

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

By J. K. Rowling

The dedication of this book is split seven ways.

*To Neil
To Jessica
To David
To Kenzie
To Di
To Anne
And to You*

If you have stuck with Harry until the very end.

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Chapter One

The Dark Lord Ascending

The two men appeared out of nowhere, a few yards apart in the narrow, moonlit lane. For a second they stood quite still, wands directed at each other's chests; then, recognizing each other, they stowed their wands beneath their cloaks and started walking briskly in the same direction.

"News?" asked the taller of the two.

"The best," replied Severus Snape.

The lane was bordered on the left by wild, low-growing brambles, on the right by a high, neatly manicured hedge. The men's long cloaks flapped around their ankles as they marched.

"Thought I might be late," said Yaxley, his blunt features sliding in and out of sight as the branches of overhanging trees broke the moonlight. "It was a little trickier than I expected. But I hope he will be satisfied. You sound confident that your reception will be good?"

Snape nodded, but did not elaborate. They turned right, into a wide driveway that led off the lane. The high hedge curved into them, running off into the distance beyond the pair of imposing wrought-iron gates barring the men's way. Neither of them broke step: In silence both raised their left arms in a kind of salute and passed straight through, as though the dark metal was smoke.

The yew hedges muffled the sound of the men's footsteps. There was a rustle somewhere to their right: Yaxley drew his wand again pointing it over his companion's head, but the source of the noise proved to be nothing more than a pure-white peacock, strutting majestically along the top of the hedge.

"He always did himself well, Lucius. *Peacocks* ..." Yaxley thrust his wand back under his cloak with a snort.

A handsome manor house grew out of the darkness at the end of the straight drive, lights glinting in the diamond paned downstairs windows. Somewhere in the dark garden beyond the hedge a fountain was playing. Gravel crackled beneath their feet as Snape and Yaxley sped toward the front door, which swung inward at their approach, though nobody had visibly opened it.

The hallway was large, dimly lit, and sumptuously decorated, with a magnificent carpet covering most of the stone floor. The eyes of the pale-faced portraits on the wall followed Snape and Yaxley as they strode past. The two men halted at a heavy wooden door leading into the next room, hesitated for the space of a heart beat, then Snape turned the bronze handle.

The drawing room was full of silent people, sitting at a long and ornate table. The room's usual furniture had been pushed carelessly up against the walls. Illumination came from a roaring fire beneath a handsome marble mantelpiece surmounted by a gilded mirror. Snape and Yaxley lingered for a moment on the threshold. As their eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light, they were drawn upward to the strangest feature of the scene: an apparently unconscious human figure hanging upside down over the table, revolving slowly as if suspended by an invisible rope, and reflected in the mirror and in the bare, polished surface of the table below. None of the people seated underneath this singular sight was looking at it except for a pale young man sitting almost directly below it. He seemed unable to prevent himself from glancing upward every minute or so.

"Yaxley. Snape," said a high, clear voice from the head of the table. "You are very nearly late."

The speaker was seated directly in front of the fireplace, so that it was difficult, at first, for the new arrivals to make out more than his silhouette. As they drew nearer, however, his face shone through the gloom, hairless, snakelike, with slits for nostrils and gleaming red eyes whose pupils were vertical. He was so pale that he seemed to emit a pearly glow.

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

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

“So?”

“My Lord, the Order of the Phoenix intends to move Harry Potter from his current place of safety on Saturday next, at nightfall.”

The interest around the table sharpened palpably; Some stiffened, others fidgeted, all gazing at Snape and Voldemort.

“Saturday ... at nightfall,” repeated Voldemort. His red eyes fastened upon Snape’s black ones with such intensity that some of the watchers looked away, apparently fearful that they themselves would be scorched by the ferocity of the gaze. Snape, however, looked calmly back into Voldemort’s face and, after a moment or two, Voldemort’s lipless mouth curved into something like a smile.

“Good. Very good. And this information comes –“

“– from the source we discussed,” said Snape.

“My Lord.”

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

“My Lord, I have heard differently.”

Yaxley waited, but Voldemort did not speak, so he went on, “Dawlish, the Auror, let slip that Potter will not be moved until the thirtieth, the night before the boy turns seventeen.”

Snape was smiling.

“My source told me that there are plans to lay a false trail; this must be it. No doubt a Confundus Charm has been placed upon Dawlish. It would not be the first time; he is known to be susceptible.”

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

“If he has been Confunded, naturally he is certain,” said Snape. “I assure *you*, Yaxley, the Auror Office will play no further part in the protection of Harry Potter. The Order believes that we have infiltrated the Ministry.”

“The Order’s got one thing right, then, eh?” said a squat man sitting a short distance from Yaxley; he gave a wheezy giggle that was echoed here and there along the table.

Voldemort did not laugh. His gaze had wandered upward to the body revolving slowly overhead, and he seemed to be lost in thought.

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

Voldemort held up a large white hand, and Yaxley subsided at once, watching resentfully as Voldemort turned back to Snape.

“Where are they going to hide the boy next?”

“At the home of one of the Order,” said Snape. “The place, according to the source, has been given every protection that the Order and Ministry together could provide. I think that there is little chance of taking him once he is there, my Lord, unless, of course, the Ministry has fallen before next Saturday, which might give us the opportunity to discover and undo enough of the enchantments to break through the rest.”

“Well, Yaxley?” Voldemort called down the table, the firelight glinting strangely in his red eyes. “*Will* the Ministry have fallen by next Saturday?”

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

“My Lord, I have good news on that score. I have – with difficulty, and after great effort – succeeded in placing an Imperius Curse upon Pius Thicknesse.”

Many of those sitting around Yaxley looked impressed; his neighbor, Dolohov, a man with a long, twisted face, clapped him on the back.

“It is a start,” said Voldemort. “But Thicknesse is only one man. Scrimgeour must be surrounded by our people before I act. One failed attempt on the Minister’s life will set me back a long way.”

“Yes – my Lord, that is true – but you know, as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Thicknesse has regular contact not only with the Minister himself, but also with the Heads of all the other Ministry departments. It will, I think, be easy now that we have such a high-ranking official under our control, to subjugate the others, and then they can all work together to bring Scrimgeour down.”

“As long as our friend Thicknesse is not discovered before he has converted the rest,” said Voldemort. “At any rate, it remains unlikely that the Ministry will be mine before next Saturday. If we cannot touch the boy at his destination, then it must be done while he travels.”

“We are at an advantage there, my Lord,” said Yaxley, who seemed determined to receive some portion of approval. “we now have several people planted within the Department of Magical Transport. If Potter Apparates or uses the Floo Network, we shall know immediately.”

“He will not do either,” said Snape. “The Order is eschewing any form of transport that is controlled or regulated by the Ministry; they mistrust everything to do with the place.”

“All the better,” said Voldemort. “He will have to move in the open. Easier to take, by far.”

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

The company around the table watched Voldemort apprehensively, each of them, by his or her expression, afraid that they might be blamed for Harry Potter’s continued existence. Voldemort, however, seemed to be speaking more to himself than to any of them, still addressing the unconscious body above him.

“I have been careless, and so have been thwarted by luck and chance, those wreckers of all but the best-laid plans. But I know better now. I understand those things that I did not understand before. I must be the one to kill Harry Potter, and I shall be.”

At these words, seemingly in response to them, a sudden wail sounded, a terrible, drawn-out cry of misery and pain. Many of those at the table looked downward, startled, for the sound had seemed to issue from below their feet.

“Wormtail,” said Voldemort, with no change in his quiet, thoughtful tone, and without removing his eyes from the revolving body above, “have I not spoken to you about keeping our prisoner quiet?”

“Yes, m-my Lord,” gasped a small man halfway down the table, who had been sitting so low in his chair that it appeared, at first glance, to be unoccupied. Now he scrambled from his seat and scurried from the room, leaving nothing behind him but a curious gleam of silver.

“As I was saying,” continued Voldemort, looking again at the tense faces of his followers, “I understand better now. I shall need, for instance, to borrow a wand from one of you before I go to kill Potter.”

The faces around him displayed nothing but shock; he might have announced that he wanted to borrow one of their arms.

“No volunteers?” said Voldemort. “Let’s see ... Lucius, I see no reason for you to have a wand anymore.”

Lucius Malfoy looked up. His skin appeared yellowish and waxy in the firelight, and his eyes were sunken and shadowed. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

“My Lord?”

“Your wand, Lucius. I require your wand.”

“I ...”

Malfoy glanced sideways at his wife. She was staring straight ahead, quite as pale as he was, her long blonde hair hanging down her back, but beneath the table her slim fingers closed briefly on his wrist. At her touch, Malfoy put his hand into his robes, withdrew a wand, and passed it along to Voldemort, who held it up in front of his red eyes, examining it closely.

“What is it?”

“Elm, my Lord,” whispered Malfoy.

“And the core?”

“Dragon – dragon heartstring.”

“Good,” said Voldemort. He drew out his wand and compared the lengths. Lucius Malfoy made an involuntary movement; for a fraction of a second, it seemed he expected to receive Voldemort’s wand in exchange for his own. The gesture was not missed by Voldemort, whose eyes widened maliciously.

“Give you my wand, Lucius? *My* wand?”

Some of the throng sniggered.

“I have given you your liberty, Lucius, is that not enough for you? But I have noticed that you and your family seem less than happy of late ... What is it about my presence in your home that displaces you, Lucius?”

“Nothing – nothing, my Lord!”

“Such *lies* Lucius ... “

The soft voice seemed to hiss on even after the cruel mouth had stopped moving. One or two of the wizards barely repressed a shudder as the hissing grew louder; something heavy could be heard sliding across the floor beneath the table.

The huge snake emerged to climb slowly up Voldemort’s chair. It rose, seemingly endlessly, and came to rest across Voldemort’s shoulders: its neck the thickness of a man’s thigh; its eyes, with their vertical slits for pupils, unblinking. Voldemort stroked the creature absently with long thin fingers, still looking at Lucius Malfoy.

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

“Of course, my Lord,” said Lucius Malfoy. His hand shook as he wiped sweat from his upper lip. “We did desire it – we do.”

To Malfoy’s left, his wife made an odd, stiff nod, her eyes averted from Voldemort and the snake. To his right, his son, Draco, who had been gazing up at the

inert body overhead, glanced quickly at Voldemort and away again, terrified to make eye contact.

“My Lord,” said a dark woman halfway down the table, her voice constricted with emotion, “it is an honor to have you here, in our family’s house. There can be no higher pleasure.”

She sat beside her sister, as unlike her in looks, with her dark hair and heavily lidded eyes, as she was in bearing and demeanor; where Narcissa sat rigid and impassive, Bellatrix leaned toward Voldemort, for mere words could not demonstrate her longing for closeness.

“No higher pleasure,” repeated Voldemort, his head tilted a little to one side as he considered Bellatrix. “That means a great deal, Bellatrix, from you.”

Her face flooded with color; her eyes welled with tears of delight.

“My Lord knows I speak nothing but the truth!”

“No higher pleasure ... even compared with the happy event that, I hear, has taken place in your family this week?”

She stared at him, her lips parted, evidently confused.

“I don’t know what you mean, my Lord.”

“I’m talking about your niece, Bellatrix. And yours, Lucius and Narcissa. She has just married the werewolf, Remus Lupin. You must be so proud.”

There was an eruption of jeering laughter from around the table. Many leaned forward to exchange gleeful looks; a few thumped the table with their fists. The giant snake, disliking the disturbance, opened its mouth wide and hissed angrily, but the Death Eaters did not hear it, so jubilant were they at Bellatrix and the Malfoys’ humiliation. Bellatrix’s face, so recently flushed with happiness, had turned an ugly, blotchy red.

“She is no niece of ours, my Lord,” she cried over the outpouring of mirth. “We – Narcissa and I – have never set eyes on our sister since she married the Mudblood. This brat has nothing to do with either of us, nor any beast she marries.”

“What say you, Draco?” asked Voldemort, and though his voice was quiet, it carried clearly through the catcalls and jeers. “Will you babysit the cubs?”

The hilarity mounted; Draco Malfoy looked in terror at his father, who was staring down into his own lap, then caught his mother’s eye. She shook her head almost imperceptibly, then resumed her own deadpan stare at the opposite wall.

“Enough,” said Voldemort, stroking the angry snake. “Enough.”

And the laughter died at once.

“Many of our oldest family trees become a little diseased over time,” he said as Bellatrix gazed at him, breathless and imploring, “You must prune yours, must you not, to keep it healthy? Cut away those parts that threaten the health of the rest.”

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

“You shall have it,” said Voldemort. “And in your family, so in the world ... we shall cut away the canker that infects us until only those of the true blood remain ...”

Voldemort raised Lucius Malfoy’s wand, pointed it directly at the slowly revolving figure suspended over the table, and gave it a tiny flick. The figure came to life with a groan and began to struggle against invisible bonds.

“Do you recognize our guest, Severus?” asked Voldemort.

Snape raised his eyes to the upside down face. All of the Death Eaters were looking up at the captive now, as though they had been given permission to show curiosity. As she revolved to face the firelight, the woman said in a cracked and terrified voice, "Severus! Help me!"

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

"And you, Draco?" asked Voldemort, stroking the snake's snout with his wand-free hand. Draco shook his head jerkily. Now that the woman had woken, he seemed unable to look at her anymore.

"But you would not have taken her classes," said Voldemort. "For those of you who do not know, we are joined here tonight by Charity Burbage who, until recently, taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

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

"Yes ... Professor Burbage taught the children of witches and wizards all about Muggles ... how they are not so different from us ... "

One of the Death Eaters spat on the floor. Charity Burbage revolved to face Snape again.

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

"Silence," said Voldemort, with another twitch of Malfoy's wand, and Charity fell silent as if gagged. "Not content with corrupting and polluting the minds of Wizarding children, last week Professor Burbage wrote an impassioned defense of Mudbloods in the *Daily Prophet*. Wizards, she says, must accept these thieves of their knowledge and magic. The dwindling of the purebloods is, says Professor Burbage, a most desirable circumstance ... She would have us all mate with Muggles ... or, no doubt, werewolves ... "

Nobody laughed this time. There was no mistaking the anger and contempt in Voldemort's voice. For the third time, Charity Burbage revolved to face Snape. Tears were pouring from her eyes into her hair. Snape looked back at her, quite impassive, as she turned slowly away from him again.

"*Avada Kadavra*"

The flash of green light illuminated every corner of the room. Charity fell, with a resounding crash, onto the table below, which trembled and creaked. Several of the Death Eaters leapt back in their chairs. Draco fell out of his onto the floor.

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

Chapter Two

In Memorandum

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

"What the --?"

He looked around, the landing of number four, Privet Drive, was deserted. Possibly the cup of tea was Dudley's idea of a clever booby trap. Keeping his bleeding hand elevated, Harry scraped the fragments of cup together with the other hand and threw them into the already crammed bin just visible inside his bedroom door. Then he tramped across to the bathroom to run his finger under the tap.

It was stupid, pointless, irritating beyond belief that he still had four days left of being unable to perform magic...but he had to admit to himself that this jagged cut in his finger would have defeated him. He had never learned how to repair wounds, and now he came to think of it – particularly in light of his immediate plans – this seemed a serious flaw in his magical education. Making a mental note to ask Hermione how it was done, he used a large wad of toilet paper to mop up as much of the tea as he could before returning to his bedroom and slamming the door behind him.

Harry had spent the morning completely emptying his school trunk for the first time since he had packed it six years ago. At the start of the intervening school years, he had merely skimmed off the topmost three quarters of the contents and replaced or updated them, leaving a layer of general debris at the bottom – old quills, desiccated beetle eyes, single socks that no longer fit. Minutes previously, Harry had plunged his hand into this mulch, experienced a stabbing pain in the fourth finger of his right hand, and withdrawn it to see a lot of blood.

He now proceeded a little more cautiously. Kneeling down beside the trunk again, he groped around in the bottom and, after retrieving an old badge that flickered feebly between *SUPPORT CEDRIC DIGGORY* and *POTTER STINKS*, a cracked and worn-out Sneakoscope, and a gold locket inside which a note signed R.A.B. had been hidden, he finally discovered the sharp edge that had done the damage. He recognized it at once. It was a two-inch-long fragment of the enchanted mirror that his dead godfather, Sirius, had given him. Harry laid it aside and felt cautiously around the trunk for the rest, but nothing more remained of his godfather's last gift except powdered glass, which clung to the deepest layer of debris like glittering grit.

Harry sat up and examined the jagged piece on which he had cut himself, seeing nothing but his own bright green eye reflected back at him. Then he placed the fragment on top of that morning's Daily prophet, which lay unread on the bed, and attempted to stem the sudden upsurge of bitter memories, the stabs of regret and of longing the discovery of the broken mirror had occasioned, by attacking the rest of the rubbish in the trunk.

It took another hour to empty it completely, throw away the useless items, and sort the remainder in piles according to whether or not he would need them from now on. His school and Quidditch robes, cauldron, parchment, quills, and most of his textbooks were piled in a corner, to be left behind. He wondered what his aunt and uncle would do with them; burn them in the dead of night, probably, as if they were evidence of some

dreadful crime. His Muggle clothing, Invisibility Cloak, potion-making kit, certain books, the photograph album Hagrid had once given him, a stack of letters, and his wand had been repacked into an old rucksack. In a front pocket were the Marauder's Map and the locket with the note signed R.A.B. inside it. The locket was accorded this place of honor not because it was valuable – in all usual senses it was worthless – but because of what it had cost to attain it.

This left a sizable stack of newspapers sitting on his desk beside his snowy owl, Hedwig: one for each of the days Harry had spent at Privet Drive this summer.

He got up off the floor, stretched, and moved across to his desk. Hedwig made no movement as he began to flick through newspapers, throwing them into the rubbish pile one by one. The owl was asleep or else faking; she was angry with Harry about the limited amount of time she was allowed out of her cage at the moment.

As he neared the bottom of the pile of newspapers, Harry slowed down, searching for one particular issue that he knew had arrived shortly after he had returned to Privet Drive for the summer; he remembered that there had been a small mention on the front about the resignation of Charity Burbage, the Muggle Studies teacher at Hogwarts. At last he found it. Turning to page ten, he sank into his desk chair and reread the article he had been looking for.

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE REMEMBERED

By Elphias Doge

I met Albus Dumbledore at the age of eleven, on our first day at Hogwarts. Our mutual attraction was undoubtedly due to the fact that we both felt ourselves to be outsiders. I had contracted dragon pox shortly before arriving at school, and while I was no longer contagious, my pock-marked visage and greenish hue did not encourage many to approach me. For his part, Albus had arrived at Hogwarts under the burden of unwanted notoriety. Scarcely a year previously, his father, Percival, had been convicted of a savage and well-publicized attack upon three young Muggles.

Albus never attempted to deny that his father (who was to die in Azkaban) had committed this crime; on the contrary, when I plucked up courage to ask him, he assured me that he knew his father to be guilty. Beyond that, Dumbledore refused to speak of the sad business, though many attempted to make him do so. Some, indeed, were disposed to praise his father's action and assumed that Albus too was a Muggle-hater. They could not have been more mistaken: As anybody who knew Albus would attest, he never revealed the remotest anti-Muggle tendency. Indeed, his determined support for Muggle rights gained him many enemies in subsequent years.

In a matter of months, however, Albus's own fame had begun to eclipse that of his father. By the end of his first year he would never again be known as the son of a Muggle-hater, but as nothing more or less than the most brilliant student ever seen at the school. Those of us who were privileged to be his friends benefited from his example, not to mention his help and encouragement, with which he was always generous. He confessed to me later in life that he knew even then that his greatest pleasure lay in teaching.

He not only won every prize of note that the school offered, he was soon in regular correspondence with the most notable magical names of the day, including Nicolas Flamel, the celebrated alchemist; Bathilda Bagshot, the noted historian; and Adalbert Waffling, the magical theoretician. Several of his papers found their way into learned publications such as *Transfiguration Today*, *Challenges in Charing*, and *The Practical Potioneer*. Dumbledore's future career seemed likely to be meteoric, and the only question that remained was when he would become Minister of Magic. Though it was often predicted in later years that he was on the point of taking the job, however, he never had Ministerial ambitions.

Three years after we had started at Hogwarts, Albus's brother, Aberforth, arrived at school. They were not alike: Aberforth was never bookish and, unlike Albus, preferred to settle arguments by dueling rather than through reasoned discussion. However, it is quite wrong to suggest, as some have, that the brothers were not friends. They rubbed along as comfortably as two such different boys could do. In fairness to Aberforth, it must be admitted that living in Albus's shadow cannot have been an altogether comfortable experience. Being continually outshone was an occupational hazard of being his friend and cannot have been any more pleasurable as a brother. When Albus and I left Hogwarts we intended to take the then-traditional tour of the world together, visiting and observing foreign wizards, before pursuing our separate careers. However, tragedy intervened. On the very eve of our trip, Albus's mother, Kendra, died, leaving Albus the head, and sole breadwinner, of the family. I postponed my departure long enough to pay my respects at Kendra's funeral, then left for what was now to be a solitary journey. With a younger brother and sister to care for, and little gold left to them, there could no longer be any question of Albus accompanying me.

That was the period of our lives when we had least contact. I wrote to Albus, describing, perhaps insensitively, the wonders of my journey, from narrow escapes from chimaeras in Greece to the experiments of the Egyptian alchemists. His letters told me little of his day-to-day life, which I guessed to be frustratingly dull for such a brilliant wizard. Immersed in my own experiences, it was with horror that I heard, toward the end of my year's travels, that another tragedy had struck the Dumbledores: the death of his sister, Ariana.

Though Ariana had been in poor health for a long time, the blow, coming so soon after the loss of their mother, had a profound effect on both of her brothers. All those closest to Albus – and I count myself one of that lucky number – agree

that Ariana's death, and Albus's feeling of personal responsibility for it (though, of course, he was guiltless), left their mark upon him forevermore.

I returned home to find a young man who had experienced a much older person's suffering. Albus was more reserved than before, and much less light-hearted. To add to his misery, the loss of Ariana had led, not to a renewed closeness between Albus and Aberforth, but to an estrangement. (In time this would lift – in later years they reestablished, if not a close relationship, then certainly a cordial one.) However, he rarely spoke of his parents or of Ariana from then on, and his friends learned not to mention them.

Other quills will describe the triumphs of the following years. Dumbledore's innumerable contributions to the store of Wizarding knowledge, including his discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, will benefit generations to come, as will the wisdom he displayed in the many judgments while Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. They say, still, that no Wizarding duel ever matched that between Dumbledore and Grindelwald in 1945. Those who witnessed it have written of the terror and the awe they felt as they watched these two extraordinary wizards to battle. Dumbledore's triumph, and its consequences for the Wizarding world, are considered a turning point in magical history to match the introduction of the International Statute of Secrecy or the downfall of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Albus Dumbledore was never proud or vain; he could find something to value in anyone, however apparently insignificant or wretched, and I believe that his early losses endowed him with great humanity and sympathy. I shall miss his friendship more than I can say, but my loss is nothing compared to the Wizarding world's. That he was the most inspiring and best loved of all Hogwarts headmasters cannot be in question. He died as he lived: working always for the greater good and, to his last hour, as willing to stretch out a hand to a small boy with dragon pox as he was on the day I met him.

Harry finished reading, but continued to gaze at the picture accompanying the obituary. Dumbledore was wearing his familiar, kindly smile, but as he peered over the top of his half-moon spectacles, he gave the impression, even in newsprint, of X-raying Harry, whose sadness mingled with a sense of humiliation.

He had thought he knew Dumbledore quite well, but ever since reading this obituary he had been forced to recognize that he had barely known him at all. Never once had he imagined Dumbledore's childhood or youth; it was as though he had sprung into being as Harry had known him, venerable and silver-haired and old. The idea of a teenage Dumbledore was simply odd, like trying to imagine a stupid Hermione or a friendly Blast-Ended Skrewt.

He had never thought to ask Dumbledore about his past. No doubt it would have felt strange, impertinent even, but after all it had been common knowledge that Dumbledore had taken part in that legendary duel with Grindelwald, and Harry had not thought to ask Dumbledore what that had been like, nor about any of his other famous achievements. No, they had always discussed Harry, Harry's past, Harry's future, Harry's plans... and it seemed to Harry now, despite the fact that his future was so dangerous and so uncertain, that he had missed irreplaceable opportunities when he had failed to ask Dumbledore more about himself, even though the only personal question he had ever asked his headmaster was also the only one he suspected that Dumbledore had not answered honestly:

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

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

After several minutes' thought, Harry tore the obituary out of the *Prophet*, folded it carefully, and tucked it inside the first volume of *Practical Defensive Magic and its Use against the Dark Arts*. Then he threw the rest of the newspaper onto the rubbish pile and turned to face the room. It was much tidier. The only things left out of place were today's *Daily Prophet*, still lying on the bed, and on top of it, the piece of broken mirror.

Harry moved across the room, slid the mirror fragment off today's *Prophet*, and unfolded the newspaper. He had merely glanced at the headline when he had taken the rolled-up paper from the delivery owl early that morning and thrown it aside, after noting that it said nothing about Voldemort. Harry was sure that the Ministry was leaning on the *Prophet* to suppress news about Voldemort. It was only now, therefore, that he saw what he had missed.

Across the bottom half of the front page a smaller headline was set over a picture of Dumbledore striding along, looking harried:

DUMBLEDORE – THE TRUTH AT LAST?

Coming next week, the shocking story of the flawed genius considered by many to be the greatest wizard of his generation. Stripping away the popular image of serene, silver-bearded wisdom, Rita Skeeter reveals the disturbed childhood, the lawless youth, the life-long feuds, and the guilty secrets that Dumbledore carried to his grave, WHY was the man tipped to be the Minister of Magic content to remain a mere headmaster? WHAT was the real purpose of the secret organization known as the Order of the Phoenix? HOW did Dumbledore really meet his end?

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

Harry ripped open the paper and found page thirteen. The article was topped with a picture showing another familiar face: a woman wearing jeweled glasses with elaborately curled blonde hair, her teeth bared in what was clearly supposed to be a winning smile, wiggling her fingers up at him. Doing his best to ignore this nauseating image, Harry read on.

In person, Rita Skeeter is much warmer and softer than her famously ferocious quill-portraits might suggest. Greeting me in the hallway of her cozy home, she leads me straight into the kitchen for a cup of tea, a slice of pound cake and, it goes without saying, a steaming vat of freshest gossip.

"Well, of course, Dumbledore is a biographer's dream," says Skeeter. "Such a long, full life. I'm sure my book will be the first of very, very many."

Skeeter was certainly quick off the mark. Her nine-hundred-page book was completed in a mere four weeks after Dumbledore's mysterious death in June. I ask her how she managed this superfast feat.

"Oh, when you've been a journalist as long as I have, working to a deadline is second nature. I knew that the Wizarding world was clamoring for the full story and I wanted to be the first to meet that need."

I mention the recent, widely publicized remarks of Elphias Doge, Special Advisor to the Wizengamot and longstanding friend of Albus Dumbledore's, that "Skeeter's book contains less fact than a Chocolate Frog card."

Skeeter throws back her head and laughs.

"Darling Dodgy! I remember interviewing him a few years back about merpeople rights, bless him. Completely gaga, seemed to think we were sitting at the bottom of Lake Windermere, kept telling me to watch out for trout."

And yet Elphias Doge's accusations of inaccuracy have been echoed in many places. Does Skeeter really feel that four short weeks have been enough to gain a full picture of Dumbledore's long and extraordinary life?

"Oh, my dear," beams Skeeter, rapping me affectionately across the knuckles, "you know as well as I do how much information can be generated by a fat bag of

Galleons, a refusal to hear the word 'no,' and a nice sharp Quick-Quotes Quill! People were queuing to dish the dirt on Dumbledore anyway. Not everyone thought he was so wonderful, you know – he trod on an awful lot of important toes. But old Dodgy Doge can get off his high hippogriff, because I've had access to a source most journalists would swap their wands for, one who has never spoken in public before and who was close to Dumbledore during the most turbulent and disturbing phase of his youth."

The advance publicity for Skeeter's biography has certainly suggested that there will be shocks in store for those who believe Dumbledore to have led a blameless life. What were the biggest surprises she uncovered, I ask?

"Now, come off it. Betty, I'm not giving away all the highlights before anybody's bought the book!" laughs Skeeter. "But I can promise that anybody who still thinks Dumbledore was white as his beard is in for a rude awakening! Let's just say that nobody hearing him rage against You-Know-Who would have dreamed that he dabbled in the Dark Arts himself in his youth! And for a wizard who spent his later years pleading for tolerance, he wasn't exactly broad-minded when he was younger! Yes, Albus Dumbledore had an extremely murky past, not to mention that very fishy family, which he worked so hard to keep hushed up."

I ask whether Skeeter is referring to Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth, whose conviction by the Wizengamot for misuse of magic caused a minor scandal fifteen years ago.

"Oh, Aberforth is just the tip of the dung heap." laughs Skeeter. "No, no, I'm talking about much worse than a brother with a fondness for fiddling about with goats, worse even than the Muggle-maiming father – Dumbledore couldn't keep either of them quiet anyway, they were both charged by the Wizengamot. No, it's the mother and the sister that intrigued me, and a little digging uncovered a positive nest of nastiness – but, as I say, you'll have to wait for chapters nine to twelve for full details. All I can say now is, it's no wonder Dumbledore never talked about how his nose got broken."

