

Title: Harry Potter – Slytherin: The Philosopher’s Stone

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Summary: Harry Potter is sorted into Slytherin House and learns of the Philosopher’s Stone.

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Chapter 1 – The Sorting Hat

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought, *‘Not Slytherin... Gryffindor, Gryffindor!’*

“Gryffindor, eh?” said the quiet voice. “Nonsense! You could be great, you know; it’s all here in your head, no doubt about that -- better be... SLYTHERIN!”

Harry heard the Sorting Hat shout the last word and sat stunned. He heard cheers and shouts from the table at the far left but did not move, desperately wishing to hear the hat correct itself and announce any other house but Slytherin.

His mind was racing, thinking of what he could do. Just as he was about to beg the hat to pick another house, it was pulled from his head and Professor McGonagall was nudging him off the stool toward the Slytherin table. The Slytherins were all on their feet, still cheering and shouting. Some were now hooting and whistling as well.

As he made his way toward them, Harry noticed whispering and muttering from the other tables, as well as from the remaining first-years awaiting their own sorting. He glanced back at Ron as he went. Ron stared at him, looking as shocked and disappointed as Harry felt.

As Harry reached the Slytherin table, a tall boy greeted him and had Harry sit next to him at the end closest to the High Table, where they had a clear view of all the teachers.

“I’m Ambrose Avery, Head Boy. Great to have you in Slytherin. Of course, I wouldn’t have expected otherwise...” he said rather loudly while shaking Harry’s hand.

Avery continued to speak, but Harry was no longer listening. All he could think about was how disappointed he was and wanting to get back on the Hogwarts Express and go... where? The thought of going back to Privet Drive was repellant. Just thinking of it cleared his head as if he had been given smelling salts.

‘No!’ he thought, *‘I’m not going to run away like some coward. I’m staying and going to be the best Slytherin I can be!’*

He looked up at the High Table. Hagrid was at the far end and staring at him -- just like Ron had.

‘Well, let him stare,’ thought Harry, starting to feel annoyed, *‘I don’t care what he thinks.’*

Harry’s eyes worked their way down the line of teachers at the High Table. He recognized Professor Dumbledore sitting in a large gold chair in the center. He looked just like his picture on the Chocolate Frog card from the train. He also recognized Professor Quirrell whom he had met in the Leaky Cauldron. He was now wearing a large purple turban, which looked very odd.

The last first-year, “Zabini, Blaze” was just sorted into Gryffindor and Professor McGonagall took the Sorting Hat with her to her place at the High Table next to Dumbledore.

Professor Dumbledore got up to speak, but before Harry had even begun to listen, Dumbledore was finished after having said only a few random silly words.

Harry turned to Avery and asked hesitantly, “Is he joking?”

Avery scoffed, and then in low voice said, “He’s mad -- the worst headmaster Hogwarts has ever had -- a real Muggle lover... but also a dangerously powerful wizard.”

Just then, delicious looking food appeared in every dish on the table. The aromas were fantastic. Harry helped himself to everything and ate with relish.

Harry noticed the other Slytherin first-years were seated together further down the table. Malfoy was next to a horrible looking ghost. Avery noticed Harry's gaze and identified the ghost as their house ghost, the Bloody Baron. "He's quite grim and never speaks, but very useful. He protects Slytherin students from Peeves the Poltergeist, a nasty little bugger who pesters all the students in the other houses."

Harry noticed Malfoy did not appear to be comfortable sitting right next to the Bloody Barron. Just then Malfoy glanced Harry's way and their eyes met. Malfoy's expression changed instantly from discomfort to anger. He mouthed some words, but Harry could not make them out. It was obvious though that Malfoy did not like the special attention Harry was getting from Avery.

Avery touched Harry's shoulder to get his attention and pointed out a dark and sinister looking man at the High Table he identified as Professor Snape, their Head of House. He was seated next to Quirrell and both were in conversation. Snape was turned toward Quirrell, so Harry could only see his profile. Only a very large hooked nose was visible behind a curtain of greasy looking black hair which hung down to his shoulders. Avery said Professor Snape was also the Potions Master and the best teacher at Hogwarts. He declared that Snape should rightly be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, because he knew more about the Dark Arts than any of the other teachers, but that Dumbledore had hired Professor Quirrell instead. He finished by saying Quirrell was a cowardly idiot.

Suddenly, Professor Snape turned his head and looked directly at Harry -- almost as if he had sensed Harry staring at his nose. Snape had a doubtful, almost quizzical look on his face. Harry thought Snape might have given the briefest hint of a smirk before turning his attention back to Professor Quirrell. Harry then noticed that Quirrell was also looking at him. At that moment, he felt a sharp stinging sensation in his scar, which almost made him cry out. Harry had never felt anything like it before. But then it was gone just as quickly, and he saw that Quirrell was again talking with Snape.

At the end of the meal, Professor Dumbledore made several announcements, including that the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side was out of bounds unless the student wanted to die painfully. Harry along with a few others laughed, but Avery told him all the teachers' warnings at Hogwarts were serious, especially the one about the Forbidden Forest.

Professor Dumbledore then led everyone in singing the school song in a madcap manor -- with hundreds of individual melodies and timings. Many Slytherin students declined to participate. When it was over -- Fred and George Weasley being the very last to finish singing -- Dumbledore ordered the house Prefects to take the lead and dismissed the assembly.

Avery took charge and led the Slytherin first-years to the dungeons, stopping and describing various aspects of the castle along the way. They eventually arrived at the entrance to the Slytherin common room. It was a non-descript portion of the dungeon corridor wall that Harry was not sure he would recognize again, but he thought it was better not to ask any questions right now. Avery said, "The password is *'The Dark Arts Rule'*." As soon as he said it, the stone wall opened up creating a doorway. Avery ushered them in.

The room was surprisingly large, long, and low and made of rough-cut stone. It was lit by many green globe oil lamps hanging from chains. There was a greenish cast to everything, some of which reflected from four glass skylights in the ceiling at the far end of the room. Harry was not sure, but it looked like there was water above the glass. A large fireplace with a roaring fire was situated on the opposite wall. The room contained many overstuffed chairs and couches, and there were also a number of ornately carved tables and chairs apparently for doing homework. But all the furniture had been pushed back against the walls to make room for what was to come.

All the returning Slytherin students were already assembled in a large circle. An older girl was standing in the middle holding a statue of a coiled snake. It was life-sized, raised up, jaws wide, looking as if about to strike. It was silver and green and had yellow eyes made of jewels that glittered in the firelight. It also had long sharp fangs that looked very real.

Avery had the first years line up inside the circle facing the girl holding the statue. He then announced an initiation ceremony.

"When I call your name, each of you will, in turn, approach the serpent, the symbol of Salazar Slytherin and Slytherin House, and say, *'I pledge my life and eternal loyalty to Salazar Slytherin, Slytherin house, and all loyal Slytherins.'* You will then kiss the serpent on the head, take your place in the circle, and remain silent."

One by one, Avery called out the names: Millicent Bulstrode, Tracey Davis, Daphne Greengrass, Pansy Parkinson, Alison Runcorn, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott. They each did as they were told. A few seemed squeamish

about kissing the snake, especially Parkinson, but Harry did not notice. He did notice it was alphabetical by last name -- girls first, then boys. Finally...

“Harry Potter!”

Harry has been repeating the pledge in his mind over and over, not wanting to make a mistake and embarrass himself on his turn. Still focusing on the pledge, he walked up to the girl and then for the first time brought his focus onto the snake, staring at its glittering yellow eyes.

Harry took a breath, concentrated and then calmly recited the pledge. When finished, he sighed with relief knowing he had not made a mistake.

But as he turned, he realized the room was no longer silent. It was in complete uproar - shouts, exclamations, gasps -- all jumbled together. Harry could not make out anything. In a panic he realized he had forgotten to kiss the snake, but before he could turn back, Avery was upon him. He grasped Harry by the shoulders exclaiming, “Slytherin’s pants, Potter, you’re a *PARSELMOUTH!*”

“A what?” asked Harry, completely bewildered.

Avery was now shaking Harry and yelling, “YOU’RE A PARSELMOUTH, A PARSELMOUTH! You can speak to *snakes*, Potter!”

All the Slytherins were now crowding around Harry, Avery, and the girl with the statue. Harry noticed her eyes were wide and her mouth was hanging open. Avery waved a hand above his head and shouted, “QUIET!”

The harangue stopped suddenly and everyone heard Harry say, “I know. I talked to a boa constrictor in the zoo this summer. I assumed all wizards could.”

There were more gasps, but Avery laughed and finally let go of Harry’s shoulders. “No, Potter. It is very, very rare. Only a few Dark Wizards have ever been gifted with it. Salazar Slytherin was famous for it... as was... *the Dark Lord.*”

Avery held his arms out and slowly turned, speaking to the assembled Slytherins, “I think we have just seen evidence which may help explain what happened ten years ago to the Dark Lord. I know you are all thinking it. However, until I discuss this with our Head of House, I do not want you discussing this with Potter. That is an *order*. Also, it is to be a Slytherin house secret that Potter is a Parselmouth. Swear it *now.*”

There were a few grumbles, but then Harry heard a chant like chorus, led by Avery -- “I swear in Slytherin’s name.” This was followed by several seconds of awkward silence.

Then the girl holding the snake statue asked, “Avery, what about the rest of the ceremony?”

“Hang that,” said Avery dismissively. “I’m going to interview Potter. All in favor...”

There was a great shout of, “AYE!” And so, it happened.

Avery had them all sit down.

The Slytherins learned about Harry’s upbringing and what he remembered about his encounter with the Dark Lord, which was next to nothing. But his housemates all gasped when he said he remembered a lot of green light. Harry learned a lot more about his housemates and how they felt about Muggles -- and not just Muggles, but also witches and wizards who were not Slytherins. It was clear that Slytherins saw themselves on top -- against the rest of the lesser world, with Muggles at the very bottom -- except possibly for blood traitors.

When Harry told them he was raised by Muggles, many were shocked and almost disbelieving. Avery said it must have been a nightmare, and to everyone’s satisfaction, Harry strongly agreed. Then Harry heard Malfoy joke from somewhere nearby, “Raised by werewolves would have been worse.”

Avery told Malfoy to shut up and then said to him, “Your father may be able to use your family’s wealth to buy influence in some circles, Malfoy, but not with us. It doesn’t change the fact he feigned the Imperius Curse and paid off the Minister for Magic to stay out of Azkaban. The Dark Lord’s *true* followers are either in there, on the run... or *dead*.”

There were many affirmative grunts and murmurs from among the Slytherins. Harry did not hear Malfoy’s voice again.

Despite the welcoming feelings he was getting from everyone, except perhaps Malfoy, Harry’s sense of foreboding was growing with each positive reference to Dark Magic and, especially, the Dark Lord. This seemed the moment to speak out.

Before Harry could change his mind, he stood up and blurted, "If you mean *Voldemort*, I want you to know, right now, he is my *enemy* because he killed my parents. And if he ever comes back, I will try to kill *him*."

There was a collective gasp from everyone. They were clearly shocked to hear it. They stared at Harry in horror.

Avery was the first to recover. He stood up too and then approvingly clapped onto Harry's shoulder. Speaking to Harry and all present, he declared, "Potter, revenge and retribution are hallmarks of Slytherin power and ambition and I would have been disappointed if you had felt any other way."

"But he said the Dark Lord's *name*," someone called out.

"So?" said Avery evenly. Then he pointed at Harry's forehead. "I think that *scar* earned him that right." There were many voices in agreement among the students, but it was not universal.

Avery then slapped Harry on the back, and stated, "I congratulate you on your sorting and officially welcome you into Slytherin house." Then he stepped back declaring, "And that goes for the rest of you first-years. The initiation ceremony is over. The rest of you lot make your congratulations to our new house members and then off to your dormitories."

Every returning Slytherin shook Harry's hand and congratulated him. So did most of the first-years. Pansy Parkinson was especially fawning. Only Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle ignored him, though Goyle appeared embarrassed when Harry looked at him.

Avery led the first-year boys to their dormitories pointing out the bathrooms -- the first doors off the common room down the left hallway. The girls hallway was on the right. Theirs was the farthest dormitory down the hall. Avery reminded them not to be late for breakfast.

The dorm room was square. It was lit by several oil lamps on each wall. There were three curtained beds with night tables facing each other on either side of the door. There was a large working oil heater in the middle of the room and a tall mirror on the wall opposite the door. There was also a very old looking clock on the wall above the door. Finally, there was what Harry assumed to be a grated ventilation shaft in the middle of the ceiling. Their trunks were already positioned at the foot of the beds, one

bed being vacant. Hedwig was in her cage on his trunk as were the others on theirs. They all had owls. Everything in the room was finished in Slytherin house colors.

There was a large sheet of parchment on each night table which was headed in very large red letters -- *Read Now and Obey!*

Harry read it. It had a lot of information they needed to know. It did not seem to be organized in any way, so you had to read it all. Some of the rules in particular caught Harry's attention.

Owls were not to be kept in dorms rooms overnight. There was a large open flue-like shaft in the common room that allowed owls to get outside and hence to the owlery.

Boys were not to try to enter the girls' dorm rooms or corridor.

First-years were not to talk to seventh-years without asking permission.

Absolutely no fighting was allowed in the dormitories or bathrooms. Apparently, it was fine in the common room. But no *dueling* was allowed anywhere in Slytherin House.

The priority of every Slytherin was to win both the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup above any personal goals.

Attending Quidditch matches was mandatory unless you were in detention or the hospital wing.

First-years must do anything a Slytherin Prefect, Head Boy, or Quidditch Captain tells them to do. This did not apply to the student officers in other houses.

The stated punishment for any violation of the rules was -- '*You don't want to know, but extremely painful.*'

Harry chatted with Nott about the rules. Nott was tall and very skinny with wild hair like Harry's. He was very friendly, and Harry like him immediately. "Call me, Theo," said Nott right away. "And me, Harry," replied Harry. They shook hands. Nott's bed was next to Harry's. Harry's bed was next to the door on the right. Malfoy's bed was next to the door on the left. Crabbe's and Goyle's beds were on Malfoy's side of the room. Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle talked among themselves. They completely ignored Harry and Theo.

Theo leaned close to Harry and said, “They think they should have had special treatment, especially Malfoy. They resent that you got all the attention.”

“I didn’t mean too,” whispered Harry earnestly.

“Don’t worry about it. They’re gits. Their families are rich, especially Malfoy’s. They aren’t used to being told off like Avery told off Malfoy,” said Theo. “But I didn’t like what Avery said either. My father was a Death Eater like theirs. He told me he was under the Imperius Curse too and got off. But Avery’s father is on the run. I heard he used the same excuse, but in his case, the Ministry *didn’t* believe him -- no money.” Theo looked serious and said, “Anyway, watch your *back*, Harry. Malfoy and his lot will take every opportunity to *bring you down*.”

Harry shrugged it off and asked Theo about Quidditch since he had not paid that close attention to Ron Weasley on the Hogwarts Express. Theo seemed just as enthusiastic as Ron had been about the game, but it still seemed very complex and hard to follow. Harry figured he would just have to see a match in person to figure it out.

The oil lamps went out at midnight just as the rules said they would. There was a low soft green glow on the ceiling, walls and floor that made it possible to get around without crashing into things. There had barely been enough time to put things away, read the rules, and get ready for bed. The boys’ bathroom had been a madhouse and they had almost forgotten to send their owls to the owlery.

As Harry lay in bed and finally had time to relax, he replayed in his mind the events of the day. Platform Nine and Three-Quarters seemed like ages ago. So much had happened. He was in *Slytherin*. Now what? He pondered Theo’s warning, but discounted it based on how Avery and everyone else had welcomed him. He already considered Theo a friend, so he was not alone in a dorm room full of enemies. He wondered about Ron in Gryffindor. Would it have been so different? He would never know. What he did know was that he already felt more at home at Hogwarts than he had ever felt at Privet Drive.

Harry soon fell asleep. He had a strange dream that the Professor Quirrell had invited him to tea in a graveyard and said, “I am looking at you Harry Potter, but you are not all that I see.” Quirrell served four teacups, two for Harry and two for himself. Then Harry heard a lion roar -- seemingly right behind him -- and Quirrell disappeared. Harry did not remember the dream the next morning.

Chapter 2 – The Potions Master

As he made his way through the Entry Hall and into the Great Hall for breakfast, Harry could not help noticing the stares and whispers of students in other houses, especially the Gryffindors. Several times he heard the word *Parselmouth*. Harry thought, disappointedly, *'So much for Slytherins swearing to keep a secret.'*

At breakfast, Avery handed out their timetables.

Harry attended his first week of classes. He and Theo sat together.

Charms and History of Magic were on Monday and Wednesday mornings. Harry thought Charms was interesting and Professor Flitwick seemed particularly excited to have Harry in his class. On the other hand, History of Magic was incredibly boring and he could barely stay awake, the novelty of having a ghost for a teacher notwithstanding.

Herbology was on Monday afternoons with the Ravenclaws. Neither Harry nor Theo had any interest in plants, magical or otherwise.

Transfiguration was on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Harry thought it was going to be a challenge because Professor McGonagall was obviously so strict -- *and* because she assigned so much homework.

Wednesday afternoon was organized study time in the Great Hall. Astronomy was on Wednesdays at midnight. It was not what he expected. Harry thought he knew a lot about space from Muggle primary school, but realized he had no clue how to actually find anything in his telescope by reading a star chart.

Defense against the Dark Arts was on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Harry and Theo had both eagerly anticipated the class, but were hugely disappointed. Professor Quirrell was obviously a nervous wreck and appeared to be afraid of what he was teaching. He also smelled strongly of garlic, which seemed to emanate from his turban.

