existed?" said Black, with a terrible fury in

"You don't understand!" whined Pettigrew. "He would have killed me, Sirius!"

"THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED!" roared Black. "DIED RATHER THAN BETRAY YOUR FRIENDS, AS WE WOULD HAVE D

Black and Lupin stood shoulder to shoulder, wands raised.

"You should have realized," said Lupin quietly, "if Voldemort didn't kill you, we would. Good-bye, Peter."

Hermione covered her face with her hands and turned to the wall.

"NO!" Harry yelled. He ran forward, placing himself in front of Pettigrew, facing the wands. "You can't kill him," he said

Black and Lupin both looked staggered.

"Harry, this piece of vermin is the reason you have no parents," Black snarled. "This cringing bit of filth would have se

wn stinking skin meant more to him than your whole family."

"I know," Harry panted. "We'll take him up to the castle. We'll hand him over to the dementors. . . He can go to Azkaban

"Harry!" gasped Pettigrew, and he flung his arms around Harry's knees. "You — thank you — it's more than I deserve

"Get off me," Harry spat, throwing Pettigrew's hands off him in disgust. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it because

become killers — just for you."

No one moved or made a sound except Pettigrew, whose breath was coming in wheezes as he clutched his chest. Black and Lupin lowered their wands.

"You're the only person who has the right to decide, Harry," said Black. "But think . . . think what he did. . ."

"He can go to Azkaban," Harry repeated. "If anyone deserves that place, he does. . ."

Pettigrew was still wheezing behind him.

"Very well," said Lupin. "Stand aside, Harry."

Harry hesitated.

"I'm going to tie him up," said Lupin. "That's all, I swear."

Harry stepped out of the way. Thin cords shot from Lupin's wand this time, and next moment, Pettigrew was wriggling

"But if you transform, Peter," growled Black, his own wand pointing at Pettigrew too, "we will kill you. You agree, Harry?"

Harry looked down at the pitiful figure on the floor and nodded so that Pettigrew could see him.

"Right," said Lupin, suddenly businesslike. "Ron, I can't mend bones nearly as well as Madam Pomfrey, so I think it's best to take him to the hospital wing."

He hurried over to Ron, bent down, tapped Ron's leg with his wand, and muttered, "Ferula." Bandages spun up Ron's leg ; Ron put his weight gingerly on the leg and didn't wince.

"That's better," he said. "Thanks."

"What about Professor Snape?" said Hermione in a small voice, looking down at Snape's prone figure.

"There's nothing seriously wrong with him," said Lupin, bending over Snape and checking his pulse. "You were just a little best if we don't revive him until we're safely back in the castle. We can take him like this. . ."

He muttered, "Mobilicorpus." As though invisible strings were tied to Snape's wrists, neck, and knees, he was pulled into the air like a grotesque puppet. He hung a few inches above the ground, his limp feet dangling. Lupin picked up the Invisibility Cloak

"And two of us should be chained to this," said Black, nudging Pettigrew with his toe. "Just to make sure."

"I'll do it," said Lupin.

"And me," said Ron savagely, limping forward.

Black conjured heavy manacles from thin air; soon Pettigrew was upright again, left arm chained to Lupin's right, right arm chained to Crookshanks's neck. It was a personal insult. Crookshanks leapt lightly off the bed and led the way out of the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY THE DEMENTOR'S KISS

Harry had never been part of a stranger group. Crookshanks led the way down the stairs; Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron followed Professor Snape, drifting creepily along, his toes hitting each stair as they descended, held up by his own wand, which pointed up the rear.

Getting back into the tunnel was difficult. Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron had to turn sideways to manage it; Lupin still had to awkwardly along the tunnel in single file. Crookshanks was still in the lead. Harry went right after Sirius, who was still with his lolling head on the low ceiling. Harry had the impression Sirius was making no effort to prevent this.

"You know what this means?" Sirius said abruptly to Harry as they made their slow progress along the tunnel. "Turning you free."

"You're free," said Harry.

"Yes . . .," said Sirius. "But I'm also — I don't know if anyone ever told you — I'm your godfather."

"Yeah, I knew that," said Harry.

"Well . . . your parents appointed me your guardian," said Sirius stiffly. "If anything happened to them . . ."

Harry waited. Did Sirius mean what he thought he meant?

"I'll understand, of course, if you want to stay with your aunt and uncle," said Sirius. "But . . . well . . . think about it. Or about a different home . . ."

Some sort of explosion took place in the pit of Harry's stomach.

"What — live with you?" he said, accidentally cracking his head on a bit of rock protruding from the ceiling. "Leave the Dursleys?"

"Of course, I thought you wouldn't want to," said Sirius quickly. "I understand, I just thought I'd —"

"Are you insane?" said Harry, his voice easily as croaky as Sirius's. "Of course I want to leave the Dursleys! Have you gone mad?"

Sirius turned right around to look at him; Snape's head was scraping the ceiling but Sirius didn't seem to care.

"You want to?" he said. "You mean it?"

"Yeah, I mean it!" said Harry.

Sirius's gaunt face broke into the first true smile Harry had seen upon it. The difference it made was startling, as though a mask had been removed; for a moment, he was recognizable as the man who had laughed at Harry's parents' wedding.

They did not speak again until they had reached the end of the tunnel. Crookshanks darted up first; he had evidently been waiting. Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron clambered upward without any sound of savaging branches.

Sirius saw Snape up through the hole, then stood back for Harry and Hermione to pass. At last, all of them were out.

The grounds were very dark now; the only light came from the distant windows of the castle. Without a word, they set off. Harry's mind was buzzing. He was going to leave the Dursleys. He was going to live with Sirius Black, his parents' best friend. Was he going to live with the convict they'd seen on television?

"One wrong move, Peter," said Lupin threateningly ahead. His wand was still pointed sideways at Pettigrew's chest.

Silently they tramped through the grounds, the castle lights growing slowly larger. Snape was still drifting weirdly ahead.

A cloud shifted. There were suddenly dim shadows on the ground. Their party was bathed in moonlight.

Snape collided with Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron, who had stopped abruptly. Sirius froze. He flung out one arm to make sure Harry could see Lupin's silhouette. He had gone rigid. Then his limbs began to shake.

"Oh, my —" Hermione gasped. "He didn't take his potion tonight! He's not safe!"

"Run," Sirius whispered. "Run. Now."

But Harry couldn't run. Ron was chained to Pettigrew and Lupin. He leapt forward but Sirius caught him around the waist.

"Leave it to me — RUN!"

There was a terrible snarling noise. Lupin's head was lengthening. So was his body. His shoulders were hunching. Harry saw his hands turning into clawed paws. Crookshanks's hair was on end again; he was backing away —

As the werewolf reared, snapping its long jaws, Sirius disappeared from Harry's side. He had transformed. The enormous dog was free of the manacle binding it, the dog seized it about the neck and pulled it backward, away from Ron and Pettigrew.

Harry stood, transfixed by the sight, too intent upon the battle to notice anything else. It was Hermione's scream that brought him back. Pettigrew had dived for Lupin's dropped wand. Ron, unsteady on his bandaged leg, fell. There was a bang, a burst of fire, and Crookshanks flew into the air and back to the earth in a heap.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry yelled, pointing his own wand at Pettigrew; Lupin's wand flew high into the air and out of sight. Too late. Pettigrew had transformed. Harry saw his bald tail whip through the manacle on Ron's outstretched arm and snap.