Family skeletons notwithstanding, does Skeeter deny the brilliance that led to Dumbledore's many magical discoveries?

"He had brains," she concedes, "although many now question whether he could really take full credit for all of his supposed achievements. As I reveal in chapter sixteen, Ivor Dillonsby claims he had already discovered eight uses of dragon's blood when Dumbledore 'borrowed' his papers."

But the importance of some of Dumbledore's achievements cannot, I venture, be denied. What of his famous defeat of Grindelwald?

"Oh, now, I'm glad you mentioned Grindelwald," says Skeeter with such a tantalizing smile. "I'm afraid those who go dewy-eyed over Dumbledore's spectacular victory must brace themselves for a bombshell – or perhaps a Dungbomb. Very dirty business indeed. All I'll say is, don't be so sure that there really was a spectacular duel of legend. After they've read my book, people may be forced to conclude that Grindelwald simply conjured a white handkerchief from the end of his wand and came quietly!"

Skeeter refuses to give any more away on this intriguing subject, so we turn instead to the relationship that will undoubtedly fascinate her readers more than any other.

"Oh yes," says Skeeter, nodding briskly, "I devote an entire chapter to the whole Potter-Dumbledore relationship. It's been called unhealthy, even sinister. Again, your readers will have to buy my book for the whole story, but there is no question that Dumbledore took an unnatural interest in Potter from the word go. Whether that was really in the boy's best interests – well, we'll see. It's certainly an open secret that Potter has had a most troubled adolescence."

I ask whether Skeeter is still in touch with Harry Potter, whom she so famously interviewed last year: a breakthrough piece in which Potter spoke exclusively of his conviction that You-Know-Who had returned.

"Oh, yes, we've developed a closer bond," says Skeeter. "Poor Potter has few real friends, and we met at one of the most testing moments of his life – the Triwizard Tournament. I am probably one of the only people alive who can say that they know the real Harry Potter."

Which leads us neatly to the many rumors still circulating about Dumbledore's final hours. Does Skeeter believe that Potter was there when Dumbledore died?

"Well, I don't want to say too much – it's all in the book – but eyewitnesses inside Hogwarts castle saw Potter running away from the scene moments after Dumbledore fell, jumped, or was pushed. Potter later gave evidence against Severus Snape, a man against whom he has a notorious grudge. Is everything as it seems? That is for the Wizarding community to decide – once they've read my book."

On that intriguing note, I take my leave. There can be no doubt that Skeeter has quilled an instant bestseller. Dumbledore's legion of admirers, meanwhile, may well be trembling at what is soon to emerge about their hero.

Harry reached the bottom of the article, but continued to stare blankly at the page. Revulsion and fury rose in him like vomit; he balled up the newspaper and threw it, with

all his force, at the wall, where it joined the rest of the rubbish heaped around his overflowing bin.

He began to stride blindly around the room, opening empty drawers and picking up books only to replace them on the same piles, barely conscious of what he was doing, as random phrases from Rita's article echoed in his head: *An entire chapter to the whole Potter-Dumbledore relationship ... It's been called unhealthy, even sinister ... He dabbled in the Dark Arts himself in his youth ... I've had access to a source most journalists would swap their wands for...*

"Lies!" Harry bellowed, and through the window he saw the next-door neighbor, who had paused to restart his lawn mower, look up nervously.

Harry sat down hard on the bed. The broken bit of mirror danced away from him; he picked it up and turned it over in his fingers, thinking, thinking of Dumbledore and the lies with which Rita Skeeter was defaming him ...

A flash of brightest blue. Harry froze, his cut finger slipping on the jagged edge of the mirror again. He had imagined it, he must have done. He glanced over his shoulder, but the wall was a sickly peach color of Aunt Petunia's choosing: There was nothing blue there for the mirror to reflect. He peered into the mirror fragment again, and saw nothing but his own bright green eye looking back at him.

He had imagined it, there was no other explanation; imagined it, because he had been thinking of his dead headmaster. If anything was certain, it was that the bright blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore would never pierce him again.

Chapter Three

The Dursleys Departing

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

Sixteen years of being addressed thus left Harry in no doubt when his uncle was calling, nevertheless, he did not immediately respond. He was still at the narrow fragment in which, for a split second, he had thought he saw Dumbledore's eye. It was not until his uncle bellowed, "BOY!", the Harry got slowly out of bed and headed for the bedroom door, pausing to add the piece of broken mirror to the rucksack filled with things he would be taking with him.

"You took you time!" roared Vernon Dursley when Harry appeared at the top of the stairs, "Get down here. I want a word!"

Harry strolled downstairs, his hands deep in his pants pockets. When he searched the living room he found all three Dursleys. They were dressed for packing; Uncle Vernon in an old ripped-up jacket and Dudley, Harry's, large, blond, muscular cousin, in his leather jacket.

"Yes?" asked Harry.

“Sit down!” said Uncle Vernon. Harry raised his eyebrows. “Please!” added Uncle Vernon, wincing slightly as though the word was sharp in his throat. Harry sat. He thought he knew what was coming. His uncle began to pace up and down, Aunt Petunia and Dudley, following his movement with anxious expressions. Finally, his large purple face crumpled with concentration. Uncle Vernon stopped in front of Harry and spoke.

"I've changed my mind" he said.

"What a surprise," said Harry.

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

"It's all a lot of claptrap," said Uncle Vernon, glaring at Harry with piggy little eyes. "I've decided I don't believe a word of it. We're staying put, we're not going anywhere."

Harry looked up at his uncle and felt a mixture of exasperation and amusement. Vernon Dursley had been changing his mind every twenty four hours for the past four weeks, packing and unpacking and repacking the car with every change of heart. Harry's favorite moment had been the one when Uncle Vernon, unaware the Dudley had added his dumbbells to his case since the last time it been repacked, had attempted to hoist it back into the boot and collapsed with a yelp of pain and much swearing.

"According to you," Vernon Dursley said, now resuming his pacing up and down the living room, "we – Petunia, Dudley, and I – are in danger. From – from –"

"Some of 'my lot' right?" said Harry

"Well I don't believe it," repeated Uncle Vernon, coming to a halt in front of Harry again. "I was awake half the night thinking it all over, and I believe it's a plot to get the house."

"The house?" repeated Harry. "What house?"

"This house!" shrieked Uncle Vernon, the vein in his forehead starting to pulse.

"*Our* house! House prices are skyrocketing around here! You want us out of the way and then you're going to do a bit of hocus pocus and before we know it the deeds will be in your name and –"

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

"Don't you dare --!" squealed Aunt Petunia, but again Vernon waved her down. Slightings on his personal appearance were it seemed as nothing to the danger he had spotted.

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

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

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

"—Voldemort," said Harry impatiently, "and we've been through this about a hundred times already. This isn't a claim, it's fact. Dumbledore told you last year, and Kingsley and Mr. Weasley –"

Vernon Dursley hunched his shoulders angrily, and Harry guessed that his uncle was attempting to ward off recollections of the unannounced visit, a few days into Harry's

summer holidays, of two fully grown wizards. The arrival on the doorstep of Kingsley Shacklebolt and Arthur Weasley had come as a most unpleasant shock to the Dursleys. Harry had to admit, however that as Mr. Weasley had once demolished half of the living room, his reappearance could not have been expected to delight Uncle Vernon.

"—Kingsley and Mr. Weasley explained it all as well," Harry pressed on remorselessly, "Once I'm seventeen, the protective charm that keeps me safe will break, and that exposes you as well as me. The Order is sure Voldemort will target you, whether to torture you to try and find out where I am, or because he thinks by holding you hostage I'd come and try to rescue you."

Uncle Vernon's and Harry's eyes met. Harry was sure that in that instant they were both wondering the same thing. Then Uncle Vernon walked on and Harry resumed, "You've got to go into hiding and the Order wants to help. You're being offered serious protection, the best there is."

Uncle Vernon said nothing but continued to pace up and down. Outside the sun hung low over the privet hedges. The next door neighbor's lawn mower stalled again.

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

"There is," said Harry, surprised.

"Well, then, why can't they protect us? It seems to me that, as innocent victims, guilty of nothing more than harboring a marked man, we ought to qualify for government protection!"

Harry laughed; he could not help himself. It was so very typical of his uncle to put his hopes in the establishment, even within this world that he despised and mistrusted. "You heard what Mr. Weasley and Kingsley said," Harry replied.

"We think the Ministry has been infiltrated."

Uncle Vernon strode back to the fireplace and back breathing so strongly that his great black mustache rippled his face still purple with concentration.

"All right," he said. Stopping in front of Harry yet again. "All right, let's say for the sake of argument we accept this protection. I still don't see why we can't have that Kingsley bloke."

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

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

"Exactly – he's the best!" said Uncle Vernon, pointing at the blank television screen. The Dursleys had spotted Kingsley on the news, walking along the Muggle Prime Minister as he visited a hospital. This, and the fact that Kingsley had mastered the knack of dressing like a Muggle, not to mention a certain reassuring something in his slow, deep voice, had caused the Dursleys to take to Kingsley in a way that they had certainly not done with any other wizard, although it was true that they had never seen him with earring in.

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

"If we'd even seen CVs..." began Uncle Vernon, but Harry lost patience. Getting to his feet, he advanced on his uncle, not pointing at the TV set himself.

"These accidents aren't accidents – the crashed and explosions and derailments and whatever else has happened since we last watched the news. People are disappearing

and dying and he's behind it – Voldemort. I've told you this over and over again, he kills Muggles for fun. Even the fogs – they're caused by dementors, and if you can't remember what they are, ask your son!"

Dudley's hands jerked upward to tower his mouth. With his parents's and Harry's eyes upon him, he slowly lowered them again and asked, "There are... more of them?" "More?" laughed Harry. "More than the two that attacked us, you mean? Of course there are hundreds, maybe thousands by this time, seeing as they feed off fear and despair—"

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

"I hope so," said Harry, "because once I'm seventeen, all of them – Death Eaters, elementors, maybe even Inperi – which means dead bodies enchanted by a Dark wizard – will be able to find you and will certainly attack you. And if you remember the last time you tried to outrun wizards, I think you'll agree you need help."

There was a brief silence in which the distant echo of Hagrid smashing down a wooden front door seemed to reverberate through the intervening years. Aunt Petunia was looking at Uncle Vernon; Dudley was staring at Harry. Finally Uncle Vernon blurted out, "But what about my work? What about Dudley's school? I don't suppose those things matter to a bunch of layabout wizards –"

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

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

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

He knew the battle was won. If Dudley was frightened enough to accept the Order's help, his parents would accompany him. There could be no question of being separated from their Duddykins. Harry glanced at the carriage clock on the mantelpiece.

"They'll be here in about five minutes, he said, and when one of the Dursley's replied, he left the room. The prospect of parting—probably forever – from his aunt, uncle, and cousin was one that he was able to contemplate quite cheerfully but there was nevertheless a certain awkwardness in the air. What did you say to one another at the end of sixteen years' solid dislike?

Back in his bedroom, Harry fiddled aimlessly with his rucksack then poked a couple of owl nuts through the bars of Hedwig's cage. They fell with dull thuds to the bottom where she ignored them.

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

The doorbell rang. Harry hesitated, then headed back out of his room and downstairs. It was too much to expect Hestia and Dedalus to cope with the Dursleys on their own.

"Harry Potter!" squeaked an excited voice, the moment Harry had opened the door; a small man in a mauve top hat that was sweeping him a deep bow. "An honor as ever!"

"Thanks , Dedalus," said Harry, bestowing a small and embarrassed smile upon the dark haired Hestia. "It's really good of you to do this... They're through here, my aunt and uncle and cousin..."

"Good day to you, Harry Potter's relatives!" said Dedalus happily striding into the living room. The Dursleys did not look at all happy to be addressed thus; Harry half

expected another change of mind. Dudley shrank neared to his mother at the sight of the witch and wizard.

"I see you are packed and ready. Excellent! The plan, as Harry has told you, is a simple one," said Dedalus, pulling an immense pocket watch out of his waistcoat and examining it. "We shall be leaving before Harry does. Due to the danger of using magic in your house –Harry being still underage it could provide the Ministry with an excuse to arrest him – we shall be driving, say, ten miles or so before Disapparating to the safe location we have picked out for you. You know how to drive, I take it?" He asked Uncle Vernon politely.

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

"Very clever of you, sir, very clever. I personally would be utterly bamboozled by all those buttons and knobs," said Dedalus. He was clearly under the impression that he was flattering Vernon Dursley, who was visibly losing confidence in the plan with every word Dedalus spoke.

"Can't even drive," he muttered under his breath, his mustache rippling indignantly, but fortunately neither Dedalus nor Hestia seemed to hear him.

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

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

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

The Dursleys, who had listened to all of this with looks of utter incomprehension on their faces, jumped as a loud voice screeched, "*Hurry up!*" Harry looked all around the room before realizing the voice had issued from Dedalus's pocket watch.

"Quite right, were operating to a very tight schedule," said Dedalus nodding at his watch and tucking it back into his waist coat. "We are attempting to time your departure from the house with your family's Disapparition, Harry thus the charm breaks the moment you all head for safety." He turned to the Dursleys, "Well, are we all packed and ready to go?"

None of them answered him. Uncle Vernon was still staring appalled at the bulge in Dedalus's waistcoat pocket.

"Perhaps we should wait outside in the hall, Dedalus," murmured Hestia. She clearly felt that it would be tactless for them to remain the room while Harry and the Dursleys exchanged loving, possibly tearful farewells.

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

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

He swung his right arm upward to shake Harry's hand, but at the last moment seemed unable to face it, and merely closed his fist and began swinging it backward and forward like a metronome.

"Ready, Diddy?" asked Petunia, fussily checking the clasp of her handbag so as to avoid looking at Harry altogether.

Dudley did not answer but stood there with his mouth slightly ajar, reminding Harry a little of the giant, Grawp.

"Come along, then," said Uncle Vernon.

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

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

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

"Why isn't he coming with us?"

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia froze when they stood staring at Dudley as though he had just expressed a desire to become a ballerina.

"What?" said Uncle Vernon loudly.

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

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

"Not in the slightest," said Harry.

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

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

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

It seemed that Dudley was struggling with concepts too difficult to put into words. After several moments of apparently painful internal struggle he said, "But where's he going to go?"

Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon looked at each other. It was clear that Dudley was frightening them. Hestia Jones broke the silence.

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

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

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

"Off with some of *our* lot?"

Hestia looked outraged. Harry had met this attitude before Witches and wizards seemed stunned that his closed living relatives took so little interest in the famous Harry Potter.

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

"Doesn't matter?" repeated Hestia, her voice rising considerably.

"Don't these people realize what you've been through? What danger you are in? The unique position you hold in the hearts of the anti Voldemort movement?"

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

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

If Harry had not seen Dudley's lips move, he might not have believed it. As it was, he stared at Dudley for several seconds before accepting that it must have been his cousin who had spoken; for one thing, Dudley had turned red. Harry was embarrassed and astonished himself.

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

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

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

He looked curiously at his cousin. They had had virtually no contact during this summer or last, as Harry had come back to Privet Drive so briefly and kept to his room so much. It now dawned on Harry, however, that the cup of cold tea on which he had trodden that morning might not have been a booby trap at all. Although rather touched he was nevertheless quite relieved that Dudley appeared to have exhausted his ability to express his feelings. After opening his mouth once or twice more, Dudley subsided into scarlet-faced silence.

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

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

"Yea but coming from Dudley that's like 'I love you,'" said Harry, torn between annoyance and a desire to laugh as Aunt Petunia continued to clutch at Dudley as if he had just saved Harry from a burning building.

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

"Yes –yes, we are," said Dedalus Diggle, who had been watching these exchanged with an air of bemusement and now seemed to pull himself together. "We really must be off. Harry –"

He tripped forward and wrung Harry's hand with both of his own.

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

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

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

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

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

Dudley gently released himself from his mother's clutches and walked toward Harry who had to repress an urge to threaten him with magic. Then Dudley held out his large, pink hand.

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

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

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

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

Aunt Petunia whose face had been buried in her handkerchief looked around at the sound. She did not seem to have expected to find herself alone with Harry. Hastily stowing her wet handkerchief into her pocket, she said, "Well – good-bye" and marched towards the door without looking at him.

"Good-bye" said Harry.

She stopped and looked back. For a moment Harry had the strangest feeling that she wanted to say something to him; She gave him an odd, tremulous look and seemed to teeter on the edge of speech, but then, with a little of her head, she hustled out of the room after he husband and son.

Chapter Four

The Seven Potters

Harry ran back upstairs to his bedroom, arriving at the window just in time to see the Dursley's car swinging out of the drive and off up the road. Dedalus's top hat was visible between Aunt Petunia and Dudley in the backseat. The car turned right at the end of Privet Drive, its windows burned scarlet for a moment in the now setting sun, and then it was gone.

Harry picked up Hedwig's cage, his Firebolt, and his rucksack, gave his unnaturally tidy bedroom one last sweeping look, and then made his ungainly way back downstairs to the hall, where he deposited cage, broomstick, and bag near the foot of the stairs. The light was fading rapidly, the hall full of shadows in the evening light. It felt most strange to stand here in the silence and know that he was about to leave the house for the last time. Long ago, when he had been left alone while the Dursleys went out to enjoy themselves, the hours of solitude had been a rare treat. Pausing only to sneak something tasty from the fridge, he had rushed upstairs to play on Dudley's computer, or put on the television and flicked through the channels to his heart's content. It gave him an odd, empty feeling remembering those times; it was like remembering a younger brother whom he had lost.

"Don't you want to take a last look at the place?" he asked Hedwig, who was still sulking with her head under her wing. "We'll never be here again. Don't you want to remember all the good times? I mean, look at this doormat. What memories ... Dudley sobbed on it after I saved him from the dementors ... Turns out he was grateful after all, can you believe it? ... And last summer, Dumbledore walked through that front door ... "

Harry lost the thread of his thoughts for a moment and Hedwig did nothing to help him retrieve it, but continued to sit with her head under her wing. Harry turned his back on the front door.

"And under here, Hedwig" – Harry pulled open a door under the stairs – "is where I used to sleep! You never knew me then – Blimey, it's small, I'd forgotten ... "

Harry looked around at the stacked shoes and umbrellas remembering how he used to wake every morning looking up at the underside of the staircase, which was more often than not adorned with a spider or two. Those had been the days before he had known anything about his true identity; before he had found out how his parents had died or why such strange things often happened around him. But Harry could still remember the dreams that had dogged him, even in those days: confused dreams involving flashes of green light and once – Uncle Vernon had nearly crashed the car when Harry had recounted it – a flying motorbike ...

There was a sudden, deafening roar from somewhere nearby. Harry straightened up with a jerk and smacked the top of his head on the low door frame. Pausing only to

employ a few of Uncle Vernon's choicest swear words, he staggered back into the kitchen, clutching his head and staring out of the window into the back garden.

The darkness seemed to be rippling, the air itself quivering. Then, one by one, figures began to pop into sight as their Disillusionment Charms lifted. Dominating the scene was Hagrid, wearing a helmet and goggles and sitting astride an enormous motorbike with a black sidecar attached. All around him other people were dismounting from brooms and, in two cases, skeletal, black winged horses.

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

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

"Change of plan," growled Mad-Eye, who was holding two enormous bulging sacks, and whose magical eye was spinning from darkening sky to house to garden with dizzying rapidity. "Let's get undercover before we talk you through it."

Harry led them all back into the kitchen where, laughing and chattering, they settled on chairs, sat themselves upon Aunt Petunia's gleaming work surfaces, or leaned up against her spotless appliances; Ron, long and lanky; Hermione, her bushy hair tied back in a long plait; Fred and George, grinning identically; Bill, badly scarred and long-haired; Mr. Weasley, kind-faced, balding, his spectacles a little awry; Mad-Eye, battle-worn, one-legged, his bright blue magical eye whizzing in its socket; Tonks, whose short hair was her favorite shade of bright pink; Lupin, grayer, more lined; Fleur, slender and beautiful, with her long silvery blonde hair; Kingsley, bald and broad-shouldered; Hagrid, with his wild hair and beard, standing hunchbacked to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling; and Mundungus Fletcher, small, dirty, and hangdog, with his droopy beady hound's eyes and matted hair. Harry's heart seemed to expand and glow at the sight: He felt incredibly fond of all of them, even Mundungus, whom he had tried to strangle the last time they had met.

"Kingsley, I thought you were looking after the Muggle Prime Minister?" he called across the room.

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

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

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

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

"That's brilliant, congrats –"

"All right, all right, we'll have time for a cozy catch-up later," roared Moody over the hubbub, and silence fell in the kitchen. Moody dropped his sacks at his feet and turned to Harry. "As Dedalus probably told you, we had to abandon Plan A. Pius Thicknesse has gone over, which gives us a big problem. He's made it an imprisonable offense to connect this house to the Floo Network, place a Portkey here, or Apparate in or out. All done in the name of your protection, to prevent You-Know-Who getting in at you. Absolutely pointless, seeing as your mother's charm does that already. What he's really done is to stop you getting out of here safely."

“Second problem: You’re underage, which means you’ve still got the Trace on you.”

“I don’t –“

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

“We can’t wait for the Trace to break, because the moment you turn seventeen you’ll lose all the protection your mother gave you. In short, Pius Thicknesse thinks he’s got you cornered good and proper.”

Harry could not help but agree with the unknown Thicknesse.

“So what are we going to do?”

“We’re going to use the only means of transport left to us, the only ones the Trace can’t detect, because we don’t need to cast spells to use them: brooms, thestrals, and Hagrid’s motorbike.”

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

“Now, your mother’s charm will only break under two conditions: when you come of age, or” – Moody gestured around the pristine kitchen – “you no longer call this place home. You and your aunt and uncle are going your separate ways tonight, in the full understanding that you’re never going to live together again, correct?”

Harry nodded.

“So this time, when you leave, there’ll be no going back, and the charm will break the moment you get outside its range. We’re choosing to break it early, because the alternative is waiting for You-Know-Who to come and seize you the moment you turn seventeen.

“The one thing we’ve got on our side is that You-Know-Who doesn’t know we’re moving you tonight. We’ve leaked a fake trail to the Ministry: They think you’re not leaving until the thirtieth. However, this is You-Know-Who we’re dealing with, so we can’t rely on him getting the date wrong; he’s bound to have a couple of Death Eaters patrolling the skies in this general area, just in case. So, we’ve given a dozen different houses every protection we can throw at them. They all look like they could be the place we’re going to hide you, they’ve all got some connection with the Order: my house, Kingsley’s place, Molly’s Auntie Muriel’s – you get the idea.”

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

“You’ll be going to Tonks’s parents. Once you’re within the boundaries of the protective enchantments we’ve put on their house you’ll be able to use a Portkey to the Burrow. Any questions?”

“Er – yes,” said Harry. “Maybe they won’t know which of the twelve secure houses I’m heading for at first, but won’t it be sort of obvious once” – he performed a quick headcount – “fourteen of us fly off toward Tonks’s parents?”

“Ah,” said Moody, “I forgot to mention the key point. Fourteen of us won’t be flying to Tonks’s parents. There will be seven Harry Potters moving through the skies tonight, each of them with a companion, each pair heading for a different safe house.”

From inside his cloak Moody now withdrew a flask of what looked like mud. There was no need for him to say another word; Harry understood the rest of the plan immediately.

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

“I told them you’d take it like this,” said Hermione with a hint of complacency.

“If you think I’m going to let six people risk their lives -- !”

“—because it’s the first time for all of us,” said Ron.

“This is different, pretending to be me —“

“Well, none of us really fancy it, Harry,” said Fred earnestly. “Imagine if something went wrong and we were stuck as specky, scrawny gits forever.”

Harry did not smile.

“You can’t do it if I don’t cooperate, you need me to give you some hair.”

“Well, that’s the plan scuppered,” said George. “Obviously there’s no chance at all of us getting a bit of your hair unless you cooperate.”

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

“Funny,” said Harry, “really amusing.”

“If it has to come to force, then it will,” growled Moody, his magical eye now quivering a little in its socket as he glared at Harry. “Everyone here’s overage, Potter, and they’re all prepared to take the risk.”

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

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

“But this is mad, there’s no need —“

“No need!” snarled Moody. “With You-Know-Who out there and half the Ministry on his side? Potter, if we’re lucky he’ll have swallowed the fake bait and he’ll be planning to ambush you on the thirtieth, but he’d be mad not to have a Death Eater or two keeping an eye out, it’s what I’d do. They might not be able to get at you or this house while your mother’s charm holds, but it’s about to break and they know the rough position of the place. Our only chance is to use decoys. Even You-Know-Who can’t split himself into seven.”

Harry caught Hermione’s eye and looked away at once.

“So, Potter – some of your hair, if you please.”

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

“Now!” barked Moody.

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

“Good,” said Moody, limping forward as he pulled the stopper out of the flask of potion. “Straight in here, if you please.”

Harry dropped the hair into the mudlike liquid. The moment it made contact with its surface, the potion began to froth and smoke, then, all at once, it turned a clear, bright gold.

“Ooh, you look much tastier than Crabbe and Goyle, Harry,” said Hermione, before catching sight of Ron’s raised eyebrows, blushing slightly, and saying, “Oh, you know what I mean – Goyle’s potion tasted like bogies.”

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

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

“We’re one short,” said Lupin.

“Here,” said Hagrid gruffly, and he lifted Mundungus by the scruff of the neck and dropped him down beside Fleur, who wrinkled her nose pointedly and moved along to stand between Fred and George instead.

“I’m a soldier, I’d sooner be a protector,” said Mundungus.

“Shut it,” growled Moody. “As I’ve already told you, you spineless worm, any Death Eaters we run into will be aiming to capture Potter, not kill him. Dumbledore always said You-Know-Who would want to finish Potter in person. It’ll be the proectors who have got the most to worry about, the Death Eaters’ll want to kill them.”

Mundungus did not look particularly reassured, but Moody was already pulling half a dozen eggcup-sized glasses from inside his cloak, which he handed out, before pouring a little Polyjuice Potion into each one.

“Altogether, then ... “

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, Fleur, and Mundungus drank. All of them gasped and grimaced as the potion hit their throats; At once, their features began to bubble and distort like hot wax. Hermione and Mundungus were shooting upward; Ron, Fred, and George were shrinking; their hair was darkening, Hermione’s and Fleur’s appearing to shoot backward into their skulls.

Moody, quite unconcerned, was now loosening the ties of the large sacks he had brought with him. When he straightened up again, there were six Harry Potters gasping and panting in front of him.

Fred and George turned to each other and said together, “Wow – we’re identical!”

“I dunno, though, I think I’m still better-looking,” said Fred, examining his reflection in the kettle.

“Bah,” said Fleur, checking herself in the microwave door, “Bill, don’t look at me – I’m ‘ideos.”

“Those whose clothes are a bit roomy, I’ve got smaller here,” said Moody, indicating the first sack, “and vice versa. Don’t forget the glasses, there’s six pairs in the side pocket. And when you’re dressed, there’s luggage in the other sack.”

The real Harry thought that this might just be the most bizarre thing he had ever seen, and he had seen some extremely odd things. He watched as his six doppelgangers rummaged in the sacks, pulling out sets of clothes, putting on glasses, stuffing their own things away. He felt like asking them to show a little more respect for privacy as they all began stripping off with impunity, clearly more at ease with displaying his body than they would have been with their own.

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

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

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

“Good,” said Moody, as at last seven dressed, bespectacles, and luggage-laden Harrys faced him. “The pairs will be as follows: Mundungus will be traveling with me, by broom –“

“Why’m I with you?” grunted the Harry nearest the back door.

“Because you’re the one that needs watching,” growled Moody, and sure enough, his magical eye did not waver from Mundungus as he continued, “Arthur and Fred –“

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

“Sorry, George –“

“I’m only yanking your wand, I’m Fred really –“

“Enough messing around!” snarled Moody. “The other one – George or Fred or whoever you are – you’re with Remus. Miss Delacour –“

“I’m taking Fleur on a thestral,” said Bill. “She’s not that fond of brooms.”

Fleur walked over to stand beside him, giving him a sappy, slavish look that Harry hoped with all his heart would never appear on his face again.

“Miss Granger with Kingsley, again by thestral –“

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

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

Ron did not look quite as pleased as Hermione.

“An’ you’re with me, Harry. That all righ’?” said Hagrid, looking a little anxious. “We’ll be on the bike, brooms an’ thestrals can’t take me weight, see. Not a lot o’ room on the seat with me on it, though, so you’ll be in the sidecar.”

“That’s great,” said Harry, not altogether truthfully.

“We think the Death Eaters will expect you to be on a broom,” said Moody, who seemed to guess how Harry was feeling. “Snape’s had plenty of time to tell them everything about you he’s never mentioned before, so if we do run into any Death Eaters, we’re betting they’ll choose one of the Potters who looks at home on a broomstick. All right then,” he went on, tying up the sack with the fake Potters’ clothes in it and leading the way back to the door, “I make it three minutes until we’re supposed to leave. No point locking the back door, it won’t keep the Death Eaters out when they come looking. Come on ...”

Harry hurried to gather his rucksack, Firebolt, and Hedwig’s cage and followed the group to the dark back garden.

On every side broomsticks were leaping into hands; Hermione had already been helped up onto a great black thestral by Kingsley, Fleur onto the other by Bill. Hagrid was standing ready beside the motorbike, goggles on.

“Is this it? Is this Sirius’s bike?”