Potions was on Friday mornings with the Gryffindors. Avery had told him that Professor Snape was tough but would treat the students in his own house fairly -- unless they were complete morons. Avery had glanced at Crabbe when he said it and winked at Harry.

There were no classes on Friday afternoons. It was 'free time' for first-years -- meaning: use the time to get your homework done before the weekend unless you are an idiot.

Harry had not yet been to Potions. At breakfast on Friday, Avery handed Harry a sealed note. It read:

*Mr H. Potter,
Come to my office this afternoon at 2:00 pm.
Prof. S. Snape.*

As Harry ate breakfast, Hedwig also delivered him a note. It was the first delivery Hedwig had ever made, other than dead mice. It was an invitation from Hagrid to visit him for tea -- also at 2:00 pm.

Harry wrote his apologies on the back of Hagrid's note and sent Hedwig off to deliver it.

Potions turned out to be the most interesting class Harry had all week. Avery was right; Professor Snape was an excellent teacher, but, like McGonagall, there was absolutely no messing around in his class. Snape scolded the class only a minute after it had started, pointing out that only Mr Potter had shown the common sense to take notes without needing to be told to do so. Malfoy had been whispering to Crabbe and Goyle at their table in the back of the classroom while Professor Snape was saying this, so he gave Malfoy detention.

Professor Snape also clearly did not like know-it-alls and humiliated Hermione Granger for always having her hand in the air. She was sitting at one of the two front workbenches with Longbottom and Zabini. Harry was at the other front workbench with Nott and Parkinson. Harry noticed that Snape kept a close eye on him as they all worked to make their first potion -- a cure for boils.

Professor Snape criticized everyone but Harry and Granger as they prepared their potions. Snape became enraged when Longbottom melted his cauldron which caused his potion to spill onto the floor, burning holes in many student's shoes. Snape ordered Zabini to take Longbottom to the hospital wing due the boils that erupted on his face, hands and arms. He then accused Granger of not helping Longbottom in order to make herself look good. She ran out of the classroom in tears.

Professor Snape then declared Harry's potion to be, "Generally satisfactory -- for a *first* effort," adding that he would expect much better of him and everyone else in the future.

He gave them an essay for homework to explain why their potions had not been perfect.

At five minutes to two, Harry went to Professor Snape's office, which was near the Potions classroom in a corridor on the same level of the dungeons as the Slytherin common room. Snape had him sit in a chair in front of his desk while he shuffled through various papers on his desk for at least fifteen minutes.

Finally, Snape arranged the papers in a stack and folded his hands on top of them. He looked directly at Harry and said, "Mr Potter, I called you here to tell you that I, unlike some others, will not play favorites because of your... how shall I put it... somewhat *unique* history and reported abilities. As to the latter, I am referring to what Avery reported happened during the Slytherin house initiation ceremony. And from that you may conclude that there are very few secrets at Hogwarts -- meaning that I will always find out about anything that goes on in this school, especially regarding *my* house. This is why I expect you to come to me with any problems *or* if you are in need of advice. Do you *understand*, Mr Potter?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

Snape nodded and said, "One last thing... I advise you to get to know Draco Malfoy. His father is one of the Hogwarts governors and is very influential with the Ministry of Magic. Establishing connections with important people will help your future. You are dismissed."

Harry and Theo spent the rest of their first free Friday afternoon exploring the castle. In the library, which was huge and impressive, they saw Hermione Granger. They were astonished to see was doing homework. Harry went over to her and said quietly, "I'm sorry Professor Snape upset you. I could see that your potion was *way* better than mine."

Granger looked shocked, as did Theo who stood behind Harry. She said, "Thank you for saying that, Potter."

"Call me, Harry," said Harry.

"Call me, Hermione," said Hermione and she held out her hand. Harry shook it and said, "See you in Potions, Hermione."

Hermione smiled and nodded.

When they left the library, Theo exclaimed, "Harry, she's a *Gryffindor!*"

Harry looked surprised and said, "So what? She seems nice and she's *really* smart."

"But Slytherins and Gryffindors don't get on. It's kind of a *rule*," explained Theo.

Harry just shrugged his shoulders.

After dinner, thinking of Hermione in the library, Harry convinced Theo to start work on their homework instead of goofing off. He said they should make it a goal to always finish their homework before Sunday evening so they could relax while everyone else was stressing out at the last minute. Theo thought he was crazy, but agreed to try.

On Saturday after breakfast, Harry and Theo, like most of the first-year students, explored the castle grounds. They checked out the front gate, with its winged boars, then walked to the Quidditch pitch. They relaxed under a tree by the black lake and saw the giant squid. They skirted the Forbidden Forest on their way to Hagrid's hut. But Hagrid was not in. On their way back to the castle, they planned to check out the Whomping Willow, but Mr Filch seemed to have been posted there to shoo away 'stupid first-years' as he called them. Theo told Harry that Filch hated all the students and they hated him back.

After lunch, Harry suggested they do some more homework in the library. Theo asked if Harry was hoping to run into Hermione again. Harry said, "No way! It's quieter than the common room and we won't get anyone trying to talk us out of doing homework on Saturday afternoon. We can have fun *tonight*." Theo agreed.

They actually finished all their homework that afternoon. Theo was amazed, saying, "Hey, this *really* works. I feel no pressure about next week now. Good call, Harry."

Harry decided to look around the library before dinner. Theo went back to the common room. Harry looked through a recent stack of *Daily Prophets* because he figured it would give him a better sense of what the Wizarding World was all about than anything else. It was fascinating to read, but he did not understand a lot of it. It made him again realize how much more he had to learn than most of the first-years.

One article caught his eye. It was about the attempted break-in of vault seven-hundred thirteen at Gringotts that Ron Weasley had mentioned on the Hogwarts Express. It had happened on the thirty-first of July -- his birthday -- and the day Hagrid had taken him to Diagon Alley and the famous Wizard bank. Hagrid had emptied that very vault of a small package.

Harry wondered if it could have been what the thieves were after. Hagrid had said it was very secret Hogwarts business. Harry had a strong feeling it was not a coincidence. He thought about going down to see Hagrid, but then Pansy Parkinson stopped by his table and asked if he would like to take a walk up to the owlery. Harry had not seen it yet, so off they went.

Chapter 3 – The Midnight Duel

The second week of term saw a notice in the Slytherin common room for mandatory flying lessons with the Gryffindors on Thursday afternoon instead of Defense Against the Dark Arts. This caused Malfoy to start bragging about the broomstick he had at home and his extensive flying experience. It made Harry nervous, since he knew absolutely nothing about flying. It would be an easy way for Malfoy to show him up.

On Thursday, the Gryffindors arrived late but Madam Hooch, the instructor, arrived even later. Harry thought she was rather wild looking. She got right to business, but Neville Longbottom botched his kickoff by going early and ended up falling off his broomstick and breaking his wrist.

Longbottom already seemed to have acquired a reputation for being very clumsy. Madam Hooch took him to the hospital wing and ordered everyone to stay grounded until she returned -- or face *expulsion*. Harry wondered if she could really do that -- it seemed rather extreme. He looked inquiringly at Theo, who just shrugged.

When Madam Hooch was out of sight, Malfoy led the Slytherins in taunting the Gryffindors about Longbottom's clumsiness. Harry laughed with them. Then Malfoy saw something of Longbottom's lying on the ground and snatched it up. Harry did not know what it was. It looked like a small crystal sphere about the size of a golf ball. Malfoy said it was something Longbottom's gran had sent him.

Hermione demanded Malfoy give it to her. But instead, he mounted his broom and took off. He flew to the top of the nearest oak tree and stuck the crystal ball there. It took him

some time to wedge it into place. However, when he got back to the ground, Professor McGonagall was waiting with her arms folded, looking very angry.

She shouted, "DRACO MALFOY, detention! What a disgraceful thing to do to a fellow student who had just been injured." She pointed her wand at the tree top and commanded, "Accio Remembrall." The crystal sphere zoomed into her hand. She gave it to Granger to return to Longbottom.

Madam Hooch returned just then, and McGonagall told her what happened. Madam Hooch looked sourly at Malfoy and said, "You are very lucky, Mr Malfoy. You'd be on the Hogwarts Express this afternoon if Professor McGonagall hadn't already handled this disgraceful incident. Now, let's get back to business."

The flying lesson resumed. Harry discovered immediately he had a natural talent for flying. He was as least as good as Malfoy, and Madam Hooch commented on it. In fact, she said Harry was better, because Malfoy's basic gripping techniques were wrong.

Hermione, however, was terrible, though not as bad as Longbottom. Harry could see that she was afraid and struggling just to stay balanced.

Then Malfoy cut sharply across her path, causing her to break instead of swerve. She fell off the front end of her broom. Harry saw it and instinctively reacted, diving at least fifty feet almost straight down to get under her just in time and break her fall before she hit the ground. Both of them ended up on the ground in an embarrassing tangle of arms and legs.

Harry heard several wolf-whistles amid a chorus of laughter and cheers from both Slytherins and Gryffindors. When they untangled, Hermione looked very embarrassed, but thanked Harry.

Madam Hooch was beside herself. Her face looked purple. She gave Malfoy a detention on top of McGonagall's and ordered him off the lawn.

By dinner, word had obviously reached Professor Snape. Malfoy was not at dinner. The word was that Snape had given him a third detention, and he was currently cleaning cauldrons in the Potions classroom. Harry noticed that Snape was talking with Madam Hooch during dinner. She was talking animatedly with her hands, making swooping and diving motions. Before the meal ended, Professor Snape left the High Table and walked over to the Slytherin table. He talked to Avery and another boy Harry

recognized as Marcus Flint, captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team. Snape then left the Great Hall giving Harry a sidelong glance on the way out.

Avery called down the table for Harry to come over. Harry was sitting with Theo and Pansy at the far end. Harry shrugged to Theo and Pansy, and got up to join Avery and Flint.

“Potter, Professor Snape just told us an amazing story,” said Avery. “He said you made an incredible dive during your flying lesson today to save a Gryffindor girl -- something I probably wouldn’t have done, but nevertheless... Madam Hooch told him you were a natural on a broom. So, where did you learn to fly in the Muggle world?”

Harry said, “I’ve never been on a broom before today.”

Avery and Flint looked at each other. “Potter...?” said Avery questioningly.

“I swear,” declared Harry. “But I *can* say I felt like I belong on a broom. I *loved* it.”

Flint looked doubtful.

“Well,” continued Avery, “Professor Snape wants Flint to give you a tryout for Quidditch right away. Meet him on the pitch on Saturday morning right after breakfast.”

In the meantime, dinner had ended. Theo had waited behind for Harry. On their way back to the common room, Harry told him what happened. “That’s *incredible*, Harry! First-years *never* get to try out. Can I come and watch?”

“I guess so,” said Harry, “But what I need is for you to explain Quidditch again so I don’t look like a complete idiot. This time, I’ll *really* pay attention.”

Theo laughed.

On Saturday morning, Theo was giving Harry last minute tips when Avery and Flint arrived on the Quidditch pitch carrying brooms and a small trunk between them. Theo had already told Harry what was inside the trunk. Harry was most concerned about the Bludgers. They set the box down. Avery tossed his broom to Harry.

Flint said, “Potter, you’re trying out for Seeker.”

Theo gasped, “Seeker!”

“Go sit in the stands, Nott. I’ll join you in a minute,” said Avery.

“Potter, we *don’t* expect you to make the team,” said Avery, “so, there’s no pressure. Just show us what you can do, and we’ll keep you in mind for next year... *if* you’re good enough. You *do* have the build for a Seeker for one thing.”

Flint took a small ball out his robe pocket and said, “We’ll start with this. I’m going to throw it, and you’re going to catch it before it hits the ground. After you catch it, throw it back to me. Mount your broom and fly up about thirty feet.”

When Harry was in position, Flint threw the ball right at Harry. He caught it easily and tossed it back. For the next five minutes, Flint threw the ball at different heights, speeds and directions. Harry caught them all. Some catches were quite difficult.

Then Flint had Harry turn his back to him and threw the ball so that Harry could not see it until it passed somewhere into his field of vision -- making it much more difficult. Still, Harry caught every single one. He heard Theo whoop on one spectacular catch just inches from the ground.

Flint finally called Harry back to the ground. “Impressive, Potter. But now, let’s see what you do against a *real* Golden Snitch.” He opened the trunk and took out the Snitch and held it out for Harry to see. “This doesn’t *want* to be caught.” Then he let it go and it darted off faster than Harry could keep his eyes on it.

“Go get it, Potter. If you don’t, you owe Hogwarts a new one. Now GO!” yelled Flint.

Harry was off like a rocket. But then he slowed down and thought, ‘*Where’s the best position to spot it?*’ It would be easier to see if it reflected the sun, so he moved to the end of the pitch putting the sun behind him. He kept his eyes moving and in less than a minute he spotted it zig zagging around mid-field. He kept his eyes fixed on it and advanced toward it, slowly increasing his speed until he suddenly leaned forward low on his broom and in a mad dash... *He had it!*

He returned the Golden Snitch to Flint who had Harry turn his back to him as he released it again. Harry used the same technique to catch it again. This happened three more times. When Harry returned to the ground after the fifth catch, Avery and Theo were standing with Flint.

All three had wide grins on their faces.

“Are you now going to claim this is only your *second* time on a broom, Potter?” asked Avery. But before Harry could answer, Avery continued, “I don’t care if you *are* lying, I’ve never seen *anything* like it! What was the longest time it took him, Marcus?”

“Five minutes,” said Flint.

“Do you want him?” asked Avery.

“Are you kidding?” said Flint, “As soon as I get back to the common room, I’m telling Higgs he’s backup Keeper.”

Avery chimed in, “And I’m going to see Professor Snape about getting Potter a proper broom. A school boom is isn’t going to cut it and my old Cleansweep isn’t much better.”

At lunch, Avery informed Harry that Professor Snape was able to persuade the headmaster to approve both ‘bending’ the first-year rule and the purchase of a *NIMBUS TWO THOUSAND* for Harry. Theo just shook his head in wonder. Word about Harry becoming the Slytherin Seeker spread even faster than his saving Granger had. The only Slytherin more unhappy than Terrance Higgs was Draco Malfoy.

On Sunday at the end of breakfast, Harry remembered what Professor Snape had said about getting to know Malfoy. There were very few students still in the Great Hall. Harry walked over and asked to sit next to Malfoy but he told Harry to sod off. Harry remained standing and tried to apologize for what happened on the train, but Malfoy stood up, joined by Crabbe and Goyle on either side. Malfoy told Harry he was too full of himself because of his scar and his dead parents -- who had gotten what they deserved.

Harry was outraged. “I *dare* you to say that without your two witless bodyguards, Malfoy.”

Malfoy laughed, “Are you challenging me to a *fight*, Potter?”

“Yes!” said Harry through gritted teeth.

“Fine,” sneered Malfoy. “A wizard’s duel at midnight in the trophy room -- just the two of us... if you have the *nerve*.”

“I’ll *be* there,” snarled Harry and he stalked off to rejoin Theo further down the table.

“That went well,” chirped Theo.

Harry's face was still red with anger. As he calmed down a very important question popped into his mind. “Theo, what's a wizard's duel?”

Theo laughed. “You're going to fight with wands until one of you either yields or is dead.”

Harry's eyes almost popped out of his head. “I just want to *punch* him in the nose!” exclaimed Harry.

“Don't worry,” said Theo. “Neither of you knows enough to do any real damage... at least, I *think* so.”

“But I bet Malfoy knows way more spells than me,” complained Harry.

“Don't worry,” said Theo confidently. “I'll teach you everything I know. Let's go outside and practice.”

Harry and Theo had only been at it a short time under the large tree by the black lake when Hermione approached them. “I saw you practicing spells and wondered if I could join you. Are you doing homework for Charms?”

Harry told her the story. She said that ordinarily she did not condone fighting, but she would make an exception in Malfoy's case. They spent the whole day at it. By the end, Harry felt ready and confident. Later, Theo admitted to Harry that Granger knew *way* more spells, hexes, jinxes, and curses than he did, and that he had learned a lot himself, concluding, “Getting to know her *wasn't* a bad idea, Harry.”

Ten minutes to midnight, Harry and Malfoy left their dorm room to respective words of encouragement from Nott, Crabbe and Goyle. Harry and Malfoy walked side by side without speaking. Harry felt very confident in his new knowledge, but figured he would just punch Malfoy in the nose if his spells did not work -- which is what he really wanted to do anyway.

As soon as they entered the common room, they stopped. Avery was sitting in a chair in front of the door to the dungeon corridor. “I understand you two plan on dueling in the Trophy Room,” said Avery matter-of-factly.

Harry and Malfoy both nodded.

“ARE YOU MAD?” thundered Avery.

Harry and Malfoy flinched.

Then in a quiet conversational tone Avery added, “All those *glass* cases... the damage, the noise... Mr Filch will have you drawn and quartered. *No. No. No...* Use the *Charms* classroom.” With that he got up, moved the chair out of the way and left the common room without another word.

Harry and Malfoy looked at each other in surprise and laughed. But then, remembering their purpose, sobered up and resumed their march -- now to the Charms classroom.

They both understood the risk they were taking being out of bed, so they proceeded cautiously and quietly through the castle. They silently ascended the grand staircase to the third floor and turned left into the Charms corridor. As they approached the classroom, they suddenly heard a loud ‘*Meow*’ behind them. They both froze.

Looking back, they saw Mrs Norris standing in the middle of the corridor. There was no time to figure out where she had come from. But it was certain that Mr Filch would be close behind. They knew the Charms corridor was a dead end, so they bolted back past Mrs Norris and continued through the landing of the grand staircase and down the corridor on the right-hand side. To their dismay, the door at the end of the corridor was locked. They could hear Mrs Norris meowing again, but further behind.