There was a howl and a rumbling growl; Harry turned to see the werewolf taking flight; it was galloping into the forest. "Sirius, he's gone, Pettigrew transformed!" Harry yelled.

Sirius was bleeding; there were gashes across his muzzle and back, but at Harry's words he scrambled up again, and disappeared away across the grounds.

Harry and Hermione dashed over to Ron.

"What did he do to him?" Hermione whispered. Ron's eyes were only half-closed, his mouth hung open; he was definitely unconscious.

"I don't know. . . ."

Harry looked desperately around. Black and Lupin both gone . . . they had no one but Snape for company, still hanging. "We'd better get them up to the castle and tell someone," said Harry, pushing his hair out of his eyes, trying to think. But then, from beyond the range of their vision, they heard a yelping, a whining: a dog in pain. . . .

"Sirius," Harry muttered, staring into the darkness.

He had a moment's indecision, but there was nothing they could do for Ron at the moment, and by the sound of it, E. Harry set off at a run, Hermione right behind him. The yelping seemed to be coming from near the lake. They pelted, trying to make out what it must mean —

The yelping stopped abruptly. As they reached the lakeshore, they saw why — Sirius had turned back into a man. He was lying on the grass, his head back, his eyes closed.

"Nooo," he moaned. "Noooo . . . please. . . ."

And then Harry saw them. Dementors, at least a hundred of them, gliding in a black mass around the lake toward them, the fog starting to obscure his vision; more were appearing out of the darkness on every side; they were encircling them.

"Hermione, think of something happy!" Harry yelled, raising his wand, blinking furiously to try and clear his vision, shouting out the words he had learned inside it —

I'm going to live with my godfather. I'm leaving the Dursleys.

He forced himself to think of Sirius, and only Sirius, and began to chant: "Expecto Patronum! Expecto Patronum!"

Black gave a shudder, rolled over, and lay motionless on the ground, pale as death.

He'll be all right. I'm going to go and live with him.

"Expecto Patronum! Hermione, help me! Expecto Patronum!"

"Expecto —" Hermione whispered, "Expecto — Expecto —"

But she couldn't do it. The dementors were closing in, barely ten feet from them. They formed a solid wall around Harry and Hermione.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry yelled, trying to blot the screaming from his ears. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

A thin wisp of silver escaped his wand and hovered like mist before him. At the same moment, Harry felt Hermione's wand flash.

"Expecto — Expecto Patronum —"

Harry felt his knees hit the cold grass. Fog was clouding his eyes. With a huge effort, he fought to remember — Sirius was with him —

"Expecto Patronum!" he gasped.

By the feeble light of his formless Patronus, he saw a dementor halt, very close to him. It couldn't walk through the cold light. It came out from under the cloak. It made a gesture as though to sweep the Patronus aside.

"No — no —" Harry gasped. "He's innocent . . . Expecto — Expecto Patronum —"

He could feel them watching him, hear their rattling breath like an evil wind around him. The nearest dementor seemed to be reaching out and lowering its hood.

Where there should have been eyes, there was only thin, gray scabbed skin, stretched blankly over empty sockets. Black and Hermione fell to the ground with the sound of a death rattle.

A paralyzing terror filled Harry so that he couldn't move or speak. His Patronus flickered and died.

White fog was blinding him. He had to fight . . . Expecto Patronum . . . he couldn't see . . . and in the distance, he heard voices. Sirius was roped in the mist for Sirius, and found his arm . . . they weren't going to take him. . . .

But a pair of strong, clammy hands suddenly attached themselves around Harry's neck. They were forcing his face up, trying to see him first. . . . He could feel its putrid breath. . . . His mother was screaming in his ears. . . . She was going to be the one to save him. . . .

And then, through the fog that was drowning him, he thought he saw a silvery light growing brighter and brighter. . . .

Facedown, too weak to move, sick and shaking, Harry opened his eyes. The dementor must have released him. The cold had stopped, the cold was ebbing away. . . .

Something was driving the dementors back. . . . It was circling around him and Sirius and Hermione. . . . The rattling, rattling sound. . . . The air was warm again. . . .

With every ounce of strength he could muster, Harry raised his head a few inches and saw an animal amid the light, a creature he had never seen before. . . . It was as bright as a unicorn. . . . Fighting to stay conscious, Harry watched it canter away. . . .

At that moment, Harry saw, by its brightness, somebody welcoming it back . . . raising his hand to pat it . . . someone who looked like Sirius. . . .

Harry didn't understand. He couldn't think anymore. He felt the last of his strength leave him, and his head hit the ground.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HERMIONE'S SECRET

Shocking business . . . shocking . . . miracle none of them died . . . never heard the like . . . by thunder, it was lucky you were all here.

"Thank you, Minister."

"Order of Merlin, Second Class, I'd say. First Class, if I can wangle it!"

"Thank you very much indeed, Minister."

"Nasty cut you've got there. . . . Black's work, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, it was Potter, Weasley, and Granger, Minister. . . ."

"No!"

"Black had bewitched them, I saw it immediately. A Confundus Charm, to judge by their behavior. They seemed to be under a spell. . . . I'm afraid it's given them a rather high opinion of themselves . . . and of course of me."

of license by the headmaster —"

"Ah, well, Snape . . . Harry Potter, you know . . . we've all got a bit of a blind spot where he's concerned."

"And yet — is it good for him to be given so much special treatment? Personally, I try and treat him like any other student — for leading his friends into such danger. Consider, Minister — against all school rules — after all the precautions — consorting with a werewolf and a murderer — and I have reason to believe he has been visiting Hogsmeade illegally."

"Well, well . . . we shall see, Snape, we shall see. . . . The boy has undoubtedly been foolish. . . ."

Harry lay listening with his eyes tight shut. He felt very groggy. The words he was hearing seemed to be traveling very slowly to understand. . . . His limbs felt like lead; his eyelids too heavy to lift. . . . He wanted to lie here, on this comfortable bed.

"What amazes me most is the behavior of the dementors . . . you've really no idea what made them retreat, Snape?"

"No, Minister . . . by the time I had come 'round they were heading back to their positions at the entrances. . . ."

"Extraordinary. And yet Black, and Harry, and the girl —"

"All unconscious by the time I reached them. I bound and gagged Black, naturally, conjured stretchers, and brought them to the hospital wing."

There was a pause. Harry's brain seemed to be moving a little faster, and as it did, a gnawing sensation grew in the pit of his stomach. He opened his eyes.

Everything was slightly blurred. Somebody had removed his glasses. He was lying in the dark hospital wing. At the very end of the ward, a woman was bending over a bed. Harry squinted. Ron's red hair was visible beneath Madam Pomfrey's arm.

Harry moved his head over on the pillow. In the bed to his right lay Hermione. Moonlight was falling across her bed. When Harry was awake, pressed a finger to her lips, then pointed to the hospital wing door. It was ajar, and the voices of the dementors were in the corridor outside.