“The very same,” said Hagrid, beaming down at Harry. “An’ the last time yeh was on it, Harry, I could fit yeh in one hand!”

Harry could not help but feel a little humiliated as he got into the sidecar. It placed him several feet below everybody else: Ron smirked at the sight of him sitting there like a child in a bumper car. Harry stuffed his rucksack and broomstick down by his feet and rammed Hedwig’s cage between his knees. He was extremely uncomfortable.

“Arthur’s done a bit o’ tinkerin’,” said Hagrid, quite oblivious to Harry’s discomfort. He settled himself astride the motorcycle, which creaked slightly and sank inches into the ground. “It’s got a few tricks up its sleeves now. Tha’ one was my idea.” He pointed a thick finger at a purple button near the speedometer.

"Please be careful, Hagrid." said Mr. Weasley, who was standing beside them, holding his broomstick. "I'm still not sure that was advisable and it's certainly only to be used in emergencies."

"All right, then." said Moody. "Everyone ready, please. I want us all to leave at exactly the same time or the whole point of the diversion's lost."

Everybody motioned their heads.

"Hold tight now, Ron," said Tonks, and Harry saw Ron throw a forcing, guilty look at Lupin before placing his hands on each side of her waist. Hagrid kicked the motorbike into life: It roared like a dragon, and the sidecar began to vibrate.

"Good luck, everyone," shouted Moody. "See you all in about an hour at the Burrow. On the count of three. One ... two .. THREE."

There was a great roar from the motorbike, and Harry felt the sidecar give a nasty lurch. He was rising through the air fast, his eyes watering slightly, hair whipped back off his face. Around him brooms were soaring upward too; the long black tail of a thestral flicked past. His legs, jammed into the sidecar by Hedwig's cage and his rucksack, were already sore and starting to go numb. So great was his discomfort that he almost forgot to take a last glimpse of number four Privet Drive. By the time he looked over the edge of the sidecar he could no longer tell which one it was.

And then, out of nowhere, out of nothing, they were surrounded. At least thirty hooded figures, suspended in midair, formed a vast circle in the middle of which the Order members had risen, oblivious –

Screams, a blaze of green light on every side: Hagrid gave a yell and the motorbike rolled over. Harry lost any sense of where they were. Streetlights above him, yells around him, he was clinging to the sidecar for dear life. Hedwig's cage, the Firebolt, and his rucksack slipped from beneath his knees –

"No – HELP!"

The broomstick spun too, but he just managed to seize the strap of his rucksack and the top of the cage as the motorbike swung the right way up again. A second's relief, and then another burst of green light. The owl screeched and fell to the floor of the cage.

"No – NO!"

The motorbike zoomed forward; Harry glimpsed hooded Death Eaters scattering as Hagrid blasted through their circle.

"Hedwig – *Hedwig* –"

But the owl lay motionless and pathetic as a toy on the floor of her cage. He could not take it in, and his terror for the others was paramount. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a mass of people moving, flares of green light, two pairs of people on brooms soaring off into the distance, but he could not tell who they were –

"Hagrid, we've got to go back, we've got to go back!" he yelled over the thunderous roar of the engine, pulling out his wand, ramming Hedwig's cage into the floor, refusing to believe that she was dead. "Hagrid, TURN AROUND!"

"My job's ter get you there safe, Harry!" bellow Hagrid, and he opened the throttle. "Stop – STOP!" Harry shouted, but as he looked back again two jets of green light flew past his left ear: Four Death Eaters had broken away from the circle and were pursuing them, aiming for Hagrid's broad back. Hagrid swerved, but the Death Eaters were keeping up with the bike; more curses shot after them, and Harry had to sink low into the sidecar to avoid them. Wriggling around he cried, "*Stupefy!*" and a red bolt of light shot

from his own wand, cleaving a gap between the four pursuing Death Eaters as they scattered to avoid it.

"Hold on, Harry, this'll do for 'em!" roared Hagrid, and Harry looked up just in time to see Hagrid slamming a thick finger into a green button near the fuel gauge. A wall, a solid black wall, erupted out of the exhaust pipe. Craning his neck, Harry saw it expand into being in midair. Three of the Death Eaters swerved and avoided it, but the fourth was not so lucky; He vanished from view and then dropped like a boulder from behind it, his broomstick broken into pieces. One of his fellows slowed up to save him, but they and the airborne wall were swallowed by darkness as Hagrid leaned low over the handlebars and sped up.

More Killing Curses flew past Harry's head from the two remaining Death Eaters' wands; they were aiming for Hagrid. Harry responded with further Stunning Spells: Red and green collided in midair in a shower of multicolored sparks, and Harry thought wildly of fireworks, and the Muggles below who would have no idea what was happening –

"Here we go again, Harry, hold on!" yelled Hagrid, and he jabbed at a second button. This time a great net burst from the bike's exhaust, but the Death Eaters were ready for it. Not only did they swerve to avoid it, but the companion who had slowed to save their unconscious friend had caught up. He bloomed suddenly out of the darkness and now three of them were pursuing the motorbike, all shooting curses after it.

"This'll do it, Harry, hold on tight!" yelled Hagrid, and Harry saw him slam his whole hand onto the purple button beside the speedometer.

With an unmistakable bellowing roar, dragon fire burst from the exhaust, white-hot and blue, and the motorbike shot forward like a bullet with a sound of wrenching metal. Harry saw the Death Eaters swerve out of sight to avoid the deadly trail of flame, and at the same time felt the sidecar sway ominously: Its metal connections to the bike had splintered with the force of acceleration.

"It's all righ', Harry!" bellowed Hagrid, now thrown flat onto the back by the surge of speed; nobody was steering now, and the sidecar was starting to twist violently in the bike's slipstream.

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

"Hagrid! No! Let me!"

"REPARO!"

There was a deafening bang and the sidecar broke away from the bike completely. Harry sped forward, propelled by the impetus of the bike's flight, then the sidecar began to lose height –

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

The sidecar rose like a cork, unsteerable but at least still airborne. He had but a split second's relief, however, as more curses streaked past him: The three Death Eaters were closing in.

"I'm comin', Harry!" Hagrid yelled from out of the darkness, but Harry could feel the sidecar beginning to sink again: Crouching as low as he could, he pointed at the middle of the oncoming figures and yelled, *"Impedimenta!"*

The jinx hit the middle Death Eater in the chest; For a moment the man was absurdly spread-eagled in midair as though he had hit an invisible barrier: One of his fellows almost collided with him –

Then the sidecar began to fall in earnest, and the remaining Death Eater shot a curse so close to Harry that he had to duck below the rim of the car, knocking out a tooth on the edge of his seat –

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

A huge hand seized the back of Harry's robes and hoisted him out of the plummeting sidecar; Harry pulled his rucksack with him as he dragged himself onto the motorbike's seat and found himself back-to-back with Hagrid. As they soared upward, away from the two remaining Death Eaters, Harry spat blood out of his mouth, pointed his wand at the falling sidecar, and yelled, "*Confringo!*"

He knew a dreadful, gut-wrenching pang for Hedwig as it exploded; the Death Eater nearest it was blasted off his broom and fell from sight; his companion fell back and vanished.

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

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

As the curses came shooting across the intervening space again, Hagrid swerved and zigzagged: Harry knew that Hagrid did not dare use the dragon-fire button again, with Harry seated so insecurely. Harry sent Stunning Spell after Stunning Spell back at their pursuers, barely holding them off. He shot another blocking jinx at them: The closest Death Eater swerved to avoid it and his hood slipped, and by the red light of his next Stunning Spell, Harry saw the strangely blank face of Stanley Shunpike – Stan – "*Expelliarmus!*" Harry yelled.

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

The hooded Death Eater's shout reached Harry even above the thunder of the motorbike's engine: Next moment, both pursuers had fallen back and disappeared from view.

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

"I don't know!"

But Harry was afraid: The hooded Death Eater had shouted "It's the real one!"; how had he known? He gazed around at the apparently empty darkness and felt its menace. Where were they?

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

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

"Hold on tight, then, Harry!"

There was a deafening, screeching roar again and the white-blue fire shot from the exhaust: Harry felt himself slipping backwards off what little of the seat he had. Hagrid flung backward upon him, barely maintaining his grip on the handlebars –

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

But Harry was not convinced; Fear lapped at him as he looked left and right for pursuers he was sure would come. . . . Why had they fallen back? One of them had still

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

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

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

Then the scar on his forehead burned like fire: as a Death Eater appeared on either side of the bike, two Killing Curses missed Harry by millimeters, cast from behind –

And then Harry saw him. Voldemort was flying like smoke on the wind, without broomstick or thestral to hold him, his snake-like face gleaming out of the blackness, his white fingers raising his wand again –

Hagrid let out a bellow of fear and steered the motorbike into a vertical dive. Clinging on for dear life, Harry sent Stunning Spells flying at random into the whirling night. He saw a body fly past him and knew he had hit one of them, but then he heard a bang and saw sparks from the engine; the motorbike spiraled through the air, completely out of control –

Green jets of light shot past them again. Harry had no idea which way was up, which down: His scar was still burning; he expected to die at any second. A hooded figure on a broomstick was feet from him, he saw it raise its arm –

"NO!"

With a shout of fury Hagrid launched himself off the bike at the Death Eater; to his horror, Harry saw both Hagrid and the Death Eater, falling out of sight, their combined weight too much for the broomstick –

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

It was over: He could not see or hear where Voldemort was; he glimpsed another Death Eater swooping out of the way and heard, "*Avada –*"

As the pain from Harry's scar forced his eyes shut, his wand acted of its own accord. He felt it drag his hand around like some great magnet, saw a spurt of golden fire through his half-closed eyelids, heard a crack and a scream of fury. The remaining Death Eater yelled; Voldemort screamed, "*NO!*" Somehow, Harry found his nose an inch from the dragon-fire button. He punched it with his wand-free hand and the bike shot more flames into the air, hurtling straight toward the ground.

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

The motorbike sped up, sucked towards the earth. Face level with the handlebars, Harry could see nothing but distant lights growing nearer and nearer: He was going to crash and there was nothing he could do about it. Behind him came another scream, "*Your wand, Selwyn, give me your wand!*"

He felt Voldemort before he saw him. Looking sideways, he stared into the red eyes and was sure they would be the last thing he ever saw: Voldemort preparing to curse him once more –

And then Voldemort vanished. Harry looked down and saw Hagrid spread-eagled on the ground below him. He pulled hard at the handlebars to avoid hitting him, groped for the brake, but with an earsplitting, ground trembling crash, he smashed into a muddy pond.

Chapter Five

Fallen Warrior

"Hagrid?"

Harry struggled to raise himself out of the debris of metal and leather that surrounded him; his hands sank into inches of muddy water as he tried to stand. He could not understand where Voldemort had gone and expected him to swoop out of the darkness at any moment. Something hot and wet was trickling down his chin and from his forehead. He crawled out of the pond and stumbled toward the great dark mass on the ground that was Hagrid.

"Hagrid? Hagrid, talk to me –"

But the dark mass did not stir.

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

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

Harry's head was swimming.

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

The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back on what felt like cushions, with a burning sensation in his ribs and right arm. His missing tooth had been regrown. The scar on his forehead was still throbbing.

"Hagrid?"

He opened his eyes and saw that he was lying on a sofa in an unfamiliar, lamplit sitting room. His rucksack lay on the floor a short distance away, wet and muddy. A fair-haired, big-bellied man was watching Harry anxiously.

"Hagrid's fine, son," said the man, "the wife's seeing to him now. How are you feeling? Anything else broken? I've fixed your ribs, your tooth, and your arm. I'm Ted, by the way, Ted Tonks – Dora's father."

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

"Voldemort –"

"Easy, now," said Ted Tonks, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder and pushing him back against the cushions. "That was a nasty crash you just had. What happened, anyway? Something go wrong with the bike? Arthur Weasley overstretch himself again, him and his Muggle contraptions?"

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

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

"They knew," said Harry.

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

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

Now Harry understood why Voldemort had vanished; it had been at the point when the motorbike crossed the barrier of the Order's charms. He only hoped they would

continue to work: He imagined Voldemort, a hundred yards above them as they spoke, looking for a way to penetrate what Harry visualized as a great transparent bubble.

He swung his legs off the sofa; he needed to see Hagrid with his own eyes before he would believe that he was alive. He had barely stood up, however, when a door opened and Hagrid squeezed through it, his face covered in mud and blood, limping a little but miraculously alive.

"Harry!"

Knocking over two delicate tables and an aspidistra, he covered the floor between them in two strides and pulled Harry into a hug that nearly cracked his newly repaired ribs. "Blimey, Harry, how did yeh get out o' that? I thought we were both goners."

"Yeah, me too. I can't believe –"

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

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

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

"Oh, I'm – I'm sorry."

As she moved forward into the room, Mrs. Tonk's resemblance to her sister Bellatrix became much less pronounced: Her hair was a light's oft brown and her eyes were wider and kinder. Nevertheless, she looked a little haughty after Harry's exclamation.

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

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

She and Ted exchanged looks. A mixture of fear and guilt gripped Harry at the sight of their expressions, if any of the others had died, it was his fault, all his fault. He had consented to the plan, given them his hair . . .

"The Portkey," he said, remembering all of a sudden. "We've got to get back to the Burrow and find out – then we'll be able to send you word, or – or Tonks will, once she's –"

"Dora'll be ok, 'Dromeda," said Ted. "She knows her stuff, she's been in plenty of tight spots with the Aurors. The Portkey's through here," he added to Harry. "It's supposed to leave in three minutes, if you want to take it."

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

He looked at Mrs. Tonks, wanting to apologize for the state of fear in which he left her and for which he felt so terribly responsible, but no words occurred to him that he did not seem hollow and insincere.

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

He was glad to leave the room and follow Ted Tonks along a short hallway and into a bedroom. Hagrid came after them, bending low to avoid hitting his head on the door lintel.

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

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

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

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

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

The realization crashed over him: He felt ashamed of himself as the tears stung his eyes. The owl had been his companion, his one great link with the magical world whenever he had been forced to return to the Dursleys.

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

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

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

With a jerk behind the navel as though an invisible hook and line had dragged him forward, Harry was pulled into nothingness, spinning uncontrollably, his finger glued to the Portkey as he and Hagrid hurtled away from Mr. Tonks. Second later, Harry's feet slammed onto hard ground and he fell onto his hands and knees in the yard of the Burrow. He heard screams. Throwing aside the no longer glowing hairbrush, Harry stood up, swaying slightly, and saw Mrs. Weasley and Ginny running down the steps by the back door as Hagrid, who had also collapsed on landing, clambered laboriously to his feet.

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

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

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

"The Death Eaters were waiting for us," Harry told her, "We were surrounded the moment we took off – they knew it was tonight – I don't know what happened to anyone else, four of them chased us, it was all we could do to get away, and then Voldemort caught up with us –"

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

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

"Haven't go' any brandy, have yeh, Molly?" asked Hagrid a little shakily, "Fer medicinal purposes?"

She could have summoned it by magic, but as she hurried back toward the crooked house, Harry knew that she wanted to hide her face. He turned to Ginny and she answered his unspoken plea for information at once.

"Ron and Tonks should have been back first, but they missed their Portkey, it came back without them," she said, pointing at a rusty oil can lying on the ground nearby. "And that one," she pointed at an acience sneaker, "should have been Dad and Fred's, they were supposed to be second. You and Hagrid were third and," she checked her watch, "if they made it, George and Lupin aught to be back in about a minute."

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

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

A blue light had appeared in the darkness: It grew larger and brighter, and Lupin and George appeared, spinning and then falling. Harry knew immediately that there was something wrong: Lupin was supporting George, who was unconscious and whose face was covered in blood.

Harry ran forward and seized George's legs. Together, he and Lupin carried George into the house and through the kitchen to the living room, where they laid him on the sofa. As the lamplight fell across George's head, Ginny gasped and Harry's stomach lurched: One of George's ears was missing. The side of his head and neck were drenched in wet, shockingly scarlet blood.

No sooner had Mrs. Weasley bent over her son that Lupin grabbed Harry by the upper arm and dragged him, none too gently, back into the kitchen, where Hagrid was still attempting to ease his bulk through the back door.

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

Lupin ignored him.

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

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

Lupin released Harry and fell back against a kitchen cupboard.

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

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I had to check," said Lupin tersely. "We've been betrayed. Voldemort knew that you were being moved tonight and the only people who could have told him were directly involved in the plan. You might have been an impostor."

"So why aren' you checkin' me?" panted Hagrid, still struggling with the door.

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

"None of the Order would have told Voldemort we were moving tonight," said Harry. The idea was dreadful to him, he could not believe it of any of them. "Voldemort only caught up with me toward the end, he didn't know which one I was in the beginning. If he'd been in on the plan he'd have known from the start I was the one with Hagrid."

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

Harry explained how the Death Eaters pursuing them had seemed to recognize him as the true Harry, how they had abandoned the chase, how they must have summoned Voldemort, who had appeared just before he and Hagrid had reached the sanctuary of Tonk's parents.

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

"I . . ." Harry tried to remember; the whole journey seemed like a blur of panic and confusion. "I saw Stan Shunpike . . . You know, the bloke who was the conductor on the Knight Bus? And I tried to Disarm him instead of – well, he doesn't know what he's doing, does he? He must be Imperiused!"

Lupin looked aghast.

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

"We were hundreds of feet up! Stan's not himself, and if I Stunned him and he'd fallen, he'd have died the same as if I'd used Avada Kedavra! Expelliarmus saved me from Voldemort two years ago," Harry added defiantly. Lupin was reminding him of the sneering Hufflepuff Zacharias Smith, who had jeered at Harry for wanting to teach Dumbledore's Army how to Disarm.

"Yes, Harry," said Lupin with painful restraint, "and a great number of Death Eaters witnessed that happening! Forgive me, but it was a very unusual move then, under

the imminent threat of death. Repeating it tonight in front of Death Eaters who either witnessed or heard about the first occasion was close to suicidal!"

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

"Of course not," said Lupin, "but the Death Eaters – frankly, most people! – would have expected you to attack back! Expelliarmus is a useful spell, Harry, but the Death Eaters seem to think it is your signature move, and I urge you not to let it become so!"

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

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

Lupin's retort was lost: Finally succeeding in squeezing through the door, Hagrid staggered to a chair and sat down; it collapsed beneath him. Ignoring his mingled oaths and apologies, Harry addressed Lupin again.

"Will George be okay?"

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

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

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

Two figures had appeared in the yard, and as Harry ran toward them he realized they were Hermione, now returning to her normal appearance, and Kingsley, both clutching a bent coat hanger, Hermione flung herself into Harry's arms, but Kingsley showed no pleasure at the sight of any of them. Over Hermione's shoulder Harry saw him raise his wand and point it at Lupin's chest.

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

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

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

"All right, all right!" said Kingsley, stowing his wand back beneath his cloak, "But somebody betrayed us! They knew, they knew it was tonight!"

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

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

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

Hermione stifled a little moan behind her hand.

"What happened to you?" Lupin asked Kingsley.

"Followed by five, injured two, might've killed one," Kingsley reeled off, "and we saw You-Know-Who as well, he joined the chase halfway through but vanished pretty quickly. Remus, he can –"

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

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

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

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

Kingsley let out a mirthless laugh.

"Hermione, there's obviously been a mass breakout which the Ministry has hushed up. Travers's hood fell off when I cursed him, he's supposed to be inside too. But what happened to you, Remus? Where's George?"

"He lost an ear," said Lupin.

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

"Snape's work," said Lupin.

"*Snape?*" shouted Harry. "You didn't say --"

"He lost his hood during the chase. Sectumsempra was always a specialty of Snape's. I wish I could say I'd paid him back in kind, but it was all I could do to keep George on the broom after he was injured, he was losing so much blood."

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

"Harry, give us a hand!" called Hagrid hoarsely from the door, in which he was stuck again. Glad of something to do, Harry pulled him free, then headed through the empty kitchen and back into the sitting room, where Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were still tending to George. Mrs. Weasley had staunched his bleeding now, and by the lamplight Harry saw a clean gaping hole where George's ear had been.

"How is he?"

Mrs. Weasley looked around and said, "I can't make it grow back, not when it's been removed by Dark Magic. But it could've been so much worse . . . He's alive."

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

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

"Hermione and Kingsley," said Harry.

"Thank goodness," Ginny whispered. They looked at each other; Harry wanted to hug her, hold on to her; he did not even care much that Mrs. Weasley was there, but before he could act on the impulse, there was a great crash from the kitchen.

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

Harry had never heard Mr. Weasley shout like that before. He burst into the living room, his bald patch gleaming with sweat, his spectacles askew, Fred right behind him, both pale but uninjured.

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

"How is he?"

Mr. Weasley dropped to his knees beside George. For the first time since Harry had known him, Fred seemed to be lost for words. He gaped over the back of the sofa at his twin's wound as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

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

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

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

"Saintlike," he murmured.

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

"Saintlike," repeated George, opening his eyes and looking up at his brother.

"You see. . . I'm holy. *Holey*, Fred, geddit?"

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

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

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

He looked around.

"Hi, Harry – you are Harry, right?"

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

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

"They're not back yet, George," said Mrs. Weasley. George's grin faded. Harry glanced at Ginny and motioned to her to accompany him back outside. As they walked through the kitchen she said in a low voice.

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

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

Kingsley was striding backward and forward, glancing up at the sky every time he turned. Harry was reminded of Uncle Vernon pacing the living room a million years ago. Hagrid, Hermione, and Lupin stood shoulder to shoulder, gazing upward in silence. None of them looked around when Harry and Ginny joined their silent vigil.

The minutes stretched into what might as well have been years. The slightest breath of wind made them all jump and turn toward the whispering bush or tree in the hope that one of the missing Order members might leap unscathed from its leaves –

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

"It's them!" screamed Hermione.

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

"Remus!" Tonks cried as she staggered off the broom into Lupin's arms. His face was set and white: He seemed unable to speak, Ron tripped dazedly toward Harry and Hermione.

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

"I thought – I thought –"

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

"Ron was great," said Tonks warmly, relinquishing her hold on Lupin.

"Wonderful. Stunned one of the Death Eaters, straight to the head, and when you're aiming at a moving target from a flying broom –"

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

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

"No," said Ginny, "we're still waiting for Bill and Fleur and Mad-Eye and Mundungus. I'm going to tell Mum and Dad you're okay, Ron –"

She ran back inside.

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

"Bellatrix," said Tonks. "She wants me quite as much as she wants Harry, Remus, She tried very hard to kill me. I just wish I'd got her, I owe Bellatrix. But we definitely injured Rodolphus Then we got to Ron's Auntie Muriel's and we missed our Portkey and she was fussing over us –"

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

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

They recounted the stories of their own journeys, but all the time the continued absence of Bill, Fleur, Mad-Eye, and Mundungus seemed to lie upon them like a frost, its icy bite harder and harder to ignore.

"I'm going to have to get back to Downing Street, I should have been there an hour ago," said Kingsley finally, after a last sweeping gaze at the sky. "Let me know when they're back,."

Lupin nodded. With a wave to the others, Kingsley walked away into the darkness toward the gate. Harry thought he heard the faintest *pop* as Kingsley Disapparated just beyond the Burrow's boundaries.

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

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

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

"How's George?" asked Lupin.

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

"He's lost –"

But the end of Mrs. Weasley's sentence was drowned in a general outcry. A thestral had just soared into sight and landed a few feet from them. Bill and Fleur slid from its back, windswept but unhurt.

"Bill! Thank God, thank God –"

Mrs. Weasley ran forward, but the hug Bill bestowed upon her was perfunctory. Looking directly at his father, he said, "Mad-Eye's dead."

Nobody spoke, nobody moved. Harry felt as though something inside him was falling, falling through the earth, leaving him forever.

"We saw it," said Bill; Fleur nodded, tear tracks glittering on her cheeks in the light from the kitchen window. "It happened just after we broke out of the circle: Mad-Eye and Dung were close by us, they were heading north too. Voldemort – he can fly – went straight for them. Dung panicked, I heard him cry out, Mad-Eye tried to stop him, but he Disapparated. Voldemort's curse hit Mad-Eye full in the face, he fell backward off his broom and – there was nothing we could do, nothing, we had half a dozen of them on our own tail –"

Bill's voice broke.

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

They all stood looking at each other. Harry could not quite comprehend it. Mad-Eye dead; it could not be Mad-Eye, so tough, so brave, the consummate survivor . . .

At last it seemed to dawn on everyone, though nobody said it, that there was no point of waiting in the yard anymore, and in silence they followed Mr. And Mrs. Weasley

back into the Burrow, and into the living room, where Fred and George were laughing together.

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

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

The twins' grins turned to grimaces of shock. Nobody seemed to know what to do. Tonks was crying silently into a handkerchief: She had been close to Mad-Eye, Harry knew, his favorite and his protégée at the Ministry of Magic. Hagrid, who had sat down on the floor in the corner where he had most space, was dabbing at his eyes with his tablecloth-sized handkerchief.

Bill walked over to the sideboard and pulled out a bottle of fire-whisky and some glasses.

"Here," he said, and with a wave of his wand, eh sent twelve full glasses soaring through the room to each of them, holding the thirteenth aloft. "Mad-Eye."

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

"Mad-Eye," echoed Hagrid, a little late, with a hiccup. The firewhisky seared Harry's throat. It seemed to burn feeling back into him, dispelling the numbness and sense of unreality firing him with something that was like courage.

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

The atmosphere changed at once. Everybody looked tense, watching Lupin, both wanting him to go on, it seemed to Harry, and slightly afraid of what they might hear.

"I know what you're thinking," said Bill, "and I wondered that too, on the way back here, because they seemed to be expecting us, didn't they? But Mundungus can't have betrayed us. They didn't know there would be seven Harrys, that confused them the moment we appeared, and in case you've forgotten, it was Mundungus who suggested that little bit of skullduggery. Why wouldn't he have told them the essential point? I think Dung panicked, it's as simple as that. He didn't want to come in the first place, but Mad-Eye made him, and You-Know-Who went straight for them. It was enough to make anyone panic."

"You-Know-Who acted exactly as Mad-Eye expected him to," sniffed Tonks.

"Mad-Eye said he'd expect the real Harry to be with the toughest, most skilled Aurors. He chased Mad-Eye first, and when Mundungus gave them away he switched to Kingsley. . . ."

"Yes, and zat eez all very good," snapped Fleur, "but still eet does not explain 'ow zey know we were moving 'Arry tonight, does eet? Somebody must 'ave been careless. Somebody let slip ze date to an outsider. It is ze only explanation for zem knowing ze date but not ze 'ole plan."

She glared around at them all, tear tracks still etched on her beautiful face, silently daring any of them to contradict her. Nobody did. The only sound to break the silence was that of Hagrid hiccupping from behind his hankerchief. Harry glanced at Hagrid, who had just risked his own life to save Harry's – Hagrid, whom he loved, whom he trusted, who had once been tricked into giving Voldemort crucial information in exchange for a dragon's egg. . . .

"No," Harry said aloud, and they all looked at him, surprised: The firewhisky seemed to have amplified his voice. "I mean . . . if somebody made a mistake," Harry went on, "and let something slip, I know they didn't mean to do it. It's not their fault," he

repeated, again a little louder than he would usually have spoken. "We've got to trust each other. I trust all of you, I don't think anyone in this room would ever sell me to Voldemort."

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

"Well said, Harry," said Fred unexpectedly.

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

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

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

"No, I think you're like James," said Lupin, "who would have regarded it as the height of dishonor to mistrust his friends."

Harry knew what Lupin was getting at: that his father had been betrayed by his friend Peter Pettigrew. He felt irrationally angry. He wanted to argue, but Lupin had turned away from him, set down his glass upon a side table, and addressed Bill, "There's work to do. I can ask Kingsley whether –"

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

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

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

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

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

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

The rest of them now dropped into chairs, all except for Harry, who remained standing. The suddenness and completeness of death was with them like a presence.

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

Ten pairs of startled eyes looked at him.

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

"I can't stay here."

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

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

"But don't be so silly!" said Mrs. Weasley. "The whole point of tonight was to get you here safely, and thank goodness it worked. And Fleur's agreed to get married here rather than in France, we've arranged everything so that we can all stay together and look after you –"

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

"If Voldemort finds out I'm here –"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I know that –"

"Mad-Eye wouldn't want –"

"I KNOW!" Harry bellowed.

He felt beleaguered and blackmailed: Did they think he did not know what they had done for him, didn't they understand that it was for precisely that reason that he wanted to go now, before they had to suffer any more on his behalf? There was a long and awkward silence in which his scar continued to prickle and throb, and which was broken at last by Mrs. Weasley.

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

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

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

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

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

"No," said Harry. "The bike was falling, I couldn't have told you where Voldemort was, but my wand spun in my hand and found him and shot a spell at him, and it wasn't even a spell I recognized. I've never made gold flames appear before."

"Often," said Mr. Weasley, "when you're in a pressured situation you can produce magic you never dreamed of. Small children often find, before they're trained –"

"It wasn't like that," said Harry through gritted teeth. His scar was burning. He felt angry and frustrated; he hated the idea that they were all imagining him to have power to match Voldemort's.

No one said anything. He knew that they did not believe him. Now that he came to think of it, he had never heard of a wand performing magic on its own before.

His scar seared with pain, it was all he could do not to moan aloud. Muttering about fresh air, he set down his glass and left the room.