“We’re *done* for,” cried Malfoy softly, clearly in a state of panic. But Harry wasn’t. They needed to get through a locked door. Hermione had just that afternoon taught him and Theo the spell he needed. What was it? *Think!*

Suddenly Harry pulled out his wand, pointed it at the lock and whispered, “*Alohomora.*” The lock clicked open, and they were both through the door in an instant. Malfoy closed it softly and quickly relocked it. They both put their ears to the door and remained absolutely quiet.

Less than a minute later they heard Mr Filch try the door and then say, “Nothing here, my sweet. Let’s go.”

Malfoy and Harry looked at each other and smiled in relief. Then without warning, they heard a deep, throaty exhale followed by a very loud and unmistakable growl. They turned their heads slowly, afraid of what was behind them.

It was an *immense* three-headed dog, at least eight feet tall, staring down at them with teeth bared. It was only a few steps away. And now, all three heads were growling.

The giant dog took a step forward toward them.

Thinking fast, Harry held his wand high and shouted, “*Lumos Maxima!*” The shout and the bright light confused and distracted the dog. Harry took three quick steps sideways away from the door. The dog took another step, but this time in his direction. He shouted, “Malfoy, open the door!”

Malfoy spun around and fumbled with the lock. The dog’s right head saw Malfoy it and turned toward him. But the other two heads remained fixed on Harry. But now the dog’s front feet were in mental conflict -- the right foot wanted to attack Malfoy, the left, Harry.

“Hurry, Malfoy, *hurry,*” urged Harry as he waved his other hand to hold his share of dog’s heads’ attention.

“I’m trying!” wailed Malfoy. “It’s STUCK!”

Malfoy’s cry caught the attention of the two heads focused on Harry and they suddenly turned toward Malfoy. The dog took two quick steps toward him. The head on the right was almost in reach and bit the back of Malfoy’s billowed robes, just as Malfoy yelled, “GOT IT!” and yanked the door open.

Malfoy started out the door but was suddenly pulled back by his robes in the dog’s right mouth as the middle head prepared to bite Malfoy’s head off.

“HELP!” screamed Malfoy when he looked around and saw the enormous open jaws descending toward him.

“STUPIFY!” screamed Harry and his stunning spell hit the exposed eye of the head pulling Malfoy back. The dog yelped and released Malfoy’s robes.

Harry raced at full force, bent down, straight into Malfoy’s back, propelling them both out the door as the jaws of the middle head snapped shut on empty air mere inches from Malfoys head.

Harry immediately jumped off Malfoy, turned and pulled the door shut as the huge beast crashed into it, shaking it so hard Harry thought it would come off its hinges.

“Let’s get out of here *now!*” exclaimed Harry as he helped Malfoy up off the floor. Obviously still shaken, Malfoy just nodded.

Throwing caution aside, they raced back to the safety of the common room and flopped down exhausted into two armchairs.

“What was that?” asked Malfoy as soon he caught his breath.

“It was the forbidden third-floor corridor on the right side that Professor Dumbledore warned about,” said Harry.

Malfoy looked stunned.

“That dog must be guarding something,” said Harry. “When I was illuminating my wand, I saw a trap door in the middle of the room... And I *think* I know what it’s guarding.”

Malfoy looked astonished. Harry told him the story.

“I wonder what’s in the package?” said Malfoy. “It has to be pretty valuable *or* powerful *or both* to be so small and so important.”

“I think we should find out, Malfoy,” said Harry.

Harry held out his hand. Malfoy looked at it for just a moment, then shook it, saying, “I agree, Potter.”

Malfoy paused and then said softly, “I’m sorry for what I said about your parents. And thanks for helping me out just now.” Malfoy knew that Harry had saved his life.

“No problem,” said Harry.

They both understood they were no longer enemies, though perhaps not yet friends. They agreed on a story to tell anyone who asked about the duel -- a draw, no serious injuries, honor satisfied -- and not a word about being in the Forbidden Corridor or the three-headed dog.

They never again mentioned anything about the things that had come between them.

Chapter 4 -- Halloween

The next week, following Potions, Harry thanked Hermione for teaching him the spells. As they walked together, he broke his agreement with Malfoy and told her what happened in the Forbidden Corridor. He could not explain to himself why, but he trusted Hermione. Still, he asked her to keep the secret. She agreed. The mystery seemed to intrigue her.

On Saturday morning at breakfast, a long thin package was delivered to Harry by six large barn owls. It had a note attached, which Harry opened first. It was from Professor Snape and said not to open the package at the table.

Harry showed the note to Theo and they rushed out of the Great Hall and back to the common room. As they were unwrapping the package, Flint and Malfoy came rushing in -- having seen the delivery. It was the promised Nimbus Two Thousand. They all admired it. Malfoy admitted that it easily outmatched his Comet Two Sixty at home.

They all immediately headed out to the Quidditch pitch for a test flight. Harry amazed everyone with his flying. He then gave each of them a turn trying it.

Harry was surprised to see Hermione in the stands as they were leaving. He went over to see her. She said the Nimbus was a just and proper reward for his gallantry and wished him luck on the team. He walked with her back to the castle.

Pansy saw Harry walking with Hermione and later confronted him in the common room. "Why are you *seeing* her? Just because you *saved* her? She's Gryffindor and *worse... a Mudblood.*"

Harry was confused and asked, "What's a Mudblood?"

"Her parents are *Muggles*, Harry," said Pansy sounding exasperated.

Harry answered sharply, "She's helped me out a *lot*, Pansy. And if you didn't know, my *mother* was Muggle-born."

This shut her up and she stalked off.

The next week, Harry practiced Quidditch alone with Flint to learn about strategy and tactics. After that, he practiced with the whole team. Harry was so good; Flint was floating on air. Any remaining concerns there might have been about replacing Terrance Higgs as his Seeker were over. After seeing Harry in practice, even Higgs had to admit, Harry was a major improvement for the team.

When Oliver Wood, the Gryffindor team captain, heard about the Nimbus Two Thousand, he went to Professor McGonagall in protest. All she could say was it was out of her hands, since the Headmaster had approved it. She and Wood both knew it would now probably be several more years before they had a chance of winning the Quidditch Cup.

With Quidditch practice, Harry was busier than ever, but he never felt more at home. Before he knew it, his second month at Hogwarts was coming to a close.

Harry was enjoying the Halloween feast when Professor Quirrell bust into the Great Hall, rushed up to the High Table in front of the Headmaster and gasped, "Troll! ...in the dungeons..." Any other words were drowned out by the immediate uproar as he slumped to the floor.

Professor Dumbledore had to quiet the crowd with magical firecrackers from his wand. He then directed the Prefects to lead the students back to their dormitories and the teachers to follow him to the dungeons.

Because the Slytherin common room was in the dungeons, the Slytherin Prefects made sure the teachers went ahead of the students and then followed closely behind. Harry was waiting at the end of the line and noticed that Quirrell was not with the teachers. He turned around and looked back into the Great Hall. Quirrell was gone.

Harry continued with the Slytherins. As they passed down the stairs from the Entry Hall to the dungeons, Professor Snape remained standing to the side at the top of the stairs. Harry nodded respectfully as he passed Snape, but Snape was looking back toward the marble staircase to the upper floors. Harry assumed Professor Snape, as head of house, was making sure all the Slytherins made it to the common room; but when he looked back, he saw that Professor Snape had not followed him down the stairs.

Harry turned and went back up the stairs without saying anything to Theo, who was in front of him in line. Looking into the Entry Hall, Harry saw Professor Snape going up the marble staircase. As quietly as possible, Harry followed him staying well behind.

On the third-floor landing, Harry heard voices just inside the corridor on the right-hand side.

“And where might you be going, Quirrell? Dumbledore wanted the staff in the dungeons with him.” It was Professor Snape’s voice. Harry quietly moved forward and hid behind a large suit of armor on the landing.

“D, D, Did he...? N, N, Not f, f, feeling well, P, P, Professor S, S, Snape. G, G, Going to the h, h, hospital wing,” stammered Quirrell nervously.

“Well, you missed your floor, Professor. Let me escort you since you don’t seem to be quite right at the moment,” said Snape sounding completely unconvinced.

“F, F, Fine,” stammered Quirrell.

Professor Snape took Professor Quirrell by the arm and turned him around, then walked him out of the corridor and down the marble staircase.

When they were out of sight, Harry followed them down intending to get back to the common room as quickly as possible.

But just as he reached the first floor, he heard a loud scream. He rushed into the corridor where he thought it had come from and paused. Then he heard a second scream. It sounded like a girl, and it had to be coming from inside the girl’s toilet.

Without hesitating about school rules, he rushed through the door, but immediately skidded to a halt. He was frozen by the sight of what could only be... the Troll. It was at least twelve feet tall, green, and brutishly ugly. Thankfully, the Troll was looking away and had obviously not heard him come in.

Harry followed the Troll’s gaze and was alarmed to see Hermione cringing against the far wall. The troll was slowly moving forward and knocking the sinks off the wall one by one with a huge club as it advanced on her. With the destruction of each sink, Hermione covered lower and lower against the wall.

Harry could see that the Troll was naturally slow and lumbering. He yelled to Hermione whose eyes were fixed rigidly on it. "HERMIONE, RUN, RUN! You're faster. You can get by it. RUN!"

But Hermione was frozen in terror.

Harry took out his wand, pointed it at the troll's legs and shouted, "*Locomotor Mortis*."

It did not have the effect he expected -- but it did have an effect. The Troll slowed to a stop and then it began to turn to face Harry. Harry realized his spell had not worked. Now the Troll raised its club and began advancing on Harry.

Harry again yelled, "HERMIONE, RUN!" This finally seemed to make Hermione snap out it. She shook her head and blinked several times. But instead of running, she took out her wand, pointed it at the Troll's club and said, "*Wingardium Leviosa*," as she flourished a swish and flick.

The Troll's club soared upward out of its hand toward the ceiling. With a sharp downward movement of her wand, the club crashed down on the Troll's head and the brute collapsed like an enormous sack of potatoes, shaking the floor.

Before Harry could take one step toward Hermione, Professors McGonagall, Snape and Quirrell rushed through the door with their wands out. At the sight of the Troll, Quirrell almost fainted again and sat down in a toilet stall with his head between his knees. Snape checked the Troll and announced, "Knocked out." McGonagall looked furious and said sternly, "What is the *meaning* of this? Why aren't you in your dormitories?"

Harry spoke first, "I was the last one out of the Great Hall, Professor. I heard a very loud scream coming from the first floor when I was just starting down the stairs to the dungeons, so I ran to investigate."

Professor Snape gave Harry a suspicious look, which Harry pretended not to see.

Then Hermione spoke before any of the teaches could ask another question. "I wasn't feeling well and was here in the bathroom before the feast started. And the next thing I knew, this creature came in and tried to kill me... Then, thank God, Harry arrived and saved me." Hermione looked down, put her hands to her face and began to cry.

Harry noticed there were no tears.

Professor McGonagall seemed to be at a loss for words so Harry spoke again. “Actually, Professor, Hermione saved *me*. My spell had no effect. It just made the Troll come after me instead of her. Then Hermione used *Wingardium Leviosa* on its club and knocked it out.”

Again, Hermione quickly chimed in, sobbing convincingly, “I was out of my wits with fear, Professor McGonagall. If Harry hadn’t come in, I’d have been killed for sure. He snapped me out of it.”

“Enough, child,” said Professor McGonagall, now looking mollified. “Ten points to Slytherin, Mr Potter, for *another* heroic act. But please don’t make a habit of it. I don’t think I can take much more excitement this term.” She paused and then added, “And five points to Gryffindor for excellent spell work, Miss Granger. Now if you please, Mr Potter, escort Miss Granger to the hospital wing. Tell Madam Pomphrey I think a Pepper-up Potion for Miss Granger is in order.”

As Harry and Hermione began to leave, Professor McGonagall added, “After that, please return to your houses. Professor Dumbledore has instructed that students shall finish the feast in their common rooms.”

On the way to the hospital wing, Harry asked Hermione why she was in the girl’s bathroom instead of at the feast, assuming her story, like his, was not true. Hermione started sobbing again, this time for real. She blubbered, “I don’t have any *friends* in Gryffindor.”

“But what about Ron and Longbottom?” asked Harry.

“Well,” she sniffed, regaining some composure, “Neville is OK, but he’s way too *needy*. I just can’t spend all my time helping him with every little thing even though he’s the only one who is ever nice to me. It’s *Ron* that’s the problem. He’s mean to me all the time, always making snide remarks in front of everyone. He says I’m a bossy know-it-all, and... *that’s* why I have no friends.”

They had stopped just outside the door to the hospital wing.

Harry said, “*I* like you, Hermione. *I’m* your friend.”

Suddenly, Hermione threw her arms around Harry and hugged him. Harry stiffened but forced himself not to push her away. Fortunately, she released him before he was forced to say something.

When Harry returned to the Slytherin common room, Professor Snape was waiting for him outside in the corridor. He had a piercing look.

“There seems to be some *time* unaccounted for in your story to Professor McGonagall, Mr Potter. You’ll be sorry if you do not tell me the truth *right now*.”

Harry admitted he followed Professor Snape and overheard his conversation with Professor Quirrell. He explained he heard Hermione’s scream on the way back to the common room.

Snape looked down his nose at Harry and then tipped his head back very slightly. “Very well, Mr Potter. What you heard is *none* of your business. You will speak to no one about it. And, more importantly, you will *never* surreptitiously follow me again. Do you *understand*?”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry. He understood. He was sure the ‘business’ Professor Snape referred to had everything do with what was being guarded by the three-headed dog. Snape had confronted Quirrell just inside the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side. What else could it be about? And he and Malfoy had already agreed to find out.

Not long after breakfast the next day, the story of the Troll in the girl’s first-floor toilet was all over the school, but in the school’s version, it was Harry who had knocked out the Troll to save Hermione. The Slytherins peppered Harry with questions, but he only told them the story he told Professor McGonagall. Everyone ignored him, preferring the popular version instead.

Pansy was even madder at him than she had been after his tryout of the Nimbus Two Thousand. She stopped sitting with him and Theo in class. Malfoy took her place. Crabb and Goyle seemed quite put out about this development. They did not like girls, and now Pansy was sitting between them.

Because Malfoy had shared the experience with the three-headed dog, Harry told Malfoy in private about what happened between Professor Snape and Quirrell and asked him to keep it a secret. Malfoy asked him if he thought Quirrell might have been the one who set the Troll loose as a diversion. Because, if not, he was definitely trying

to take advantage of it. There was no doubt he was headed for the room at the end the Forbidden Corridor before being intercepted by Snape.

“One thing for certain,” warned Malfoy, “we need to make sure to stay clear of Professor Snape as we try to figure this out.”

Harry agreed, and added, “I don’t want to tell Theo about this. I don’t think he can keep a secret. I think he might have been the one who let out the ‘Slytherin secret’ of me being a Parselmouth... But he’s still my friend.”

“I was friends with Nott growing up... both him and Crabbe, but we had a falling out,” said Malfoy. “His father and mine don’t get on any more either. But if he’s your friend, that’s OK.” Then he added, “Speaking of friends, do you *fancy* Granger?”

“No. She’s just a friend. But I already told Pansy I don’t care if Hermione *is* Muggle-born,” said Harry firmly.

“I heard,” said Malfoy.

“I hope *you* don’t have a problem with it,” said Harry, fearing it might be.

“Well, maybe *before* the three-headed dog, but not now,” admitted Malfoy. “Just know this -- there are a lot of Slytherins who *will* have a problem with it, Potter. You may have to make a *choice* sooner or later.”

“What choice?” asked Harry.

“To be a true Slytherin or a blood-traitor,” said Malfoy ominously.

Chapter 5 -- Quidditch

As they entered November, Pansy made an effort to hang around Malfoy, but he ignored her. Very soon she turned her attention to Nott. Within a week, Theo was no longer sitting with Harry in class or at the table in the Great Hall. Pansy had his full attention.

The biggest impact was in double Potions with the Gryffindors. Theo had squeezed in at the worktable with Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle. More surprising, Hermione replaced Theo at Harry’s and Malfoy’s worktable and Snape did not say anything -- which

astonished everyone. Professor Snape had always approved of Harry and Malfoy working together, but his behavior toward Hermione had changed. While he still never praised her, now he no longer criticized her. She was clearly the best student at Potions, with Malfoy second and Harry a distant third because of Hermione's and Malfoy's help. Longbottom languished without Hermione's help and Zabini resented Hermione for leaving him alone with Longbottom.

Also, it was now just Harry and Malfoy against the rest in their dorm room. They still were not real friends, though everyone assumed they were. They were more like two independent detectives working together to solve a mystery. Harry assumed Nott was now ignoring him because of Pansy. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be the most put out by the realignment and were angry at Malfoy for his "betrayal." They were so gormless, their schoolwork suffered without having Malfoy to copy from. They ended up hanging around Millicent Bulstrode, but she was not much smarter than they were.

The Quidditch season started with Gryffindor vs Slytherin. If Slytherin won, they would take a bigger lead in the House Championship. Flint was extremely confident. Few people outside the Slytherin team had seen Harry practice, even though by now everyone knew he was the new Slytherin Seeker.

Harry was grateful to Hermione for helping him in the library to keep up with his homework because of all the time taken up by Quidditch practice. Because of Pansy's attention, Nott had abandoned the plan of promptly doing homework with Harry.

The night before the first Quidditch match, Hermione lent Harry the book, *Quidditch Through the Ages*, which was full of interesting facts and stories about the wizard sport.

In the dressing room for their first match, Flint gave a pep talk. He especially encouraged the beaters, Bole and Derrick, to keep the Bludgers away from Harry better than they had in their last practice.