Madam Pomfrey now came walking briskly up the dark ward to Harry's bed. He turned to look at her. She was carrying a large, round object that looked like a small boulder.

"Ah, you're awake!" she said briskly. She placed the chocolate on Harry's bedside table and began breaking it apart with her hands.

"How's Ron?" said Harry and Hermione together.

"He'll live," said Madam Pomfrey grimly. "As for you two . . . you'll be staying here until I'm satisfied you're — Potter, what are you doing?" Harry was sitting up, putting his glasses back on, and picking up his wand.

"I need to see the headmaster," he said.

"Potter," said Madam Pomfrey soothingly, "it's all right. They've got Black. He's locked away upstairs. The dementors will guard him."

"WHAT?"

Harry jumped up out of bed; Hermione had done the same. But his shout had been heard in the corridor outside; now the door opened.

"Harry, Harry, what's this?" said Fudge, looking agitated. "You should be in bed — has he had any chocolate?" he asked.

"Minister, listen!" Harry said. "Sirius Black's innocent! Peter Pettigrew faked his own death! We saw him tonight! You can't lock him away!" But Fudge was shaking his head with a small smile on his face.

"Harry, Harry, you're very confused, you've been through a dreadful ordeal, lie back down, now, we've got everything under control."

"YOU HAVEN'T!" Harry yelled. "YOU'VE GOT THE WRONG MAN!"

"Minister, listen, please," Hermione said; she had hurried to Harry's side and was gazing imploringly into Fudge's face. "Sirius Black is innocent, I mean, and —"

"You see, Minister?" said Snape. "Confused, both of them. . . . Black's done a very good job on them. . . ."

"WE'RE NOT CONFUNDED!" Harry roared.

"Minister! Professor!" said Madam Pomfrey angrily. "I must insist that you leave. Potter is my patient, and he should be in bed."

"I'm not distressed, I'm trying to tell them what happened!" Harry said furiously. "If they'd just listen —"

But Madam Pomfrey suddenly stuffed a large chunk of chocolate into Harry's mouth; he choked, and she seized the opportunity to leave.

"Now, please, Minister, these children need care. Please leave —"

The door opened again. It was Dumbledore. Harry swallowed his mouthful of chocolate with great difficulty and got up.

"Professor Dumbledore, Sirius Black —"

"For heaven's sake!" said Madam Pomfrey hysterically. "Is this a hospital wing or not? Headmaster, I must insist —"

"My apologies, Poppy, but I need a word with Mr. Potter and Miss Granger," said Dumbledore calmly. "I have just been informed that they are awake."

"I suppose he's told you the same fairy tale he's planted in Potter's mind?" spat Snape. "Something about a rat, and Peter Pettigrew?"

"That, indeed, is Black's story," said Dumbledore, surveying Snape closely through his half-moon spectacles.

"And does my evidence count for nothing?" snarled Snape. "Peter Pettigrew was not in the Shrieking Shack, nor did I see him!"

"That was because you were knocked out, Professor!" said Hermione earnestly. "You didn't arrive in time to hear —"

"Miss Granger, HOLD YOUR TONGUE!"

"Now, Snape," said Fudge, startled, "the young lady is disturbed in her mind, we must make allowances —"

"I would like to speak to Harry and Hermione alone," said Dumbledore abruptly. "Cornelius, Severus, Poppy — please leave."

"Headmaster!" sputtered Madam Pomfrey. "They need treatment, they need rest —"

"This cannot wait," said Dumbledore. "I must insist."

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips and strode away into her office at the end of the ward, slamming the door behind her. The door to the hospital wing was open.

"The dementors should have arrived by now," he said. "I'll go and meet them. Dumbledore, I'll see you upstairs."

He crossed to the door and held it open for Snape, but Snape hadn't moved.

"You surely don't believe a word of Black's story?" Snape whispered, his eyes fixed on Dumbledore's face.

"I wish to speak to Harry and Hermione alone," Dumbledore repeated.

Snape took a step toward Dumbledore.

"Sirius Black showed he was capable of murder at the age of sixteen," he breathed. "You haven't forgotten that, Headmaster."

"My memory is as good as it ever was, Severus," said Dumbledore quietly.

Snape turned on his heel and marched through the door Fudge was still holding. It closed behind them, and Dumbledore was alone at the same time.

"Professor, Black's telling the truth — we saw Pettigrew —"

"— he escaped when Professor Lupin turned into a werewolf —"

"— he's a rat —"

"— Pettigrew's front paw, I mean, finger, he cut it off —"

"— Pettigrew attacked Ron, it wasn't Sirius —"

But Dumbledore held up his hand to stem the flood of explanations.

"It is your turn to listen, and I beg you will not interrupt me, because there is very little time," he said quietly. "There is only your word — and the word of two thirteen-year-old wizards will not convince anybody. A street full of eyewitnesses would not convince the Ministry that Sirius had been the Potters' Secret-Keeper."

"Professor Lupin can tell you —" Harry said, unable to stop himself.

"Professor Lupin is currently deep in the forest, unable to tell anyone anything. By the time he is human again, it will be too late. Werewolves are so mistrusted by most of our kind that his support will count for very little — and the fact that he is a wizard —"

"But —"

"Listen to me, Harry. It is too late, you understand me? You must see that Professor Snape's version of events is far more credible than yours."

"He hates Sirius," Hermione said desperately. "All because of some stupid trick Sirius played on him —"

"Sirius has not acted like an innocent man. The attack on the Fat Lady — entering Gryffindor Tower with a knife — was planned by Sirius. It was his sentence."

"But you believe us."

"Yes, I do," said Dumbledore quietly. "But I have no power to make other men see the truth, or to overrule the Ministry."

Harry stared up into the grave face and felt as though the ground beneath him were falling sharply away. He had grown used to Dumbledore pulling some amazing solution out of the air. But no . . . their last hope was gone.

"What we need," said Dumbledore slowly, and his light blue eyes moved from Harry to Hermione, "is more time."

"But —" Hermione began. And then her eyes became very round. "OH!"

"Now, pay attention," said Dumbledore, speaking very low, and very clearly. "Sirius is locked in Professor Flitwick's office. He is being tortured. If all goes well, you will be able to save more than one innocent life tonight. But remember this, both of you — you know what is at stake. . . . You — must — not — be — seen."

Harry didn't have a clue what was going on. Dumbledore had turned on his heel and looked back as he reached the door.

"I am going to lock you in. It is —" he consulted his watch, "five minutes to midnight. Miss Granger, three turns should do."

"Good luck?" Harry repeated as the door closed behind Dumbledore. "Three turns? What's he talking about? What are you doing?"

But Hermione was fumbling with the neck of her robes, pulling from beneath them a very long, very fine gold chain.

"Harry, come here," she said urgently. "Quick!"

Harry moved toward her, completely bewildered. She was holding the chain out. He saw a tiny, sparkling hourglass hanging from it.

"Here —"

She had thrown the chain around his neck too.

"Ready?" she said breathlessly.

"What are we doing?" Harry said, completely lost.

Hermione turned the hourglass over three times.