As he crossed the yard, the great skeletal thestral looked up – rustled its enormous batlike wings, then resumed its grazing. Harry stopped at the gate into the garden, staring out at its overgrown plants, rubbing his pounding forehead and thinking of Dumbledore.

Dumbledore would have believed him, he knew it. Dumbledore would have known how and why Harry's wand had acted independently, because Dumbledore always had the answers; he had known about wands, had explained to Harry the strange connection that existed between his wand and Voldemort's But Dumbledore, like Mad-Eye, like Sirius, like his parents, like his poor owl, all were gone where Harry could never talk to them again. He felt a burning in his throat that had nothing to do with firewhisky. . . .

And then, out of nowhere, the pain in his scar peaked. As he clutched his forehead and closed his eyes, a voice screamed inside his head.

"You told me the problem would be solved by using another's wand!"

And into his mind burst the vision of an emaciated old man lying in rags upon a stone floor, screaming, a horrible drawn-out scream, a scream of unendurable agony. . . .

"No! No! I beg you, I beg you. . . ."

"You lied to Lord Voldemort, Ollivander!"

"I did not. . . . I swear I did not. . . ."

"You sought to help Potter, to help him escape me!"

"I swear I did not. . . . I believed a different wand would work. . . ."

"Explain, then, what happened. Lucius's wand is destroyed!"

"I cannot understand. . . . The connection . . . exists only . . . between your two wands. . . ."

"Lies!"

"Please . . . I beg you. . . ."

And Harry saw the white hand raise its wand and felt Voldemort's surge of vicious anger, saw the frail old man on the floor writhe in agony –

"Harry?"

It was over as quickly as it had come: Harry stood shaking in the darkness, clutching the gate into the garden, his heart racing, his scar still tingling. It was several moments before he realized that Ron and Hermione were at his side.

"Harry, come back in the house," Hermione whispered, "You aren't still thinking of leaving?"

"Yeah, you've got to stay, mate," said Ron, thumping Harry on the back.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked, close enough now to look into Harry's face. "You look awful!"

"Well," said Harry shakily, "I probably look better than Ollivander. . . ."

When he had finished telling them what he had seen, Ron looked appalled, but Hermione downright terrified.

"But it was supposed to have stopped! Your scar – it wasn't supposed to do this anymore! You mustn't let that connection open up again – Dumbledore wanted you to close your mind!"

When he did not reply, she gripped his arm.

"Harry, he's taking over the Ministry and the newspapers and half the Wizarding world! Don't let him inside your head too!"

Chapter Six

The Ghoul in Pajamas

The shock of losing Mad-Eye hung over the house in the days that followed; Harry kept expecting to see him stumping in through the back door like the other Order members, who passed in and out to relay news. Harry felt that nothing but action would assuage his feelings of guilt and grief and that he ought to set out on his mission to find and destroy Horcruxes as soon as possible.

"Well, you can't do anything about the" – Ron mouthed the word *Horcruxes* – "till you're seventeen. You've still got the Trace on you. And we can plan here as well as

anywhere, can't we? Or," he dropped his voice to a whisper, "d'you reckon you already know where the You-Know-Whats are?"

"No," Harry admitted.

"I think Hermione's been doing a bit of research," said Ron. "She said she was saving it for when you got here."

They were sitting at the breakfast table; Mr. Weasley and Bill had just left for work. Mrs. Weasley had gone upstairs to wake Hermione and Ginny, while Fleur had drifted off to take a bath.

"The Trace'll break on the thirty-first," said Harry. "That means I only need to stay here four days. Then I can –"

"Five days," Ron corrected him firmly. "We've got to stay for the wedding. They'll kill us if we miss it."

Harry understood "they" to mean Fleur and Mrs. Weasley.

"It's one extra day," said Ron, when Harry looked mutinous.

"Don't they realize how important –?"

"Course they don't," said Ron. "They haven't got a clue. And now you mention it, I wanted to talk to you about that."

Ron glanced toward the door into the hall to check that Mrs. Weasley was not returning yet, then leaned in closer to Harry.

"Mum's been trying to get it out of Hermione and me. What we're off to do. She'll try you next, so brace yourself. Dad and Lupin've both asked as well, but when we said Dumbledore told you not to tell anyone except us, they dropped it. Not Mum, though. She's determined."

Ron's prediction came true within hours. Shortly before lunch, Mrs. Weasley detached Harry from the others by asking him to help identify a lone man's sock that she thought might have come out of his rucksack. Once she had him cornered in the tiny scullery off the kitchen, she started.

"Ron and Hermione seem to think that the three of you are dropping out of Hogwarts," she began in a light, casual tone.

"Oh," said Harry. "Well, yeah. We are."

The mangle turned of its own accord in a corner, wringing out what looked like one of Mr. Weasley's vests.

"May I ask *why* you are abandoning your education?" said Mrs. Weasley.

"Well, Dumbledore left me . . . stuff to do," mumbled Harry. "Ron and Hermione know about it, and they want to come too."

"What sort of 'stuff'?"

"I'm sorry, I can't –"

"Well, frankly, I think Arthur and I have a right to know, and I'm sure Mr. And Mrs. Granger would agree!" said Mrs. Weasley. Harry had been afraid of the "concerned parent" attack. He forced himself to look directly into her eyes, noticing as he did so that they were precisely the same shade of brown as Ginny's. This did not help.

"Dumbledore didn't want anyone else to know, Mrs. Weasley. I'm sorry. Ron and Hermione don't have to come, it's their choice –"

"I don't see that *you* have to go either!" she snapped, dropping all pretense now. "You're barely of age, any of you! It's utter nonsense, if Dumbledore needed work doing, he had the whole Order at his command! Harry, you must have misunderstood him."

Probably he was telling you something he *wanted* done, and you took it to mean that he wanted *you*—“

“I didn’t misunderstand,” said Harry flatly. “It’s got to be me.”

He handed her back the single sock he was supposed to be identifying, which was patterned with golden bulrushes.

“And that’s not mine. I don’t support Puddlemere United.”

“Oh, of course not,” said Mrs. Weasley with a sudden and rather unnerving return to her casual tone. “I should have realized. Well, Harry, while we’ve still got you here, you won’t mind helping with the preparations for Bill and Fleur’s wedding, will you? There’s still so much to do.”

“No – I – of course not,” said Harry, disconcerted by this sudden change of subject.

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

From that moment on, Mrs. Weasley kept Harry, Ron and Hermione so busy with preparations for the wedding that they hardly had any time to think. The kindest explanation of this behavior would have been that Mrs. Weasley wanted to distract them all from thoughts of Mad-Eye and the terrors of their recent journey. After two days of nonstop cutlery cleaning, of color-matching favors, ribbons, and flowers, of de-gnoming the garden and helping Mrs. Weasley cook vast batches of canapés, however, Harry started to suspect her of a different motive. All the jobs she handed out seemed to keep him, Ron, and Hermione away from one another; he had not had a chance to speak to the two of them alone since the first night, when he had told them about Voldemort torturing Ollivander.

“I think Mum thinks that if she can stop the three of you getting together and planning, she’ll be able to delay you leaving,” Ginny told Harry in an undertone, as they laid the table for dinner on the third night of his stay.

“And then what does she think’s going to happen?” Harry muttered. “Someone else might kill off Voldemort while she’s holding us here making vol-au-vents?”

He had spoken without thinking, and saw Ginny’s face whiten.

“So it’s true?” she said. “That’s what you’re trying to do?”

“I – not – I was joking,” said Harry evasively.

They stared at each other, and there was something more than shock in Ginny’s expression. Suddenly Harry became aware that this was the first time that he had been alone with her since those stolen hours in secluded corners of the Hogwarts grounds. He was sure she was remembering them too. Both of them jumped as the door opened, and Mr. Weasley, Kingsley, and Bill walked in.

They were often joined by other Order members for dinner now, because the Burrow had replaced number twelve, Grimmauld Place as the headquarters. Mr. Weasley had explained that after the death of Dumbledore, their Secret-Keeper, each of the people to whom Dumbledore had confided Grimmauld Place’s location had become a Secret-Keeper in turn.

“And as there are around twenty of us, that greatly dilutes the power of the Fidelius Charm. Twenty times as many opportunities for the Death Eaters to get the secret out of somebody. We can’t expect it to hold much longer.”

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

“Well, Mad-Eye set up a couple of curses against Snape in case he turns up there again. We hope they’ll be strong enough both to keep him out and to bind his tongue if he tries to talk about the place, but we can’t be sure. It would have been insane to keep using the place as headquarters now that its protection has become so shaky.”

The kitchen was so crowded that evening it was difficult to maneuver knives and forks. Harry found himself crammed beside Ginny; the unsaid things that had just passed between them made him wish they had been separated by a few more people. He was trying so hard to avoid brushing her arm he could barely cut his chicken.

“No news about Mad-Eye?” Harry asked Bill.

“Nothing,” replied Bill.

They had not been able to hold a funeral for Moody, because Bill and Lupin had failed to recover his body. It had been difficult to know where he might have fallen, given the darkness and the confusion of the battle.

“The *Daily Prophet* hasn’t said a word about him dying or about finding the body,” Bill went on. “But that doesn’t mean much. It’s keeping a lot quiet these days.”

“And they still haven’t called a hearing about all the underage magic I used escaping the Death Eaters?” Harry called across the table to Mr. Weasley, who shook his head.

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

“The latter, I think. Scrimgeour doesn’t want to admit that You-Know-Who is as powerful as he is, nor that Azkaban’s seen a mass breakout.”

“Yeah, why tell the public the truth?” said Harry, clenching his knife so tightly that the faint scars on the back of his right hand stood out, white against his skin: *I must not tell lies*.

“Isn’t anyone at the Ministry prepared to stand up to him?” asked Ron angrily.

“Of course, Ron, but people are terrified,” Mr. Weasley replied, “terrified that they will be next to disappear, their children the next to be attacked! There are nasty rumors going around; I for one don’t believe the Muggle Studies professor at Hogwarts resigned. She hasn’t been seen for weeks now. Meanwhile Scrimgeour remains shut up in his office all day; I just hope he’s working on a plan.”

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

“We must decide ‘ow you will be disguised, ‘Arry,” said Fleur, once everyone had pudding. “For ze wedding,” she added, when he looked confused. “Of course, none of our guests are Death Eaters, but we cannot guarantee zat zey will not let something slip after zey ‘ave ‘ad champagne.”

From this, Harry gathered that she still suspected Hagrid.

“Yes, good point,” said Mrs. Weasley from the top of the table where she sat, spectacles perched on the end of her nose, scanning an immense list of jobs that she had scribbled on a very long piece of parchment. “Now, Ron, have you cleaned out your room yet?”

“Why?” exclaimed Ron, slamming his spoon down and glaring at his mother.

“Why does my room have to be cleaned out? Harry and I are fine with it the way it is!”

“We are holding your brother’s wedding here in a few days’ time, young man –“

“And are they getting married in my bedroom?” asked Ron furiously. “No! So why in the name of Merlin’s saggy left –“

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

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

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

“No, Harry, dear, I’d much rather you helped Arthur much out the chickens, and Hermione, I’d be ever so grateful if you’d change the sheets for Monsieur and Madame Delacour; you know they’re arriving at eleven tomorrow morning.”

But as it turned out, there was very little to do for the chickens. “There’s no need to, er, mention it to Molly,” Mr. Weasley told Harry, blocking his access to the coop, “but, er, Ted Tonks sent me most of what was left of Sirius’s bike and, er, I’m hiding – that’s to say, keeping – it in here. Fantastic stuff: There’s an exhaust gaskin, as I believe it’s called, the most magnificent battery, and it’ll be a great opportunity to find out how brakes work. I’m going to try and put it all back together again when Molly’s not – I mean, when I’ve got time.”

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

“I’m doing it, I’m doing – ! Oh, it’s you,” said Ron in relief, as Harry entered the room. Ron lay back down on the bed, which he had evidently just vacated. The room was just as messy as it had been all week; the only chance was that Hermione was now sitting in the far corner, her fluffy ginger cat, Crookshanks, at her feet, sorting books, some of which Harry recognized as his own, into two enormous piles.

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

“And how did you manage to get away?”

“Oh, Ron’s mum forgot that she asked Ginny and me to change the sheets yesterday,” said Hermione. She threw *Numerology and Grammatica* onto one pile and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* onto the other.

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

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

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

“Even if the Killing Curse missed, Mad-Eye still fell about a thousand feet,” said Hermione, now weight *Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland* in her hand.

“He could have used a Shield Charm –“

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

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

“Of course we don’t want him to be dead!” said Hermione, looking shocked. “It’s dreadful that he’s dead! But we’re being realistic!”

For the first time, Harry imagined Mad-Eye’s body, broken as Dumbledore’s had been, yet with that one eye still whizzing in its socket. He felt a stab of revulsion mixed with a bizarre desire to laugh.

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

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Like Barty Crouch, turned into a bone and buried in Hagrid’s front garden. They probably transfigured Moody and stuffed him –“

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

“Oh no,” said Harry, struggling to get up from the old camp bed. “Hermione, I wasn’t trying to upset –“

But with a great creaking of rusty bedsprings, Ron bounded off the bed and got there first. One arm around Hermione, he fished in his jeans pocket and withdrew a revolting-looking handkerchief that he had used to clean out the oven earlier. Hastily pulling out his wand, he pointed it at the rag and said, “*Tergeo*.”

The wand siphoned off most of the grease. Looking rather pleased with himself, Ron handed the slightly smoking handkerchief to Hermione.

“Oh . . . thanks, Ron. . . . I’m sorry. . . .” She blew her nose and hiccupped. “It’s just so awf-ful, isn’t it? R-right after Dumbledore . . . I j-just n-never imagined Mad-Eye dying, somehow, he seemed so tough!”

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

“‘C-constant vigilance,’” said Hermione, mopping her eyes.

“That’s right,” said Ron, nodding. “He’d tell us to learn from what happened to him. And what I’ve learned is not to trust that cowardly little squirt, Mundungus.”

Hermione gave a shaky laugh and leaned forward to pick up two more books. A second later, Ron had snatched his arm back from around her shoulders; she had dropped *The Monster of Monsters* on his foot. The book had broken free from its restraining belt and snapped viciously at Ron’s ankle.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Hermione cried as Harry wrenched the book from Ron’s leg and retied it shit.

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

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

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

“Ha ha,” said Hermione, looking down at *Spellman’s Syllabary*. “I wonder . . . will we need to translate runes? It’s possible. . . . I think we’d better take it, to be safe.”

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

“Listen,” said Harry.

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

“I know you said after Dumbledore’s funeral that you wanted to come with me,” Harry began.

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

“As we knew he would,” he sighed, turning back to the books. “You know, I think I *will* take *Hogwarts, A History*. Even if we’re not going back there, I don’t think I’d feel right if I didn’t have it with –“

“Listen!” said Harry again.

“No, Harry, *you* listen,” said Hermione. “We’re coming with you. That was decided months ago – years, really.”

“But –“

“Shut up,” Ron advised him.

“– are you sure you’ve thought this through?” Harry persisted.

“Let’s see,” said Hermione, slamming *Travels with Trolls* onto the discarded pile with a rather fierce look. “I’ve been packing for days, so we’re ready to leave at a moment’s notice, which for your information has included doing some pretty difficult magic, not to mention smuggling Mad-Eye’s whole stock of Polyjuice Potion right under Ron’s mum’s nose.

“I’ve also modified my parents’ memories so that they’re convinced they’re really called Wendell and Monica Wilkins, and that their life’s ambition is to move to Australia, which they have now done. That’s to make it more difficult for Voldemort to track them down and interrogate them about me – or you, because unfortunately, I’ve told them quite a bit about you.

“Assuming I survive our hunt for the Horcruxes, I’ll find Mum and Dad and lift the enchantment. If I don’t – well, I think I’ve cast a good enough charm to keep them safe and happy. Wendell and Monica Wilkins don’t know that they’ve got a daughter, you see.”

Hermione’s eyes were swimming with tears again. Ron got back off the bed, put his arm around her once more, and frowned at Harry as though reproaching him for lack of tact. Harry could not think of anything to say, not least because it was highly unusual for Ron to be teaching anyone else tact.

“I – Hermione, I’m sorry – I didn’t –“

“Didn’t realize that Ron and I know perfectly well what might happen if we come with you? Well, we do. Ron, show Harry what you’ve done.”

“Nah, he’s just eaten,” said Ron.

“Go on, he needs to know!”

“Oh, all right. Harry, come here.”

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

“C’mon.”

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

“*Descendo*,” muttered Ron, pointing his wand at the low ceiling. A hatch opened right over their heads and a ladder slid down to their feet. A horrible, half-sucking, half-moaning sound came out of the square hole, along with an unpleasant smell like open drains.

“That’s your ghoul, isn’t it?” asked Harry, who had never actually met the creature that sometimes disrupted the nightly silence.

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

Harry followed Ron up the few short steps into the tiny attic space. His head and shoulders were in the room before he caught sight of the creature curled up a few feet from him, fast asleep in the gloom with its large mouth wide open.

“But it . . . it looks . . . do ghouls normally wear pajamas?”

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

Harry contemplated the thing, slightly revolted. It was human in shape and size, and was wearing what, now that Harry’s eyes became used to the darkness, was clearly an old pair of Ron’s pajamas. He was also sure that ghouls were generally rather slimy and bald, rather than distinctly hairy and covered in angry purple blisters.

“He’s me, see?” said Ron.

“No,” said Harry. “I don’t.”

“I’ll explain it back in my room, the smell’s getting to me,” said Ron. They climbed back down the ladder, which Ron returned to the ceiling, and rejoined Hermione, who was still sorting books.

“Once we’ve left, the ghoul’s going to come and live down here in my room,” said Ron. “I think he’s really looking forward to it – well, it’s hard to tell, because all he can do is moan and drool – but he nods a lot when you mention it. Anyway, he’s going to be me with spattergroit. Good, eh?”

Harry merely looked his confusion.

“It is!” said Ron, clearly frustrated that Harry had not grasped the brilliance of the plan. “Look, when we three don’t turn up at Hogwarts again, everyone’s going to think Hermione and I must be with you, right? Which means the Death Eaters will go straight for our families to see if they’ve got information on where you are.”

“But hopefully it’ll look like I’ve gone away with Mum and Dad; a lot of Muggle-borns are talking about going into hiding at the moment,” said Hermione.

“We can’t hide my whole family, it’ll look too fishy and they can’t all leave their jobs,” said Ron. “So we’re going to put out the story that I’m seriously ill with spattergroit, which is why I can’t go back to school. If anyone comes calling to investigate, Mum or Dad can show them the ghoul in my bed, covered in pustules. Spattergroit’s really contagious, so they’re not going to want to go near him. It won’t matter that he can’t say anything, either, because apparently you can’t once the fungus has spread to your uvula.”

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

“Dad is. He helped Fred and George transform the ghoul. Mum . . . well, you’ve seen what she’s like. She won’t accept we’re going till we’re gone.”

There was silence in the room, broken only by gentle thuds as Hermione continued to throw books onto one pile or the other. Ron sat watching her, and Harry looked from one to the other, unable to say anything. The measure they had taken to protect their families made him realize, more than anything else could have done, that they really were going to come with him and that they knew exactly how dangerous that would be. He wanted to tell them what that meant to him, but he simply could not find words important enough.

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

“Ginny’s probably left a speck of dust on a poxy napkin ring,” said Ron. “I dunno why the Delacours have got to come two days before the wedding.”

“Fleur’s sister’s a bridesmaid, she needs to be here for the rehearsal, and she’s too young to come on her own,” said Hermione, as she pored indecisively over *Break with a Banshee*.

“Well, guests aren’t going to help Mum’s stress levels,” said Ron.

“What we really need to decide,” said Hermione, tossing *Defensive Magical Theory* into the bin without a second glance and picking up *An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe*, “is where we’re going after we leave here. I know you said you wanted to go to Godric’s Hollow first, Harry, and I understand why, but . . . well . . . shouldn’t we make the Horcruxes our priority?”

“If we knew where any of the Horcruxes were, I’d agree with you,” said Harry, who did not believe that Hermione really understood his desire to return to Godric’s Hollow. His parents’ graves were only part of the attraction: He had a strong, though inexplicable, feeling that the place held answers for him. Perhaps it was simply because it was there that he had survived Voldemort’s Killing Curse; now that he was facing the challenge of repeating the feat, Harry was drawn to the place where it had happened, wanting to understand.

“Don’t you think there’s a possibility that Voldemort’s keeping a watch on Godric’s Hollow?” Hermione asked. “He might expect you to go back and visit your parents’ graves once you’re free to go wherever you like?”

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

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

Hermione nodded.

“He said in his note he was going to destroy it, didn’t he?”

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

“*I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.*” Harry read out.

“Well, what if he *did* finish it off?” said Ron.

“Or she.” Interposed Hermione.

“Whichever,” said Ron. “it’d be one less for us to do!”

“Yes, but we’re still going to have to try and trace the real locket, aren’t we?” said Hermione, “to find out whether or not it’s destroyed.”

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

“Well,” said Hermione, “I’ve been researching that.”

“How?” asked Harry. “I didn’t think there were any books on Horcruxes in the library?”

“There weren’t,” said Hermione, who had turned pink. “Dumbledore removed them all, but he – he didn’t destroy them.”

Ron sat up straight, wide-eyed.

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

“It – it wasn’t stealing!” said Hermione, looking from Harry to Ron with a kind of desperation. “They were still library books, even if Dumbledore had taken them off the shelves. Anyway, if he *really* didn’t want anyone to get at them, I’m sure he would have made it much harder to –“

“Get to the point!” said Ron.

“Well . . . it was easy,” said Hermione in a small voice. “I just did a Summoning Charm. You know – Accio. And – they zoomed out of Dumbledore’s study window right into the girls’ dormitory.”

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

“Just after his – Dumbledore’s – funeral,” said Hermione in an even smaller voice. “Right after we agreed we’d leave school and go and look for the Horcruxes. When I went back upstairs to get my things it – it just occurred to me that the more we knew about them, the better it would be . . . and I was alone in there . . . so I tried . . . and it worked. They flew straight in through the open window and I – I packed them.”

She swallowed and then said imploringly, “I can’t believe Dumbledore would have been angry, it’s not as though we’re going to use the information to make a Horcrux, is it?”

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

Hermione rummaged for a moment and then extracted from the pile a large volume, bound in faded black leather. She looked a little nauseated and held it as gingerly as if it were something recently dead.

“This is the one that gives explicit instructions on how to make a Horcrux. *Secrets of the Darkest Art* – it’s a horrible book, really awful, full of evil magic. I wonder when Dumbledore removed it from the library. . . . if he didn’t do it until he was headmaster, I bet Voldemort got all the instruction he needed from here.”

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

“He only approached Slughorn to find out what would happen if you split your soul into seven,” said Harry. “Dumbledore was sure Riddle already knew how to make a Horcrux by the time he asked Slughorn about them. I think you’re right, Hermione, that could easily have been where he got the information.”

“And the more I’ve read about them,” said Hermione, “the more horrible they seem, and the less I can believe that he actually made six. It warns in this book how unstable you make the rest of your soul by ripping it, and that’s just by making one Horcrux!”

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

“Isn’t there any way of putting yourself back together?” Ron asked.

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

“Why? How do you do it?” asked Harry.

“Remorse,” said Hermione. “You’ve got to really feel what you’ve done. There’s a footnote. Apparently the pain of it can destroy you. I can’t see Voldemort attempting it somehow, can you?”

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

“Yes,” said Hermione, now turning the fragile pages as if examining rotting entrails, “because it warns Dark wizards how strong they have to make the enchantments

on them. From all that I've read, what Harry did to Riddle's diary was one of the few really foolproof ways of destroying a Horcrux."

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

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

"It doesn't have to be a basilisk fang," said Hermione patiently. "It has to be something so destructive that the Horcrux can't repair itself. Basilisk venom only has one antidote, and it's incredibly rare –"

"– phoenix tears," said Harry, nodding.

"Exactly," said Hermione. "Our problem is that there are very few substances as destructive as basilisk venom, and they're all dangerous to carry around with you. That's a problem we're going to have to solve, though, because ripping, smashing, or crushing a Horcrux won't do the trick. You've got to put it beyond magical repair."

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

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

Seeing that Harry and Ron looked thoroughly confused, Hermione hurried on. "Look, if I picked up a sword right now, Ron, and ran you through with it, I wouldn't damage your soul at all."

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

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

"That diary sort of died when I stabbed it," said Harry, remembering ink pouring like blood from the punctured pages, and the screams of the piece of Voldemort's soul as it vanished.

"And once the diary was properly destroyed, the bit of soul trapped in it could no longer exist. Ginny tried to get rid of the diary before you did, flushing it away, but obviously it came back good as new."

"Hang on," said Ron, frowning. "The bit of soul in that diary was possessing Ginny, wasn't it? How does that work, then?"

"While the magical container is still intact, the bit of soul inside it can flit in and out of someone if they get too close to the object. I don't mean holding it for too long, it's nothing to do with touching it," she added before Ron could speak. "I mean close emotionally. Ginny poured her heart out into that diary, she made herself incredibly vulnerable. You're in trouble if you get too fond of or dependent on the Horcrux."

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

His voice trailed away: He was thinking of all the things he should have asked Dumbledore, and of how, since the headmaster had died, it seemed to Harry that he had wasted so many opportunities when Dumbledore had been alive, to find out more . . . to find out everything. . . .

The silence was shattered as the bedroom door flew open with a wall-shaking crash. Hermione shrieked and dropped *Secrets of the Darkest Art*; Crookshanks streaked under the bed, hissing indignantly; Ron jumped off the bed, skidded on a discarded

Chocolate Frog wrapper, and smacked his head on the opposite wall; and Harry instinctively dived for his wand before realizing that he was looking up at Mrs. Weasley, whose hair was disheveled and whose face was contorted with rage.

"I'm so sorry to break up this cozy little gathering," she said, her voice trembling. "I'm sure you all need your rest . . . but there are wedding presents stacked in my room that need sorting out and I was under the impression that you had agreed to help."

"Oh yes," said Hermione, looking terrified as she lept to her feet, sending books flying in every direction. "we will . . . we're sorry . . ."

With an anguished look at Harry and Ron, Hermione hurried out of the room after Mrs. Weasley.

"it's like being a house-elf," complained Ron in an undertone, still massaging his head as he and Harry followed. "Except without the job satisfaction. The sooner this wedding's over, the happier, I'll be."

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

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

The Delacours arrived the following morning at eleven o' clock. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were feeling quite resentful toward Fleur's family by this time; and it was with ill grace that Ron stumped back upstairs to put on matching socks, and Harry attempted to flatten his hair. Once they had all been deemed smart enough, they trooped out into the sunny backyard to await the visitors.

Harry had never seen the place looking so tidy. The rusty cauldrons and old Wellington boots that usually littered the steps by the back door were gone, replaced by two new Flutterby bushes standing either side of the door in large pots; though there was no breeze, the leaves waved lazily, giving an attractive rippling effect. The chickens had been shut away, the yard had been swept, and the nearby garden had been pruned, plucked, and generally spruced up, although Harry, who liked it in its overgrown state, thought that it looked rather forlorn without its usual contingent of capering gnomes.

He had lost track of how many security enchantments had been placed upon the Burrow by both the Order and the Ministry; all he knew was that it was no longer possible for anybody to travel by magic directly into the place. Mr. Weasley had therefore gone to meet the Delacours on top of a nearby hill, where they were to arrive by Portkey. The first sound of their approach was an unusually high-pitched laugh, which turned out to be coming from Mr. Weasley, who appeared at the gate moments later, laden with luggage and leading a beautiful blonde woman in long, leaf green robes, who could be Fleur's mother.

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

Monsieur Delacour was nowhere near as attractive as his wife; he was a head shorter and extremely plumb, with a little, pointed black beard. However, he looked good-natured. Bouncing towards Mrs. Weasley on high-heeled boots, he kissed her twice on each cheek, leaving her flustered.

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

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

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

“Dear lady!” said Monsieur Delacour, still holding Mrs. Weasley’s hand between his own two plump ones and beaming. “We are most honored at the approaching union of our two families! Let me present my wife, Apolline.”

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

“*Enchantée*,” she said. “Your ‘usband ‘as been telling us such amusing stories!”

Mr. Weasley gave a maniacal laugh; Mrs. Weasley threw him a look, upon which he became immediately silent and assumed an expression appropriate to the sickbed of a close friend.

“And, of course, you ‘ave met my leetle daughter, Gabrielle!” said Monsieur Delacour. Gabrielle was Fleur in miniature; eleven years old, with waist-length hair of pure, silvery blonde, she gave Mrs. Weasley a dazzling smile and hugged her, then threw Harry a glowing look, batting her eyelashes. Ginny cleared her throat loudly.

“Well, come in, do!” said Mrs. Weasley brightly, and she ushered the Delacours into the house, with many “No, please!”s and “After you!”s and “Not at all!”s.

The Delacours, it soon transpired, were helpful, pleasant guests. They were pleased with everything and keen to assist with the preparations for the wedding. Monsieur Delacour pronounced everything from the seating plan to the bridesmaids’ shoes “*Charmant!*” Madame Delacour was most accomplished at household spells and had the oven properly cleaned in a trice; Gabrielle followed her elder sister around, trying to assist in any way she could and jabbering away in rapid French.