Harry had pre-match jitters, but they disappeared as soon as he mounted his broom and took off. He felt exhilarated.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle to start the match. She released the Bludgers, the Golden Snitch and then threw out the Quaffle.

The first time Harry saw the Snitch, he was distracted by a Bludger hit by one of the Weasley twins. It was obvious to Harry that they were excellent Beaters. The match commentator was a Gryffindor and clearly biased, but he was still fun to listen too. Just

as Harry dodged another Bludger, his Nimbus began to jerk violently. It was all he could do just to hold on.

Flint saw Harry struggling and tried to get him off his broom, but the violent jerking and random movement made it impossible. He ordered his Beaters to station themselves below Harry and catch him if he fell. The rest of the Slytherin team were in disarray, not knowing what to do.

In the meantime, Gryffindor scored six quick goals.

Malfoy knew that only a powerful jinx could interfere with a broomstick. Watching from the Slytherin section, he quickly scanned the crowd. After about a minute, he spotted Professor Quirrell sitting far to his right near the top row of the stands where there were fewer people. Quirrell was staring up at Harry without blinking and continuously mouthing something.

Malfoy left his seat and headed for the stairs. As he reached them and was about to head up, he collided with Hermione. They looked at each other and then both rapidly climbed the stairs together.

“To save Potter?” asked Malfoy.

“Yes,” breathed Hermione heavily, obviously winded from running over from the Gryffindor section on the far side, “Professor Snape is...” But before she could finish, Malfoy grabbed her arm and said, “No! It’s Quirrell.”

“What?” said Hermione stopping. Turning to her, Malfoy said, “Trust me. Potter and I have reason to suspect him. Follow my lead.”

Malfoy led Hermione up to the top of the stands and then they ran along the empty top row. They slowed down and quietly approached from above the row where Professor Quirrell was sitting. Malfoy signaled Hermione to stop and remain still. Then he gathered himself and jumped down two rows to land roughly and noisily, bumping right into Quirrell so hard it made him yelp.

“Oh, please *excuse* me, Professor Quirrell!” exclaimed Malfoy, “I didn’t mean to bump into you. I hope you don’t mind if I sit here.”

Just as Professor Quirrell was about to answer, Hermione climbed down nosily from the other side, pretended to lose her balance and used Quirrell’s shoulder to catch

herself as she sat next to him too. “Oops, sorry Professor. It’s a *great* match, isn’t it? The view is so much *better* from higher up. It’s far too crowded below.”

“Yes... *quite*,” said Quirrell through gritted teeth, without stuttering.

When they all looked back at Harry, he was again in full control of his broom. Malfoy and Hermione began to cheer loudly and bounce in their seats as the match continued, keeping Quirrell effectively corralled between them.

Amazingly, less than a minute later, Harry made a spectacular diving catch of the Golden Snitch -- catching it inches from the ground with the very tips of his extended fingers. It won the match for Slytherin. The score was 150 to 80.

Malfoy rushed down to the field to celebrate with the Slytherins. Hermione wanted to congratulate Harry too, but decided to do it later. Instead she walked Professor Quirrell back to the castle chatting animatedly about Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Quirrell barely said a word.

Hermione was anxious to talk to Malfoy about why he suspected Professor Quirrell. She said goodbye to Quirrell in the Entrance Hall and waited. The Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws all passed by her looking very disappointed.

The Slytherins soon followed, celebrating, and carrying Harry on their shoulders. Hermione was able to catch Malfoy’s attention and he stopped to talk with her while the rest of the Slytherins proceeded to their common room for a victory party.

“Why did you suspect Professor Quirrell?” asked Hermione.

“Why did you suspect Professor Snape?” retorted Malfoy.

“Because I saw him through binoculars staring at Harry and mouthing a jinx,” declared Hermione firmly, adding, less firmly, “And because *everyone* but the Slytherins hate Professor Snape.”

“Really?” said Malfoy drolly. “Even if true, why would Professor Snape jinx a player on his *own* house Quidditch team?”

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but nothing came out.

“Right,” said Malfoy sharply. “If you were *anyone* else, I’d say, ‘sod off.’ But Harry trusts you. I assume he’ll tell you soon enough. So...”

Malfoy told Hermione the story of the three-headed dog, what Harry thought it was guarding, and how Snape prevented Quirrell from getting into the room on Halloween.

Hermione pretended to be amazed, since Harry had already told her most of it. “How exciting. I want to help.”

Malfoy smirked, “Why did I *know* you’d say that?”

Hermione ignored the jibe and exclaimed, “I bet Professor Snape was using a *counter jinx* to help Harry stay on his broom. Based on their conversation in the Forbidden Corridor, it explains why Professor Snape was ready to counter Professor Quirrell’s jinx. But it doesn’t explain why Professor Quirrell was attacking Harry in the first place. He doesn’t know that Harry knows anything. There’s something we’re missing. I...”

Malfoy cut her off, “There’s a lot more than *something*, Granger ...including the victory party I’m missing out on listening to you try to solve the mystery in your spare time. I’ll tell Potter what I told you and what you said.” With that he turned on his heel and walked away.

“Thank you... *you jerk*,” said Hermione under her breath.

Then she turned on her heel and went to see Hagrid.

Hermione had met Hagrid personally in her very first walk around the grounds after arriving at Hogwarts. Being so lonely during her first two months, she had visited him quite often.

“Hagrid, I saw it through *your* binoculars,” Hermione reminded him.

She had told him everything that happened after Harry’s broom had gone crazy. Hagrid just would not believe that either Professor Quirrell or Snape had anything to do with it, simply because they were Hogwarts teachers.

“It just *couldn’t* have been a coincidence,” she continued.

Hagrid shook his head.

So, to bolster her argument, Hermione decided to tell Hagrid what Malfoy had just told her, but without revealing the source.

Hagrid was incensed, “Who *told* ya ’bout Fluffy?”

In the next few minutes, Hermione wheedled out of Hagrid the story of Fluffy, confirmation it was guarding the object Hagrid had retrieved from Gringotts, and that the information was top secret Hogwarts business strictly between Professor Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel.

Hagrid was furious with himself for mentioning Nicholas Flamel and asked Hermione to promise to not get involved.

Instead she changed the subject back to Fluffy and Hagrid eagerly entertained her with stories of the great beast’s amusing antics.

Before she left, Hagrid asked Hermione if she could get Harry to visit him.

Chapter 6 – The Mirror of Erised

After the Slytherin Quidditch victory party, Malfoy told Harry what had happened during the Quidditch match -- that Professor Quirrell had been the one jinxing his broom and that Professor Snape had been trying to stop it with a counter-jinx.

“Did Professor Snape tell you?” asked Harry immediately.

Malfoy laughed, “No way.” Then he told Harry what he and Granger had done.

“Wow, you two *saved* me for sure. I couldn’t have held on much longer. Thanks, Malfoy,” said Harry appreciatively.

Then Malfoy told Harry that he had brought Granger in on the secret about the Forbidden Corridor.

Harry was pleased because he had been reluctant to admit to Malfoy that he had already broken their secret and because he had been wanting to bring Hermione into their confidence. He said he was sure her brain would help them figure it out. “It’s even more reason to have brought Hermione in,” Harry added approvingly.

“That’s why I did it,” said Malfoy.

Harry suggested that they have a meeting with her as soon as possible. But schoolwork and Quidditch would keep them busy for the next several weeks.

Christmas was fast approaching.

Harry wanted to have a meeting with Hermione and Malfoy before they left for Christmas break. They finally met the last Friday afternoon of term.

Hermione told them she had researched the Gringotts break-in but did not find out anything new. It was only the second break-in on record. She also told them about Hagrid and Fluffy. All they could do was shake their heads. And finally, she told them about Nicholas Flamel and that she had spent weeks in the library trying to find out who he was.

“I *know* I’ve seen that name somewhere, but I can’t remember where or when,” said Harry, sounding quite frustrated.

Malfoy suggested they ask Madam Pince or a teacher, but Hermione said it would attract too much attention. Harry agreed to research it during the holidays, since he was not going home for Christmas.

Hermione suggested he might be able to sneak into the Restricted Section when Madam Pince left the library to use the toilet. She added that she was sorry that Harry had to stay at Hogwarts for the holidays.

“Are you kidding!” exclaimed Harry. “This is going to be my *best* Christmas ever. You don’t know the Dursley’s. They’re horrible.”

Malfoy assumed that Harry hated all Muggles like he did, and said, “It makes perfect sense to me, Granger. Nothing to be sorry about.”

Harry was the only Slytherin to remain for Christmas and had the common room to himself. He saw all the Weasleys in the Great Hall at meals, but they did not invite him to sit with them because they were still angry about his spectacular Quidditch victory over Gryffindor, especially since Slytherin had not scored a single goal.

On Christmas morning, Harry was astonished to find Christmas presents at the foot of his bed -- his first ever *real* Christmas presents. He did not count the very small parcel from the Dursleys containing a fifty-pence piece. It included a note effectively acknowledging his decision not to go home for Christmas as *his* present to *them*. Harry sat on his bed to open the rest.

The first was a roughly cut wooden flute from Hagrid. Hermione had told him about Hagrid's request to visit him and the present made him feel guilty for putting it off. His second present was a large box of chocolate frogs from Hermione, which, with the rest, made him embarrassed because *he* had not gotten presents for anyone.

His last present was a cloak made of extremely fine, silvery cloth that almost seemed to slip through his fingers like water. The package also contained an anonymous note that said the cloak had belonged to his *father* and to '*Use it well.*'

Harry jumped up and immediately tried on the cloak. It felt silky and light as a feather. He turned to face the mirror on the far wall and was shocked to see his head seeming to float in midair. He lifted the front of the cloak from the floor and could see his legs and feet in the mirror.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. He then pulled the cloak up so it covered his head. It was like looking through the sheerest veil. His reflection in the mirror was now completely gone.

He was invisible!

He returned to his bed and reread the note. He wondered who it could have been from? The handwriting was very neat and elegant.

Christmas dinner was the best meal Harry had ever experienced. Since he was the only Slytherin, Professor Dumbledore invited him to sit at the High Table next to Hagrid. Harry thanked Hagrid for the flute and apologized for not having visited him all term and promised to do so the next day.

Harry returned to his dorm room laden with items from the exploding Christmas crackers along with an extra helping of Christmas pudding wrapped in a napkin. He whiled away the afternoon rereading *Quidditch Through the Ages* and polishing his Nimbus Two Thousand. He was way too full to go up for Christmas evening leftovers in the Great Hall and instead took a nap. When he awoke, the dorm room was dark and the clock showed it was just after midnight.

Harry felt wide awake and thought about the 'Invisibility Cloak'. He *had* to try it. He decided to go to the library and check the Restricted Section for Nicolas Flamel. He borrowed an oil lamp from the common room and headed out wearing the cloak. He did not encounter anyone on the way and, to his surprise, found the library unlocked. He carefully stepped over the rope across the entrance to the Restricted Section -- assuming it might have been enchanted to sound an alarm if touched.

Harry then spent at least an hour thumbing through a large number of very dreadful old books. He now understood why there *was* a Restricted Section. He saw many things that were going to be difficult to forget. Some of the books even seemed to be whispering to him or trying to make him read aloud. Many books did not have a table of contents or index and he had to check them page by page.

At last, he came to a large heavy black and silver book which was difficult to wield out of its slot. As soon as he had maneuvered the book onto his knee, it fell open and immediately emitted a loud, piercing scream that echoed through the library. Harry snapped the book shut, but the scream went on and on. While struggling to fit the book back into its place, he knocked over his lamp, putting it out. Despite being back in place, the screaming book was only somewhat muffled. But it was enough to hear rapid footsteps approaching in the corridor outside.

Harry made sure his cloak was properly in place, then ran for it, forgetting the lamp. He dodged by Mr Filch as he left the library and continued running until he stopped for breath. He was not sure where he was, especially in the darkness. He was standing near a tall suit of armor, but there were many of those about the castle.

Suddenly he heard approaching footsteps again, this time with voices. It was Filch and Professor Snape looking to catch whoever had been in the Restricted Section. Harry backed away as quietly as he could and squeezed through a door that stood ajar a short distance away. He held his breath as they passed.

When he was sure they had gone, he checked out his hiding place. Moonlight coming in through the windows provided quite a bit of light. It looked like a classroom that had been turned into a store room for desks and chairs piled high.

However, there was also a huge magnificent freestanding mirror with an expensive looking gold frame. An inscription was carved into the top that read, '*Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.*'

Harry moved closer to examine the mirror, expecting to see no reflection of himself due to his invisibility cloak. Instead, he almost cried out because not only did he see himself, but also a room full of people behind him. He spun around, but saw no one. Did this mirror reflect only people in invisibility cloaks? No, that did not make sense.

He walked closer to the mirror and the people surrounding him seemed to move closer too. He reached out behind him but there was no one there. Then he looked at the people. There was a young couple directly behind him and others around them who looked older. They were all smiling and waving at him.

The young woman was very pretty with red hair. She had green eyes just like his. The young man wore glasses and had the same black unkempt hair that he did. The man put his arm around the woman. She was crying and smiling at the same time.

With a realization that weakened his knees, Harry knew he was looking at his *parents* for the first time. Desperately he pressed up against the mirror, hoping he could step through, and whispered, "Mum? Dad?" They just kept smiling and looking at him.

He took off the cloak, thinking it might make a difference, but nothing changed. He tried everything he could think of to establish communication, but nothing changed. They were alive inside the mirror; he was sure of it. But he was locked out. He had to find a way to talk to them. Harry had never felt such heartache, such longing, such desire in his life and he was consumed by it.

Harry stood there transfixed for how long he did not know. Only some distant noise from somewhere in the castle broke his concentration. Twilight was coming through the window; he had to get back to his dorm room before dawn.

He took one last loving look at his mother and father and said, "I'll be back."

Harry was desperate to share his experience with someone. He immediately thought of Hermione. She would understand and hopefully help him figure out how to communicate with his parents. He doubted Malfoy would be interested. He did not trust Nott anymore. And there was no one else he could ask right now. He would just have to wait until Hermione got back from Christmas break.

Harry forgot about his promise to visit Hagrid on Boxing Day. He slept through breakfast and dinner and, using the cloak, returned to the Mirror as soon as it got dark. He sat in front of it all night. He did not want to do anything else.

When he was too tired to remain, he returned to his dormitory. He ate the two-day old leftover Christmas pudding and went to bed.

After he awoke and though his stomach was growling, Harry immediately thought of returning to the Mirror room. It was nighttime again, but he was now oblivious to the time. He crawled out of bed, put on his cloak and left. As soon as he sat in front of the mirror, he heard a soft cough behind him. Harry jumped up and spun around so fast, he almost lost his balance.

“Back *again*, Harry?” It was the Headmaster, Professor Dumbledore. He was sitting in a desk right next to the door. Harry could not think how he had not seen him... or been seen himself. Harry pulled off his cloak.

It was a very embarrassing way to meet the headmaster for the first time. Professor Dumbledore was kind and understanding, but Harry understood he was being taught a very important life lesson.

The mirror was a cheat -- an illusion that provided no knowledge or truth, only desperate desire. You should not dwell on dreams that cannot be and forget to live your life.

Harry could only hope that the ache in his heart would diminish, because Professor Dumbledore said he would hide what he called *The Mirror of Erised* so Harry would never find it.

However, Professor Dumbledore told Harry if he ever did come across it again, he would be prepared. But Harry was not at all confident.

Harry did learn some other very important things as well... Some wizards do not need invisibility cloaks to become invisible. Also, some wizards, though very few, can see *through* invisibility cloaks. And that Professor Dumbledore was either one of the happiest men on earth because all he saw in the mirror was himself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks, or that he was not telling the truth about what he really saw.

Before Harry could work up the nerve to question him about that, Dumbledore said, “It is almost daylight, Harry. Let us go and enjoy another wonderful breakfast together in the Great Hall. After that, why not go visit Hagrid? I am sure he would like that.”

Chapter 7 – Nicolas Flamel

Harry sat with Professor Dumbledore at breakfast. Hagrid was not there, which Harry was thankful for because he was ashamed for having broken his promise yet again. Even though he was very tired, he excused himself and went straight to Hagrid's hut as soon as he was finished eating.

Hagrid seemed extremely pleased to see him.

Harry met Fang and he and Hagrid talked about many things -- but mostly Harry's parents. Having seen them in the Mirror, Harry had to know more, so, he asked Hagrid to tell him everything he knew. Hagrid eagerly obliged and talked about them for at least an hour.

His parents were both very smart and accomplished wizards. His father had been an amazing Quidditch Seeker, though Hagrid said that Harry would have given him a run for his money. His parents had not gotten along at first but then fell in love. They had fought very bravely against You-Know-Who and his supporters.

Harry reveled in these and other stories. It was obvious that Hagrid had loved and admired his parents. It made him ache that Hagrid had known them so well and he so little.

Hagrid admitted he was surprised that Harry had been sorted into Slytherin, since his parents had been Gryffindors. But he was very pleased that Harry had become friends with Hermione, whom Hagrid was especially fond of.

Harry decided not to bring up Fluffy or Nicolas Flamel on his first visit.

It had been a wonderful morning and, as he walked back to the castle through the light snow, Harry vowed to visit Hagrid every week.

The afternoon before the students were due to return from Christmas break, Harry was sitting by the fire in the Slytherin common room reading *The Daily Prophet*. He took a break and opened one of the Chocolate Frogs that Hermione had given him for Christmas.

The card inside was another Albus Dumbledore, like the one he had gotten on the Hogwarts Express and long since lost track of. He glanced at it and set it aside, but as soon as he had, he snatched it back up and gaped at it.

There it was, '*...his partner, Nicholas Flamel.*'

This was where he had seen the name.