The dark ward dissolved. Harry had the sensation that he was flying very fast, backward. A blur of colors and shapes. He couldn't hear his own voice —

And then he felt solid ground beneath his feet, and everything came into focus again —

He was standing next to Hermione in the deserted entrance hall and a stream of golden sunlight was falling across them. He felt the chain of the hourglass cutting into his neck.

"Hermione, what — ?"

"In here!" Hermione seized Harry's arm and dragged him across the hall to the door of a broom closet; she opened it and they went in.

"What — how — Hermione, what happened?"

"We've gone back in time," Hermione whispered, lifting the chain off Harry's neck in the darkness. "Three hours back. I found his leg and gave it a very hard pinch. It hurt a lot, which seemed to rule out the possibility that he was a werewolf."

"But —"

"Shh! Listen! Someone's coming! I think — I think it might be us!"

Hermione had her ear pressed against the cupboard door.

"Footsteps across the hall . . . yes, I think it's us going down to Hagrid's!"

"Are you telling me," Harry whispered, "that we're here in this cupboard and we're out there too?"

"Yes," said Hermione, her ear still glued to the cupboard door. "I'm sure it's us. It doesn't sound like more than three people."

e Invisibility Cloak —"

She broke off, still listening intently.

"We've gone down the front steps. . . ."

Hermione sat down on an upturned bucket, looking desperately anxious, but Harry wanted a few questions answered.

"Where did you get that hourglass thing?"

"It's called a Time-Turner," Hermione whispered, "and I got it from Professor McGonagall on our first day back. I've been using it. Professor McGonagall made me swear I wouldn't tell anyone. She had to write all sorts of letters to the Ministry of Magic so I could have it. That I'd never, ever use it for anything except my studies. . . . I've been turning it back so I could do hours over again."

But . . .

"Harry, I don't understand what Dumbledore wants us to do. Why did he tell us to go back three hours? How's that going to help?"

Harry stared at her shadowy face.

"There must be something that happened around now he wants us to change," he said slowly. "What happened? We need to know."

"This is three hours ago, and we are walking down to Hagrid's," said Hermione. "We just heard ourselves leaving. . . ."

Harry frowned; he felt as though he were screwing up his whole brain in concentration.

"Dumbledore just said — just said we could save more than one innocent life. . . ." And then it hit him. "Hermione, we need to know what happened."

"But — how will that help Sirius?"

"Dumbledore said — he just told us where the window is — the window of Flitwick's office! Where they've got Sirius! Sirius! Sirius can escape on Buckbeak — they can escape together!"

From what Harry could see of Hermione's face, she looked terrified.

"If we manage that without being seen, it'll be a miracle!"

"Well, we've got to try, haven't we?" said Harry. He stood up and pressed his ear against the door.

"Doesn't sound like anyone's there. . . . Come on, let's go. . . ."

Harry pushed open the closet door. The entrance hall was deserted. As quietly and quickly as they could, they darted out. The moonlight was already lengthening, the tops of the trees in the Forbidden Forest gilded once more with gold.

"If anyone's looking out of the window —" Hermione squeaked, looking up at the castle behind them.

"We'll run for it," said Harry determinedly. "Straight into the forest, all right? We'll have to hide behind a tree or something."

"Okay, but we'll go around by the greenhouses!" said Hermione breathlessly. "We need to keep out of sight of Hagrid's window!"

Still working out what she meant, Harry set off at a sprint, Hermione behind him. They tore across the vegetable garden, then out of sight again, fast as they could, skirting around the Whomping Willow, tearing toward the shelter of the forest. . . .

Safe in the shadows of the trees, Harry turned around; seconds later, Hermione arrived beside him, panting.

"Right," she gasped. "We need to sneak over to Hagrid's. . . . Keep out of sight, Harry. . . ."

They made their way silently through the trees, keeping to the very edge of the forest. Then, as they glimpsed the front of Hagrid's cabin, they moved quickly behind a wide oak trunk and peered out from either side. Hagrid had appeared in his doorway, shaking his head in his own voice.

"It's us. We're wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off."

"Yeh shouldn't've come!" Hagrid whispered. He stood back, then shut the door quickly.

"This is the weirdest thing we've ever done," Harry said fervently.

"Let's move along a bit," Hermione whispered. "We need to get nearer to Buckbeak!"

They crept through the trees until they saw the nervous hippogriff, tethered to the fence around Hagrid's pumpkin patch.

"Now?" Harry whispered.

"No!" said Hermione. "If we steal him now, those Committee people will think Hagrid set him free! We've got to wait until he's alone!"

"That's going to give us about sixty seconds," said Harry. This was starting to seem impossible.

At that moment, there was a crash of breaking china from inside Hagrid's cabin.

"That's Hagrid breaking the milk jug," Hermione whispered. "I'm going to find Scabbers in a moment —"

Sure enough, a few minutes later, they heard Hermione's shriek of surprise.

"Hermione," said Harry suddenly, "what if we — we just run in there and grab Pettigrew —"

"No!" said Hermione in a terrified whisper. "Don't you understand? We're breaking one of the most important Wizarding rules! We can't break into Hagrid's house, if we're seen —"

"We'd only be seen by ourselves and Hagrid!"

"Harry, what do you think you'd do if you saw yourself bursting into Hagrid's house?" said Hermione.

"I'd — I'd think I'd gone mad," said Harry, "or I'd think there was some Dark Magic going on —"

"Exactly! You wouldn't understand, you might even attack yourself! Don't you see? Professor McGonagall told me what happened. . . . Loads of them ended up killing their past or future selves by mistake!"

"Okay!" said Harry. "It was just an idea, I just thought —"

But Hermione nudged him and pointed toward the castle. Harry moved his head a few inches to get a clear view of the entrance. He saw that Sirius and Macnair the executioner were coming down the steps.

"We're about to come out!" Hermione breathed.

And sure enough, moments later, Hagrid's back door opened, and Harry saw himself, Ron, and Hermione walking out. Harry saw himself, standing behind the tree, and watching himself in the pumpkin patch.

"It's okay, Beaky, it's okay . . ." Hagrid said to Buckbeak. Then he turned to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Go on. Get go-

"Hagrid, we can't —"

"We'll tell them what really happened —"

"They can't kill him —"

"Go! It's bad enough without you lot in trouble an' all!"

Harry watched the Hermione in the pumpkin patch throw the Invisibility Cloak over him and Ron.

"Go quick. Don' listen. . . ."

There was a knock on Hagrid's front door. The execution party had arrived. Hagrid turned around and headed back i-

latten in patches all around the cabin and heard three pairs of feet retreating. He, Ron, and Hermione had gone . . . h-

hat was happening inside the cabin through the back door.

"Where is the beast?" came the cold voice of Macnair.

"Out — outside," Hagrid croaked.

Harry pulled his head out of sight as Macnair's face appeared at Hagrid's window, staring out at Buckbeak. Then they

"We — er — have to read you the official notice of execution, Hagrid. I'll make it quick. And then you and Macnair need

cedure —"

Macnair's face vanished from the window. It was now or never.

"Wait here," Harry whispered to Hermione. "I'll do it."

As Fudge's voice started again, Harry darted out from behind his tree, vaulted the fence into the pumpkin patch, and

"It is the decision of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures that the hippogriff Buckbeak, hereafter

sundown —"

Careful not to blink, Harry stared up into Buckbeak's fierce orange eyes once more and bowed. Buckbeak sank to his

e knot of rope tying Buckbeak to the fence.