On the downside, the Burrow was not built to accommodate so many people. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were now sleeping in the sitting room, having shouted down Monsieur and Madame Delacour’s protests and insisted they take their bedroom. Gabrielle was sleeping with Fleur in Percy’s old room, and Bill would be sharing with Charlie, his best man, once Charlie arrived from Romania. Opportunities to make plans together became virtually nonexistent, and it was in desperation that Harry, Ron and Hermione took to volunteering to feed the chickens just to escape the overcrowded house.

“But she *still* won’t leave us alone!” snarled Ron, and their second attempt at a meeting in the yard was foiled by the appearance of Mrs. Weasley carrying a large basket of laundry in her arms.

“Oh, good, you’ve fed the chickens,” she called as she approached them. “We’d better shut them away again before the men arrive tomorrow . . . to put up the tent for the wedding,” she explained, pausing to lean against the henhouse. She looked exhausted. “Millamant’s Magic Marquees . . . they’re very good. Bill’s escorting them. . . . You’d better stay inside while they’re here, Harry. I must say it does complicate organizing a wedding, having all these security spells around the place.”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry humbly.

“Oh, don’t be silly, dear!” said Mrs. Weasley at once. “I didn’t mean – well, your safety’s much more important! Actually, I’ve been wanting to ask you how you want to celebrate your birthday, Harry. Seventeen, after all, it’s an important day. . . .”

“I don’t want a fuss,” said Harry quickly, envisaging the additional strain this would put on them all. “Really, Mrs. Weasley, just a normal dinner would be fine. . . . It’s the day before the wedding. . . .”

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

“That’d be great,” said Harry. “But please, don’t go to loads of trouble.”

“Not at all, not at all . . . It’s no trouble. . . .”

She looked at him, a long, searching look, then smiled a little sadly, straightened up, and walked away. Harry watched as she waved her wand near the washing line, and the damp clothes rose into the air to hang themselves up, and suddenly he felt a great wave of remorse for the inconvenience and the pain he was giving her.

Chapter Seven

The Will of Albus Dumbledore

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

"Oi, wake'up."

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

"You were muttering in your sleep."

"Was I?"

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

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

"Who's Gregorovitch?"

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

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

"I think Voldemort's looking for him."

"Poor bloke," said Ron fervently.

Harry sat up, still rubbing his scar, now wide awake. He tried to remember exactly what he had seen in the dream, but all that came back was a mountainous horizon and the outline of the little village cradled in a deep valley.

"I think he's abroad."

"Who, Gregorovitch?"

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

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

Ron sounded worried.

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

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

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

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

"Who?"

"Dragomir Gorgovitch, Chaser, transferred to the Chudley Cannons for a record fee two years ago. Record holder for most Quaffle drops in a season."

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

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

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

Harry seized the wand lying beside his camp bed, pointed it at the cluttered desk where he had left his glasses, and said, "Avvio Glasses!" Although they were only around a foot away, there was something immensely satisfying about seeing them zoom toward him, at least until they poked him in the eye.

"Slick," snorted Ron.

Reveling in the removal of his Trace, Harry sent Ron's possessions flying around the room, causing Pigwidgeon to wake up and flutter excitedly around his cage. Harry also tried tying the laces of his trainers by magic (the resultant knot took several minutes to untie by hand) and, purely for the pleasure of it, turned the orange robes on Ron's Chudley Cannons posters bright blue.

"I'd do your fly by hand, though," Ron advised Harry, sniggering when Harry immediately checked it. "Here's your present. Unwrap it up here, it's not for my mother's eyes."

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

"This isn't your average book," said Ron. "It'd pure gold: Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches. Explains everything you need to know about girls. If only I'd had this last year I'd have known exactly how to get rid of Lavender and I would've known how to get going with... Well, Fred and George gave me a copy, and I've learned a lot. You'd be surprised, it's not all about wandwork, either."

When they arrived in the kitchen they found a pile of presents waiting on the table. Bill and Monsieur Delacour were finishing their breakfasts, while Mrs. Weasley stood chatting to them over the frying pan.

"Arthur told me to wish you a happy seventeenth, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley, beaming at him. "He had to leave early for work, but he'll be back for dinner. That's our present on top."

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

"It's traditional to give a wizard a watch when he comes of age," said Mrs. Weasley, watching him anxiously from beside the cooker. "I'm afraid that one isn't new like Ron's, it was actually my brother Fabian's and he wasn't terribly careful with his possessions, it's a bit dented on the back, but--"

The rest of her speech was lost; Harry had got up and hugged her. He tried to put a lot of unsaid things into the hug and perhaps she understood them, because he patted his cheek clumsily when he released her, then waved her wand in a slightly random way, causing half a pack of bacon to flop out of the frying pan onto the floor.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" said Hermione, hurrying into the kitchen and adding her own present to the top of the pile. "It's not much, but I hope you like it. What did you get him?" she added to Ron, who seemed not to hear her.

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

She had bought him a new Sneakoscope. The other packages contained an enchanted razor from Bill and Fleur ("Ah yes, zis will give you ze smoothest shave you will ever 'ave," Monsieur Delacour assured him, "but you must tell it clearly what you want...ozzerwise you might find you 'ave a leetle less hair zan you would like..."), chocolates from the Delacours, and an enormous box of the latest Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes merchandise from Fred and George.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione did not linger at the table, as the arrival of Madame Delacour, Fleur, and Gabrielle made the kitchen uncomfortably crowded.

"I'll pack these for you," Hermione said brightly, taking Harry's presents out of his arms as the three of them headed back upstairs. "I'm nearly done, I'm just waiting for the rest of your underpants to come out of the wash, Ron--"

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

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

It was Ginny. Ron came to an abrupt halt, but Hermione took him by the elbow and tugged him on up the stairs. Feeling nervous, Harry followed Ginny into her room.

He had never been inside it before. It was small, but bright. There was a large poster of the Wizarding band the Weird Sisters on one wall, and a picture of Gwenog Jones, Captain of the all-witch Quidditch team the Holyhead Harpies, on the other. A desk stood facing the open window, which looked out over the orchard where he and Ginny had once played a two-a-side Quidditch with Ron and Hermione, and which now housed a large, pearly white marquee. The golden flag on top was level with Ginny's window.

Ginny looked up into Harry's face, took a deep breath, and said, "Happy seventeenth."

"Yeah...thanks."

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

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

She ignored this. He could not blame her.

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

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

She disregarded this too.

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

He chanced a glance at her. She was not tearful; that was one of the many wonderful things about Ginny, she was rarely weepy. He had sometimes thought that having six brothers must have toughened her up.

She took a step closer to him.

"So then I thought, I'd like you to have something to remember me by, you know, if you meet some veela when you're off doing whatever you're doing."

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

"There's the silver lining I've been looking for," she whispered, and then she was kissing him as she had never kissed him before, and Harry was kissing her back, and it was blissful oblivion better than firewhisky; she was the only real thing in the world, Ginny, the feel of her, one had at her back and one in her long, sweet-smelling hair--

The door banged open behind them and they jumped apart.

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

"Ron!" Hermione was just behind him, slight out of breath. There was a strained silence, then Ginny had said in a flat little voice,

"Well, happy birthday anyway, Harry."

Ron's ears were scarlet; Hermione looked nervous. Harry wanted to slam the door in their faces, but it felt as though a cold draft had entered the room when the door opened, and his shining moment had popped like a soap bubble. All the reasons for ending his relationship with Ginny, for staying well away from her, seemed to have slunk inside the room with Ron, and all happy forgetfulness was gone.

He looked at Ginny, wanting to say something, though he hardly knew what, but she had turned her back on him. He thought that she might have succumbed, for once, to tears. He could not do anything to comfort her in front of Ron.

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

Ron marched downstairs, though the still-crowded kitchen and into the yard, and Harry kept pace with him all the way, Hermione trotting along behind them looking scared.

Once he reached the seclusion of the freshly mown lawn, Ron rounded on Harry.

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

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

"Ron--"

But Ron held up a hand to silence her.

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

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

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

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

As he said it, a vivid picture formed in Harry's mind of Ginny in a white dress, marrying a tall, faceless, and unpleasant stranger.

In one spiraling moment it seemed to hit him: Her future was free and unencumbered, whereas his...he could see nothing but Voldemort ahead.

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

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

Ron looked half resentful, half sheepish; he rocked backward and forward on his feet for a moment, then said, "Right then, well, that's...yeah."

Ginny did not seek another one-to-one meeting with Harry for the rest of the day, nor by any look or gesture did she show that they had shared more than polite conversation in her room. Nevertheless, Charlie's arrival came as a relief to Harry. It provided a distraction, watching Mrs. Weasley force Charlie into a chair, raise her wand threateningly, and announce that he was about to get a proper haircut.

As Harry's birthday dinner would have stretched the Burrow's kitchen to breaking point even before the arrival of Charlie, Lupin, Tonks, and Hagrid, several tables were placed end to end in the garden. Fred and George bewitched a number of purple lanterns all emblazoned with a large number 17, to hang in midair over the guests. Thanks to Mrs. Weasley's ministrations, George's wound was neat and clean, but Harry was not yet used to the dark hole in the side of his head, despite the twins' many jokes about it.

Hermione made purple and gold streamers erupt from the end of her wand and drape themselves artistically over the trees and bushes.

"Nice," said Ron, as with one final flourish of her wand, Hermione

turned the leaves on the crabapple tree to gold. "You've really got an eye for that sort of thing."

"Thank you, Ron!" said Hermione, looking both pleased and a little confused. Harry turned away, smiling to himself. He had a funny notion that he would find a chapter on compliments when he found time to peruse his copy of *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches*; he caught Ginny's eye and grinned at her before remembering his promise to Ron and hurriedly striking up a conversation with Monsieur Delacour.

"Out of the way, out of the way!" sang Mrs. Weasley, coming through the gate with what appeared to be a giant, beach-ball-sized Snitch floating in front of her. Seconds later Harry realized that it was his birthday cake, which Mrs. Weasley was suspending with her wand, rather than risk carrying it over the uneven ground. When the cake had finally landed in the middle of the table, Harry said,

"That looks amazing, Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, it's nothing, dear," she said fondly. Over her shoulder, Ron gave Harry the thumbs-up and mouthed, Good one.

By seven o'clock all the guests had arrived, led into the house by Fred and George, who had waited for them at the end of the lane. Hagrid had honored the occasion by wearing his best, and horrible, hairy brown suit. Although Lupin smiled as he shook Harry's hand, Harry thought he looked rather unhappy. It was all very odd; Tonks, beside him, looked simply radiant.

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

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

"Vaguely," said Harry, grinning up at him. "Didn't you smash down the front door, give Dudley a pig's tail, and tell me I was a wizard?"

"I forge' the details," Hagrid chortled. "All righ', Ron, Hermione?"

"We're fine," said Hermione. "How are you?"

"Ar, not bad. Bin busy, we got some newborn unicorns. I'll show yeh when yeh get back--" Harry avoided Ron's and Hermione's gazes as Hagrid rummaged in his pocket. "Here. Harry -- couldn't think what ter get teh, but then I remembered this." He pulled out a small, slightly furry drawstring pouch with a long string, evidently intended to be worn around the neck. "Mokeskin. Hide anythin' in there an' no one but the owner can get it out. They're rare, them."

"Hagrid, thanks!"

"S'nothin'," said Hagrid with a wave of a dustbin-lid-sized hand. "An' there's Charlie! Always liked him -- hey! Charlie!"

Charlie approached, running his hand slightly ruefully over his new, brutally short haircut. He was shorter than Ron, thickset, with a number of burns and scratches up his muscley arms.

"Hi, Hagrid, how's it going?"

"Bin meanin' ter write fer ages. How's Norbert doin'?"

"Norbert?" Charlie laughed. "The Norwegian Ridgeback? We call her Norberta now."

"Wha -- Norbert's a girl?"

"Oh yeah," said Charlie.

"How can you tell?" asked Hermione.

"They're a lot more vicious," said Charlie. He looked over his shoulder and dropped his voice. "Wish Dad would hurry up and get here. Mum's getting edgy."

They all looked over at Mrs. Weasley. She was trying to talk to Madame Delacour while glancing repeatedly at the gate.

"I think we'd better start without Arthur," she called to the garden at large after a moment or two. "He must have been held up at -- oh!"

They all saw it at the same time: a streak of light that came flying across the yard and onto the table, where it resolved itself into a bright silver weasel, which stood on its hind legs and spoke with Mr. Weasley's voice.

"Minister of Magic coming with me."

The Patronus dissolved into thin air, leaving Fleur's family peering in astonishment at the place where it had vanished.

"We shouldn't be here," said Lupin at once. "Harry -- I'm sorry -- I'll explain some other time--"

He seized Tonk's wrist and pulled her away; they reached the fence, climbed over it, and vanished from sight. Mrs. Weasley looked bewildered.

"The Minister -- but why--? I don't understand--"

But there was no time to discuss the matter; a second later, Mr. Weasley had appeared out of thin air at the gate, accompanied by Rufus Scrimgeour, instantly recognizable by his mane of grizzled hair.

The two newcomers marched across the yard toward the garden and the lantern-lit table, where everybody sat in silence, watching them draw closer. As Scrimgeour came within range of the lantern light. Harry saw that he looked much older than the last time that had met, scraggy and grim.

"Sorry to intrude," said Scrimgeour, as he limped to a halt before the table. "Especially as I can see that I am gate-crashing a party."

His eyes lingered for a moment on the giant Snitch cake.

"Many happy returns."

"Thanks," said Harry.

"I require a private word with you," Scrimgeour went on. "Also with Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger."

"Us?" said Ron, sounding surprised. "Why us?"

"I shall tell you that when we are somewhere more private," said Scrimgeour. "Is there such a place?" he demanded of Mr. Weasley.

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Weasley, who looked nervous. "The, er, sitting room, why don't you use that?"

"You can lead the way," Scrimgeour said to Ron. "There will be no need for you to accompany us, Arthur."

Harry saw Mr. Weasley exchange a worried look with Mrs. Weasley as he, Ron, and Hermione stood up. As they led the way back to the house in silence, Harry knew that the other two were thinking the same as he was; Scrimgeour must, somehow, have learned that the three of them were planning to drop out of Hogwarts.

Scrimgeour did not speak as they all passed through the messed kitchen and into the Burrow's sitting room. Although the garden had been full of soft golden evening light, it was already dark in here; Harry flicked his wand at the oil lamps as he entered and they illuminated the shabby but cozy room. Scrimgeour sat himself in the sagging armchair that Mr. Weasley normally occupied, leaving Harry, Ron, and Hermione to squeeze side by side onto the sofa. Once they had done so, Scrimgeour spoke.

"I have some questions for the three of you, and I think it will be best if we do it individually. If you two" -- he pointed at Harry and Hermione -- "can wait upstairs, I will start with Ronald."

"We're not going anywhere," said Harry, while Hermione nodded vigorously. "You can speak to us together, or not at all."

Scrimgeour gave Harry a cold, appraising look. Harry had the impression that the Minister was wondering whether it was worthwhile opening hostilities this early.

"Very well then, together," he said, shrugging. He cleared his throat. "I am here, as I'm sure you know, because of Albus Dumbledore's will."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another.

"A surprise, apparently! You were not aware then that Dumbledore had left you anything?"

"A-all of us?" said Ron, "Me and Hermione too?"

"Yes, all of --"

But Harry interrupted.

"Dumbledore died over a month ago. Why has it taken this long to give us what he left us?"

"Isn't it obvious?" said Hermione, before Scrimgeour could answer. "They wanted to examine whatever he's left us. You had no right to do that!" she said, and her voice trembled slightly.

"I had every right," said Scrimgeour dismissively. "The Decree for Justifiable Confiscation gives the Ministry the power to confiscate the contents of a will--"

"That law was created to stop wizards passing on Dark artifacts," said Hermione, "and the Ministry is supposed to have powerful evidence that the deceased's possessions are illegal before seizing them! Are you telling me that you thought Dumbledore was trying to pass us something cursed?"

"Are you planning to follow a career in Magical Law, Miss Granger?" asked Scrimgeour.

"No, I'm not," retorted Hermione. "I'm hoping to do some good in the world!" Ron laughed. Scrimgeour's eyes flickered toward him and away again as Harry spoke.

"So why have you decided to let us have our things now? Can't think of a pretext to keep them?"

"No, it'll be because thirty-one days are up," said Hermione at once. "They can't keep the objects longer than that unless they can prove they're dangerous. Right?"

"Would you say you were close to Dumbledore, Ronald?" asked Scrimgeour, ignoring Hermione. Ron looked startled.

"Me? Not -- not really... It was always Harry who..."

Ron looked around at Harry and Hermione, to see Hermione giving him a stop-talking-now! sort of look, but the damage was done; Scrimgeour looked as though he had heard exactly what he had expected, and wanted, to hear. He swooped like a bird of prey upon Ron's answer.

"If you were not very close to Dumbledore, how do you account for the fact that he remembered you in his will? He made exceptionally few personal bequests. The vast majority of his possessions -- his private library, his magical instruments, and other personal effects -- were left to Hogwarts. Why do you think you were singled out?"

"I...dunno," said Ron. "I...when I say we weren't close...I mean, I think he liked me..."

"You're being modest, Ron," said Hermione. "Dumbledore was very fond of you."

This was stretching the truth to breaking point; as far as Harry knew, Ron and Dumbledore had never been alone together, and

direct contact between them had been negligible. However, Scrimgeour did not seem to be listening. He put his hand inside his cloak and drew out a drawstring pouch much larger than the one Hagrid had given Harry. From it, he removed a scroll of parchment which he unrolled and read aloud.

"The Last Will and Testament of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore'... Yes, here we are... 'To Ronald Bilius Weasley, I leave my Deluminator, in the hope that he will remember me when he uses it.'"

Scrimgeour took from the bag an object that Harry had seen before: It looked something like a silver cigarette lighter, but it had, he knew, the power to suck all light from a place, and restore it, with a simple click. Scrimgeour leaned forward and passed the Deluminator to Ron, who took it and turned it over in the fingers looking stunned.

"That is a valuable object," said Scrimgeour, watching Ron. "It may even be unique. Certainly it is of Dumbledore's own design. Why would he have left you and item so rare?"

Ron shook his head, looking bewildered.

"Dumbledore must have taught thousands of students," Scrimgeour persevered. "Yet the only ones he remembered in his will are you three. Why is that? To what use did he think you would put to the Deluminator, Mr. Weasley?"

"Put out lights, I s'pose," mumbled Ron. "What else could I do with it?"

Evidently Scrimgeour had no suggestions. After squinting at Ron for a moment or two, he turned back to Dumbledore's will.

"To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard, in the hope that she will find it entertaining and instructive."

Scrimgeour now pulled out of the book a small book that looked as ancient as the copy of Secrets of the Darkest Art upstairs. Its binding was stained and peeling in places. Hermione took it from Scrimgeour without a word. She held the book in her lap and gazed at it. Harry saw that the title was in runes; he had never learned to read them. As he looked, a tear splashed onto the embossed symbols.

"Why do you think Dumbledore left you that book, Miss Granger?" asked Scrimgeour.

"He... he knew I liked books," said Hermione in a thick voice, mopping her eyes with her sleeve.

"But why that particular book?"

"I don't know. He must have thought I'd enjoy it."

"Did you ever discuss codes, or any means of passing secret messages, with Dumbledore?"

"No, I didn't," said Hermione, still wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "And if the Ministry hasn't found any hidden codes in this book in thirty-one days, I doubt that I will."

She suppressed a sob. They were wedged together so tightly that Ron had difficulty extracting his arm to put it around Hermione's shoulders. Scrimgeour turned back to the will.

"To Harry James Potter," he read, and Harry's insides contracted with a sudden excitement, "I leave the Snitch he caught in his first Quidditch match at Hogwarts, as a reminder of the rewards of perseverance and skill."

As Scrimgeour pulled out the tiny, walnut-sized golden ball, its silver wings fluttered rather feebly, and Harry could not help feeling a definite sense of anticlimax.

"Why did Dumbledore leave you this Snitch?" asked Scrimgeour.

"No idea," said Harry. "For the reasons you just read out, I suppose... to remind me what you can get if you... persevere and whatever it was."

"You think this a mere symbolic keepsake, then?"

"I suppose so," said Harry. "What else could it be?"

"I'm asking the questions," said Scrimgeour, shifting his chair a little closer to the sofa. Dusk was really falling outside now; the marquee beyond the windows towered ghostly white over the hedge.

"I notice that your birthday cake is in the shape of a Snitch," Scrimgeour said to Harry. "Why is that?"

Hermione laughed derisively.

"Oh, it can't be a reference to the fact Harry's a great Seeker, that's way too obvious," she said. "There must be a secret message from Dumbledore hidden in the icing!"

"I don't think there's anything hidden in the icing," said Scrimgeour, "but a Snitch would be a very good hiding place for a small object. You know why, I'm sure?"

Harry shrugged, Hermione, however, answered: Harry thought that answering questions correctly was such a deeply ingrained habit she could not suppress the urge.

"Because Snitches have flesh memories," she said.

"What?" said Harry and Ron together; both considered Hermione's Quidditch knowledge negligible.

"Correct," said Scrimgeour. "A Snitch is not touched by bare skin before it is released, not even by the maker, who wears gloves. It carries an enchantment by which it can identify the first human to lay hands upon it, in case of a disputed capture. This Snitch" -- he held up the tiny golden ball -- "will remember your touch, Potter."

It occurs to me that Dumbledore, who had prodigious magical skill, whatever his other faults, might have enchanted this Snitch so that it will open only for you."

Harry's heart was beating rather fast. He was sure that Scrimgeour was right. How could he avoid taking the Snitch with his bare hand in front of the Minister?

"You don't say anything," said Scrimgeour. "Perhaps you already know what the Snitch contains?"

"No," said Harry, still wondering how he could appear to touch the Snitch without really doing so. If only he knew Legilimency, really knew it, and could read Hermione's mind; he could practically hear her brain whizzing beside him.

"Take it," said Scrimgeour quietly.

Harry met the Minister's yellow eyes and knew he had no option but to obey. He held out his hand, and Scrimgeour leaned forward again and placed the Snitch, slowly and deliberately, into Harry's palm.

Nothing happened. As Harry's fingers closed around the Snitch, its tired wings fluttered and were still. Scrimgeour, Ron, and Hermione continued to gaze avidly at the now partially concealed ball, as if still hoping it might transform in some way.

"That was dramatic," said Harry coolly. Both Ron and Hermione laughed.

"That's all, then, is it?" asked Hermione, making to prise herself off the sofa.

"Not quite," said Scrimgeour, who looked bad tempered now. "Dumbledore left you a second bequest, Potter."

"What is it?" asked Harry, excitement rekindling.

Scrimgeour did not bother to read from the will this time.

"The sword of Godric Gryffindor," he said. Hermione and Ron both stiffened. Harry looked around for a sign of the ruby-encrusted hilt, but Scrimgeour did not pull the sword from the leather pouch, which in any case looked much too small to contain it.

"So where is it?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Unfortunately," said Scrimgeour, "that sword was not Dumbledore's to give away. The sword of Godric Gryffindor is an important historical artifact, and as such, belongs--"

"It belongs to Harry!" said Hermione hotly. "It chose him, he was the one who found it, it came to him out of the Sorting Hat--"

"According to reliable historical sources, the sword may present itself to any worthy Gryffindor," said Scrimgeour. "That does not make it the exclusive property of Mr. Potter, whatever Dumbledore may have decided." Scrimgeour scratched his badly shaven cheek, scrutinizing Harry. "Why do you think--?"

--Dumbledore wanted to give me the sword?" said Harry, struggling to keep his temper. "Maybe he thought it would look nice on my wall."

"This is not a joke, Potter!" growled Scrimgeour. "Was it because Dumbledore believed that only the sword of Godric Gryffindor could defeat the Heir of Slytherin? Did he wish to give you that sword, Potter, because he believed, as do many, that you are the one destined to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"Interesting theory," said Harry. "Has anyone ever tried sticking a sword in Voldemort? Maybe the Ministry should put some people onto that, instead of wasting their time stripping down Deluminators or covering up breakouts from Azkaban. So this is what you've been doing, Minister, shut up in your office, trying to break open

a Snitch? People are dying – I was nearly one of them – Voldemort chased me across three countries, he killed Mad-Eye Moody, but there's no word about any of that from the Ministry, has there? And you still expect us to cooperate with you!"

"You go too far!" shouted Scrimgeour, standing up: Harry jumped to his feet too. Scrimgeour limped toward Harry and jabbed him hard in the chest with the point of his wand; it singed a hole in Harry's T-shirt like a lit cigarette.

"Oi!" said Ron, jumping up and raising his own wand, but Harry said,

"No! D'you want to give him an excuse to arrest us?"

"Remembered you're not at school, have you?" said Scrimgeour breathing hard into Harry's face. "Remembered that I am not Dumbledore, who forgave your insolence and insubordination? You may wear that scar like a crown, Potter, but it is not up to a seventeen-year-old boy to tell me how to do my job! It's time you learned some respect!"

"It's time you earned it." said Harry.

The floor trembled; there was a sound of running footsteps, then the door to the sitting room burst open and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley ran in.

"We --- we thought we heard --" began Mr. Weasley, looking thoroughly alarmed at the sight of Harry and the Minister virtually nose to nose.

"—raised voices," panted Mrs. Weasley.

Scrimgeour took a couple of steps back from Harry, glancing at the hole he had made in Harry's T-shirt. He seemed to regret his loss of temper.

"It – it was nothing," he growled. "I ... regret your attitude," he said, looking Harry full in the face once more. "You seem to think that the Ministry does not desire what you – what Dumbledore – desired. We ought to work together."

"I don't like your methods, Minister," said Harry. "Remember?"

For the second time, he raised his right fist and displayed to Scrimgeour the scar that still showed white on the back of it, spelling *I must not tell lies*. Scrimgeour's expression hardened. He turned away without another word and limped from the room. Mrs. Weasley hurried after him; Harry heard her stop at the back door. After a minute or so she called, "He's gone!"

What did he want?" Mr. Weasley asked, looking around at Harry, Ron, and Hermione as Mrs. Weasley came hurrying back to them.

"To give us what Dumbledore left us," said Harry. "They've only just released the content of his will."

Outside in the garden, over the dinner tables, the three objects Scrimgeour had given them were passed from hand to hand. Everyone exclaimed over the Deluminator and the *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* and lamented the fact that Scrimgeour had refused to pass on the sword, but none of them could offer any suggestion as to why Dumbledore would have left Harry an old Snitch. As Mr. Weasley examined the Deluminator for the third of fourth time, Mrs. Weasley said tentatively, "Harry, dear, everyone's awfully hungry we didn't like to start without you... Shall I serve dinner now?"

They all ate rather hurriedly and then after a hasty chorus of "Happy Birthday" and much gulping of cake, the party broke up. Hagrid, who was invited to the wedding the following day, but was far too bulky to sleep in the overstretched Burrow, left to set up a tent for himself in a neighboring field.

"Meet us upstairs," Harry whispered to Hermione, while they helped Mrs. Weasley restore the garden to its normal state. "After everyone's gone to bed."

Up in the attic room, Ron examined his Deluminator, and Harry filled Hagrid's mokeskin purse, not with gold, but with those items he most prized, apparently worthless though some of them were the Marauder's Map, the shard of Sirius's enchanted mirror, and R.A.B.'s locket. He pulled the string tight and slipped the purse around his neck, then sat holding the old Snitch and watching its wings flutter feebly. At last, Hermione tapped on the door and tiptoed inside.

"Muffiatio," she whispered, waving her wand in the direction of the stairs.

"Thought you didn't approve of that spell?" said Ron.

"Times change," said Hermione. "Now, show us that Deluminator."

Ron obliged at once. Holding it up in front of him, he clicked it. The solitary lamp they had lit went out at once.

"The thing is," whispered Hermione through the dark, "we could have achieved that with Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder."

There was a small *click*, and the ball of light from the lamp flew back to the ceiling and illuminated them all once more.

"Still, it's cool," said Ron, a little defensively. "And from what they said, Dumbledore invented it himself!"

"I know but, surely he wouldn't have singled you out in his will just to help us turn out the lights!"

"D'you think he knew the Ministry would confiscate his will and examine everything he'd left us?" asked Harry.

"Definitely," said Hermione. "He couldn't tell us in the will why he was leaving us these things, but that will doesn't explain..."

"... why he couldn't have given us a hint when he was alive?" asked Ron.

"Well, exactly," said Hermione, now flicking through *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. "If these things are important enough to pass on right under the nose of the Ministry, you'd think he'd have left us know why... unless he thought it was obvious?"

"Thought wrong, then, didn't he?" said Ron. "I always said he was mental. Brilliant and everything, but cracked. Leaving Harry an old Snitch – what the hell was that about?"

"I've no idea," said Hermione. "When Scrimgeour made you take it, Harry, I was so sure that something was going to happen!"

"Yeah, well," said Harry, his pulse quickened as he raised the Snitch in his fingers. "I wasn't going to try too hard in front of Scrimgeour was I?"

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione.

"The Snitch I caught in my first ever Quidditch match?" said Harry. "Don't you remember?"

Hermione looked simply bemused. Ron, however, gasped, pointing frantically from Harry to the Snitch and back again until he found his voice.

"That was the one you nearly swallowed!"

"Exactly," said Harry, and with his heart beating fast, he pressed his mouth to the Snitch.

It did not open. Frustration and bitter disappointment welled up inside him: He lowered the golden sphere, but then Hermione cried out.

"Writing! There's writing on it, quick, look!"