He read it again in full, '*...and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel.*'

Flamel was an *alchemist*. But what could that have to do with the small package? He pondered it for quite a while, but gave up without any good ideas. He knew that Hermione would be more likely to figure it out.

He was not disappointed. He saw Hermione arrive at dinner not long after the Hogwarts Express was scheduled to arrive.

Harry casually walked over to the Gryffindor table. He welcomed Hermione back from Christmas break and thanked her for the box of Chocolate Frogs. He apologized for not being able to find anything in the Restricted Section and then handed her the Albus Dumbledore Chocolate Frog card. She looked at it and immediately swiveled around to stare at him. Harry could tell she was suppressing the urge to shout and jump up and down. He just said, "Let's meet in the library after dinner."

Harry grinned as he walked back to the Slytherin table. Malfoy had come in while he was talking with Hermione. "What was that about?" he asked.

Harry explained and guessed that Hermione would have an answer on Flamel by morning.

He was wrong. Hermione had the answer by the time he and Malfoy arrived in the library. She was already there with an enormous book open in front of her at her usual table.

Hermione explained who Flamel was and the only thing the small package could possibly contain was a Philosopher's Stone -- a fabled magical object that enabled wizard alchemists to turn base metal into gold or to create the *Elixir of Life* which would enable you to live forever. The fact that the book recorded Nicolas Flamel and his wife as being over six hundred years old clearly indicated that the famed alchemist actually possessed one.

They agreed that Professor Quirrell must be after the magical stone. But then they argued over whether Professor Snape meant to prevent Quirrell from having it or... to have it for himself. Malfoy refused to believe the latter, while Hermione did believe it.

Harry was not sure. To stop the arguing, Harry said, "Let's wait and see how it plays out." To that they agreed.

Hermione also said she believed there had to be more than the three-headed dog guarding the stone. She said there must be other obstacles set up by the teachers, including Professor Dumbledore, under the trap door. Harry and Malfoy had to agree it made sense.

Hermione then concluded by saying, "We need to visit Hagrid tomorrow afternoon and see what we can get out of him."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea," said Malfoy sounding apprehensive.

"Why?" asked Harry.

"My father says Hagrid is a *madman* and to keep away from him. He got expelled for letting a *monster* loose in the castle when he was a student. They snapped his wand and everything," explained Malfoy.

Harry and Hermione look shocked. But Hermione recovered and said, "I admit Hagrid seems to love dangerous creatures. But if it were true, why would Professor Dumbledore have taken him on as gamekeeper? That doesn't make sense. I bet they're just stories that have grown up over the years. I mean, he *is* big and scary looking... *if you don't know him*. Right, Harry?" She looked to Harry for support.

Harry nodded. "Yea, that sounds right."

Hermione scowled at Harry's merger endorsement.

"Right," said Malfoy skeptically. "I'll think about it."

However, the next morning they launched right back into their busy schedules and they did not see Hagrid as planned.

Weeks passed again. Hermione nagged Harry daily as they did their homework in the library about seeing Hagrid. As an excuse, Harry said he was trying to persuade Malfoy.

In fact, Harry had come to believe that keeping either Professor Quirrell or Professor Snape from trying to become rich or live forever was not their concern. Had they not

already solved the mystery? The dog and perhaps other things were guarding the Philosopher's Stone. So what?

And having figured it out, wasn't his agreement with Malfoy completed? Now what?

Gryffindor barely beat Hufflepuff in the first Quidditch match of the new term. Harry congratulated Hermione.

Harry noticed he seemed to be running into Professor Snape a lot, as if Snape were keeping an eye on him. Harry wondered if Snape suspected him of ignoring his warning that it was "*none* of your business." Professor Snape now always seemed to have a penetrating gaze when he looked at Harry. And Harry began to have the uncomfortable feeling that Snape could read his mind.

Chapter 8 – Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback

Flint told the Quidditch team that Professor Snape would be refereeing their match against Ravenclaw in February. He said he did not know why but assumed Madam Hooch would not be available for some reason.

Slytherin flattened Ravenclaw. They were now well ahead in the points standing for both the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup.

Hermione kept a close eye on Professor Quirrell; Harry and Malfoy not so much. As far as they could tell, he had not made another attempt to enter the Forbidden Corridor. They did notice Professor Quirrell was not looking at all good. His skin seemed to have yellowed. He had dark circles under his eyes, and he had definitely lost weight.

Hermione also made it a point, when she could, to surreptitiously listen at the locked door and tap on it to make sure Fluffy was still growling.

Their biggest challenge was trying to keep up with school work. The teachers were piling on homework and their exams were only ten weeks away. As a result, Malfoy had joined Harry in spending a lot of time in the library with Hermione. She had the best notes for revision by far.

On Friday afternoon, they saw Hagrid shuffling around the library looking at books. Harry kept his head buried in his Transfiguration text book because he had again failed in his vow to visit Hagrid every week. Since she never remembered seeing Hagrid in the library, Hermione asked him what he was looking for, but he hid a book he was holding behind his back and deflected the question.

“So, are ya still lookin’ fer Nicolas Flamel, Hermione?” asked Hagrid.

“Oh, *no*, Hagrid,” answered Hermione cheerfully. “We figured that out right after Christmas break. We *know* Fluffy’s guarding the Philosopher’s Stone. And we’d like to ask you a few questions about that.”

Hagrid’s eyes almost popped out of his head. “Quiet, Hermione!” he whispered excitedly, sounding panicked. “No one’s supposed ta know. Yer messin’ with thin’s ya shouldn’t. It’s all right if ya wanna come an visit me, but I’m not gonna talk ’bout it anymore.” Then he strode off grumbling to himself.

Hermione wondered aloud what book Hagrid had been hiding. Malfoy got up to check the section Hagrid had emerged from and came back to report he found a stack of books about dragons on the restock self.

“Dragons!” exclaimed Harry. “I wonder if he’s got one hidden in the Forbidden Forest. He told me in London that he’s always wanted one.”

“It’s illegal to keep Dragons because they’re too dangerous. They *can’t* be tamed,” said Malfoy matter-of-factly. And then he quipped, “But we’re talking about *Hagrid* here. When has *he* ever followed the rules regarding *monsters*?”

When they finished revising, Harry, Hermione and Draco went to visit Hagrid. Malfoy decided to come along for the first time. He said he wanted to see if Granger could wheedle more information about what was protecting the Philosopher’s Stone, but Harry suspected Malfoy was really hoping to find out more about why Hagrid was researching dragons.

Hagrid was surprised to see Malfoy. He greeted him as “Mr Malfoy” while he called Harry and Hermione by their first names. Malfoy did not ask Hagrid to use his first name.

It was suffocatingly hot inside his hut. The fire was at full blaze.

Hermione asked an 'innocent' question about how Fluffy was being fed.

"Ah, yer not gonna fool me, Hermione," scolded Hagrid. "I have to admit ya surprised me figgerin' it all out like ya did. But ya already know too much an I'm not sayin' any more 'bout it, ya hear?"

Hermione ignored him and asked, "I suppose a *dragon* would even be better at guarding the Stone than Fluffy."

"Oh, sure," said Hagrid, nodding his head. "Nuthin's better 'an a *dragon*."

"Or in addition to Fluffy... having *more* than one thing guarding the Stone to protect it would be better too, wouldn't it?" suggested Hermione.

"That's what Perfessor Dumbledore said," agreed Hagrid nodding again. "So, I provided Fluffy, an the teachers provided the other protections..." Hagrid began ticking them off on his fingers, "...Perfessor Dumbledore, o' course, Perfessor Sprout, Perfessor McGonagall, Perfessor Flitwick, Perfessor Snape, and Perfessor Quirrell... But nothin's gonna get by Fluffy."

When Hagrid ticked off Professor Quirrell as one of the teachers, the three looked at each other.

Harry asked, "Do all the teachers know how to get past Fluffy?"

"Jus' me an Perfessor Dumbledore," said Hagrid. "He's the only one knows 'em all."

Finally, Malfoy complained about the heat and asked Hagrid to open the door or a window.

"Can't," said Hagrid. He got up and moved the heat deflecting plate in the hearth and pointed into the fire.

Sitting right in the middle of the flames was an enormous black egg.

Malfoy exclaimed excitedly, "That's a *dragon's* egg, isn't it? Where did you *get* it?"

"Won it las' night from a stranger in the Hog's Head," said Hagrid.

Hermione asked him what he was going to do with after it hatched -- assuming he could not possibly be thinking of keeping it. But Hagrid spent the next ten minutes telling them about dragon husbandry and breeding.

It was going to take a few days to hatch, so Hagrid had plenty of time to read up on it.

On the way back to the castle, Hermione said she had never seen Hagrid happier. She also seemed quite satisfied that Professor Dumbledore had set up seven layers of protection for the Philosopher's Stone.

Harry wondered if Malfoy would now break off their relationship.

A few days later at breakfast, Hermione got a note from Hagrid saying 'it' was getting ready to hatch. She told Harry and Malfoy and they agreed to go visit Hagrid during lunch break.

When they got to the hut, they could hear Hagrid crooning through the door. He let them in and, as proud as any new parent, showed them Norbert, the name he had given to the Norwegian Ridgeback.

Hagrid was disappointed they missed the hatching but could not be more thrilled with his new charge -- despite the fact Norbert had obviously already set Hagrid's bed on fire in at least three places.

They spent the next week visiting Hagrid every day after classes trying to reason with him to let the dragon go. It was already bigger than Fang, who refused to come inside anymore -- for good reason. And it was wreaking havoc on Hagrid's hut and all his belongings.

However, surprisingly, Malfoy seemed to like the dragon just as much as Hagrid.

Hermione did not want to get Hagrid into trouble, but she said they might have to go to Professor Dumbledore -- to prevent certain disaster.

Malfoy said Hagrid was not going to let Norbert go unless they could find someplace it would be safe. So, they had to come up with a plan.

Harry had a brainstorm. "Charlie!"

Malfoy and Hermine asked, "Who?" at the same time.

“On the Hogwarts Express, Ron Weasley told me his brother Charlie studies dragons in Romania. He’ll have a solution. Hermione, you can ask Ron to write Charlie a letter.”

Hermione shook her head, “Ron wouldn’t do it for me. He *hates* me. But... I think Fred and George would. They’re nice to me and, more importantly, they’ll keep a secret -- especially if it involves possible mayhem.”

It turned out Fred and George were fully up to the task. They even went to see Norbert -- hoping to see some mayhem. A week later, Fred and George told Hermione that Charlie would take Norbert.

Hagrid reluctantly agreed to give up Norbert, who was now bigger than a Shetland pony and threatening to completely destroy his hut.

Hermione made the arrangements by owl post directly with Charlie. They would crate up Norbert and have him waiting outside the school gate at midnight on Saturday. Some of Charlie’s friends in England would make the pickup and delivery for him. It had to be outside the gate, because there was no way Charlie’s friends could get into the school grounds without raising an alarm.

“This is all good,” said Malfoy. “But how are we going to get out of the castle after hours without being seen?”

Hermione was shocked that she had not thought of that. “I was so busy with the arrangements, I didn’t think.”

When none of them could think of any possible way, Harry was forced to reveal his biggest secret -- the Invisibility Cloak. He told them about getting it for Christmas anonymously from someone who said it had been his father’s. Harry did not mention having used it or finding the Mirror of Erised. Hermione and Malfoy were both skeptical until he showed it to them. They were awestruck.

“My father showed me one once, but it was *nothing* like this. Think what we could *do* with it!” exclaimed Malfoy.

Harry noticed Malfoy had said “we.”

They tried it on to make sure they could all fit under it. They could, well enough. They also practiced walking around in it. Malfoy scared some Hufflepuff first years,

pretending to be Peeves, the Poltergeist. Harry thought his voice impersonation was quite good. Hermione said they were being childish.

On Saturday night an hour before midnight, Harry, Hermione and Malfoy left the castle under the invisibility cloak. Harry had given it to Hermione earlier in the day so she could sneak down from Gryffindor tower and then meet them right outside their common room.

Before they reached Hagrid's hut, they removed the cloak and Harry stuffed it inside his robe pocket. Hagrid already had Norbert tightly crated when they reached his hut. He was in tears and had obviously been crying for some time given the dampness of his beard.

Hermione was going to use a hovering charm to move the huge crate, but Hagrid insisted on carrying it himself. He sang lullabies to Norbert as they walked along, while Norbert struggled futilely to tear the crate open.

They followed Hagrid to the school gate. He used his keys to unlock it and then set the crate outside. They only had to wait a few minutes before Charlie's friends arrived on broomsticks right on time. Charlie's friends fitted a sling around the crate, said their goodbyes and were off. Hagrid waved and bid a tearful farewell to Norbert.

Hagrid relocked the gate. He insisted they come back to his hut for some tea, so they did. Hagrid chose to drink something stronger but remained inconsolable.

Finally, Hermione said they had to get back to the castle and they left.

On the way back, despite the pain it had caused Hagrid, they agreed they had done the right thing. In truth, they were glad to be rid of the creature. By the end, it was scaring them half to death, including Malfoy.

As they entered the front doors to the castle, Mr Filch was waiting for them.

"Umm, we are in trouble now," he crooned.

They had forgotten to put on the invisibility cloak.

Chapter 9 – Detention

Mr Filch took them up to Professor McGonagall's office on the first floor and told them to wait.

McGonagall entered the room a few minutes later in a tartan dressing gown. She had a mean looking smirk on her face... until she saw Hermione.

Her smirk turned to shock and she gasped, "Miss Granger! How *dare* you? My own house! These two I might have expected, but not *you*. I am *ashamed* of you. Out of bed *and* out of bounds -- outside on the school grounds no less. It is nearly *two* in the morning."

She paused and drew herself to her full height and passed her sentence.

"One hundred points taken for each of you... *and* detention. And I shall be speaking to Professor Snape. It would not surprise me if he took even more points from you two. As for you Miss Granger... if I hear of the slightest rule breaking from you until the end of term, it will be detention *every night*. Now *get to bed*, all of you!"

Hermione was in tears and rushed off. Harry and Malfoy made their way back to their dormitory in silence. But just before Harry got into bed, he heard Malfoy groan, "We're *doomed*." Harry was thinking exactly the same thing.

The next morning, Professor Snape grabbed Harry and Malfoy before they had barely sat down for breakfast. "My office, *now!*"

Professor Snape's eyes seemed to bore into Harry, who avoided eye contact. Finally, as if he could not contain himself, he hissed, "*Two-hundred points!* ...If this has anything to do with what I told you before, Mr Potter, you'll be..."

"It doesn't," said Malfoy, interrupting Snape.

Snape's head whipped around to stare at Malfoy. "I see. So, you are in on Mr Potter's little game, are you? I'd have thought better of you to get mixed up in rule breaking."

"It *wasn't* that, it was... something else," said Malfoy.

"Then out with it *now*, or I'll have you both *suspended*," demanded Snape.

"It was a... a *dragon*," confessed Malfoy.

Harry expected Professor Snape to explode with skepticism. Instead, he stared straight into Malfoy’s eyes as if he were reading his mind. After at least ten seconds, he said quite coolly, “Yes, I see... Dragon’s *fascinate* you, don’t they, Mr Malfoy? I want the whole story... *now*.”

“We...” started Harry, but Snape held out his hand to stop him, saying, “From *you*, Mr Malfoy.”

Malfoy told the whole story -- *except* for the invisibility cloak.

Professor Snape did not say a word for at least a minute. He just stared at them, seething.

Then he said, “If you had simply come to me in the *beginning*, this would have been easily dealt with and Slytherin would not now be at the *bottom* of the House Cup points. I do not think your housemates are going to be very *pleased* with you.”

Professor Snape was right.

By the time they got back to the Great Hall near the end of breakfast, the rest of the Slytherins had all realized their points had plummeted overnight. Then the word had spread from the Gryffindors, who had also lost points dropping them to third place, that Harry Potter had led two other stupid first-years out of bounds.

Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students cheered Harry in mock appreciation. But Slytherins and Gryffindors were openly hostile and threatening. Harry received virtually all the blame because he was famous. Malfoy got some abuse but mostly from the Slytherins. Hermione, however, became an *outcast* from Gryffindor.

She had cost them the chance to be in first place, where they would have been if she had not been hanging out with *Slytherins*. She was now seen as a house traitor. The three were literally driven out of their common rooms and had no recourse but to stick together now more than ever.

But there were no recriminations between them. In fact, they all became *real* friends -- first name friends -- including Draco and Hermione.

Marcus Flint came to Harry and told him the rest of the Quidditch team wanted Flint to kick Harry off the team, but Flint, as captain, had overruled them. He explained to Harry that if they won their last match with Hufflepuff, they would get fifty points back, but

more importantly, they would *win* the Quidditch Cup, which was all Flint cared about. He knew they had a much better chance of winning with Harry than with Higgs.

But he told Harry he had better get the Snitch -- *or else*.

Harry believed Flint was serious about the “or else.” He had already been roughed up several times by older Slytherin students -- embarrassingly, including a couple of *girls*. Avery would not even look at him anymore.

Harry did catch the Snitch in their last match of the season. But the fifty points and the Quidditch Cup did not redeem Harry (or Draco) in the eyes of the Slytherins. Harry and Draco were not allowed to attend the Quidditch Cup victory party. They were still a hundred and fifty points down and it was as all their fault.

About a week before end of term exams, Harry and Draco were walking to the library when they overheard Professor Quirrell talking to someone in a classroom. The door was slightly ajar. It sounded like Quirrell was being threatened. He was pleading.

“But I tried...”

“No. Please, not again, *please*...”

They stopped and listened at the door.

“It is difficult. If you could...”

“No. No. Not *that* again. *Please* give me another chance.”

Though Professor Quirrell was talking quite audibly, and not stuttering, they could not hear the other person. Quirrell seemed to finally agree to what the other person was saying.

“All right. All right... I will...”