". . . sentenced to execution by beheading, to be carried out by the Committee's appointed executioner, Walden Mac-

"Come on, Buckbeak," Harry murmured, "come on, we're going to help you. Quietly . . . quietly . . ."

". . . as witnessed below. Hagrid, you sign here. . . ."

Harry threw all his weight onto the rope, but Buckbeak had dug in his front feet.

"Well, let's get this over with," said the reedy voice of the Committee member from inside Hagrid's cabin. "Hagrid, per-

"No, I — I wan' ter be with him. . . . I don' wan' him ter be alone —"

Footsteps echoed from within the cabin.

"Buckbeak, move!" Harry hissed.

Harry tugged harder on the rope around Buckbeak's neck. The hippogriff began to walk, rustling its wings irritably. T-

agrid's back door.

"One moment, please, Macnair," came Dumbledore's voice. "You need to sign too." The footsteps stopped. Harry hear-

.

Hermione's white face was sticking out from behind a tree.

"Harry, hurry!" she mouthed.

Harry could still hear Dumbledore's voice talking from within the cabin. He gave the rope another wrench. Buckbeak

"Quick! Quick!" Hermione moaned, darting out from behind her tree, seizing the rope too and adding her weight to n-

now blocked from sight; they couldn't see Hagrid's garden at all.

"Stop!" he whispered to Hermione. "They might hear us —"

Hagrid's back door had opened with a bang. Harry, Hermione, and Buckbeak stood quite still; even the hippogriff se-

Silence . . . then —

"Where is it?" said the reedy voice of the Committee member. "Where is the beast?"

"It was tied here!" said the executioner furiously. "I saw it! Just here!"

"How extraordinary," said Dumbledore. There was a note of amusement in his voice.

"Beaky!" said Hagrid huskily.

There was a swishing noise, and the thud of an axe. The executioner seemed to have swung it into the fence in ange-

s words through his sobs.

"Gone! Gone! Bless his little beak, he's gone! Musta pulled himself free! Beaky, yeh clever boy!"

Buckbeak started to strain against the rope, trying to get back to Hagrid. Harry and Hermione tightened their grip an-

"Someone untied him!" the executioner was snarling. "We should search the grounds, the forest —"

"Macnair, if Buckbeak has indeed been stolen, do you really think the thief will have led him away on foot?" said Dum-

. . . Hagrid, I could do with a cup of tea. Or a large brandy."

"O' — o' course, Professor," said Hagrid, who sounded weak with happiness. "Come in, come in. . . ."

Harry and Hermione listened closely. They heard footsteps, the soft cursing of the executioner, the snap of the door,

"Now what?" whispered Harry, looking around.

"We'll have to hide in here," said Hermione, who looked very shaken. "We need to wait until they've gone back to the

s's window. He won't be there for another couple of hours. . . . Oh, this is going to be difficult. . . ."

She looked nervously over her shoulder into the depths of the forest. The sun was setting now.

"We're going to have to move," said Harry, thinking hard. "We've got to be able to see the Whomping Willow, or we w-

"Okay," said Hermione, getting a firmer grip on Buckbeak's rope. "But we've got to keep out of sight, Harry, remember? They moved around the edge of the forest, darkness falling thickly around them, until they were hidden behind a cluster of trees."

"There's Ron!" said Harry suddenly.

A dark figure was sprinting across the lawn and its shout echoed through the still night air.

"Get away from him — get away — Scabbers, come here —"

And then they saw two more figures materialize out of nowhere. Harry watched himself and Hermione chasing after them.

"Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat —"

"There's Sirius!" said Harry. The great shape of the dog had bounded out from the roots of the Willow. They saw him running.

"Looks even worse from here, doesn't it?" said Harry, watching the dog pulling Ron into the roots. "Ouch — look, I just saw the Willow branch!"

The Whomping Willow was creaking and lashing out with its lower branches; they could see themselves darting here and there.

"That was Crookshanks pressing the knot," said Hermione.

"And there we go . . .," Harry muttered. "We're in."

The moment they disappeared, the tree began to move again. Seconds later, they heard footsteps quite close by. Dementors were coming.

Heir way up to the castle.

"Right after we'd gone down into the passage!" said Hermione. "If only Dumbledore had come with us . . ."

"Macnair and Fudge would've come too," said Harry bitterly. "I bet you anything Fudge would've told Macnair to murder them."

They watched the four men climb the castle steps and disappear from view. For a few minutes the scene was deserted.

"Here comes Lupin!" said Harry as they saw another figure sprinting down the stone steps and haring toward the Willow.

pletely.

They watched Lupin seize a broken branch from the ground and prod the knot on the trunk. The tree stopped fighting.

"If he'd only grabbed the Cloak," said Harry. "It's just lying there. . . ."

He turned to Hermione.

"If I just dashed out now and grabbed it, Snape'd never be able to get it and —"

"Harry, we mustn't be seen!"

"How can you stand this?" he asked Hermione fiercely. "Just standing here and watching it happen?" He hesitated. "I'm not sure."

"Harry, no!"

Hermione seized the back of Harry's robes not a moment too soon. Just then, they heard a burst of song. It was Hagrid.

ce, and weaving slightly as he walked. A large bottle was swinging from his hands.

"See?" Hermione whispered. "See what would have happened? We've got to keep out of sight! No, Buckbeak!"

The hippogriff was making frantic attempts to get to Hagrid again; Harry seized his rope too, straining to hold Buckbeak.

He was gone. Buckbeak stopped fighting to get away. His head drooped sadly.

Barely two minutes later, the castle doors flew open yet again, and Snape came charging out of them, running toward them.

Harry's fists clenched as they watched Snape skid to a halt next to the tree, looking around. He grabbed the Cloak and ran.

"Get your filthy hands off it," Harry snarled under his breath.

"Shh!"

Snape seized the branch Lupin had used to freeze the tree, prodded the knot, and vanished from view as he put on the Cloak.

"So that's it," said Hermione quietly. "We're all down there . . . and now we've just got to wait until we come back up again."

She took the end of Buckbeak's rope and tied it securely around the nearest tree, then sat down on the dry ground, waiting.

"Harry, there's something I don't understand. . . . Why didn't the dementors get Sirius? I remember them coming, and they didn't."

Harry sat down too. He explained what he'd seen; how, as the nearest dementor had lowered its mouth to Harry's, a Patronus had appeared and the dementors to retreat.

Hermione's mouth was slightly open by the time Harry had finished.

"But what was it?"

"There's only one thing it could have been, to make the dementors go," said Harry. "A real Patronus. A powerful one."

"But who conjured it?"

Harry didn't say anything. He was thinking back to the person he'd seen on the other bank of the lake. He knew who it was.

"Didn't you see what they looked like?" said Hermione eagerly. "Was it one of the teachers?"

"No," said Harry. "He wasn't a teacher."

"But it must have been a really powerful wizard, to drive all those dementors away. . . . If the Patronus was shining so brightly."

"Yeah, I saw him," said Harry slowly. "But . . . maybe I imagined it. . . . I wasn't thinking straight. . . . I passed out right after."