He nearly dropped the Snitch in surprise and excitement. Hermione was quite right. Engraved upon the smooth golden surface, where seconds before there had been nothing, were five words written in the thin, slanted handwriting that Harry recognized as Dumbledore's

I open at the close.

He had barely read them when the words vanished again.

"I open at the close...." What's that supposed to mean?"

Hermione and Ron shook their heads, looking blank.

"I open at the close... at the close... I open at the close..."

But no matter how often they repeated the words, with many different inflections, they were unable to wring any more meaning from them.

"And the sword," said Ron finally, when they had at last abandoned their attempts to divine meaning in the Snitch's inscription.

"Why did he want Harry to have the sword?"

"And why couldn't he just have told me?" Harry said quietly. "I was *there*, it was right there on the wall of his office during all our talks last year! If he wanted me to have it, why didn't he just give it to me then?"

He felt as though he were sitting in an examination with a question he ought to have been able to answer in front of him, his brain slow and unresponsive. Was there something he had missed in the long talks with Dumbledore last year? Ought he to know what it all meant? Had Dumbledore expected him to understand?

"And as for this book." Said Hermione, "*The Tales of Beedle the Bard* ... I've never even heard of them!"

"You've never heard of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*?" said Ron incredulously. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not," said Hermione in surprise. "Do you know them then?"

"Well, of course I do!"

Harry looked up, diverted. The circumstance of Ron having read a book that Hermione had not was unprecedented. Ron, however, looked bemused by their surprise.

"Oh come on! All the old kids' stories are supposed to be Beedle's aren't they? 'The Fountain of Fair Fortune' ... 'The Wizard and the Hopping Pot'... 'Babbitty Rabbitty and her Cackling Stump'..."

"Excuse me?" said Hermione giggling. "What was the last one?"

"Come off it!" said Ron, looking in disbelief from Harry to Hermione. "You must've heard of Babbitty Rabbitty –"

"Ron, you know full well Harry and I were brought up by Muggles!" said Hermione. "We didn't hear stories like that when we were little, we heard 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves' and 'Cinderella' –"

"What's that, an illness?" asked Ron.

"So these are children's stories?" asked Hermione, bending against over the runes.

"Yeah." Said Ron uncertainly. "I mean, just what you hear, you know, that all these old stories came from Beedle. I dunno what they're like in the original versions."

"But I wonder why Dumbledore thought I should read them?"

Something cracked downstairs.

"Probably just Charlie, now Mum's asleep, sneaking off to regrow his hair," said Ron nervously.

"All the same, we should get to bed," whispered Hermione. "It wouldn't do to oversleep tomorrow."

"No," agreed Ron. "A brutal triple murder by the bridegroom's mother might put a bit of damper on the wedding. I'll get the light."

And he clicked the Deluminator once more as Hermione left the room.

Chapter Eight

The Wedding

Three o'clock on the following afternoon found Harry, Ron, Fred and George standing outside the great white marquee in the orchard, awaiting the arrival of the wedding guests. Harry had taken a large dose of Polyjuice Potion and was now the double of a redheaded Muggle boy from the local village, Ottery St. Catchpole, from whom Fred had stolen hairs using a Summoning Charm. The plan was to introduce Harry as "Cousin Barny" and trust to the great number of Weasley relatives to camouflage him.

All four of them were clutching seating plans, so that they could help show people to the right seats. A host of white-robed waiters had arrived an hour earlier, along with a golden jacketed band, and all of these wizards were currently sitting a short distance away under a tree. Harry could see a blue haze of pipe smoke issuing from the spot. Behind Harry, the entrance to the marquee revealed rows and rows of fragile golden chairs set on either side of a long purple carpet. The supporting poles were entwined with white and gold flowers. Fred and George had fastened an enormous bunch of golden balloons over the exact point where Bill and Fleur would shortly become husband and wife. Outside, butterflies and bees were hovering lazily over the grass and hedgerow. Harry was rather uncomfortable. The Muggle boy whose appearance he was affecting

was slightly fatter than him and his dress robes felt hot and tight in the full glare of a summer's day.

"When I get married," said Fred, tugging at the collar of his own robes, "I won't be bothering with any of this nonsense. You can all wear what you like, and I'll put a full Body Bird Curse on Mum until it's all over."

"She wasn't too bad this morning, considering," said George. "Cried a bit about Percy not being here, but who wants him. Oh blimey, brace yourselves = here they come, look."

Brightly colored figures were appearing, one by one out of nowhere at the distant boundary of the yard. Within minutes a procession had formed, which began to snake its way up through the garden toward the marquee. Exotic flowers and bewitched birds fluttered on the witches' hats, while precious gems glittered from many of the wizards' cravats; a hum of excited chatter grew louder and louder, drowning the sound of the bees as the crowd approached the tent.

"Excellent, I think I see a few veela cousins," said George, craning his neck for a better look. "They'll need help understanding our English customs, I'll look after them...."

"Not so fast, Your Holeyness," said Fred, and darting past the gaggle of middle-aged witches heading for the procession, he said, "Here – *permettez moi* to assister vous," to a pair of pretty French girls, who giggled and allowed him to escort them inside. George was left to deal with the middle-aged witches and Ron took charge of Mr. Weasley's old Ministry-colleague Perkins, while a rather deaf old couple fell to Harry's lot.

"Wotcher," said a familiar voice as he came out of the marquee again and found Tonks and Lupin at the front of the queue. She had turned blonde for the occasion. "Arthur told us you were the one with the curly hair. Sorry about last night," she added in a whisper as Harry led them up the aisle. "The Ministry's being very anti-werewolf at the museum and we thought our presence might not do you any favors."

"It's fine, I understand," said Harry, speaking more to Lupin than Tonks. Lupin gave him a swift smile, but as they turned away Harry saw Lupin's face fall again into lines of misery. He did not understand it, but there was no time to dwell on the matter. Hagrid was causing a certain amount of disruption. Having misunderstood Fred's directions as he had sat himself, not upon the magically enlarged and reinforced seat set aside for him in the back row, but on five sets that now resembled a large pile of golden matchsticks.

While Mr. Weasley repaired the damage and Hagrid shouted apologies to anybody who would listen, Harry hurried back to the entrance to find Ron face-to-face with a most eccentric-looking wizard. Slightly cross-eyed, with shoulder-length white hair the texture of candyfloss, he wore a cap whose tassel dangled in front of his nose and robes of an eye-watering shade of egg-yolk yellow. An odd symbol, rather like a triangular eye, glistened from a golden chain around his neck.

"Xenophilius Lovegood," he said, extending a hand to Harry, "my daughter and I live just over the hill, so kind of the good Weasleys to invite us. But I think you know my Luna?" he added to Ron.

"Yes," said Ron. "Isn't she with you?"

“She lingered in that charming little garden to say hello to the gnomes, such a glorious infestation! How few wizards realize just how much we can learn from the wise little gnomes – or, to give them their correct name, the Gernumbli gardensi.”

“Ours do know a lot of excellent swear words,” said Ron, “but I think Fred and George taught them those.”

He led a party of warlocks into the marquee as Luna rushed up.

“Hello, Harry!” she said.

“Er – my name’s Barry,” said Harry, flummoxed.

“Oh, have you changed that too?” she asked brightly.

“How did you know -?”

“Oh, just your expression,” she said.

Like her father, Luna was wearing bright yellow robes, which she had accessorized with a large sunflower in her hair. Once you get over the brightness of it all, the general effect was quite pleasant. At least there were no radishes dangling from her ears.

Xenophilius, who was deep in conversation with an acquaintance, had missed the exchange between Luna and Harry. Bidding the wizard farewell, he turned to his daughter, who held up her finger and said, “Daddy, look – one of the gnomes actually bit me.”

“How wonderful! Gnome saliva is enormously beneficial.” Said Mr. Lovegood, seizing Luna’s outstretched fingers and examining the bleeding puncture marks. “Luna, my love, if you should feel any burgeoning talent today – perhaps an unexpected urge to sing opera or to declaim in Mermish – do not repress it! You may have been gifted by the Gernumblies!”

Ron, passing them in the opposite direction let out a loud snort.

“Ron can laugh,” said Luna serenely as Harry led her and Xenophilius toward their seats, “but my father has done a lot of research on Gernumbli magic.”

“Really?” said Harry, who had long since decided not to challenge Luna or her father’s peculiar views. “Are you sure you don’t want to put anything on that bite, though?”

“Oh, it’s fine,” said Luna, sucking her finger in a dreamy fashion and looking Harry up and down. “You look smart. I told Daddy most people would probably wear dress robes, but he believes you ought to wear sun colors to a wedding, for luck, you know.”

As she drifted off after her father, Ron reappeared with an elderly witch clutching his arm. Her beaky nose, red-rimmed eyes, and leathery pink hat gave her the look of a bad-tempered flamingo.

“...and your hair’s much too long, Ronald, for a moment I thought you were Ginevra. Merlin’s beard, what is Xenophilius Lovegood wearing? He looks like an omelet. And who are you?” she barked at Harry.

“Oh yeah, Auntie Muriel, this is our cousin Barny.”

“Another Weasley? You breed like gnomes. Isn’t Harry Potter here? I was hoping to meet him. I thought he was a friend of yours, Ronald, or have you merely been boasting?”

“No – he couldn’t come –“

“Hmm. Made an excuse, did he? Not as gormless as he looks in press photographs, then. I’ve just been instructing the bride on how best to wear my tiara,”

she shouted at Harry. “Goblin-made, you know, and been in my family for centuries. She’s a good-looking girl, but still – *French*. Well, well, find me a good seat, Ronald, I am a hundred and seven and I ought not to be on my feet too long.”

Ron gave Harry a meaningful look as he passed and did not reappear for some time. When next they met at the entrance, Harry had shown a dozen more people to their places. The Marquee was nearly full now and for the first time there was no queue outside.

“Nightmare, Muriel is,” said Ron, mopping his forehead on his sleeve. “She used to come for Christmas every year, then, thank God, she took offense because Fred and George set off a Durgbomb under her chair at diner. Dad always says she’ll have written them out of her will – like they care, they’re going to end up richer than anyone in the family, rate they’re going... Wow,” he added, blinking rather rapidly as Hermione came hurrying toward them. “You look great!”

“Always the tone of surprise,” said Hermione, though she smiled. She was wearing a floaty, lilac-colored dress with matching high heels; her hair was sleek and shiny. “Your Great-Aunt Muriel doesn’t agree, I just met her upstairs while she was giving Fleur the tiara. She said, ‘Oh dear, is this the Muggle-born?’ and then, ‘Bad posture and skinny ankles.’”

“Don’t take it personally, she’s rude to everyone,” said Ron.

“Talking about Muriel?” inquired George, reemerging from the marquee with Fred. “Yeah, she’s just told me my ears are lopsided. Old bat. I wish old Uncle Bilius was still with us, though; he was a right laugh at weddings.”

“Wasn’t he the one who saw a Grim and died twenty-four hours later?” asked Hermione.

“Well, yeah, he went a bit odd toward the end,” conceded George.

“But before he went loopy he was the life and soul of the party,” said Fred. “He used to down an entire bottle of fire whisky, then run onto the dance floor, hoist up his robes, and start pulling bunches of flowers out of his –“

“Yes, he sounds a real charmer,” said Hermione, while Harry roared with laughter.

“Never married, for some reason,” said Ron.

“yea maze me,” said Hermione.

They were all laughing so much that none of them noticed the latecomer, a dark-haired young man with a large, curved nose and thick black eyebrows, until he held out his invitation to Ron and said, with his eyes on Hermione, “You look vunderful.”

“Viktor!” she shrieked, and dropped her small beaded bag, which made a loud thump quite disproportionate to its size. As she scrambled, blushing, to pick it up, she said “I didn’t know you were – goodness – it’s lovely to see – how are you?”

Ron’s ears had turned bright red again. After glancing at Krum’s invitation as if he did not believe a word of it, he said, much too loudly, “how come you’re here?”

“Fleur invited me,” said Krum, eyebrows rised.

Harry, who had no grudge against Krum, shook hands; then feeling that it would be prudent to remove Krum from Ron’s vicinity, offered to show him his seat.

“your friend is not pleased to see me,” said Krum, as they entered the now packed marquee. “Or is he a relative?” he added with a glance at Harry’s red curly hair.

“Cousin.” Harry muttered, but Krum was not really listening. His appearance was causing a stir, particularly amongst the vela cousins: He was, after all, a famous

Quidditch player. While people were still craning their necks to get a good look at him, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George came hurrying down the aisle.

“Time to sit down,” Fred told Harry, “or we’re going to get run over by the bride.”

Harry, Ron and Hermione took their seats in the second row behind Fred and George. Hermione looked rather pink and Ron’s ears were still scarlet. After a few moments he muttered to Harry, “Did you see he’s grown a stupid little beard?”

Harry gave a noncommittal grunt.

A sense of jittery anticipation had filled the warm tent, the general murmuring broken by occasional spurts of excited laughter. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley strolled up the aisle, smiling and waving at relatives; Mrs. Weasley was wearing a brand-new set of amethyst colored robes with a matching hat.

A moment later Bill and Charlie stood up at the front of the marquee, both wearing dress robes, with larger white roses in their buttonholes; Fred wolf-whistled and there was an outbreak of giggling from the veela cousins. Then the crowd fell silent as music swelled from what seemed to be the golden balloons.

“Ooooh!” said Hermione, swiveling around in her seat to look at the entrance.

A great collective sigh issued from the assembled witches and wizards as Monsieur Delacour and Fleur came walking up the aisle, Fleur gliding, Monsieur Delacour bouncing and beaming. Fleur was wearing a very simple white dress and seemed to be emitting a strong, silvery glow. While her radiance usually dimmed everyone else by comparison, today it beautified everybody it fell upon. Ginny and Gabrielle, both wearing golden dresses, looked even prettier than usual and once Fleur had reached for him, Bill did not look as though he had ever met Fenrir Greyback.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said a slightly singsong voice, and with a slight shock, Harry saw the same small, tuft-haired wizard who had presided at Dumbledore’s funeral, now standing in front of Bill and Fleur. “We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of two faithful souls...”

“Yes, my tiara set off the whole thing nicely,” said Aunt Muriel in a rather carrying whisper. “But I must say, Ginevra’s dress is far too low cut.”

Ginny glanced around, grinning, winked at Harry, then quickly faced the front again. Harry’s mind wandered a long way from the marquee, back to the afternoons spent alone with Ginny in lonely parts of the school grounds. They seemed so long ago; they had always seemed too good to be true, as though he had been stealing shining hours from a normal person’s life, a person without a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead....

“Do you, William Arthur, take Fleur Isabelle...?”

In the front row, Mrs. Weasley and Madame Delacour were both sobbing quietly into scraps of lace. Trumpetlike sounds from the back of the marquee told everyone that Hagrid had taken out one of his own tablecloth-sized handkerchiefs. Hermione turned around and beamed at Harry; her eyes too were full of tears.

“...then I declare you bonded for life.”

The tuft-haired wizard waved his hand high over the heads of Bill and Fleur and a shower of silver stars fell upon them, spiraling around their now entwined figures. As Fred and George led a round of applause, the golden balloons overhead burst. Birds of paradise and tiny golden bells flew and floated out of them, adding their songs and chimes to the din.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” called the tufty-haired wizard. “If you would please stand up!”

They all did so, Auntie Muriel grumbling audibly; he waved his wand again. The scars on which they had been sitting rose gracefully into the air as the canvas walls of the marquee vanished, so that they stood beneath a canopy supported by golden poles, with a glorious view of the sunlit orchard and surrounding countryside. Next, a pool of molten gold spread from the center of the tent to form a gleaming dance floor; the hovering chairs grouped themselves around small, white-clothed tables, which all floated gracefully back to earth round it, and the golden-jacketed hand trooped toward a podium.

“Smooth,” said Ron approvingly as the waiters popped up on all sides, some hearing silver trays of pumpkin juice, butterbeer, and firewhisky, others tottering piles of tarts and sandwiches.

“We should go and congratulate them!” said Hermione, standing on tiptoe to see the place where Bill and Fleur had vanished amid a crowd of well-wishers.

“We’ll have time later,” shrugged Ron, snatching three butterbeers from a passing tray and handing one to Harry. “Hermione, cophold, let’s grab a table.... Not there! Nowhere near uriel –“

Ron led the way across the empty dance floor, glancing left and right as he went; Harry felt sure that he was keeping an eye out for Krum. By the time they had reached the other side of the marquee, most of the tables were occupied: The emptiest was the one where Luna sat alone.

“All right if we join you?” asked Ron.

“oh yes,” she said happily. “Daddy’s just gone to give Bill and Fleur our present.”

“What is it, a lifetime’s supply of Gurdyroots?” asked Ron.

Hermione aimed a kick at him under the table, but caught Harry instead. Eyes watering in pain, Harry lost track of the conversation for a few moments.

The band had begun to play, Bill and Fleur took to the dance floor first, to great applause; after a while, Mr. Weasley led Madame Delacour onto the floor, followed by Mr. Weasley and Fleur’s father.

“I like this song,” said Luna, swaying in time to the waltzlike tune, and a few seconds later she stood up and glided onto the dance floor, where she revolved on the spot, quite alone, eyes closed and waving her arms.

“She’s great isn’t she?” said Ron admiringly. “Always good value.”

But the smile vanished from his face at once: Viktor Krum had dropped into Luna’s vacant seat. Hermione looked pleasurably flustered but this time Krum had not come to compliment her. With a scowl on his face he said, “Who is that man in the yellow?”

“That’s Xenophilius Lovegood, he’s the father of a friend of ours,” said Ron. His pugnacious tone indicated that they were not about to laugh at Xenophilius, despite the clear provocation. “Come and dance,” he added abruptly to Hermione.

She looked taken aback, but pleased too, and got up. They vanished together into the growing throng on the dance floor.

“Ah, they are together now?” asked Krum, momentarily distracted.

“Er – sort of,” said Harry.

“Who are you?” Krum asked.

“Barny Weasley.”

They shook hands.

“You, Barny – you know this man Lovegood well?”

“No, I only met him today. Why?”

Krum glowered over the top of his drink, watching Xenophilius, who was chatting to several warlocks on the other side of the dance floor.

“Because,” said Krum, “If he vus not a guest of Fleur’s I vould dud him, here and now, for veering that filthy sign upon his chest.”

“Sign?” said Harry, looking over at Xenophilius too. The srnge triangular eye was gleaming on his chest. “Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“Grindelvald. That is Grindelvald’s sign.”

“Grindelwald... the Dark wizard Dumbledore defeated?”

“Exactly.”

Krum’s jaw muscles worked as if he were chewing, then he said, “Grindelvald killed many people, my grandfather, for instance. Of course, he vos never powerful in this country, they said he feared Dumbledore – and rightly, seeing how he vos finished. But this” – he pointed a finger at Xenophilius – “this is his symbol, I recognized it at vunce: Grindelvald carved it into a vall at Durmstrang ver he vos a pupil there. Some idiots copied it onto their boks and clothes thinking to shock, make themselves impressive – until those of us who had lost family members to Grindelvald taught them better.”

Krum cracked his knuckles menacingly and glowered at Xenophilius. Harry felt perplexed. It seemed incredibly unlikely that Luna’s father was a supporter of the Dark Arts, and nobody else in the tent seemed to have recognized the triangular, ninlike shape.

“Are you – er – quite sure it’s Grindelwald’s -?”

“I am not mistaken,” said Krum coldly. “I walked past that sign for several years, I know it vell.”

“Well, there’s a chance,” said Harry, “that Xenophilius doesn’t actually know what the symbol means, the Lovegoods are quite... unusual. He could have easily picked it up somewhere and think it’s a cross section of the head of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack or something.”

“The cross section of a vot?”

“Well, I don’t know what they are, but apparently he and his daughter go on holiday looking for them....”

Harry felt he was doing a bad job explaining Luna and her father.

“That’s her,” he said, pointing at Luna, who was still dancing alone, waving her rms around her head like someone attempting to beat off midges.

“Vy is she doing that?” asked Krum.

“Probably trying to get rid of a Wrackspurt,” sid Harry, who recognized the symptoms.

Krum did not seem to know whether or not Harry was making fun of him. He drew his hand from inside his robe and tapped it menacingly on his thighs; sparks flew out of the end.

“Gregorovitch!” said Harry loudly, and Krum started, but Harry was too excited to care; the memory had come back to him at the sight of Krum’s wand: Ollivander taking it and examining it carefully before the Triwizard Tournament.

“Vot about him?” asked Krum suspiciously.

“He’s a wandmaker!”

“I know that,” said Krum.

“He made your wand! That’s why I thought – Quidditch –“

Krum was looking more and more suspicious.

“how do you know Gregorovitch made my wand?”

“I...I read it somewhere, I think,” said Harry. “In a – a fan magazine,” he improvised wildly and Krum looked mollified.

“I had not realized I ever discussed my vand with fans,” he said.

“So... er... where is Gregorowitch these days?”

Krum looked puzzled.

“He retired several years ago. I was one of the last to purchase a Gregorovitch vand. They are the best –although I know, of course, that your Britons set much store by Ollivander.”

Harry did not answer. He pretended to watch the dancers, like Krum, but he was thinking hard. So Voldemort was looking for a celebrated wandmaker and Harry did not have to search far for a reason. It was surely because of what Harry’s wand had done on the night that Voldemort pursued him across the skies. The holly and phoenix feather wand had conquered the borrowed wand, some thing that Ollivander had not anticipated or understood. Would Gregorowitch know better? Was he truly more skilled than Ollivander, did he know secrets of wands that Ollivander did not?

“This girl is very nice-looking,” Krum said, recalling Harry to his surroundings. Krum was pointing at Ginny, who had just joined Luna. “She is also a relative of yours?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, suddenly irritated, “and she’s seeing someone. Ejalous type. Big bloke. You wouldn’t want to cross him.”

Krum grunted.

“Vot,” he said, draining his goblet and getting to his feet again, “is the point of being an international Quidditch player if all the good-looking girls are taken?”

And he strode off leaving Harry to take a sandwich from a passing waiter and make his way around the edge of the crowded dance floor. He wanted to find Ron, to tell him about Gregorovitch, but he was dancing with Hermione out in the middle of the floor. Harry leaned up against one of the golden pillars and watched Ginny, who was now dancing with Fred and George’s friend Lee Jordan, trying not to feel resentful about the promise he had given Ron.

He had never been to a wedding before, so he could not judge how Wizarding celebrations differed from Muggle ones, though he was pretty sure that the latter would not involve a wedding cake topped with two model phoenixes that took flight when the cake was cut, or bottles of champagne that floated unsupported through the crowd. As the evening drew in, and moths began to swoop under the canopy, now lit with floating golden lanterns, the revelry became more and more uncontained. Fred and George had long since disappeared into the darkness with a pair of Fleur’s cousins; Charlie, Hagrid, and a squat wizard in a purple porkpie hat were singing “Odn the Hero” in the corner.

Wandering through the crowd so as to escape a drunken uncle of Ron’s who seemed unsure whether or not Harry was his son, Harry spotted an old wizard sitting alone at a table. His cloud of white hair made him look rather like an aged dandelion clock and was topped by a moth-eaten fez. He was vaguely familiar: Racking his brains,

Harry suddenly realized that this was Elphias Doge, member of the Order of the Phoenix and the writer of Dumbledore's obituary.

Harry approached him.

"My I sit down?"

"Of course, of course," said Doge; he had a rather high-pitched, wheezy voice.

Harry leaned in.

"Mr. Doge, I'm Harry Potter."

Doge gasped.

"My dear boy! Arthur told me you were here, disguised... I am so glad, so honored!"

In a flutter of nervous pleasure Doge poured Harry a goblet of champagne.

"I thought of writing to you," he whispered, "after Dumbledore... the shock... and for you, I am sure..."

Doge's tiny eyes filled with sudden tears.

"I saw the obituary you wrote for the *Daily Prophet*," said Harry. "I didn't realize you knew Professor Dumbledore so well."

"As well as anyone," said Doge, dabbing his eyes with a napkin. "Certainly I knew him longest, if you don't count Aberforth – and somehow, people never *do* seem to count Aberforth."

"Speaking of the *Daily Prophet*... I don't know whether you saw, Mr. Doge -?"

"Oh, please call me Elphias, dear boy."

"Elphias, I don't know whether you saw the interview Rita Skeeter gave about Dumbledore?"

Doge's face flooded with angry color.

"Oh yes, Harry, I saw it. That woman, or vulture might be a more accurate term, positively pestered me to talk to her, I am ashamed to say that I became rather rude, called her an interfering trout, which resulted, as you may have seen, in aspersions cast upon my sanity."

"Well, in that interview," Harry went on, "Rita Skeeter hinted that Professor Dumbledore was involved in the Dark Arts when he was young."

"Don't believe a word of it!" said Doge at once. "Not a word, Harry! Let nothing tarnish your memories of Albus Dumbledore!"

Harry looked into Doge's earnest, pained face, and felt, not reassured, but frustrated. Did Doge really think it was that easy, that Harry could simply *choose* not to believe? Didn't Doge understand Harry's need to be sure, to know *everything*?"

Perhaps Doge suspected Harry's feelings, for he looked concerned and hurried on, "Harry, Rita, Skeeter is a dreadful –"

But he was interrupted by a shrill cackle.

"Rita Skeeter? Oh, I love her, always read her!"

Harry and Doge looked up to see Auntie Muriel standing there, the plumes dancing on her hair, a goblet of champagne in her hand. "She's written a book about Dumbledore, you know!"

"Hello, Muriel," said Doge, "Yes, we were just discussing –"

Yea there! Give me your chair, I'm a hundred and seven!"

Noher redheaded Weasley cousin jumped off hi seat, looking alarmed, and Auntie Muriel swung it around with surprising strength and plopped herself don upon it between Doge and Harry.

“hello again, Barry or whatever your name is,” she said to Harry, “Now what were you saying about Rita Skeeter, Elphias? You know, she’s written a biography of Dumbleore? I cn’t wait to read it. I must remember to place an order at Flourish and Blotts!”

Doge looked stiff and solemn at this but untie Muriel drained her goblet and clicked her bony fingers at a passing waiter for a replacement. She took another large gulp o champagne, belched and then said, “There’s no need to look like a pair of stuffed frogs! Before he became so respected and respectable and all that tosh, there were some mighty funny rumors about Albus!”

“Ill-informed sniping,” said Doge, turning radish-colored again.

“You would say that, Elphias,” cackled Auntie Muriel. “I noticed how you skated over the sticky patches in that obituary of yours!”

“I’m sorry you think so,” said Doge, more coldly still. “I assure you I was writing from the heart.”

“oh, we all know you worshipped Dumbleore; I daresay you’ll still think he was a saint even if it does turn out that he did away with his Squib sister!”

“*Muriel!*” exclaimed Doge.

A chill that had nothing to do with the iced champagne was stealing through Harry’s chest.

“What do you mean?” he asked Muriel. “Who said his sister was a Squib? I thought she was ill?”

“Thought wrong, then, didn’t you, Barry!” said Auntie Muriel, looking delighted at the effect she had produced. “Anyway, how could you expect to know anything about it! IT all happened years and years before you were even thought of, my dear, and the truth is that those of us who were alive then never knew what really happened. That’s why I can’t wait to find out what Skeeter’s unearthed! Dumbledore kept that sister of his quiet for a long time!”

“Untrue!” wheezed Doge, “Absolutely untrue!”

“He never told me his sister as a Squib,” said Harry, without thinking, still cod insie.

“And why on earth would he tell you?” screeched Muriel, swaying a little in her seat as she attempted to focus upon Harry.

“The reason Albus never spoke about Ariana,” began Elphias in a voice stiff with emotion, “is, I should have thought, quite clear. He was so devastated by her death –“

“Why did nobody ever see her, Elphias?” squawked Muriel, “Why did half of us never even know she existed, until they carried the coffin out of the house and held a funeral for her? Where was saintly Albus while Ariana was locked in the cellar? Off being brilliant at Hogwarts, and never mind what was going on in his own house!”

“What d’you mean, locked in the cellar?” asked Harry. “What is this?”

Doge looked wretched. Auntie Muriel cackled again and answered Harry.

“Dumbledore’s mother was a terrifying woman, simply terrifying. Muggle-born, though I heard she pretended otherwise-“

“She never pretended anything of the sort! Kendra was a fine woman,” whispered Doge miserably, but Auntie Muriel ignored him.

“- proud and very domineering, the sort of witch who would have been mortified to produce a Squib-“

:Ariana was not a Squib!” wheezed Doge.

“So you say, Elphias, but explain, then, why she never attended Hogwarts!” said Auntie Muriel. She turned back to Harry. “In our day, Squibs were often hushed up, thought to take it to the extreme of actually imprisoning a little girl in the house and pretending she didn’t exist –“

“I tell you, that’s not what happened!” said Doge, but Auntie Muriel steamrolled on, still addressing Harry.

Squibs were usually shipped off to Muggle schools and encouraged to integrate into the Muggle community... much kinder than trying to find them a place in the Wizarding world, where they must always be second class, but naturally Kendra Dumbledore wouldn’t have dreamed of letting her daughter go to a Muggle school –“

“Ariana was delicate!” said Doge desperately. “Her health was always too poor to permit her –“

“- to permit her to leave the house?” cackled Muriel. “And yet she was never taken to St. Mungo’s and no Healer was ever summoned to see her!”