They heard Professor Quirrell coming to the door, so they quickly moved a few steps back down the corridor and made it seem like they were slowly walking toward the room as Quirrell came out straightening his turban.

They both nodded to him but he acted as if he had not seen them as he rushed past. He looked to be in serious emotional distress.

Harry whispered, "Should we wait to see who the other person is?"

Draco nodded.

They walked slowly back and forth for at least a minute, but when no one emerged, Draco said, "Let's take a look."

The room was empty but there was another door at the far end.

Draco cursed, and then said, "I can't imagine who that was. I wonder why we couldn't hear them."

"Do you think it could have been Professor Snape confronting Quirrell again?" asked Harry.

"No," said Draco. "Why would Snape be whispering? He never does that when he's threatening students. Did he whisper when you heard them before?"

"No," said Harry. "But now we know Professor Quirrell isn't just acting by himself. That complicates it," said Harry.

"Let's get to the library and tell Hermione," said Draco. And they did.

Hermione listened to them recount what had just happened.

"There is something very *odd* going on," said Hermione thoughtfully. "Based on what Hagrid said, there are five teachers, including Professor Dumbledore, providing protective spells beyond the trap door that Fluffy is guarding. I think we have to assume that Professor Quirrell thinks he can get past all the protections, not just his own. Otherwise, he wouldn't have made an attempt on Halloween. Do any of us think Professor Quirrell is capable of that?"

"No," said Harry and Draco together.

Hermione continued, "Then if someone is forcing Professor Quirrell to try and get the stone, that person must have the skill, or the knowledge, or both to enable Quirrell to do it. Who could it be?"

"Only Dumbledore, for sure," said Draco.

“But maybe Professor McGonagall or Professor Snape,” said Harry.

“I agree.” said Hermione. “However, I don’t suspect any of them and I’m sure you don’t either.”

They didn’t.

“Yet it has to be someone *inside* the school who is behind this, and someone who has *power* over Professor Quirrell,” Hermione concluded.

“Maybe it’s a *vampire*,” said Draco.

Hermione and Harry looked at him questioningly.

“Well, I heard he ran into one in Albania and he’s deathly afraid of them. Maybe there’s one in the castle. They can become invisible, you know. And have you seen how Quirrell looks now? Maybe it’s bewitched him and *feeding* on him...”

Hermione looked skeptical, but said, “OK... maybe. I’ll do some research.”

But then she said, “Look, I think there’s more to this than someone looking to get rich. We should go to Professor Dumbledore.”

Harry and Draco both shook their heads.

Harry said, “Draco and I aren’t allowed to go to Professor Dumbledore without going through Professor Snape first. And he already told me specifically to stay out of this. He’d kill me if he knew I hadn’t stopped investigating.”

As Harry and Draco were about to leave, Hermione said, “There’s something *e/else* you should know. Fred and George came by and apologized to me.”

“For what?” Harry and Draco said together.

Hermione explained, “They said they found out that *Ron* tipped off Mr Filch that I went out of bounds. Ron must have seen me leave the common room. He took a chance leaving the common room himself to tell Mr Filch, but Mr Filch didn’t turn him in. I guess Mr Filch likes having informants.”

Harry and Draco’s mouths dropped open in shock.

“Ron *wanted* to get me in trouble, to get me a detention, but he never expected Professor McGonagall to take *so many* points. He didn’t know you two were involved either. You were just a *bonus*,” said Hermione bitterly.

“Do you think he saw the Invisibility Cloak?” asked Harry.

“No,” said Hermione. “I didn’t put it on until after I got into the corridor. I didn’t see him. He must have waited a bit so I wouldn’t see or hear him come out.”

Draco growled, “I’m going to *get* him.”

“No,” said Hermione. “You’ll just get into more trouble.”

They argued about it until Madam Pince came over and told them to be quiet or leave.

The next morning, they all got notes at breakfast telling them they were having detention with Hagrid at midnight and to meet him in the Entrance Hall.

Chapter 10 – The Forbidden Forest

Hagrid met them on time and led them back to his hut. He went inside briefly and came out with his crossbow, a quiver of bolts hung on his wide belt, a lantern, and Fang, who greeted all three enthusiastically.

“Just cuz yer my friends don’t mean this’ll be an *easy* detention,” Hagrid said. “This’ll be *real* work an could be *dangerous*. Tha’s why I’m bringin’ this along,” he assured them, hefting his crossbow. “We’re goin’ into the Forbidden Forest ta find an injured unicorn. Somethin’s been after ’em. Found a dead one last week.”

Draco looked scared. “Students aren’t *allowed* to go in there...”

“Unless there be a teacher or staff with ’em,” Hagrid responded. “I know more ’bout the Forest than any teacher... ’cept maybe Perfessor Dumbledore. If ya don’t wanna go, get back up ta the school an pack yer bags.”

Draco did not say anything else.

“All right. Follow me.” Hagrid led them just inside the edge of the forest and held up his lantern. He showed them some unicorn blood on the leafy ground which appeared silvery in the light. “We’re gonna try ta find it. We may have ta put it down if it’s too bad injured.”

“What if we run into what’s *attacking* the unicorns?” asked Draco, not sounding any less scared.

“There’s nothin’ ta worry ’bout if yer with me and Fang,” said Hagrid confidently. “Now the first thin’ we’re gonna do is split up...”

“What?!” exclaimed Draco. “You just said...”

Hermione chimed in, “Hagrid, I *don’t* think that’s a good idea. Professor Dumbledore would certainly not want you to have students outside of your protection in the Forbidden Forest.”

Harry quickly agreed, “Hermione’s right, Hagrid,” and Draco exclaimed, “Right!”

Hagrid looked at Hermione thoughtfully and then said, “OK. Let’s go.”

They trooped off in file. Fang led the way, sniffing the ground. Harry followed close behind, then Draco, Hermione and Hagrid -- holding the lantern high. The trail was not hard to follow with Fang. Every so often they would spot the silvery blood reflecting on the leaf litter.

After about a half hour, Hagrid suddenly said in a harsh whisper, “GET DOWN QUICK!”

They all crouched down below the top of the undergrowth along the game trail. Except Draco, who had lain down completely flat along with Fang, who had also clearly understood and obeyed Hagrid’s command.

Hagrid shielded the lantern and then quietly notched a bolt onto his crossbow and held it ready to fire. They remained deathly silent and listened.

They could hear something moving through the undergrowth nearby. It was not a sound like their own crunching footsteps had been. It was a creepy sound -- like something crawling or being dragged across dead leaves.

The sound faded after a short time.

The three students together let out the breath they had been holding in a long sigh.

“What was that?” quavered Draco, now shivering with dread.

“Dun’ know,” Hagrid grunted. “Never heard nothin’ like it before. It’s somethin’ that shouldn’ be here.”

“Should we go back?” asked Hermione.

“Na, no *one* creature’s gonna ’ttack all of us together,” said Hagrid confidently. “Let’s go.”

They went on, but now much more slowly and much more conscious of the slightest sound. And now the three students had their wands out.

They walked on for at least another half hour, deeper into the forest. It got more tangled and denser the farther they went. There was also a lot more unicorn blood. Then Harry saw the forest brightening ahead, and he observed moonlight streaming down into a small clearing. A moment later he saw something bright white and gleaming on the ground just inside.

Fang ran forward toward the bright object and then suddenly yelped, turned tail and bolted off into the forest.

Hagrid yelled, “Fang! Ya bloody coward. It’s jus’ a unicorn.”

Harry stopped and said, “Look!” pointing so the others could see. Draco and Hermione moved up close behind him to get a better view.

“That’s the one, all right,” said Hagrid softly. “Dead, by the looks of ’im.”

The path into the clearing was tight, so Harry continued to move forward in the lead. He was about twenty feet from the unicorn when something dark rose up from behind it.

It was a cloaked figure but horribly shaped. It moved like a monstrous crab and began to slowly climb over the dead unicorn toward them.

Harry stopped dead in his tracks. Draco bumped into him and then gasped as he looked over Harry’s shoulder.

Hagrid shouted, "GET BACK! GET BEHIND ME!" He had already dropped the crossbow and lantern, picked up Hermione and thrown her behind him on the trail.

Draco and Harry were just starting to scramble backwards when there was a burst of incredibly bright light from the creature, which was still advancing.

Harry, who had already half turned, was blinded in one eye. He completed his turn, stumbled, and fell heavily into Draco, who yelled, "WATCH OUT!" They both went down, and Harry's wand tumbled away.

Hagrid threw his hands up in front of his face yelling, "I CAN'T SEE! RUN! RUN!"

Hagrid blundered forward in an obvious attempt to reach Draco and Harry on the narrow path but did not know they had both fallen. He stumbled over the two boys and fell sideways into a large oak tree hitting his head. It sounded like a bat hitting a bludger.

Harry scrambled to get up. On his knees, he felt Draco in front of him getting back to his feet. Harry glanced back over his shoulder and saw the creature was now only ten feet away and still slowly advancing.

Harry heard Draco yell, "STU...!" But then there was a flash of red light and Draco was blasted backwards.

Harry began frantically feeling around on the ground for his wand when his scar erupted in intense pain. He fell backwards onto the path clutching his head. The only thing he could sense beyond the pain was the creature about to descend upon him as its body blocked the moonlight.

As he felt impending doom, Harry saw a bright light arcing over him, then heard shattering glass and a scream. The pain in his forehead was suddenly gone and he saw the creature retreating rapidly.

Its cloak was on fire.

Harry pushed himself up onto his elbows and saw the burning creature spin and then raise itself impossibly into a vertical position. Its limbs rotated like some horrible mechanical man.

Then he heard Hermione shout, "*Incendio!*"

A jet of flame flew over Harry's head at the already burning figure. But suddenly, the creature was gone and only the smoke remained.

Hermione rushed forward to stand protectively over Harry.

"Do you think it's gone?" she asked, sounding as anxious as Harry felt. She was holding her wand out and looking wildly in multiple directions.

Harry said, "I don't know. Can you light your wand so I can find mine?"

Hermione did and he found it in the undergrowth at the edge of the path. Then he got up.

"*Incendio?*" asked Harry.

"It's a spell I've read about. I didn't know how far the flame would go," said Hermione, having resumed holding her wand straight out and scanning around.

Harry said, "You keep watch. I'll check on Draco and Hagrid."

Just as he said his name, Hagrid gave a loud groan.

"Thank God for that," said Harry. "He must have just been knocked out."

Harry stepped past Hagrid and knelt beside Draco, who seemed to be breathing normally. "I think Draco was just knocked out too."

"Stunned, for sure," said Hermione.

Harry slapped Draco lightly on the cheek, but he did not wake up. "He's not responding."

"Try, '*Enervate*,'" said Hermione.

It worked. Draco came around right away, though he was clearly dazed. While Draco was clearing his head, Harry used the charm on Hagrid, who also started coming around.

Hermione said, "I'm using Draco's wand. Can you look for mine, Harry?"

Harry did and quickly found her wand further back on the trail. After a few minutes, they were all standing together once again, wands returned. Hagrid was holding his head and still looking a little dazed. Hermione explained what happened.

"When Hagrid threw me behind him, I dropped my wand when I braced to hit the ground. The flash didn't blind me and I tried to find my wand. Then I heard Draco's partial spell and saw him blasted backward. I crawled forward, grabbed the lantern, and threw it at the creature. Then I saw Draco's wand next to him. I grabbed it and used it, but the creature disappeared right at the same time."

Draco said, "I wasn't blinded, but I was knocked down by Harry when he spun around. When I stood up again, I tried to stun the creature but got hit with a spell and don't remember anything after that."

Harry said, "I got temporarily blinded in one eye, but then my scar hurt so bad I fell down and almost fainted. It was almost on top of me when I saw the lantern flying. It screamed and backed away. My scar stopped hurting and whatever it was... changed shape. It stood up like a man, but the movement was all wrong."

"I saw it too. It sent shivers up my spine," said Hermione, shivering again.

"Well, it wasn't a *creature*," said Harry, "because it used magic to attack us."

"What was that *thing* doing to the unicorn, Hagrid?" asked Draco. Hagrid just grunted.

"It was drinking its blood," said a placid voice from the clearing.

They all jumped and whirled around with their wands out to see who had spoken.

It was a centaur. He was quite tall, handsome and had a beautiful palomino color even in the moonlight. He was slowly approaching them. His movement was so well controlled, you could only hear his hoof falls if you listened very carefully. Their own conversation had masked his approach.

"Hello, Firenze," said Hagrid.

"Good evening, Hagrid," said Firenze serenely, then sadly, "The unicorn is dead."

Hagrid introduced them, “I’d like ya ta meet some friends o’ mine. This is Hermione Granger, Draco Malfoy, and Harry Potter -- students up at the school.”

“Good evening,” Firenze said again.

They all said, “Hello,” though Hermione’s came out sounding like a squeak. She seemed completely agog, with her mouth hanging open.

“Why would it be drinking unicorn blood?” asked Harry.

“Unicorn blood will keep you alive even if you are an inch from death. It is a monstrous crime to kill a unicorn. Only someone with nothing to lose would do so because they will forever have a cursed life,” said Firenze solemnly.

“Who would *choose* such a life?” asked Hermione.

“Can you think of no one who has desperately clung to life for so many years waiting for a chance to return?” asked Firenze, looking directly at Harry.

Harry and Hermione both gasped. Draco looked at them questioningly.

“Now, Firenze, ya don’t wanna be scarin’ these kids with talk like that,” said Hagrid sounding annoyed.

“Hagrid, you *know* what is being guarded up at the school and you know *why*,” said Firenze angrily. “The *stars* have foretold it.”

“We know too!” exclaimed Draco, finally putting two and two together as Harry and Hermione had. “The Philosopher’s Stone! ...The Dark Lord is *still alive* somehow and wants it so he can make the Elixir of Life and come back. He’s living off the *unicorns* until he can get the Stone.”

“Now look here ya three... I told ya, it’s none o’ yer business...” warned Hagrid.

“The wisdom of children...” said Firenze. “You should leave the forest now. It isn’t safe. I bid you goodbye.” He turned and walked back across the clearing and out of sight into the forest beyond.

“Don’t ya listen ta ’im now...” Hagrid started to say, when Harry cut across him.

“Hagrid, we’re not *stupid*. *Voldemort* is living off the unicorns in the Forbidden Forest. We’ve got to tell Professor Dumbledore *right away*... TONIGHT! Let’s *go!*”

Hagrid tried to get Harry to change his mind, but he would not be deterred. He pushed past Hagrid and started back up the path. Hermione and Draco joined him and Hagrid was forced to follow them. They reached Hagrid’s hut in less than a half hour with Harry driving the pace.

Fang rushed out from under the hut to greet them, but Harry kept striding past him straight to the castle making the others keep up.

As soon as they were inside the Entrance Hall, Harry stopped and turned around. “Hagrid, please take us to Professor Dumbledore. I don’t know where he sleeps.”

“I’m tellin’ ya, I don’t like this,” said Hagrid.

“If you don’t, we’ll wake up the whole school,” said Hermione.

“All right,” growled Hagrid reluctantly.

He took them to Professor Dumbledore. They were amazed by the rising spiral staircase behind the gargoyle. The password Hagrid used was ‘chocolate frogs’.

Professor Dumbledore seemed quite calm as he admitted them to his office, still in his dressing gown, less than a minute after Hagrid pounded on the door.

When they were assembled before him and he was seated behind his desk, Dumbledore said, “To what do I owe the pleasure of this pre-dawn get together? I assume it has to do with your detention, does it not?”

“Yes, sir, Perfessor Dumbledore, sir,” answered Hagrid sounding *very* uncomfortable. “There were an... *incident*... in the Forbidden Forest... an these three insisted I bring ’em ta see ya, Perfessor Dumbledore, sir.”

“Ah. I see. In that case, let us have the students tell me about it, if you do not mind, Rubeus,” said Dumbledore kindly.

“No, sir. Fine, sir, Professor Dumbledore, sir,” said Hagrid sounding relieved.

“Good. Why not have you start first, Miss Granger?” suggested Dumbledore, resting his elbows on his desk and pressing his fingertips together under his chin.

Harry and Draco were very happy with the Headmaster's suggestion.

Hermione took a deep breath and began. She did not sound the least bit nervous. “Sir, we were searching for an injured unicorn. Just as we found it, we were attacked by a cloaked crawling being that was drinking the unicorn's blood. Hagrid was knocked out trying to protect us. We were barely able to drive it off using fire. As we did, it stood up very unnaturally and then disappeared. We then met a centaur who explained what unicorn blood could do. Because of the Philosopher's Stone being stored under guard in the school, we concluded the being was Voldemort using the unicorn blood to sustain himself until he can steal the Philosopher's Stone and fully restore himself using the Elixir of Life. We also believe he has an accomplice in the school.” After a brief pause, she added, “*Sir.*”

As she spoke, Professor Dumbledore's eyebrows rose higher and higher until they were lost under his sweeping curtains of silver hair. When she finished, he paused a moment, placed his palms flat on the desktop, and asked, “Do either of you boys have anything to add?”

Draco looked at Harry, then Professor Dumbledore, and said, “Sir, he... the being... the Dark Lord... tried to *kill us all*. Hermione *saved* us, sir.”

Harry chimed in, “That's *right*, sir. My scar hurt so bad I couldn't do anything to help. Voldemort had almost gotten to me when Hermione threw the lantern at him and set his cloak on fire. That drove him off, but when he was over me and the lantern flew at him, I saw under his hood and saw... *red eyes.*”

“You say your scar *hurt*, Harry?” asked Dumbledore firmly, sounding concerned for the first time.

“Yes, sir,” said Harry.

“Has it hurt you *before?*” asked Dumbledore intently.