"Who did you think it was?"

"I think —" Harry swallowed, knowing how strange this was going to sound. "I think it was my dad."

Harry glanced up at Hermione and saw that her mouth was fully open now. She was gazing at him with a mixture of shock and interest.

"Harry, your dad's — well — dead," she said quietly.

"I know that," said Harry quickly.

"You think you saw his ghost?"

"I don't know . . . no . . . he looked solid. . . ."

"But then —"

"Maybe I was seeing things," said Harry. "But . . . from what I could see . . . it looked like him. . . . I've got photos of him."

Hermione was still looking at him as though worried about his sanity.

"I know it sounds crazy," said Harry flatly. He turned to look at Buckbeak, who was digging his beak into the ground, and the uckbeak.

He was thinking about his father and about his three oldest friends . . . Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. . . . Harry had reappeared this evening when everyone had thought he was dead. . . . Was it so impossible his father had done what he had been too far away to see distinctly . . . yet he had felt sure, for a moment, before he'd lost consciousness. . . .

The leaves overhead rustled faintly in the breeze. The moon drifted in and out of sight behind the shifting clouds. He waited. And then, at last, after over an hour . . .

"Here we come!" Hermione whispered.

She and Harry got to their feet. Buckbeak raised his head. They saw Lupin, Ron, and Pettigrew clambering awkwardly up the stone wall, lifting weirdly upward. Next came Harry, Hermione, and Black. They all began to walk toward the castle.

Harry's heart was starting to beat very fast. He glanced up at the sky. Any moment now, that cloud was going to move. "Harry," Hermione muttered as though she knew exactly what he was thinking, "we've got to stay put. We mustn't be seen."

"So we're just going to let Pettigrew escape all over again. . . ." said Harry quietly.

"How do you expect to find a rat in the dark?" snapped Hermione. "There's nothing we can do! We came back to help you. All right!"

The moon slid out from behind its cloud. They saw the tiny figures across the grounds stop. Then they saw movement. "There goes Lupin," Hermione whispered. "He's transforming —"

"Hermione!" said Harry suddenly. "We've got to move!"

"We mustn't, I keep telling you —"

"Not to interfere! Lupin's going to run into the forest, right at us!"

Hermione gasped.

"Quick!" she moaned, dashing to untie Buckbeak. "Quick! Where are we going to go? Where are we going to hide? The forest?"

"Back to Hagrid's!" Harry said. "It's empty now — come on!"

They ran as fast as they could, Buckbeak cantering along behind them. They could hear the werewolf howling behind them. The cabin was in sight; Harry skidded to the door, wrenched it open, and Hermione and Buckbeak flashed past him; the hound barked loudly.

"Shh, Fang, it's us!" said Hermione, hurrying over and scratching his ears to quieten him. "That was really close!" she said. "Yeah . . ."

Harry was looking out of the window. It was much harder to see what was going on from here. Buckbeak seemed very content of the fire, folded his wings contentedly, and seemed ready for a good nap.

"I think I'd better go outside again, you know," said Harry slowly. "I can't see what's going on — we won't know when the dementors come. Hermione looked up. Her expression was suspicious.

"I'm not going to try and interfere," said Harry quickly. "But if we don't see what's going on, how're we going to know when they come?"

"Well . . . okay, then . . . I'll wait here with Buckbeak . . . but Harry, be careful — there's a werewolf out there — and the dementors. Harry stepped outside again and edged around the cabin. He could hear yelping in the distance. That meant the dementors were coming to him any moment. . . .

Harry stared out toward the lake, his heart doing a kind of drumroll in his chest. . . . Whoever had sent that Patronus was powerful. For a fraction of a second he stood, irresolute, in front of Hagrid's door. You must not be seen. But he didn't want to go in.

And there were the dementors. They were emerging out of the darkness from every direction, gliding around the edge of the lake to the opposite bank. . . . He wouldn't have to get near them. . . .

Harry began to run. He had no thought in his head except his father. . . . If it was him . . . if it really was him . . . he had to get to the lake. The lake was coming nearer and nearer, but there was no sign of anybody. On the opposite bank, he could see tiny glimmers of light. There was a bush at the very edge of the water. Harry threw himself behind it, peering desperately through the leaves.

A terrified excitement shot through him — any moment now — "Come on!" he muttered, staring about. "Where are you? Dad, come on —"

But no one came. Harry raised his head to look at the circle of dementors across the lake. One of them was lowering its head, coming to help this time —

And then it hit him — he understood. He hadn't seen his father — he had seen himself —

Harry flung himself out from behind the bush and pulled out his wand.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" he yelled.

And out of the end of his wand burst, not a shapeless cloud of mist, but a blinding, dazzling, silver animal. He screwed his eyes shut. It was galloping silently away from him, across the black surface of the lake. He saw it lower its head and charge at the black shapes on the ground, and the dementors were falling back, scattering, retreating into the darkness. The Patronus turned. It was cantering back toward Harry across the still surface of the water. It wasn't a horse. It was a stag, as the moon above . . . it was coming back to him. . . .

It stopped on the bank. Its hooves made no mark on the soft ground as it stared at Harry with its large, silver eyes. "Prongs," he whispered.

But as his trembling fingertips stretched toward the creature, it vanished.

"Okay," said Harry, wrenching his gaze from the sky, "let's go. . ."

They slipped through the doorway behind them and down a tightly spiraling stone staircase. As they reached the bottom wall and listened. It sounded like Fudge and Snape. They were walking quickly along the corridor at the foot of the stairs. . . only hope Dumbledore's not going to make difficulties," Snape was saying. "The Kiss will be performed immediately. As soon as Macnair returns with the dementors. This whole Black affair has been highly embarrassing. I can't tell you how at we've got him at last. . . I daresay they'll want to interview you, Snape . . . and once young Harry's back in his right mind, how you saved him. . ."

Harry clenched his teeth. He caught a glimpse of Snape's smirk as he and Fudge passed Harry and Hermione's hiding place. Moments to make sure they'd really gone, then started to run in the opposite direction. Down one staircase, then another. "Peeves!" Harry muttered, grabbing Hermione's wrist. "In here!"

They tore into a deserted classroom to their left just in time. Peeves seemed to be bouncing along the corridor in both directions. "Oh, he's horrible," whispered Hermione, her ear to the door. "I bet he's all excited because the dementors are going to get him, Harry!"

They waited until Peeves's gloating voice had faded into the distance, then slid back out of the room and broke into a run. "Hermione — what'll happen — if we don't get back inside — before Dumbledore locks the door?" Harry panted.

"I don't want to think about it!" Hermione moaned, checking her watch again. "One minute!"

They had reached the end of the corridor with the hospital wing entrance. "Okay — I can hear Dumbledore," said Harry. They crept along the corridor. The door opened. Dumbledore's back appeared.

"I am going to lock you in," they heard him saying. "It is five minutes to midnight. Miss Granger, three turns should do it. Dumbledore backed out of the room, closed the door, and took out his wand to magically lock it. Panicking, Harry and Hermione crept under the long silver mustache. "Well?" he said quietly.

"We did it!" said Harry breathlessly. "Sirius has gone, on Buckbeak. . ."