“Really, Muriel, how can you possibly know whether –“

“For your information, Elphias, my cousin Lancelot was a Healer at St. Mungo’s at the time, and he told my family in strictest confidence that Ariana had never been seen there. All most suspicious, Lancelot thought!”

Doge looked to be on the verge of tears. Auntie Muriel, who seemed to be enjoying herself hugely, snapped her fingers for more champagne. Numbly Harry thought of how the Dursleys had once shut him up, locked him away, kept him out of sight, all for the crime of being a wizard. Had Dumbledore’s sister suffered the same fate in reverse: imprisoned for her lack of magic? And had Dumbledore truly left her to her fate while he went off to Hogwarts to prove himself brilliant and talented?

“Now, if Kendra hadn’t died first,” Muriel resumed, “I’d have said that it was she who finished off Ariana –“

“How can you, Muriel!” groaned Doge. “A mother kill her own daughter? Think what you’re saying!”

“If the mother in question was capable of imprisoning her daughter for years on end, why not?” shrugged Auntie Muriel. “But as I say, it doesn’t fit, because Kendra died before Ariana – of what, nobody ever seemed sure-“

“Yes, Ariana might have made a desperate bid for freedom and killed Kendra in the struggle,” said Auntie Muriel thoughtfully. “Shake your head all you like, Elphias. You were at Ariana’s funeral, were you not?”

“Yes I was,” said Doge, through trembling lips,” and a more desperately sad occasion I cannot remember. Albus was heartbroken-“

“His heart wasn’t the only thing. Didn’t Aberforth break Albus’ nose halfway through the service?”

If Doge had looked horrified before this, it was nothing to how he looked now. Muriel might have stabbed him. She cackled loudly and took another swig of champagne, which dribbled down her chin.

“How do you -?” croaked Doge.

“My mother was friendly with old Bathilda Bagshot,” said Auntie Muriel happily. “Mathilda described the whole thing to mother while I was listening at the door. A coffin-side brawl The way Bathilda told it, Alberforth shouted that it was all Albus’ fault that Ariana was dead and then punched him in the face. According to Bathilda, Albus did not even defend himself, and that’s odd enough in itself. Albus could have destroyed Aberforth in a duel with both hands tied behind his back.

Muriel swigged yet more champagne. The recitation of those old scandals seemed to elate her as much as they horrified Doge. Harry did not know what to think, what to believe. He wanted the truth and yet all Doge did was sit there and bleat feebly that Ariana had been ill. Harry could hardly believe that Dumbledore would not have intervened if such cruelty was happening inside his own house, and yet there was undoubtedly something odd about the story.

“And I’ll tell you something else,” Muriel said, hiccupping slightly as she lowered her goblet. “I think Bathilda has spilled the beans to Rita Skeeter. All those hints in Skeeter’s interview about an important source close to the Dumbledores – goodness knows she was there all through the Ariana business, and it would fit!”

“Bathilda, would never talk to Rita Skeeter!” whispered Doge.

“Bathilda Bagshot?” Harry said. “The author of *A History of Magic*?”

The name was printed on the front of one of Harry’s textbooks, though admittedly not one of the ones he had read more attentively.

“Yes,” said Doge, clutching at Harry’s question like a drowning man at a life heir. “A most gifted magical historian and an old friend of Albus’s.”

“Quite gaga these days, I’ve heard,” said Auntie Muriel cheerfully.

“If that is so, it is even more dishonorable for Skeeter to have taken advantage of her,” said Doge, “and no reliance can be placed on anything Bathilda may have said!”

“Oh, there are ways of bringing back memories, and I’m sure Rita Skeeter knows them all,” said Auntie Muriel “But even if Bathilda’s completely cuckoo, I’m sure she’d still have old photographs, maybe even letters. She knew the Dumbledores for years.... Well worth a trip to Godric’s Hollow, I’d have thought.”

Harry, who had been taking a sip of butterbeer, choked. Doge banged him on the back as Harry coughed, looking at Auntie Muriel through streaming eyes. Once he had control of his voice again, he asked, “Bathilda Bagshot lives in Godric’s Hollow?”

“Oh yes, she’s been there forever! The Dumbledores moved there after Percival was imprisoned, and she was their neighbor.”

“The Dumbledores lived in Godric’s Hollows?”

“Yes, Barry, that’s what I just said,” said Auntie Muriel testily.

Harry felt drained, empty. Never once, in six years, had Dumbledore told Harry that they had both lived and lost loved ones in Godric’s Hollow. Why? Were Lily and James buried close to Dumbledore’s mother and sister? Had Dumbledore visited their graves, perhaps walked past Lily’s and James’s to do so? And he had never once told Harry ... never bothered to say...

And why it was so important, Harry could not explain even to himself, yet he felt it had been tantamount to a lie not to tell him that they had this place and these experiences in common. He stared ahead of him, barely noticing what was going on

around him, and did not realize that Hermione had appeared out of the crowd until she drew up a chair beside him.

“I simply can’t dance anymore,” she panted, slipping of one of her shoes and rubbing the sole of her foot. “Ron’s gone looking to find more butterbeers. It’s a bit odd. I’ve just seen Viktor storming away from Luna’s father, it looked like they’d been arguing –” She dropped her voice, staring at him. “Harry, are you okay?”

Harry did not know where to begin, but it did not matter, at that moment, something large and silver came falling through the canopy over the dance floor. Graceful and gleaming, the lynx landed lightly in the middle of the astonished dancers. Heads turned, as those nearest it froze absurdly in mid-dance. Then the Patronus’s mouth opened wide and it spoke in the loud, deep, slow voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

“The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming.”

Chapter Nine

A Place to Hide

Everything seemed fuzzy, slow. Harry and Hermione jumped to their feet and drew their wands. Many people were only just realizing that something strange had happened; heads were still turning toward the silver cat as it vanished. Silence spread outward in cold ripples from the place where the Patronus had landed. Then somebody screamed.

Harry and Hermione threw themselves into the panicking crowd. Guests were sprinting in all directions; many were Disapparating; the protective enchantments around the Burrow had broken.

“Ron!” Hermione cried. “Ron, where are you?”

As they pushed their way across the dance floor, Harry saw cloaked and masked figures appearing in the crowd; then he saw Lupin and Tonks, their wands raised, and heard both of them shout, “*Protego!*”, a cry that was echoed on all sides –

“Ron! Ron!” Hermione called, half sobbing as she and Harry were buffered by terrified guests: Harry seized her hand to make sure they weren’t separated as a streak of light whizzed over their heads, whether a protective charm or something more sinister he did not know –

And then Ron was there. He caught hold of Hermione’s free arm, and Harry felt her turn on the spot; sight and sound were extinguished as darkness pressed in upon him; all he could feel was Hermione’s hand as he was squeezed through space and time, away from the Burrow, away from the descending Death Eaters, away, perhaps, from Voldemort himself. . . .

“Where are we?” said Ron’s voice.

Harry opened his eyes. For a moment he thought they had not left the wedding after all; They still seemed to be surrounded by people.

“Tottenham Court Road,” panted Hermione. “Walk, just walk, we need to find somewhere for you to change.”

Harry did as she asked. They half walked, half ran up the wide dark street thronged with late-night revelers and lined with closed shops, stars twinkling above them.

A double-decker bus rumbled by and a group of merry pub-goers ogled them as they passed; Harry and Ron were still wearing dress robes.

“Hermione, we haven’t got anything to change into,” Ron told her, as a young woman burst into raucous giggles at the sight of him.

“Why didn’t I make sure I had the Invisibility Cloak with me?” said Harry, inwardly cursing his own stupidity. “All last year I kept it on me and –“

“It’s okay, I’ve got the Cloak, I’ve got clothes for both of you,” said Hermione, “Just try and act naturally until – this will do.”

She led them down a side street, then into the shelter of a shadowy alleyway.

“When you say you’ve got the Cloak, and clothes . . .” said Harry, frowning at Hermione, who was carrying nothing except her small beaded handbag, in which she was now rummaging.

“Yes, they’re here,” said Hermione, and to Harry and Ron’s utter astonishment, she pulled out a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, some maroon socks, and finally the silvery Invisibility Cloak.

“How the ruddy hell – ?”

“Undetectable Extension Charm,” said Hermione. “Tricky, but I think I’ve done it okay; anyway, I managed to fit everything we need in here.” She gave the fragile-looking bag a little shake and it echoed like a cargo hold as a number of heavy objects rolled around inside it. “Oh, damn, that’ll be the books,” she said, peering into it, “and I had them all stacked by subject. . . . Oh well. . . . Harry, you’d better take the Invisibility Cloak. Ron, hurry up and change. . . .”

“When did you do all this?” Harry asked as Ron stripped off his robes.

“I told you at the Burrow, I’ve had the essentials packed for days, you know, in case we needed to make a quick getaway. I packed your rucksack this morning, Harry, after you changed, and put it in here. . . . I just had a feeling. . . .”

“You’re amazing, you are,” said Ron, handing her his bundled-up robes.

“Thank you,” said Hermione, managing a small smile as she pushed the robes into the bag. “Please, Harry, get that Cloak on!”

Harry threw his Invisibility Cloak around his shoulders and pulled it up over his head, vanishing from sight. He was only just beginning to appreciate what had happened.

“The others – everybody at the wedding –“

“We can’t worry about that now,” whispered Hermione. “It’s you they’re after, Harry, and we’ll just put everyone in even more danger by going back.”

“She’s right,” said Ron, who seemed to know that Harry was about to argue, even if he could not see his face. “Most of the Order was there, they’ll look after everyone.”

Harry nodded, then remembered that they could not see him, and said, “Yeah.” But he thought of Ginny, and fear bubbled like acid in his stomach.

“Come on, I think we ought to keep moving,” said Hermione.

They moved back up the side street and onto the main road again, where a group of men on the opposite side was singing and weaving across the pavement.

“Just as a matter of interest, why Tottenham Court Road?” Ron asked Hermione.

“I’ve no idea, it just popped into my head, but I’m sure we’re safer out in the Muggle world, it’s not where they’ll expect us to be.”

“True,” said Ron, looking around, “but don’t you feel a bit – exposed?”

“Where else is there?” asked Hermione, cringing as the men on the other side of the road started wolf-whistling at her. “We can hardly book rooms at the Leaky Cauldron, can we? And Grimmauld Place is out if Snape can get in there. . . . I suppose we could try my parents’ home, though I think there’s a chance they might check there. . . . Oh, I wish they’d shut up!”

“All right, darling?” the drunkest of the men on the other pavement was yelling. “Fancy a drink? Ditch ginger and come and have a pint!”

“Let’s sit down somewhere,” Hermione said hastily as Ron opened his mouth to shout back across the road. “Look, this will do, in here!”

It was a small and shabby all-night café. A light layer of grease lay on all the Formica-topped tables, but it was at least empty. Harry slipped into a booth first and Ron sat next to him opposite Hermione, who had her back to the entrance and did not like it: She glanced over her shoulder so frequently she appeared to have a twitch. Harry did not like being stationary; walking had given the illusion that they had a goal. Beneath the Cloak he could feel the last vestiges of Polyjuice leaving him, his hands returning to their usual length and shape. He pulled his glasses out of his pocket and put them on again.

After a minute or two, Ron said, “You know, we’re not far from the Leaky Cauldron here, it’s only in Charing Cross –“

“Ron, we can’t!” said Hermione at once.

“Not to stay there, but to find out what’s going on!”

“We know what’s going on! Voldemort’s taken over the Ministry, what else do we need to know?”

“Okay, okay, it was just an idea!”

They relapsed into a prickly silence. The gum-chewing waitress shuffled over and Hermione ordered two cappuccinos: As Harry was invisible, it would have looked odd to order him one. A pair of burly workmen entered the café and squeezed into the next booth. Hermione dropped her voice to a whisper.

“I say we find a quiet place to Disapparate and head for the countryside. Once we’re there, we could send a message to the Order.”

“Can you do that talking Patronus thing, then?” asked Ron.

“I’ve been practicing and I think so,” said Hermione.

“Well, as long as it doesn’t get them into trouble, though they might’ve been arrested already. God, that’s revolting,” Ron added after one sip of the foamy, grayish coffee. The waitress had heard; she shot Ron a nasty look as she shuffled off to take the new customers’ orders. The larger of the two workmen, who was blond and quite huge, now that Harry came to look at him, waved her away. She stared, affronted.

“Let’s get going, then, I don’t want to drink this muck,” said Ron. “Hermione, have you got Muggle money to pay for this?”

“Yes, I took out all my Building Society savings before I came to the Burrow. I’ll bet all the change is at the bottom,” sighed Hermione, reaching for her beaded bag.

The two workmen made identical movements, and Harry mirrored them without conscious thought: All three of them drew their wands. Ron, a few seconds late in realizing what was going on, lunged across the table, pushing Hermione sideways onto her bench. The force of the Death Eaters’ spells shattered the tiled wall where Ron’s head had just been, as Harry, still invisible, yelled, “*Stupefy!*”

The great blond Death Eater was hit in the face by a jet of red light: He slumped sideways, unconscious. His companion, unable to see who had cast the spell, fired another at Ron: Shining black ropes flew from his wand-tip and bound Ron head to foot – the waitress screamed and ran for the door – Harry sent another Stunning Spell at the Death Eater with the twisted face who had tied up Ron, but the spell missed, rebounded on the window, and hit the waitress, who collapsed in front of the door.

“*Expulso!*” bellowed the Death Eater, and the table behind which Harry was standing blew up: The force of the explosion slammed him into the wall and he felt his wand leave his hand as the Cloak slipped off him.

“*Petrificus Totalus!*” screamed Hermione from out of sight, and the Death Eater fell forward like a statue to land with a crunching thud on the mess of broken china, table, and coffee. Hermione crawled out from underneath the bench, shaking bits of glass ashtray out of her hair and trembling all over.

“*D-diffindo,*” she said, pointing her wand at Ron, who roared in pain as she slashed open the knee of his jeans, leaving a deep cut. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Ron, my hand’s shaking! *Diffindo!*”

The severed ropes fell away. Ron got to his feet, shaking his arms to regain feeling in them. Harry picked up his wand and climbed over all the debris to where the large blond Death Eater was sprawled across the bench.

“I should’ve recognized him, he was there the night Dumbledore died,” he said. He turned over the darker Death Eater with his foot; the man’s eyes moved rapidly between Harry, Ron and Hermione.

“That’s Dolohov,” said Ron. “I recognize him from the old wanted posters. I think the big one’s Thorfinn Rowle.”

“Never mind what they’re called!” said Hermione a little hysterically. “How did they find us? What are we going to do?”

Somehow her panic seemed to clear Harry’s head.

“Lock the door,” he told her, “and Ron, turn out the lights.”

He looked down at the paralyzed Dolohov, thinking fast as the lock clicked and Ron used the Deluminator to plunge the café into darkness. Harry could hear the men who had jeered at Hermione earlier, yelling at another girl in the distance.

“What are we going to do with them?” Ron whispered to Harry through the dark; then, even more quietly, “Kill them? They’d kill us. They had a good go just now.”

Hermione shuddered and took a step backward. Harry shook his head.

“We just need to wipe their memories,” said Harry. “It’s better like that, it’ll throw them off the scent. If we killed them it’d be obvious we were here.”

“You’re the boss,” said Ron, sounding profoundly relieved. “But I’ve never down a Memory Charm.”

“Nor have I,” said Hermione, “but I know the theory.”

She took a deep, calming breath, then pointed her wand at Dolohov’s forehead and said, “*Obliviate.*”

At once, Dolohov’s eyes became unfocused and dreamy.

“Brilliant!” said Harry, clapping her on the back. “Take care of the other one and the waitress while Ron and I clear up.”

“Clear up?” said Ron, looking around at the partly destroyed café. “Why?”

“Don’t you think they might wonder what’s happened if they wake up and find themselves in a place that looks like it’s just been bombed?”

“Oh right, yeah . . .”

Ron struggled for a moment before managing to extract his wand from his pocket.

“It’s no wonder I can’t get it out, Hermione, you packed my old jeans, they’re tight.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” hissed Hermione, and as she dragged the waitress out of sight of the windows, Harry heard her mutter a suggestion as to where Ron could stick his wand instead.

Once the café was restored to its previous condition, they heaved the Death Eaters back into their booth and propped them up facing each other. “But how did they find us?” Hermione asked, looking from one inert man to the other. “How did they know where we were?”

She turned to Harry.

“You – you don’t think you’ve still got your Trace on you, do you, Harry?”

“He can’t have,” said Ron. “The Trace breaks at seventeen, that’s Wizarding law, you can’t put it on an adult.”

“As far as you know,” said Hermione. “What if the Death Eaters have found a way to put it on a seventeen-year-old?”

“But Harry hasn’t been near a Death Eater in the last twenty-four hours. Who’s supposed to have put a Trace back on him?”

Hermione did not reply. Harry felt contaminated, tainted: Was that really how the Death Eaters had found them?

“If I can’t use magic, and you can’t use magic near me, without us giving away our position –” he began.

“We’re not splitting up!” said Hermione firmly.

“We need a safe place to hide,” said Ron. “Give us time to think things through.”

“Grimmauld Place,” said Harry.

The other two gaped.

“Don’t be silly, Harry, Snape can get in there!”

“Ron’s dad said they’ve put up jinxes against him – and even if they haven’t worked,” he pressed on as Hermione began to argue “so what? I swear, I’d like nothing better than to meet Snape!”

“But –”

“Hermione, where else is there? It’s the best chance we’ve got. Snape’s only one Death Eater. If I’ve still got the Trace on me, we’ll have whole crowds of them on us wherever else we go.”

She could not argue, though she looked as if she would have liked to. While she unlocked the café door, Ron clicked the Deluminator to release the café’s light. Then, on Harry’s count of three, they reversed the spells upon their three victims, and before the waitress or either of the Death Eaters could do more than stir sleepily, Harry, Ron and Hermione had turned on the spot and vanished into the compressing darkness once more.

Seconds later Harry’s lungs expanded gratefully and he opened his eyes: They were now standing in the middle of a familiar small and shabby square. Tall, dilapidated houses looked down on them from every side. Number twelve was visible to them, for they had been told of its existence by Dumbledore, its Secret-Keeper, and they rushed

toward it, checking every few yards that they were not being followed or observed. They raced up the stone steps, and Harry tapped the front door once with his wand. They heard a series of metallic clicks and the clatter of a chain, then the door swung open with a creak and they hurried over the threshold.

As Harry closed the door behind them, the old-fashioned gas lamps sprang into life, casting flickering light along the length of the hallway. It looked just as Harry remembered it: eerie, cobwebbed, the outlines of the house-elf heads on the wall throwing odd shadows up the staircase. Long dark curtains concealed the portrait of Sirius's mother. The only thing that was out of place was the troll's leg umbrella stand, which was lying on its side as if Tonks had just knocked it over again.

"I think somebody's been in here," Hermione whispered, pointing toward it.

"That could've happened as the Order left," Ron murmured back.

"So where are these jinxes they put up against Snape?" Harry asked.

"Maybe they're only activated if he shows up?" suggested Ron.

Yet they remained close together on the doormat, backs against the door, scared to move farther into the house.

"Well, we can't stay here forever," said Harry, and he took a step forward.

"*Severus Snape?*"

Mad-Eye Moody's voice whispered out of the darkness, making all three of them jump back in fright. "We're not Snape!" croaked Harry, before something whooshed over him like cold air and his tongue curled backward on itself, making it impossible to speak. Before he had time to feel inside his mouth, however, his tongue had unraveled again.

The other two seemed to have experienced the same unpleasant sensation. Ron was making retching noises; Hermione stammered, "That m-must have b-been the T-Tongue-Tying Curse Mad-Eye set up for Snape!"

Gingerly Harry took another step forward. Something shifted in the shadows at the end of the hall, and before any of them could say another word, a figure had risen up out of the carpet, tall, dust-colored, and terrible; Hermione screamed and so did Mrs. Black, her curtains flying open; the gray figure was gliding toward them, faster and faster, its waist-length hair and beard streaming behind it, its face sunken, fleshless, with empty eye sockets: Horribly familiar, dreadfully altered, it raised a wasted arm, pointing at Harry.

"No!" Harry shouted, and though he had raised his wand no spell occurred to him. "No! It wasn't us! We didn't kill you –"

On the word *kill*, the figure exploded in a great cloud of dust: Coughing, his eyes watering, Harry looked around to see Hermione crouched on the floor by the door with her arms over her head, and Ron, who was shaking from head to foot, patting her clumsily on the shoulder and saying, "It's all r-right. . . . It's g-gone. . . ."

Dust swirled around Harry like mist, catching the blue gaslight, as Mrs. Black continued to scream.

"*Mudbloods, filth, stains of dishonor, taint of shame on the house of my fathers –*"

"SHUT UP!" Harry bellowed, directing his wand at her, and with a bang and a burst of red sparks, the curtains swung shut again, silencing her.

"That . . . that was . . ." Hermione whimpered, as Ron helped her to her feet.

"Yeah," said Harry, "but it wasn't really him, was it? Just something to scare Snape."

Had it worked, Harry wondered, or had Snape already blasted the horror-figure aside as casually as he had killed the real Dumbledore? Nerves still tingling, he led the other two up the hall, half-expecting some new terror to reveal itself, but nothing moved except for a mouse skittering along the skirting board.

“Before we go any farther, I think we’d better check,” whispered Hermione, and she raised her wand and said, “*Homenum revelio.*”

Nothing happened.

“Well, you’ve just had a big shock,” said Ron kindly. “What was that supposed to do?”

“It did what I meant it to do!” said Hermione rather crossly. “That was a spell to reveal human presence, and there’s nobody here except us!”

“And old Dusty,” said Ron, glancing at the patch of carpet from which the corpse-figure had risen.

“Let’s go up,” said Hermione with a frightened look at the same spot, and she led the way up the creaking stairs to the drawing room on the first floor.

Hermione waved her wand to ignite the old gas lamps, then, shivering slightly in the drafty room, she perched on the sofa, her arms wrapped tightly around her. Ron crossed to the window and moved the heavy velvet curtains aside an inch.

“Can’t see anyone out there,” he reported. “And you’d think, if Harry still had a Trace on him, they’d have followed us here. I know they can’t get in the house, but – what’s up, Harry?”

Harry had given a cry of pain: His scar had burned against as something flashed across his mind like a bright light on water. He saw a large shadow and felt a fury that was not his own pound through his body, violent and brief as an electric shock.

“What did you see?” Ron asked, advancing on Harry. “Did you see him at my place?”

“No, I just felt anger – he’s really angry –“

“But that could be at the Burrow,” said Ron loudly. “What else? Didn’t you see anything? Was he cursing someone?”

“No, I just felt anger – I couldn’t tell –“

Harry felt badgered, confused, and Hermione did not help as she said in a frightened voice, “Your scar, again? But what’s going on? I thought that connection had closed!”

“It did, for a while,” muttered Harry; his scar was still painful, which made it hard to concentrate. “I – I think it’s started opening again whenever he loses control, that’s how it used to –“

“But then you’ve got to close your mind!” said Hermione shrilly. “Harry, Dumbledore didn’t want you to use that connection, he wanted you to shut it down, that’s why you were supposed to use Occlumency! Otherwise Voldemort can plant false images in your mind, remember –“

“Yeah, I do remember, thanks,” said Harry through gritted teeth; he did not need Hermione to tell him that Voldemort had once used this selfsame connection between them to lead him into a trap, nor that it had resulted in Sirius’s death. He wished that he had not told them what he had seen and felt; it made Voldemort more threatening, as though he were pressing against the window of the room, and still the pain in his scar was building and he fought it: It was like resisting the urge to be sick.

He turned his back on Ron and Hermione, pretending to examine the old tapestry of the Black family tree on the wall. Then Hermione shrieked: Harry drew his wand again and spun around to see a silver Patronus soar through the drawing room window and land upon the floor in front of them, where it solidified into the weasel that spoke with the voice of Ron's father.

"Family safe, do not reply, we are being watched."

The Patronus dissolved into nothingness. Ron let out a noise between a whimper and a groan and dropped onto the sofa: Hermione joined him, gripping his arm.

"They're all right, they're all right!" she whispered, and Ron half laughed and hugged her.

"Harry," he said over Hermione's shoulder, "I –"

"It's not a problem," said Harry, sickened by the pain in his head. "It's your family, 'course you were worried. I'd feel the same way." He thought of Ginny. "I *do* feel the same way."

The pain in his scar was reaching a peak, burning as it had back in the garden of the Burrow. Faintly he heard Hermione say "I don't want to be on my own. Could we use the sleeping bags I've brought and camp in here tonight?"

He heard Ron agree. He could not fight the pain much longer. He had to succumb.

"Bathroom," he muttered, and he left the room as fast as he could without running.

He barely made it: Bolting the door behind him with trembling hands, he grasped his pounding head and fell to the floor, then in an explosion of agony, he felt the rage that did not belong to him possess his soul, saw a long room lit only by firelight, and the giant blond Death Eater on the floor, screaming and writhing, and a slighter figure standing over him, wand outstretched, while Harry spoke in a high, cold, merciless voice.

"More, Rowle, or shall we end it and feed you to Nagisa? Lord Voldemort is not sure that he will forgive this time. . . . You called me back for this, to tell me that Harry Potter has escaped again? Draco, give Rowle another taste of our displeasure. . . . Do it, or feel my wrath yourself!"

A log fell in the fire: Flames reared, their light darting across a terrified, pointed white face – with a sense of emerging from deep water, Harry drew heaving breaths and opened his eyes.

He was spread-eagled on the cold black marble floor, his nose inches from one of the silver serpent tails that supported the large bathtub. He sat up. Malfoy's gaunt, petrified face seemed burned on the inside of his eyes. Harry felt sickened by what he had seen, by the use to which Draco was now being put by Voldemort.

There was a sharp rap on the door, and Harry jumped as Hermione's voice rang out.

"Harry, do you want your toothbrush? I've got it here."

"Yeah, great, thanks," he said, fighting to keep his voice casual as he stood up to let her in.

Chapter Ten

Kreacher's Tale

Harry woke early next morning, wrapped in a sleeping bag on the drawing room floor. A chink of sky was visible between the heavy curtains. It was the cool, clear blue of watered ink, somewhere between night and dawn, and everything was quiet except for Ron and Hermione's slow, deep breathing. Harry glanced over at the dark shapes they made on the floor beside him. Ron had had a fit of gallantry and insisted that Hermione sleep on the cushions from the sofa, so that her silhouette was raised above his. Her arm curved to the floor, her fingers inches from Ron's. Harry wondered whether they had fallen asleep holding hands. The idea made him feel strangely lonely.

He looked up at the shadowy ceiling, the cobwebbed chandelier. Less than twenty-four hours ago, he had been standing in the sunlight at the entrance to the marquee, waiting to show in wedding guests. It seemed a lifetime away. What was going to happen now? He lay on the floor and he thought of the Horcruxes, of the daunting complex mission Dumbledore had left him... Dumbledore...

The grief that had possessed him since Dumbledore's death felt different now. The accusations he had heard from Muriel at the wedding seemed to have nested in his brain like diseased things, infecting his memories of the wizard he had idolized. Could Dumbledore have let such things happen? Had he been like Dudley, content to watch neglect and abuse as long as it did not affect him? Could he have turned his back on a sister who was being imprisoned and hidden?

Harry thought of Godric's Hollow, of graves Dumbledore had never mentioned there; he thought of mysterious objects left without explanation in Dumbledore's will, and resentment swelled in the darkness. Why hadn't Dumbledore told him? Why hadn't he explained? Had Dumbledore actually cared about Harry at all? Or had Harry been nothing more than a tool to be polished and honed, but not trusted, never confided in?

Harry could not stand lying there with nothing but bitter thoughts for company. Desperate for something to do, for distraction, he slipped out of his sleeping bag, picked up his wand, and crept out of the room. On the landing he whispered, "*Lumos*," and started to climb the stairs by wandlight.

On the second landing was the bedroom in which he and Ron had slept last time they had been here; he glanced into it. The wardrobe doors stood open and the bedclothes had been ripped back. Harry remembered the overturned troll leg downstairs. Somebody had searched the house since the Order had left. Snape? Or perhaps Mundungus, who had pilfered plenty from this house both before and after Sirius died? Harry's gaze wandered to the portrait that sometimes contained Phineas Nigellus Black, Sirius's great-great grandfather, but it was empty, showing nothing but a stretch of muddy backdrop. Phineas Nigellus was evidently spending the night in the headmaster's study at Hogwarts.

Harry continued up the stairs until he reached the topmost landing where there were only two doors. The one facing him bore a nameplate reading Sirius. Harry had never entered his godfather's bedroom before. He pushed open the door, holding his wand high to cast light as widely as possible. The room was spacious and must once have been handsome. There was a large bed with a carved wooden headboard, a tall window obscured by long velvet curtains and a chandelier thickly coated in dust with candle scrubs still resting in its sockets, solid wax banging in frostlike drips. A fine film of dust

covered the pictures on the walls and the bed's headboard; a spiders web stretched between the chandelier and the top of the large wooden wardrobe, and as Harry moved deeper into the room, he heard a scurrying of disturbed mice.