“Not hurt... not like tonight,” said Harry. “Once before, right after the sorting ceremony, I was looking at Professor Snape talking to Professor Quirrell at the High Table... my scar suddenly stung a bit. But it was *nothing* like tonight.”

Dumbledore nodded his head several times, and then said, “Thank you all for coming to see me. Now listen carefully. You are *not* to repeat this to anyone -- I repeat -- not to *anyone*. To do so would create a panic. I will inform the teachers. I assure you I will be taking additional security measures to safeguard the school and the students. If by some means you come across anything else you think important, see your heads of house. They will be informed of your role, which, I must emphasize, has now come to an end. This is now a matter for the teachers and staff. Do you understand me?”

Harry, Draco and Hermione all said, “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Then off to bed for whatever sleep you can manage before morning. Rubeus, please escort these students to their respective houses.”

Chapter 11 – Through the Trap Door

Harry, Draco and Hermione were exhausted the next day, but still anxious to further discuss everything that had happened. Before breakfast, they huddled in the small room off the Entrance Hall where first-years waited before the sorting ceremony.

“Hermione, why didn’t you mention to Professor Dumbledore that Professor Quirrell is Voldemort’s accomplice?” asked Harry.

“Just a minute,” said Draco. “Why do you and Hermione keep saying the Dark Lord’s name? No one else does it; it’s... disrespectful. I know Avery said Harry’s entitled, but can’t we just say *the Dark Lord*? People who said his name used to end up *dead*.”

“Hermione and I never grew up fearing his name,” said Harry.

“Don’t stop using it, Harry,” advised Hermione, declaring, “I think it gives us *strength*. And I will never use such milk-toast terms like You-Know-Who or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.”

“Suit yourselves,” said Draco, unconvinced.

Harry repeated his question to Hermione, “So why didn’t you tell Professor Dumbledore about Quirrell?”

“Because I assume Professor Snape has already reported Professor Quirrell’s suspicious activities to Professor Dumbledore. What happened last night now explains

why the Philosopher's Stone is so heavily guarded. They're waiting for Professor Quirrell to make his move so they can catch Voldemort." Then she added testily, "If you had concerns, Harry, *you* could have brought it up."

"Well, I didn't," said Harry matter-of-factly, "because he asked *you* to tell what happened. And I figured he'd be more likely to believe it if it came from you. He obviously knows how smart you are."

Hermione blushed.

Draco asked, "Should we go back and tell him about Quirrell in the classroom?"

"We could..." said Harry slowly, then arguing, "but does it really provide anything more than we've already told them. After seeing Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest, I don't think there's any way he got into the school to talk to Professor Quirrell. Quirrell either has a means of talking to him magically or there's another accomplice. I don't know. We're supposed to go to Professor Snape first, but I bet he isn't pleased about us going straight to Professor Dumbledore. He obviously suspects Quirrell... of something. When the teachers find out, if they haven't already, what happened in the Forest, Professor Snape will know Quirrell is Voldemort's accomplice. Professor Dumbledore has to know it too. But one thing for sure, Professor Snape now knows we ignored him and kept on medaling. I'm surprised he hasn't already had us report to him."

"I give him until dinner... at the latest," quipped Draco.

No surprise... Snape had Harry and Draco in his office at lunchtime.

He lectured them at length on concealing the fact they knew about the Philosopher's Stone and kept it from him. However, it soon became clear he wanted a more detailed account of their encounter with the 'being' in the Forest.

They told him everything. Then Professor Snape surprised them.

"You *may* have convinced Professor Dumbledore of the Dark Lord's return, but not me," said Snape condescendingly. "Regardless, there are going to be more security measures. School ghosts will be assigned to guard all school entrances and alert the staff of any intruders. In addition, the teachers are going to conduct an extensive search of the Forbidden Forest for any signs of the 'being' that is killing the unicorns. You may inform Miss Granger but no one else. Is that understood?"

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

“And you are not, I repeat, *not* to be involved any longer. If you disobey me again, I will see to it that you are both *expelled*. Is that also understood?”

Again, they agreed and were dismissed.

Beginning that afternoon, Draco started taking every opportunity to harass Ron Weasley and make his life miserable -- much more so than he would have done to any other Gryffindor in his year. Losing the points because of Ron had been bad enough, but the detention in the Forbidden Forest had been *unforgivable* as far as Draco was concerned.

Whenever Hermione was a witness to it, she showed her disapproval, but it did not deter Draco. He was a top-notch harasser.

Harry also noticed that Professor Snape also seemed to come down on Ron more than usual. He wondered if Mr Filch had let slip to Professor Snape that Ron had been the informant that had cost the Slytherins two hundred house points.

Hermione was shocked when Harry told her that Professor Snape did not believe the being in the forest was Voldemort.

“But at least Professor Dumbledore believes it,” said Hermione.

“Does he?” asked Draco. “Did he say that? I don’t think he did.”

Hermione opened her mouth to speak and then stopped. She looked to be in deep thought. Finally, she sighed and said, “You’re right, Draco. He didn’t *specifically* say anything about Voldemort one way or another. But he did tell us nicely to stay out of whatever is going on.”

“But, Draco, I thought Professor Snape said we *had* convinced Professor Dumbledore, though not him...? And also, to stay out of it... *again*, but not so nicely,” said Harry.

“Professor Snape said we *may* have convinced Dumbledore,” reminded Draco.

“Regardless, I guess we should do what they said,” Hermione said grudgingly. But a moment later she cursed loudly, shocking both Harry and Draco, and then exclaimed, “I want to know what’s *going on!*”

Harry, Hermione and Draco resumed their normal school routine. Still being shunned by the rest of the students, they continued doing homework together and revising for end of year exams.

Much to his dismay, Harry began to experience more sudden sharp pains in his scar after the attack in the forest. He was also dreaming about the attack almost every night. He could still see the glint of red eyes. Harry thought it was because Voldemort must be getting stronger. He only felt safe being inside the castle and having Professor Dumbledore in charge.

They did not know how, except Hermione, but they finally made it through their exams, passing them all.

They were enjoying Friday afternoon outside with the rest of the students after the last exam. Harry’s scar was hurting him again and it seemed to be getting worse. Hermione asked him about it.

Harry admitted it was worse and said, “I think it means Voldemort is getting angrier. He must be pushing Quirrell harder to go after the Stone.”

“But Quirrell doesn’t know how to get past Fluffy to begin with. Hagrid would never betray Professor Dumbledore,” said Hermione reassuringly.

Harry suddenly slapped his forehead hard.

Hermione looked alarmed, but before she could ask about his scar hurting, Harry said, “We’ve got to see Hagrid *now*,” and he got up and ran toward Hagrid’s hut.

Hermione and Draco looked at each other and then took off after him.

Hagrid was playing tug of war with Fang using a bit of thick rope when Harry ran up to him.

“What 're ya on 'bout, Harry?” asked Hagrid as he let go of the rope. Fang started tossing it in the air and chasing after it.

It took a bit of time for Harry to catch his breath. As he started to speak, Hermione and Draco caught up. “When you won the dragon egg at the Hog’s Head, what did the stranger look like?”

“Never saw 'is face. Kept 'is hood up. But then, that ain't nothin' unusual in the Hog's Head. It's pretty dark in there besides,” mused Hagrid.

“What did you talk about? How did the dragon egg come up?” asked Harry.

“Well, I don't remember much 'cause he kept buyin' me drinks, but he said he were a magical creatures trader, an I told 'im I were Gamekeeper at Hogwarts... Uh... Then he said he had a dragon egg an offered ta play me fer it, but only if he thought I could handle a dragon. He asked me if I handled any dangerous creatures, an I told 'im 'bout Fluffy -- 'bout as dangerous as they come.”

“What did you offer up in return?” asked Draco.

“Uh... an Acromantula egg,” said Hagrid.

“A what?” asked Draco.

“A giant intelligent spider...” started Hermione, but Harry cut her off with a wave of his hand.

“Did the trader seem *interested* in Fluffy?” asked Harry anxiously.

“O' course. He were in the business. Them three-headed dogs 're rare, ya see. But I told 'im there'd be no problem if ya know how ta calm 'em -- just play 'em some music an they fall right off ta sleep.”

Harry had a horrified look on his face, which was matched by Hagrid, who exclaimed, “That's a secret! I shouldn' a told ya that! Don't ya go repeatin' that ta no one!”

Harry's mind was racing.

Hermione spoke before Harry could think what to say, urging, “Hagrid, you’ve got to tell this to Professor Dumbledore *right now*.”

Draco exclaimed, “Hagrid, someone’s trying to learn how to get the Stone!”

Hagrid looked panicked. “Yer right. I’ll go right now.” And he took off at a run. The ground shook. It was the first time they had ever seen Hagrid run and it was almost scary.

Hermione asked, “Harry, how did you guess?”

Harry said, “It suddenly occurred to me that one of Hagrid’s greatest wishes was to have a dragon and a stranger just happened to show up and practically give him one. It was too much of a coincidence.”

“But that was more than *two months* ago,” said Draco. “If Quirrell -- and I assume we all agree that the magical creature trader was Quirrell -- then, why hasn’t he tried to get the Stone yet?”

“He either doesn’t yet have all the clues to the other things protecting the Stone or he’s waiting for the right moment,” said Harry. “But the way my scar keeps hurting me more makes me think it’s building up to something happening soon.”

“If I didn’t know you, Harry,” said Draco dryly, “I’d say you were *mental*... but I think you’re right. We need to keep our eyes and ears open to anything suspicious.”

“Right!” declared Hermione. “This is *Voldemort* we’re talking about -- *returning to power!* I know we promised Professor Dumbledore to stay out of it, but we have to be ready to do *anything* to stop him.”

After breakfast the next morning, Professor Dumbledore assembled the teachers in the Entrance Hall as he had been doing on weekends since the incident in the Forbidden Forest. They all marched out and headed for Hagrid’s cabin. All the students had been told they were helping Hagrid conduct a complete survey of magical creatures in the Forest, which would not be completed until the end of term.

For the first time, this alarmed the trio, because after what they had learned from Hagrid, their concern had shifted back to protecting the Stone rather than the search for Voldemort.

They agreed to take turns standing watch in the third-floor corridor under the invisibility cloak until the teachers had returned from the forest. The other two would wait in the library. They would transfer the watch duty and the invisibility cloak in the nearest bathroom.

They would be missing from the corridor for less than a minute each time. At the first sign of anything suspicious, the plan was for the person on watch to alert the school ghost on duty at the castle door in the Entry Hall to get Professor Dumbledore.

That was the first priority. The second was to join the other two in the library and decide what to do next.

Harry had the first watch. Nothing happened. He never saw a single student in the corridor. Everyone was enjoying the weekend outside after final exams. Most of the older students were in Hogsmeade.

Draco relieved Harry and then Hermione relieved him in time to have lunch.

In the early afternoon, Harry relieved Draco. The corridor remained quiet. They all admitted it was incredibly boring.

Then Harry heard quiet footsteps approaching. He tensed but did not see anything. Then he noticed the air seemed to distort slightly and he felt air movement as something passed him. It sent shivers up his spine.

It could not be a ghost. Maybe it was Peeves -- he could become invisible, but Harry had never heard of him walking before. He always floated. Then he thought it might be someone under an invisibility cloak, but he had only experienced his own and this one made the air distort like looking through an old handmade glass window.

Then he had another thought -- Professor Dumbledore said he could make himself invisible without an invisibility cloak. Could this be Dumbledore back from the Forest, checking on the corridor? But why would he become invisible to do that in his own castle in midafternoon? And had he not suggested to Harry that he could see through invisibility cloaks and would therefore have seen Harry?

As Harry was still thinking, the distortion reached the door at the end of the Forbidden Corridor and not more than a moment later, the door opened and closed. The distortion was gone.

Harry jumped. He supposed he should have expected it, but it had still come as a shock. He started toward the door, but then stopped. The *plan* -- do not ignore the plan! If he ignored it and failed, there would be no backup.

He pulled off the invisibility cloak, stuffing it into his robes as he raced down the corridor to the marble staircase and then down the steps two at a time to the Entry Hall. He raced up to Nearly Headless Nick, who was on duty at the front door and yelled, "You've got to alert Professor Dumbledore! Someone's just entered the room in Forbidden Corridor on the Third Floor!"

"But my instructions are only to alert the staff if an unauthorized person tries to *enter the castle*," said Nick rather pompously.

"What!" exclaimed Harry. "Listen to me! This is an *emergency*! Professor Dumbledore needs to know! Please notify him, NOW!"

"But he is not in the castle. He is out in the Forbidden Forest with the other teachers," said Nick as if this explained his reluctance.

"So what? Get him, PLEASE!" begged Harry.

"Outside the castle, I cannot see through things, such as walls, as I can inside the castle. I cannot locate the Headmaster any better than you can in the Forbidden Forest. Plus, as I told you, I cannot leave my post except to report an *intruder*," insisted Nick.

"This is *crazy*! You've got to *do* something!" pleaded Harry. Critical time was being wasted.

"Very well," sighed Nick, "I shall notify Mr Filch. I can summon Mrs Norris and she will fetch him."

"OK! Fine! DO IT!" yelled Harry. "I can't wait for that. I've got to go. Tell Filch it's a critical emergency when you see him."

Without waiting for a reply, Harry raced up the stairs to the library. He passed a few students on the way who sneered at him. He thought of asking for help but it would be impossible to explain the situation.

He burst into the library and raced over to Madam Pince, who looked completely taken aback.

Before she could say anything, Harry exclaimed, between gasps of breath, that there was a life and death emergency in the Forbidden Corridor and Professor Dumbledore was needed immediately. Harry did not know if she had any way of contacting Dumbledore, but now he knew at least one competent member of staff had been alerted.

Without waiting for a reply from her, Harry turned and found Draco and Hermione already standing behind him.

He commanded, "Let's go!" and they followed him as he ran out of the library.

In less than a minute, they arrived outside the door at the end of the Forbidden Corridor. Hermione and Draco were begging for information but Harry said, "Give me a second to catch my breath."

All Draco and Hermione could do was exchange anxious looks.

Finally, Harry explained what he had seen and done. Then he said, "I've got to go after Quirrell -- at least to slow him down until help arrives... Hermione, you go down to Hagrid's hut and wait so you can tell Professor Dumbledore everything that's happened on the way back." He pulled out the invisibility cloak and said, "Draco, you take the Invisibility Cloak and keep a look out. If Quirrell come out before I get back, follow him and tell anyone you can what's going on."

Hermione shook her head, declaring, "No, we're both coming *with* you." She sounded adamant.

"No. You..." Harry started but was cut off by Draco.

"You can't stop us, Harry. We're a team and we're wasting time." Then he said, "You said Quirrell's invisible. We can be invisible too... Hermione, listen for Fluffy."

Hermione put her ear against the door and after a moment said, "I can't hear anything."

“OK. OK,” said Harry anxiously, “Let’s go.”

They pulled the invisibility cloak over themselves, opened the door, and walked through.

Chapter 12 – The Magical Chambers

Fluffy was asleep on the floor behind the trapdoor. A small harp sat next to it.

They made straight for the trap door, but after taking only two steps, Fluffy’s middle head suddenly sniffed and opened its eyes. It raised its head and growled, waking the other two heads. The beast sprang to its feet looking right and left. And then it walked forward to stand over the trap door and continued to growl and try to sniff them out.

The three stopped at once. Then Hermione started singing the Hogwarts School Song to the tune of a lullaby. Harry and Draco joined in.

*“Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty, Hogwarts, teach us something please,
Whether we be old and bald or young with scabby knees...”*

The effect on Fluffy was amazingly fast. Its six eyes lids began to flutter.

*“Our heads could do will filling with some interesting stuff,
For now they’re bare and full of air, dead flies and bits of fluff, ...”*

All three of its great jaws yawned and its heads drooped.

*“So teach us things worth knowing, bring back what we’ve forgot,
Just do your best, we’ll do the rest, and learn until our brains all rot.”*

The giant dog turned in in a tight circle three times and then flopped down onto the floor next to the trapdoor. It seemed to be asleep.

They all kept singing, starting the song over again, and slowly walked forward.

Harry stopped singing and whispered, “You two keep singing. I’ll open the trapdoor.”

He got out from under the cloak, pulled up the recessed hand ring and heaved the door open. The view below was pitch black. He could not see anything and there was no way to climb down.

He whispered, "We'll have to drop, I'll go first and call out if it's safe to follow. If I don't, you'll have to go get help."

Draco stuck his hand out from under the cloak and signaled thumbs up as he and Hermione kept singing.

Harry lowered himself into the opening and briefly hung from the edge hoping to feel the bottom. When he didn't, he sighed once and let go, bracing for impact.

He was alarmed at how long he was falling but then suddenly soft landed onto something, which when he lit his wand turned out to be some sort of very thick vine-like plant covering the floor. He rolled out of the way and yelled up at the tiny patch of light from the trapdoor, "It's OK! You can jump. It's a soft landing."

A few seconds later, Draco landed beside him and he quickly rolled out of the way too, yelling to Hermione to jump.

Hermione screamed all the way down and yelped when she landed, "If I'd known how far it was, I'd have probably chickened out... I hate heights." Then laughing at herself, she stood up and lit her wand. She immediately cried out, "Harry, Draco, look at yourselves!"

She struggled to get to the closest wall as snakelike tendrils from plant were trying to ensnare her feet and ankles. Harry and Draco realized their arms and legs were already immobilized by the plant as they frantically tried to get up, but couldn't. The harder they tried, the tighter the vines became.

"It's Devil's Snare," shouted Hermione. "I'm trying to remember what Professor Sprout said..."

"Hurry, Hermione, I can't breathe," gasped Harry.

Draco was fighting to keep it from wrapping around his neck too, but was losing fast. "*Fire, Hermione. Use Fire!*" he gasped.