Dumbledore beamed at them.

"Well done. I think —" He listened intently for any sound within the hospital wing. "Yes, I think you've gone too — get out. Harry and Hermione slipped back inside the dormitory. It was empty except for Ron, who was still lying motionless in bed. They crept back to their own beds, Hermione tucking the Time-Turner back under her robes. A moment later, Madam Pomfrey came. "Did I hear the headmaster leaving? Am I allowed to look after my patients now?"

She was in a very bad mood. Harry and Hermione thought it best to accept their chocolate quietly. Madam Pomfrey gave them a look. "Well, yes, but you must be careful. Low. He and Hermione were waiting, listening, their nerves jangling. . . And then, as they both took a fourth piece of chocolate, a cry echoing from somewhere above them. . .

"What was that?" said Madam Pomfrey in alarm.

Now they could hear angry voices, growing louder and louder. Madam Pomfrey was staring at the door.

"Really — they'll wake everybody up! What do they think they're doing?"

Harry was trying to hear what the voices were saying. They were drawing nearer —

"He must have Disapparated, Severus. We should have left somebody in the room with him. When this gets out —"

"HE DIDN'T DISAPPARATE!" Snape roared, now very close at hand. "YOU CAN'T APPARATE OR DISAPPARATE INSIDE THE SCHOOL!"

"Severus — be reasonable — Harry has been locked up —"

BAM.

The door of the hospital wing burst open.

Fudge, Snape, and Dumbledore came striding into the ward. Dumbledore alone looked calm. Indeed, he looked as though he was beside himself.

"OUT WITH IT, POTTER!" he bellowed. "WHAT DID YOU DO?"

"Professor Snape!" shrieked Madam Pomfrey. "Control yourself!"

"See here, Snape, be reasonable," said Fudge. "This door's been locked, we just saw —"

"THEY HELPED HIM ESCAPE, I KNOW IT!" Snape howled, pointing at Harry and Hermione. His face was twisted; spit was flying from his mouth.

"Calm down, man!" Fudge barked. "You're talking nonsense!"

"YOU DON'T KNOW POTTER!" shrieked Snape. "HE DID IT, I KNOW HE DID IT —"

"That will do, Severus," said Dumbledore quietly. "Think about what you are saying. This door has been locked since the boys left their beds?"

"Of course not!" said Madam Pomfrey, bristling. "I would have heard them!"

"Well, there you have it, Severus," said Dumbledore calmly. "Unless you are suggesting that Harry and Hermione are responsible for troubling them further."

Snape stood there, seething, staring from Fudge, who looked thoroughly shocked at his behavior, to Dumbledore, who was swishing behind him, and stormed out of the ward.

"Fellow seems quite unbalanced," said Fudge, staring after him. "I'd watch out for him if I were you, Dumbledore."

"Oh, he's not unbalanced," said Dumbledore quietly. "He's just suffered a severe disappointment."

"He's not the only one!" puffed Fudge. "The Daily Prophet's going to have a field day! We had Black cornered and he escaped. The story of that hippogriff's escape to get out, and I'll be a laughingstock! Well . . . I'd better go and notify the Ministry."

"And the dementors?" said Dumbledore. "They'll be removed from the school, I trust?"

"Oh yes, they'll have to go," said Fudge, running his fingers distractedly through his hair. "Never dreamed they'd attack!"

y out of control . . . no, I'll have them packed off back to Azkaban tonight. . . . Perhaps we should think about dragons.

"Hagrid would like that," said Dumbledore with a swift smile at Harry and Hermione. As he and Fudge left the dormitory, Hermione, looking angrily to herself, she headed back to her office.

There was a low moan from the other end of the ward. Ron had woken up. They could see him sitting up, rubbing his eyes.

"What — what happened?" he groaned. "Harry? Why are we in here? Where's Sirius? Where's Lupin? What's going on?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other.

"You explain," said Harry, helping himself to some more chocolate.

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the hospital wing at noon the next day, it was to find an almost deserted castle. Hagrid was taking full advantage of another Hogsmeade visit. Neither Ron nor Hermione felt like going, however, so they stayed.

They were talking about the ordinary events of the previous night and wondering where Sirius and Buckbeak were now. Sitting near the lake, watching the water.

Harry lost the thread of the conversation as he looked across to the opposite bank. The stag had galloped toward him.

A shadow fell across them and they looked up to see a very bleary-eyed Hagrid, mopping his sweaty face with one of his hands.

"Know I shouldn't feel happy, after wha' happened las' night," he said. "I mean, Black escapin' again, an' everythin' — b"

"What?" they said, pretending to look curious.

"Beaky! He escaped! He's free! Bin celebratin' all night!"

"That's wonderful!" said Hermione, giving Ron a reproving look because he looked as though he was close to laughing.

"Yeah . . . can't've tied him up properly," said Hagrid, gazing happily out over the grounds. "I was worried this mornin' he'd get away."

"What?" said Harry quickly.

"Blimey, haven't yeh heard?" said Hagrid, his smile fading a little. He lowered his voice, even though there was nobody else around.

" . . . Thought everyone'd know by now . . . Professor Lupin's a werewolf, see. An' he was loose on the grounds las' night."

"He's packing?" said Harry, alarmed. "Why?"

"Leavin', isn' he?" said Hagrid, looking surprised that Harry had to ask. "Resigned firs' thing this mornin'. Says he can't stay."

Harry scrambled to his feet.

"I'm going to see him," he said to Ron and Hermione.

"But if he's resigned —"

"— doesn't sound like there's anything we can do —"

"I don't care. I still want to see him. I'll meet you back here."

Lupin's office door was open. He had already packed most of his things. The grindylow's empty tank stood next to his desk.

He was bending over something on his desk and looked up only when Harry knocked on the door.

"I saw you coming," said Lupin, smiling. He pointed to the parchment he had been poring over. It was the Marauder's Map.

"I just saw Hagrid," said Harry. "And he said you'd resigned. It's not true, is it?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Lupin. He started opening his desk drawers and taking out the contents.

"Why?" said Harry. "The Ministry of Magic don't think you were helping Sirius, do they?"

Lupin crossed to the door and closed it behind Harry.

"No. Professor Dumbledore managed to convince Fudge that I was trying to save your lives." He sighed. "That was the worst thing that's ever hit him hard. So he — er — accidentally let slip that I am a werewolf this morning at breakfast."

"You're not leaving just because of that!" said Harry.

Lupin smiled wryly.

"This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents. . . . They will not want a werewolf teaching their children."

"You've bitten any of you. . . . That must never happen again."

"You're the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we've ever had!" said Harry. "Don't go!"

Lupin shook his head and didn't speak. He carried on emptying his drawers. Then, while Harry was trying to think of something to say.

"The master told me this morning, you saved a lot of lives last night, Harry. If I'm proud of anything, it's how much you've helped."

"How d'you know about that?" said Harry, distracted.

"What else could have driven the dementors back?"

Harry told Lupin what had happened. When he'd finished, Lupin was smiling again.

"Yes, your father was always a stag when he transformed," he said. "You guessed right . . . that's why we called him Pegasus."

Lupin threw his last few books into his case, closed the desk drawers, and turned to look at Harry.