The teenage Sirius had plastered the walls with so many posters and pictures that little of the walls silvery-gray silk was visible. Harry could only assume that Sirius's parents had been unable to remove the Permanent Sticking Charm that kept them on the wall because he was sure they would not have appreciated their eldest son's taste in decoration. Sirius seemed to have gone out of his way to annoy his parents. There were several large Gryffindor banners, faded scarlet and held just to underline his difference from all the rest of the Slytherin family. There were many pictures of Muggle motorcycles, and also (Harry had to admire Sirius's nerve) several posters of bikini-clad Muggle girls. Harry could tell that they were Muggles because they remained quite stationary within their pictures, faded smiles and glazed eyes frozen on the paper. This was in contrast to the only Wizarding photograph on the walls which was a picture of four Hogwarts students standing arm in arm, laughing at the camera.

With a leap of pleasure, Harry recognized his father, his untidy black hair stuck up at the back like Harry's, and he too wore glasses. Beside him was Sirius, carelessly handsome, his slightly arrogant face so much younger and happier than Harry had ever seen it alive. To Sirius's right stood Pettigrew, more than a head shorter, plump and watery-eyed, flushed with pleasure at his inclusion in this coolest of gangs, with the much-admired rebels that James and Sirius had been. On James's left was Lupin, even then a little shabby-looking, but he had the same air of delighted surprise at finding himself liked and included or was it simply because Harry knew how it had been, that he saw these things in the picture? He tried to take it from the wall; it was his now, after all, Sirius had left him everything, but it would not budge. Sirius had taken no chances in preventing his parents from redecorating his room.

Harry looked around at the floor. The sky outside was growing brightest. A shaft of light revealed bits of paper, books, and small objects scattered over the carpet. Evidently Sirius's bedroom had been reached too, although its contents seemed to have been judged mostly, if not entirely, worthless. A few of the books had been shaken roughly enough to part company with the covers and sundry pages littered the floor.

Harry bent down, picked up a few of the pieces of paper, and examined them. He recognized one as part of an old edition of *A History of Magic*, by Bathilda Bagshot, and another as belonging to a motorcycle maintenance manual. The third was handwritten and crumpled. He smoothed it out.

Dear Padfoot

Thank you, thank you, for Harry's birthday present! It was his favorite by far. One year old and already zooming along on a toy broomstick, he looked so pleased with himself. I'm enclosing a picture so you can see. You know it only rises about two feet off the ground but he nearly killed the cat and he smashed a horrible vase Petunia sent me for Christmas (no complaints there). Of course James thought it was so funny, says he's going to be a great Quidditch player but we've had to pack away all the ornaments and make sure we don't take our eyes off him when he gets going.

We had a very quiet birthday tea, just us and old Bathilda who has always been sweet to us and who dotes on Garry. We were so sorry you couldn't come, but the

Order's got to come first, and Harry's not old enough to know it's his birthday anyway! James is getting a bit frustrated shut up here, he tries not to show it but I can tell – also Dumbledore's still got his Invisibility Cloak, so no chance of little excursions. If you could visit, it would cheer him up so much. Wormy was here last weekend. I thought he seemed down, but that was probably the next about the McKinnons; I cried all evening when I heard.

Bathilda drops in most days, she's a fascinating old shing with the most amazing stories about Dumbledore. I'm not sure he'd be pleased if he knew! I don't know how much to believe, actually because it seems incredible that Dumbledore

Harry's extremities seemed to have gone numb. He stood quite still, holding the miraculous paper in his nerveless fingers while inside him a kind of quiet eruptions sent joy and grief thundering its equal measure through his veins. Lurching to the bed, he sat down.

He read the letter again, but could not take in any more meaning than he had done the first time, and was reduced to staring at the handwriting itself. She had made her "g"s the same way he did. He searched through the letter for every one of them, and each felt like a friendly little wave glimpsed from behind a veil. The letter was an incredible treasure, proof that Lily Potter had lived, really lived, that her warm hand had once moved across this parchment, tracing ink into these letters, these words, words about him, Harry, her son.

Impatiently brushing away the wetness in his eyes, he reread the letter, this time concentrating on the meaning. It was like listening to a half-remembered voice.

They had a cat... perhaps it had perished, like his parents at Godric's Hollow... or else fled when there was nobody left to feed it... Sirius had bought him his first broomstick... His parents had known Bathilda Bagshot; had Dumbledore introduced them? *Dumbledore's still got his Invisibility Cloak...* there was something funny there...

Harry paused, pondering his mother's words. Why had Dumbledore taken James's Invisibility Cloak? Harry distinctly remembered his headmaster telling him years before, "I don't need a cloak to become invisible" Perhaps some less gifted Order member had needed its assistance, and Dumbledore had acted as a carrier? Harry passed on...

Wormy was here... Pettigrew, the traitor, had seemed "down" had he? Was he aware that he was seeing James and Lily alive for the last time?

And finally Bathilda again, who told incredible stories about Dumbledore. *It seems incredible that Dumbledore ---*

That Dumbledore what? But there were any number of things that would seem incredible about Dumbledore; that he had once received bottom marks in a Transfiguration test, for instance or had taken up goat charming like Aberforth...

Harry got to his feet and scanned the floor: Perhaps the rest of the letter was here somewhere. He seized papers, treating them in his eagerness, with as little consideration as the original searcher, he pulled open drawers, shook out books, stood on a chair to run his hand over the top of the wardrobe, and crawled under the bed and armchair.

At last, lying facedown on the floor, he spotted what looked like a torn piece of paper under the chest of drawers. When he pulled it out, it proved to be most of the photograph that Lily had described in her letter. A black-haired baby was zooming in and

out of the picture on a tiny broom, roaring with laughter, and a pair of legs that must have belonged to James was chasing after him. Harry tucked the photograph into his pocket with Lily's letter and continued to look for the second sheet.

After another quarter of an hour, however he was forced to conclude that the rest of his mother's letter was gone. Had it simply been lost in the sixteen years that had elapsed since it had been written, or had it been taken by whoever had searched the room? Harry read the first sheet again, this time looking for clues as to what might have made the second sheet valuable. His toy broomstick could hardly be considered interesting to the Death Eaters... The only potentially useful thing he could see her was possible information on Dumbledore. *It seems incredible that Dumbledore – what?*

"Harry? Harry? *Harry!*"

"I'm here!" he called, "What's happened?"

There was a clatter of footsteps outside the door, and Hermione burst inside.

"We woke up and didn't know where you were!" she said breathlessly. She turned and shouted over her shoulder, "Ron! I've found him"

Ron's annoyed voice echoed distantly from several floors below.

"Good! Tell him from me he's a git!"

"Harry don't just disappear, please, we were terrified! Why did you come up here anyway?" She gazed around the ransacked room. "What have you been doing?"

"Look what I've just found"

He held out his mother's letter. Hermione took it out and read it while Harry watched her. When she reached the end of the page she looked up at him.

"Oh Harry..."

"And there's this too"

He handed her the torn photograph, and Hermione smiled at the baby zooming in and out of sight on the toy broom.

"I've been looking for the rest of the letter," Harry said, "but it's not here"

Hermione glanced around.

"Did you make all this mess, or was some of it done when you got here?"

"Someone had searched before me," said Harry.

"I thought so. Every room I looked into on the way up had been disturbed. What were they after, do you think?"

"Information on the Order, if it was Snape"

"But you'd think he'd already have all he needed. I mean was *in* the Order, wasn't he?"

"Well then," said Harry, keen to discuss his theory, "what about information on Dumbledore? The second page of the letter, for instance. You know this Bathilda my mum mentions, you know who she is?"

"Who?"

"Bathilda Bagshot, the author of –"

"*A History of Magic*," said Hermione, looking interested. "So your parents knew her? She was an incredible magic historian"

"And she's still alive," said Harry, "and she lives in Godric's Hollow. Ron's Auntie Muriel was talking about her at the wedding. She knew Dumbledore's family too. Be pretty interesting to talk to, wouldn't she?" There was a little too much understanding in the smile Hermione gave him for Harry's liking. He took back the letter and the

photograph and tucked them inside the pouch around his neck, so as not to have to look at her and give himself away. “I understand why you’d love to talk to her about, and Dumbledore too,” said Hermione. “But that wouldn’t really help us in our search for the Horcruxes, would it?” Harry did not answer, and she rushed on, “Harry, I know you really want to go to Godric’s Hollow, but I’m scared. I’m scared at how easily those Death Eaters found us yesterday. It just makes me feel more than ever that we ought to avoid the place where your parents are buried, I’m sure they’d be expecting you to visit it.”

“It’s not just that,” Harry said, still avoiding looking at her, “Muriel said stuff about Dumbledore at the wedding. I want to know the truth...”

He told Hermione everything that Muriel had told him. When he had finished, Hermione said, “Of course, I can see why that’s upset you, Harry –“

“I’m not upset,” he lied, “I’d just like to know whether or not it’s true or –“

“Harry do you really think you’ll get the truth from a malicious old woman like Muriel, or from Rita Skeeter? How can you believe them? You knew Dumbledore!”

“I thought I did,” he muttered.

“But you know how much truth there was in everything Rita wrote about you! Doge is right, how can you let these people tarnish your memories of Dumbledore?”

He looked away, trying not to betray the resentment he felt. There it was again: Choose what to believe. He wanted the truth. Why was everybody so determined that he should not get it?

“Shall we go down to the kitchen?” Hermione suggested after a little pause. “Find something for breakfast?”

He agreed, but grudgingly, and followed her out onto the landing and past the second door that led off it. There were deep scratch marks in the paintwork below a small sign that he had not noticed in the dark. He passed at the top of the stairs to read it. It was a porapous little sign, neatly lettered by hand the sort of thing that Percy Weasley might have stuck on his bedroom door.

*Do Not Enter
Without the Express Permission of
Regulus Arcturus Black*

Excitement trickled through Harry, but he was not immediately sure why. He read the sign again. Hermione was already a flight of stairs below him.

“Hermione,” he said, and he was surprised that his voice was so calm. “Come back up here.”

“What’s the matter?”

“R.A.B. I think I’ve found him.”

There was a gasp, and then Hermione ran back up the stairs.

“In your mum’s letter? But I didn’t see –“

Harry shook his head, pointing at Regulus’s sign. She read it, then clutched Harry’s arm so tightly that he winced.

“Sirius’s brother?” she whispered.

“He was a Death Eater,” said Harry. “Sirius told me about him, he joined up when he was really young and then got cold feet and tried to leave – so they killed him.”

“That fits!” gasped Hermione. “If he was a Death Eater he had access to Voldemort, and if he became disenchanted, then he would have wanted to bring Voldemort down!”

She released Harry, leaned over the banister, and screamed, “Ron! RON! Get up here, quick!”

Ron appeared, panting, a minute later, his wand ready in his hand.

“What’s up? If it’s massive spiders again I want breakfast before I –“

He frowned at the sign on Regulus’s door, in which Hermione was silently pointing.

“What? That was Sirius’s brother, wasn’t it? Regulus Arcturus ... Regulus ... R.A.B.! The locket – you don’t reckon -- ?”

“Let’s find out,” said Harry. He pushed the door: It was locked. Hermione pointed her wand at the handle and said, “*Alohamora.*” There was a click, and the door swung open.

They moved over the threshold together, gazing around. Regulus’s bedroom was slightly smaller than Sirius’s, though it had the same sense of former grandeur. Whereas Sirius had sought to advertise his diffidence from the rest of the family, Regulus had striven to emphasize the opposite. The Slytherin colors of emerald and silver were everywhere, draping the bed, the walls, and the windows. The Black family crest was painstakingly painted over the bed, along with its motto, TOUJOURS PUR. Beneath this was a collection of yellow newspaper cuttings, all stuck together to make a ragged collage. Hermione crossed the room to examine them.

“They’re all about Voldemort,” she said. “Regulus seems to have been a fan for a few years before he joined the Death Eaters ...”

A little puff of dust rose from the bedcovers as she sat down to read the clippings. Harry, meanwhile, had noticed another photograph: a Hogwarts Quidditch team was smiling and waving out of the frame. He moved closer and saw the snakes emblazoned on their chests: Slytherins. Regulus was instantly recognizable as the boy sitting in the middle of the front row: He had the same dark hair and slightly haughty look of his brother, though he was smaller, slighter, and rather less handsome than Sirius had been.

“He played Seeker,” said Harry.

“What?” said Hermione vaguely; she was still immersed in Voldemort’s press clippings.

“He’s sitting in the middle of the front row, that’s where the Seeker ... Never mind,” said Harry, realizing that nobody was listening. Ron was on his hands and knees, searching under the wardrobe. Harry looked around the room for likely hiding places and approached the desk. Yet again, somebody had searched before them. The drawers’ contents had been turned over recently, the dust disturbed, but there was nothing of value there: old quills, out-of-date textbooks that bore evidence of being roughly handled, a recently smashed ink bottle, its sticky residue covering the contents of the drawer.

“There’s an easier way,” said Hermione, as Harry wiped his inky fingers on his jeans. She raised her wand and said, “*Accio Locket!*”

Nothing happened. Ron, who had been searching the folds of the faded curtains, looked disappointed.

“Is that it, then? It’s not here?”

“Oh, it could still be here, but under counter-enchantments,” said Hermione. “Charms to prevent it from being summoned magically, you know.”

“Like Voldemort put on the stone basin in the cave,” said Harry, remembering how he had been unable to Summon the fake locket.

“How are we supposed to find it then?” asked Ron.

“We search manually,” said Hermione.

“That’s a good idea,” said Ron, rolling his eyes, and he resumed his examination of the curtains.

They combed every inch of the room for more than an hour, but were forced, finally, to conclude that the locket was not there.

The sun had risen now; its light dazzled them even through the grimy landing windows.

“It could be somewhere else in the house, though,” said Hermione in a rallying tone as they walked back downstairs. As Harry and Ron had become more discouraged, she seemed to have become more determined. “Whether he’d manage to destroy it or not, he’d want to keep it hidden from Voldemort, wouldn’t he? Remember all those awful things we had to get rid of when we were here last time? That clock that shot bolts at everyone and those old robes that tried to strangle Ron; Regulus might have put them there to protect the locket’s hiding place, even though we didn’t realize it at ... at ... “

Harry and Ron looked at her. She was standing with one foot in midair, with the dumbstruck look of one who had just been Obliviated: her eyes had even drifted out of focus.

“... at the time,” she finished in a whisper.

“Something wrong?” asked Ron.

“There was a locket.”

“What?” said Harry and Ron together.

“In the cabinet in the drawing room. Nobody could open it. And we ... we ... “

Harry felt as though a brick had slid down through his chest into his stomach. He remembered. He had even handled the thing as they passed it around, each trying in turn to pry it open. It had been tossed into a sack of rubbish, along with the snuffbox of Wartcap powder and the music box that had made everyone sleepy ...”

“Kreacher nicked loads of things back from us,” said Harry. It was the only chance, the only slender hope left to them, and he was going to cling to it until forced to let go. “He had a whole stash of stuff in his cupboard in the kitchen. C’mon.”

He ran down the stairs taking two steps at a time, the other two thundering along in his wake. They made so much noise that they woke the portrait of Sirius’s mother as they passed through the hall.

“*Filth! Mudbloods! Scum!*” she screamed after them as they dashed down into the basement kitchen and slammed the door behind them. Harry ran the length of the room, skidded to a halt at the door of Kreacher’s cupboard, and wrenched it open. There was the nest of dirty old blankets in which the house-elf had once slept, but they were not longer glittering with the trinkets Kreacher had salvaged. The only thing there was an old copy of *Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*. Refusing to believe his eyes, Harry snatched up the blankets and shook them. A dead mouse fell out and rolled dismally across the floor. Ron groaned as he threw himself into a kitchen chair; Hermione closed her eyes.

“It’s not over yet,” said Harry, and he raised his voice and called, “*Kreacher!*”

There was a loud *crack* and the house elf that Harry had so reluctantly inherited from Sirius appeared out of nowhere in front of the cold and empty fireplace: tiny, half human-sized, his pale skin hanging off him in folds, white hair sprouting copiously from his batlike ears. He was still wearing the filthy rag in which they had first met him, and the contemptuous look he bent upon Harry showed that his attitude to his change of ownership had altered no more than his outfit.

“Master,” croaked Kreacher in his bullfrog’s voice, and he bowed low; muttering to his knees, “back in my Mistress’s old house with the blood-traitor Weasley and the Mudblood –”

“I forbid you to call anyone ‘blood traitor’ or ‘Mudblood,’” growled Harry. He would have found Kreacher, with his snoutlike nose and bloodshot eyes, a distinctively unlovable object even if the elf had not betrayed Sirius to Voldemort.

“I’ve got a question for you,” said Harry, his heart beating rather fast as he looked down at the elf, “and I order you to answer it truthfully. Understand?”

“Yes, Master,” said Kreacher, bowing low again. Harry saw his lips moving soundlessly, undoubtedly framing the insults he was now forbidden to utter.

“Two years ago,” said Harry, his heart now hammering against his ribs, “there was a big gold locket in the drawing room upstairs. We threw it out. Did you steal it back?”

There was a moment’s silence, during which Kreacher straightened up to look Harry full in the face. Then he said, “Yes.”

“Where is it now?” asked Harry jubilantly as Ron and Hermione looked gleeful.

Kreacher closed his eyes as though he could not bear to see their reactions to his next word.

“Gone.”

“Gone?” echoed Harry, elation floating out of him, “What do you mean, it’s gone?”

The elf shivered. He swayed.

“Kreacher,” said Harry fiercely, “I order you –”

“Mundungus Fletcher,” croaked the elf, his eyes still tight shut. “Mundungus Fletcher stole it all; Miss Bella’s and Miss Cissy’s pictures, my Mistress’s gloves, the Order of Merlin, First Class, the goblets with the family crest, and – and –”

Kreacher was gulping for air: His hollow chest was rising and falling rapidly, then his eyes flew open and he uttered a bloodcurdling scream.

“—*and the locket, Master Regulus’s locket. Kreacher did wrong, Kreacher failed in his orders!*”

Harry reacted instinctively: As Kreacher lunged for the poker standing in the grate, he launched himself upon the elf, flattening him. Hermione’s scream mingled with Kreacher’s but Harry bellowed louder than both of them: “Kreacher, I order you to stay still!”

He felt the elf freeze and released him. Kreacher lay flat on the cold stone floor, tears gushing from his sagging eyes.

“Harry, let him up!” Hermione whispered.

“So he can beat himself up with the poker?” snorted Harry, kneeling beside the elf. “I don’t think so. Right. Kreacher, I want the truth: How do you know Mundungus Fletcher stole the locket?”

“Kreacher saw him!” gasped the elf as tears poured over his snout and into his mouth full of graying teeth. “Kreacher saw him coming out of Kreacher’s cupboard with his hands full of Kreacher’s treasures. Kreacher told the sneak thief to stop, but Mundungus Fletcher laughed and r-ran ... “

“You called the locket ‘Master Regulus’s,’” said Harry. “Why? Where did it come from? What did Regulus have to do with it? Kreacher, sit up and tell me everything you know about that locket, and everything Regulus had to do with it!”

The elf sat up, curled into a ball, placed his wet face between his knees, and began to rock backward and forward. When he spoke, his voice was muffled but quite distinct in the silent, echoing kitchen.

“Master Sirius ran away, good riddance, for he was a bad boy and broke my Mistress’s heart with his lawless ways. But Master Regulus had proper order; he knew what was due to the name of Black and the dignity of his pure blood. For years he talked of the Dark Lord, who was going to bring the wizards out of hiding to rule the Muggles and the Muggle-borns ... and when he was sixteen years old, Master Regulus joined the Dark Lord. So proud, so proud, so happy to serve ...

And one day, a year after he joined, Master Regulus came down to the kitchen to see Kreacher. Master Regulus always liked Kreacher. And Master Regulus said ... he said ...”

The old elf rocked faster than ever.

“... he said that the Dark Lord required an elf.”

“Voldemort needed an *elf*?” Harry repeated, looking around at Ron and Hermione, who looked just as puzzled as he did.

“Oh yes,” moaned Kreacher. “And Master Regulus had volunteered Kreacher. It was an honor, said Master Regulus, an honor for him and for Kreacher, who must be sure to do whatever the Dark Lord ordered him to do ... and then to c-come home.”

Kreacher rocked still faster, his breath coming in sobs.

“So Kreacher went to the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord did not tell Kreacher what they were to do, but took Kreacher with him to a cave beside the sea. And beyond the cave was a cavern, and in the cavern was a great black lake ... “

The hairs on the back of Harry’s neck stood up. Kreacher’s croaking voice seemed to come to him from across the dark water. He saw what had happened as clearly as though he had been present.

“... There was a boat ...”

Of course there had been a boat; Harry knew the boat, ghostly green and tiny, bewitched so as to carry one wizard and one victim toward the island in the center. This, then, was how Voldemort had tested the defenses surrounding the Horcrux, by borrowing a disposable creature, a house-elf...

“There was a b-basin full of potion on the island. The D-Dark Lord made Kreacher drink it ...”

The elf quaked from head to foot.

“Kreacher drank, and as he drank he saw terrible thing ... Kreacher’s insides burned ... Kreacher cried for Master Regulus to save him, he cried for his Mistress Black,

but the Dark Lord only laughed ... He made Kreacher drink all the potion ... He dropped a locket into the empty basin ... He filled it with more potion.”

“And then the Dark Lord sailed away, leaving Kreacher on the island ... “

Harry could see it happening. He watched Voldemort’s white, snakelike face vanishing into darkness, those red eyes fixed pitilessly on the thrashing elf whose death would occur within minutes, whenever he succumbed to the desperate thirst that the burning poison caused its victim ... But here, Harry’s imagination could go no further, for he could not see how Kreacher had escaped.

“Kreacher needed water, he crawled to the island’s edge and he drank from the black lake ... and hands, dead hands, came out of the water and dragged Kreacher under the surface ... “

“How did you get away?” Harry asked, and he was not surprised to hear himself whispering.

Kreacher raised his ugly head and looked Harry with his great, bloodshot eyes.

“Master Regulus told Kreacher to come back,” he said.

“I know – but how did you escape the Inferi?”

Kreacher did not seem to understand.

“Master Regulus told Kreacher to come back,” he repeated.

“I know, but – “

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it, Harry?” said Ron. “He Disapparated!”

“But ... you couldn’t Apparate in and out of that cave,” said Harry, “otherwise Dumbledore – “

“Elf magic isn’t like wizard’s magic, is it?” said Ron, “I mean, they can Apparate and Disapparate in and out of Hogwarts when we can’t.”

There was a silence as Harry digested this. How could Voldemort have made such a mistake? But even as he thought this, Hermione spoke, and her voice was icy.

“Of course, Voldemort would have considered the ways of house-elves far beneath his notice ... It would never have occurred to him that they might have magic that he didn’t.”

“The house-elf’s highest law is his Master’s bidding,” intoned Kreacher.

“Kreacher was told to come home, so Kreacher came home ... “

“Well, then, you did what you were told, didn’t you?” said Hermione kindly. “You didn’t disobey orders at all!”

Kreacher shook his head, rocking as fast as ever.

“So what happened when you got back?” Harry asked. “What did Regulus say when you told him what happened?”

“Master Regulus was very worried, very worried,” croaked Kreacher. “Master Regulus told Kreacher to stay hidden and not to leave the house. And then ... it was a little while later ... Master Regulus came to find Kreacher in his cupboard one night, and Master Regulus was strange, not as he usually was, disturbed in his mind, Kreacher could tell ... and he asked Kreacher to take him to the cave, the cave where Kreacher had gone with the Dark Lord ... “

And so they had set off. Harry could visualize them quite clearly, the frightened old elf and the thin, dark Seeker who had so resembled Sirius ... Kreacher knew how to open the concealed entrance to the underground cavern, knew how to raise the tiny boat:

this time it was his beloved Regulus who sailed with him to the island with its basin of poison ...

“And he made you drink the poison?” said Harry, disgusted.

But Kreacher shook his head and wept. Hermione’s hands leapt to her mouth: She seemed to have understood something.

“M-Master Regulus took from his pocket a locket like the one the Dark Lord had,” said Kreacher, tears pouring down either side of his snoutlike nose. “And he told Kreacher to take it and, when the basin was empty, to switch the lockets ...”

Kreacher’s sobs came in great rasps now; Harry had to concentrate hard to understand him.

“And he order – Kreacher to leave – without him. And he told Kreacher – to go home – and never to tell my Mistress – what he had done – but to destroy – the first locket. And he drank – all the potion – and Kreacher swapped the lockets – and watched ... as Master Regulus ... was dragged beneath the water ... and ... “

“Oh, Kreacher!” wailed Hermione, who was crying. She dropped to her knees beside the elf and tried to hug him. At once he was on his feet, cringing away from her, quite obviously repulsed.

“The Mudblood touched Kreacher, he will not allow it, what would his Mistress say?”

“I told you not to call her ‘Mudblood’!” snarled Harry, but the elf was already punishing himself. He fell to the ground and banged his forehead on the floor.

“Stop him – stop him!” Hermione cried. “Oh, don’t you see now how sick it is, the way they’ve got to obey?”

“Kreacher – stop, stop!” shouted Harry.

The elf lay on the floor, panting and shivering, green mucus glistening around his snot, a bruise already blooming on his pallid forehead where he had struck himself, his eyes swollen and bloodshot and swimming in tears. Harry had never seen anything so pitiful.

“So you brought the locket home,” he said relentlessly, for he was determined to know the full story. “And you tried to destroy it?”

“Nothing Kreacher did made any mark upon it,” moaned the elf. “Kreacher tried everything, everything he knew, but nothing, nothing would work ... So many powerful spells upon the casing, Kreacher was sure the way to destroy it was to get inside it, but it would not open ... Kreacher punished himself, he tried again, he punished himself, he tried again. Kreacher failed to obey orders, Kreacher could not destroy the locket! And his mistress was mad with grief, because Master Regulus had disappeared and Kreacher could not tell her what had happened, no, because Master Regulus had f-f-forbidden him to tell any of the f-f-family what happened in the c-cave ...”

Kreacher began to sob so hard that there were no more coherent words. Tears flowed down Hermione’s cheeks as she watched Kreacher, but she did not dare touch him again. Even Ron, who was no fan of Kreacher’s, looked troubled. Harry sat back on his heels and shook his head, trying to clear it.

“I don’t understand you, Kreacher,” he said finally. “Voldemort tried to kill you, Regulus died to bring Voldemort down, but you were still happy to betray Sirius to Voldemort? You were happy to go to Narcissa and Bellatrix, and pass information to Voldemort through them ... “

“Harry, Kreacher doesn’t think like that,” said Hermione, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand. “He’s a slave; house-elves are used to bad, even brutal treatment; what Voldemort did to Kreacher wasn’t that far out of the common way. What do wizards mean to an elf like Kreacher? He’s loyal to people who are kind to him, and Mrs. Black must have been, and Regulus certainly was, so he served them willingly and parroted their beliefs. I know what you’re going to say,” she went on as Harry began to protest, “that Regulus changed his mind ... but he doesn’t seem to have explained that to Kreacher, does he?” And I think I know why. Kreacher and Regulus’s family were all safest if they kept to the old pure-blood line. Regulus was trying to protect them all.”

“Sirius – “

“Sirius was horrible to Kreacher, Harry, and it’s no good looking like that, you know it’s true. Kreacher had been alone for such a long time when Sirius came to live here, and he was probably starving for a bit of affection. I’m sure ‘Miss Cissy’ and ‘Miss Bella’ were perfectly lovely to Kreacher when he turned up, so he did them a favor and told them everything they wanted to know. I’ve said all along that wizards would pay for how they treat house-elves. Well, Voldemort did ... and so did Sirius.”

Harry had no retort. As he watched Kreacher sobbing on the floor, he remembered what Dumbledore had said to him, mere hours after Sirius’s death: *I do not think Sirius ever saw Kreacher as a being with feelings as acute as a human’s ...*

“Kreacher,” said Harry after a while, “when you feel up to it, er ... please sit up.”

It was several minutes before Kreacher hiccupped himself into silence. Then he pushed himself into a sitting position again, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes like a small child.

“Kreacher, I am going to ask you to do something,” said Harry. He glanced at Hermione for assistance. He wanted to give the order kindly, but at the same time, he could not pretend that it was not an order. However, the change in his tone seemed to have gained her approval: She smiled encouragingly.

“Kreacher, I want you, please, to go and find Mundungus Fletcher. We need to find out where the locket – where Master Regulus’s locket is. It’s really important. We want to finish the work Master Regulus started, we want to – er – ensure that he didn’t die in vain.”

Kreacher dropped his fists and looked up at Harry.

“Find Mundungus Fletcher?” he croaked.

And bring him here, to Grimmauld Place,” said Harry. “Do you think you could do that for us?”

As Kreacher nodded and got to his feet, Harry had a sudden inspiration. He pulled out Hagrid’s purse and took out the fake Horcrux, the substitute locket in which Regulus had placed the note to Voldemort.

“Kreacher, I’d, er, like you to have this,” he said, pressing the locket into the elf’s hand. “This belonged to Regulus and I’m sure he’d want you to have it as a token of gratitude for what you—“

“Overkill, mate,” said Ron as the elf took one look at the locket, let out a howl of shock and misery, and threw himself back onto the ground.

It took them nearly half an hour to calm down Kreacher, who was so overcome to be presented with a Black family heirloom for his very own that he was too weak at the knees to stand properly. When finally he was able to totter a few steps they all

accompanied him to his cupboard, watched him tuck up the locket safely in his dirty blankets, and assured him that they would make its protection their first priority while he was away. He then made two low bows to Harry and Ron, and even gave a funny little spasm in Hermione's direction that might have been an attempt at a respectful salute, before Disapparating with the usual loud *crack*.