"Here — I brought this from the Shrieking Shack last night," he said, handing Harry back the Invisibility Cloak. "And . . . I'm no longer your teacher, so I don't feel guilty about giving you this back as well. It's no use to me, and I daresay you'll find it useful."

Harry took the map and grinned.

"You told me Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs would've wanted to lure me out of school . . . you said they'd have been proud of me."

"And so we would have," said Lupin, now reaching down to close his case. "I have no hesitation in saying that James would have been proud of you."

Harry thought of the secret passages out of the castle.

There was a knock on the door. Harry hastily stuffed the Marauder's Map and the Invisibility Cloak into his pocket.

It was Professor Dumbledore. He didn't look surprised to see Harry there.

"Your carriage is at the gates, Remus," he said.

"Thank you, Headmaster."

Lupin picked up his old suitcase and the empty grindylow tank.

"Well — good-bye, Harry," he said, smiling. "It has been a real pleasure teaching you. I feel sure we'll meet again some day. . . ."

t Dumbledore might have stepped in to stop Snape failing him on purpose. Snape's behavior toward Harry over the summer was certainly a possibility, but it certainly had. A muscle twitched unpleasantly at the corner of his eye, constantly flexing his fingers, as though itching to place them around Harry's throat.

Percy had got his top-grade N.E.W.T.s; Fred and George had scraped a handful of O.W.L.s each. Gryffindor House, minus the Slytherin Cup, had won the House Championship for the third year running. This meant that the end of term feast took place at the Gryffindor table, and the feast was the noisiest of the lot, as everybody celebrated. Even Harry managed to forget about the journey back to Hogwarts with the rest.

As the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station the next morning, Hermione gave Harry and Ron some surprising news. "I went to see Professor McGonagall this morning, just before breakfast. I've decided to drop Muggle Studies."

"But you passed your exam with three hundred and twenty percent!" said Ron.

"I know," sighed Hermione, "but I can't stand another year like this one. That Time-Turner, it was driving me mad. I've decided to have a normal schedule again."

"I still can't believe you didn't tell us about it," said Ron grumpily. "We're supposed to be your friends."

"I promised I wouldn't tell anyone," said Hermione severely. She looked around at Harry, who was watching Hogwarts disappear behind the trees. "I don't want to see it again. . . ."

"Oh, cheer up, Harry!" said Hermione sadly.

"I'm okay," said Harry quickly. "Just thinking about the holidays."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about them too," said Ron. "Harry, you've got to come and stay with us. I'll fix it up with Mum and Dad now —"

"A telephone, Ron," said Hermione. "Honestly, you should take Muggle Studies next year. . . ."

Ron ignored her.

"It's the Quidditch World Cup this summer! How about it, Harry? Come and stay, and we'll go and see it! Dad can usually get us tickets. This proposal had the effect of cheering Harry up a great deal.

"Yeah . . . I bet the Dursleys'd be pleased to let me come . . . especially after what I did to Aunt Marge. . . ."

Feeling considerably more cheerful, Harry joined Ron and Hermione in several games of Exploding Snap, and when it was time to go to bed, he ate a chocolate frog, though nothing with chocolate in it.

But it was late in the afternoon before the thing that made him truly happy turned up. . . .

"Harry," said Hermione suddenly, peering over his shoulder. "What's that thing outside your window?"

Harry turned to look outside. Something very small and gray was bobbing in and out of sight beyond the glass. He stepped to the window, took a letter that was much too big for it. The owl was so small, in fact, that it kept tumbling over in the air, buffeted this way and that. He reached down the window, stretched out his arm, and caught it. It felt like a very fluffy Snitch. He brought it carefully inside the compartment, where it was cooing around their compartment, apparently very pleased with itself for accomplishing its task. Hedwig clicked her beak at him, perched on his seat, following the owl with his great yellow eyes. Ron, noticing this, snatched the owl safely out of harm's way.

Harry picked up the letter. It was addressed to him. He ripped open the letter, and shouted, "It's from Sirius!"

"What?" said Ron and Hermione excitedly. "Read it aloud!"

Dear Harry,

I hope this finds you before you reach your aunt and uncle. I don't know whether they're used to owl post.

Buckbeak and I are in hiding. I won't tell you where, in case this falls into the wrong hands. I have some doubt about whether they'll find me, but I did seem eager for the job.

I believe the dementors are still searching for me, but they haven't a hope of finding me here. I am planning to allow them to leave the castle, so that the security on the castle will be lifted.

There is something I never got around to telling you during our brief meeting. It was I who sent you the Firebolt —

"Ha!" said Hermione triumphantly. "See! I told you it was from him!"

"Yes, but he hadn't jinxed it, had he?" said Ron. "Ouch!"

The tiny owl, now hooting happily in his hand, had nibbled one of his fingers in what it seemed to think was an affectionate gesture. Crookshanks took the order to the Owl Office for me. I used your name but told them to take the gold from Gringotts. I'll send you a box of thirteen birthdays' worth of presents from your godfather.

I would also like to apologize for the fright I think I gave you that night last year when you left your uncle's house. I had to go on my journey north, but I think the sight of me alarmed you.

I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at Hogwarts more enjoyable.

If ever you need me, send word. Your owl will find me.

I'll write again soon.

Sirius

Harry looked eagerly inside the envelope. There was another piece of parchment in there. He read it through quickly, then took a drink from a bottle of hot butterbeer in one gulp.

I, Sirius Black, Harry Potter's godfather, hereby give him permission to visit Hogsmeade on weekends.

"That'll be good enough for Dumbledore!" said Harry happily. He looked back at Sirius's letter.

"Hang on, there's a P.S. . . ."

I thought your friend Ron might like to keep this owl, as it's my fault he no longer has a rat.

Ron's eyes widened. The minute owl was still hooting excitedly.

"Keep him?" he said uncertainly. He looked closely at the owl for a moment; then, to Harry's and Hermione's great surprise, he said, "What d'you reckon?" Ron asked the cat. "Definitely an owl!" Crookshanks purred.

"That's good enough for me," said Ron happily. "He's mine."

Harry read and reread the letter from Sirius all the way back into King's Cross station. It was still clutched tightly in his hand as he crossed the barrier of platform nine and three-quarters. Harry spotted Uncle Vernon at once. He was standing a good distance from the entrance, and as he easily hugged Harry in greeting, his worst suspicions about them seemed confirmed.

"I'll call about the World Cup!" Ron yelled after Harry as Harry bid him and Hermione good-bye, then wheeled the trolley. He greeted him in his usual fashion.

"What's that?" he snarled, staring at the envelope Harry was still clutching in his hand. "If it's another form for me to sign, I'll be happy to do it."

"It's not," said Harry cheerfully. "It's a letter from my godfather."

"Godfather?" spluttered Uncle Vernon. "You haven't got a godfather!"

"Yes, I have," said Harry brightly. "He was my mum and dad's best friend. He's a convicted murderer, but he's broken out of prison. He's been with me, though . . . keep up with my news . . . check if I'm happy. . . ."

And, grinning broadly at the look of horror on Uncle Vernon's face, Harry set off toward the station exit, Hedwig rattling in his cage. It was a much warmer summer than the last.