“That’s it!” she shouted. “It likes the dark and damp!” She pointed her wand at the plant away from the boys and shouted, “*Incendio!*” A jet of red flame shot out from her wand and incinerated a large patch of the plant, leaving smoldering embers at the margins.

The Devil’s Snare retreated immediately releasing Harry and Draco. They scrambled to their feet.

“Good work, Hermione,” said Harry appreciatively.

“Thanks to Draco for remembering,” said Hermione. “I might have been too late.”

“No,” said Draco, “You would have come up with something; you’re too good.”

Hermione was surprised by Draco’s compliment. She smiled and said, “Thank you, Draco. Oh... by the way, I have the Cloak.”

They all now had their wands out and lit to the maximum to hold off the deadly vine as they figured out what to do next.

Harry pointed to an arched opening in the stone wall now visible. “That’s the only way forward. Let’s go.” It was a corridor.

After a short distance, they entered a brilliantly lit chamber with a high arched ceiling. The air above them was filled with glittering objects with fluttering wings. They looked like jeweled birds. There was a heavy looking door on the other side of the chamber that led on.

They discussed what to do. They assumed that the birds, or whatever they were, would attack them if they tried to get to the door. Hermione was best at opening locked doors, so Harry proposed that he and Draco provide cover while Hermione opened the door. They got into position and dashed across the room. They reached the door without incident. Hermione worked at the door handle, but it would not open even using *Alohomora*. Draco and Harry added their strength to Hermione’s, but it would not budge.

“It’s locked solid,” said Hermione, exasperated.

Harry swore.

But Draco said pointing, “Wait! Harry, those are keys -- flying keys -- not birds. And look over there -- broomsticks!” There were a half-dozen broomsticks lined up along the wall next to the corridor entrance.

It was obvious, they had to catch the key. But which one; there seemed to be hundreds.

“It’s got to be a big, antique key to fit the lock. It’s probably silver, like the rest of the hardware,” said Hermione. “You two go; I’d just get in your way.”

Harry and Draco grinned at Hermione. They ran, grabbed a broom each and were off searching. The keys did not want to be caught and avoided their grasps, swooping and juking -- just like the Golden Snitch. After a minute, Draco noticed a key with a damaged wing that seemed to fit the description and alerted Harry.

“I’ll drive it toward you,” shouted Draco and he chased it toward Harry. Harry unerringly snatched it from the air as Draco streaked by and let out a whoop.

“Got it!” exclaimed Harry.

The key fit perfectly and unlocked the door with a loud click. When Hermione released it, the key rejoined the others, looking even worse for wear than before.

The next room was so dark they could not see anything when they opened the door. But as soon as they stepped inside, torches illuminated. The room was enormous, and full of large statues arranged in rows, black on their side and white on the other. Harry was not sure what he was looking at, but both Draco and Hermione said, “Chessboard.”

Then it was obvious. They would have to play a game of chess -- and win -- to open the door behind the white chess pieces. Harry and Hermione looked at each other nervously. Neither of them were chess players.

But it was worse. Draco approached the nearest black chess piece, a knight, and touched it. It sprang to life and looked at him. “Do we have to become chess pieces to play?” asked Draco. The black knight nodded.

Harry and Hermione groaned. Draco looked at them and nodded, “Right. This is *wizard’s* chess. It could be *bloody* for us against these pieces.”

Draco was not exaggerating. The pieces were massive and towering. And the weapons most of them held looked deadly. Even the Bishop’s crook looked like it could easily crush their skulls.

Hermione started shaking.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got this,” said Draco matter-of-factly. “I’m a *very* good chess player. I’ve played my father as long as I can remember. Of course, I’ve never beaten him -- almost did, a few times -- but he’s a *grand master*. I can beat *anyone* in Slytherin. And if Quirrell was able to win, I can too.”

He sounded very confident.

Harry and Hermione were in Draco’s hands. They submitted to his instructions. He made Harry the queen-side bishop and made Hermione the king, whispering to her, “This will keep you out of danger, Hermione. You will never be attacked, just forced to surrender -- *if* I lose.” Before Hermione could say anything, he stepped into the square next to her, touching the black queen. The black queen turned and moved off the board.

As soon as Draco was in position, a white pawn moved forward two squares. The game was on. Pieces were won and lost.

Draco had been too modest. Draco was master of the game, despite having the added task of keeping Harry, and himself, from being pulverized. It was over in twenty-seven moves -- check and mate -- with Draco threatening the white king.

Hermione raced over and gave Draco a quick hug. He seemed stunned by her reaction. Harry slapped him on the back and said, “Well done, mate.”

Draco grinned and said, “Thanks... Let’s go. We might just have gained on Quirrell.”

As soon as they pushed open the next door and looked inside, they saw a very angry looking Troll with a huge club. He had a large red welt on his forehead. The smell from the creature was horrendous even twenty feet away.

Hermione backed away and groaned, “Not *again*.”

Draco looked concerned too.

Harry said, "Invisibility Cloak, unless you want to fight it."

Draco asked, "What do we do if we *do* have to fight it?"

"Just *Incendio*, I'm afraid," said Hermione anxiously. "That's the only sure thing I can think of, because you can't stun them. Harry and I were very lucky the last time. But I really don't want to seriously hurt it."

Hermione pulled out the cloak and they got under it. As quietly as possible, they entered the room and crept slowly across. The smell got worse as they got closer. They all felt like throwing up.

Then without warning, the Troll moved right in front of the door blocking their exit. It must have heard them.

Draco whispered, "Let's move against the side wall. I'll distract him and you two go through. I'll join up with you if I can. If not, I'll go back and get help."

Harry and Hermione agreed.

As soon as they reached the side wall, Draco ducked out from under the cloak, and ran several steps toward the Troll to get its attention. He taunted it and sent several stunning spells at it, which as Hermione said, had no effect.

Actually, they did have an effect. They enraged the Troll and it lumbered at Draco with its huge club raised to smash him to a pulp. Draco retreated back luring it toward the chess room door.

When the Troll was behind them, Harry and Hermione moved quickly to the exit door and went through it, slamming it shut.

As soon as the door closed, purple fire shot up filling the door frame behind them. It was intensely hot and drove them headlong into the room. Ahead of them, black fire erupted and was filling the frame of the exit door.

They were trapped.

The dark colored flames gave off an eerie illumination.

The room was bare except for a small table with a number of stoppered glass bottles arranged in a row. There were seven in all, and each was a different size and shape. Next to the bottles was a roll of parchment.

Hermione pulled off the cloak and snatched up the parchment. She read it and then showed Harry, saying, "Look. It's a riddle." She read aloud:

*"Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,
Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,
One among us seven will let you move ahead,
Another will transport the drinker back instead,
Two among our number hold only nettle wine,
Three of us are killers, waiting hidden in line.
Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,
To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:
First, however slyly the poison tries to hide
You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;
Second, different are those who stand at either end,
But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;
Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,
Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;
Fourth, the second left and the second on the right
Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight."*

Harry's head swam, but Hermione said, "I've got this one, Harry. It's logic, not magic. A lot of wizards would be stuck in here."

"Well, Quirrell wasn't," said Harry, adding, "and I think a lot of *Muggles* would be stuck here too," defending wizard-kind.

"Perhaps," said Hermione absently as she flattened the parchment and placed it on the table.

She was bending over, reading and rereading, while pointing at various bottles. After a couple of minutes, she stood up straight and said, "Done. The smallest bottle enables us to move forward through the black flames. The rounded bottle on the right end gets us back through the purple flames."

"But what if Quirrell *switched* the bottles around before he left?" asked Harry uneasily.

“Hmm. I hadn't thought of that,” said Hermione. She picked up the middle bottle and moved it to the right end. As soon as she set it down, it scooted across the table and back into place.

“Nope,” chirped Hermione, smiling at Harry.

Harry looked at the smallest bottle. “There's hardly any potion left, Hermione. I should go on alone and you should go back to check on Draco.”

Hermione shook her head. “I bet even a drop is enough. Besides, the next room is going to be the most difficult.”

“Why is that?” asked Harry nervously.

“It's Professor Dumbledore's,” explained Hermione. “Fluffy was Hagrid's, Devil's Snare was Professor Sprout's, winged keys was Professor Flitwick's, wizards' chess was Professor McGonagall's, the Troll was Professor Quirrell's, and this potions riddle is Professor Snape's.”

Harry was amazed by Hermione's ability to analyze a situation. All he ever seemed to do was react by instinct.

Because Harry had not responded, Hermione said, “You *need* me, Harry... And I *want* to help.”

Harry knew she was right.

“All right,” said Harry finally.

They each took the tiniest sip from the smallest bottle. The potion had no taste but was as cold as ice.

They slipped back under the invisibility cloak and headed toward the black flames with their wands at the ready. They could not feel the flames as they passed through them and opened the final door.

As they expected, Professor Quirrell was standing at the far end of the chamber with his back to them.

He was standing in front of a large ornate mirror, which Harry instantly recognized as the Mirror of Erised.

Chapter 13 – The Man with Two Faces

Harry and Hermione stopped and remained completely silent.

Quirrell was speaking out loud. “I don’t know what to do. I see myself in the mirror holding the Stone in triumph. I’ve tried every spell I know, but I cannot *get* it.”

“Let me see for *myself*,” said a high-pitched voice seemingly coming from Quirrell himself.

Harry and Hermione remained still, tense and watching.

Quirrell seemed to tremble. He reached up and began unwinding his turban.

It initially appeared that Quirrell was bald as the top of his head was revealed, but something was not right. Then they saw *it* as Quirrell continued unwrapping the turban.

Harry gasped in shock. Hermione screamed.

A snakelike face was protruding from the back of Quirrell’s head. Its evil red eyes stared directly at where Harry and Hermione were standing under the invisibility cloak.

Suddenly Harry’s scar exploded in pain, and he dropped to his knees, causing the cloak to be yanked down, exposing Hermione’s legs.

Quirrell whirled around, pointed his wand at them and the invisibility cloak flew off Harry and Hermione. It sailed through the air and landed at Quirrell’s feet. But even before the cloak had landed, Harry and Hermione’s wands flew out of their hands and soared high into the air over the mirror to land near the far wall of the chamber.

Hermione reached down to try to help Harry to his feet, but she was hit with a jet of red light and collapsed backwards, unconscious.

The pain in Harry’s scar suddenly subsided leaving a dull ache. He looked up at Quirrell from his knees. He now saw the snakelike face in the mirror. It could only be...
Voldemort!

“Harry Potter, we meet again... and much sooner than expected,” said Voldemort.

“It was *you* in the Forbidden Forest with Quirrell,” said Harry accusingly.

“Yes,” said Voldemort dismissively. “You see what Lord Voldemort is forced to become -- living like a *parasite* off another... but not for long. Once we have the Philosopher's Stone, Lord Voldemort shall return and gather other loyal followers to his side. You, Harry Potter, are a proud Slytherin. It is *natural* that you should join us. Lord Voldemort can reveal *powers* to you *beyond* your imagination.”

“NEVER!” shouted Harry. “You killed my parents!”

Voldemort laughed, “They were *nothing*. Do not deny your *dark destiny*... Lord Voldemort sees himself in *you*, Harry Potter.”

“I'll *never* join you.” Harry almost spat the words.

“Very well, Harry Potter,” said Voldemort silkily.

Then he commanded Quirrell, his voice becoming businesslike. “Harry Potter knows about the Mirror. Bring him here to look into it.”

Quirrell flicked his wand and Harry felt himself being forced to stand and walk to face the mirror, stopping next to Quirrell, who remained facing toward Hermione. Quirrell then placed his free hand on Harry's shoulder and gripped it firmly.

“What do you *see*, boy?” demanded Voldemort.

Harry looked into the Mirror of Erised and saw himself helping Hermione, with Voldemort-Quirrell lying dead on the floor.

Harry lied and said, “I see my parents.”

“Too clever by half, Harry Potter. Lord Voldemort *knows* you are lying... WHERE IS THE STONE?” Voldemort was losing patience.

“I *don't* know,” said Harry defiantly.

“Torture the girl,” said Voldemort, as easily as if he had just ordered tea.

Quirrell pointed his wand at Hermione and said, "*Crucio!*"

Hermione began screaming and writhing.

"STOP IT!" yelled Harry.

"Tell me where the *Stone* is," demanded Voldemort, "...or she *dies*."

"I DON'T KNOW!" Harry yelled again.

"You have *three* seconds... One... Two..." Voldemort said, sounding quite pleasant.

Harry reacted. He did the only thing he could. He spun around and jumped at Quirrell's wand hand, grabbing it as tightly as he could with both hands and dragging his arm down.

Harry's scar burned savagely. He closed his eyes in pain, but he knew instinctively he could not let go. But quite unexpectedly, his scar suddenly stopped hurting, and he realized the screaming he was hearing was now coming from Quirrell and not Hermione. Quirrell suddenly fell to the ground, which pulled Harry down on top of him.

Harry opened his eyes and saw that smoke was coming from under his hands, which were still holding tightly onto Quirrell's wand hand. It was sizzling and popping, but Harry felt no heat. Quirrell began using his free hand to try to push Harry off him.

Panicking, Quirrell screamed to his Master, "*What's happening? My hand is BURNING!*"

Voldemort shrieked in rage, "KILL HIM! KILL HIM! KILL HIM!"

Quirrell's free hand suddenly shifted to grasp Harry's throat, but then he screamed even more and instantly withdrew it, crying "*IT BURNS, IT BURNS; I can't hold him!*"

Harry suddenly realized that, for some reason, Quirrell could not touch his skin without burning. He knew what he had to do.

As Voldemort continued to shriek, "KILL HIM. KILL HIM," Harry released one of his hands gripping Quirrell's wand hand. He raised his arm to shake off the sleeve of his

robe and then grabbed Quirrell around the neck with the crook of his arm. Quirrell screamed even louder than before and tried rolling around to dislodge Harry.

Harry's scar started burning again, but he fought through the pain as he had never done before. He knew he could not let go, no matter what. His best hope was to get a better grip, so he released his hold on Quirrell's wand hand and used that arm to lock his choke hold around Quirrell's neck.

Quirrell's and Voldemort's screams were deafening. Quirrell was bucking like a horse. It was taking all of Harry's strength to hang on. The pain in his scar intensified and became overwhelming. He knew he would not be able to hold on much longer.

He was fading, fading, fading...

The next thing Harry knew, someone was wiping his brow. He opened his eyes. It was Hermione bending over him, looking very worried. She had tears in her eyes.

"Oh, *thank God*, Harry. I tried to wake you with *Enervate*, but you didn't wake up. You looked like you were dead, but I could see you were breathing very slowly."

Harry tried to get up, but could not move. His voice very soft, he said, "I feel so *weak*, Hermione... I can't move."

"Just be still. I wanted to go for help but I didn't want to leave you alone. Should I go now?" she asked.

"No... Wait..." said Harry slowly. "Tell me... what happened... Did Voldemort... get away? ...Did he get... the Stone? ...How long... have I... been out?"

"Not that long, but you look *really* bad," said Hermione, sounding very worried. "You're completely white and barely breathing. I could hardly pull you out from under Quirrell."

Harry tried to move his head to look for Quirrell, but he could not move it. "Hermione... tell me... what happened?" It was difficult to speak. Hermione could barely hear him.

"Quirrell's dead. It looks like he was burned alive. Voldemort is... gone; I don't know how. I wish I could believe he died with Quirrell." She shuddered and then continued.

“I don't know where the Stone is; I never saw it. The jet of red light knocked me out. Then I woke up and felt like I was being electrocuted. It was *agony*. Then it stopped. It took me a bit to recover and then I heard Quirrell and Voldemort screaming and saw you wrestling with Quirrell on the ground. You had him in a headlock. By the time I found my wand, it was over.”

“Can you... help me... get up, ...Hermione?” asked Harry. His voice was very soft.

“Harry, don't talk. You need to keep still. You don't look well. I should go for help, but I don't want to leave you like this.” She was now sobbing softly.

Suddenly, Hermione gasped.

Professor Dumbledore had just charged into the chamber with his hair and robes streaming behind him and his wand held straight out. His eyes darted quickly around the room and then spotted them. His look changed from determined foe to concerned friend. He rushed over to Harry and Hermione and knelt over Harry's head.

“Harry, are you all right?” he asked, placing his palms on either side of Harry's head.

“He can't move,” said Hermione. “He only came around a minute ago. I was going to go for help, but I wasn't sure I could leave him like this.”

“Completely understandable,” said Dumbledore. “But you would not have been able to leave this chamber. In fact, you would have hurt yourself if you had been persistent. This last chamber is a *trap*, a flytrap, by design. Until I lift the enchantment, while I live, only I can free those who enter this chamber.”

“But what about *Voldemort*?” exclaimed Hermione. “*He* was here too -- on the back of Professor Quirrell's head!”

Dumbledore looked at her sharply, but then Harry tried to speak, though now he was inaudible.

“Harry, we need to get you to the hospital wing right away. I am going to put you to sleep. Just relax.” Dumbledore waved his wand and Harry's eyes closed.

“Miss Granger, please collect Harry's things. Oh, and I know about the Cloak. Please keep it safely hidden.” He gave Hermione a wink as he conjured a floating stretcher out of thin air and levitated Harry onto it.

Professor Dumbledore then pointed his wand at the doorway, made a complicated wand movement and muttered an incantation that Hermione could not make out. Then he said, "Please lead the way, Miss Granger. There will be no impediments or obstacles on our journey out."

Chapter 14 – The Bridge

When Harry awoke in the hospital wing, Professor Dumbledore was sitting by his bedside. He told Harry he had been asleep for three days. His bedside table was covered with Honeydukes candy, but his attention was focused on the Quidditch Cup, which was overflowing with get-well cards. His wand was lying there too.

Dumbledore gestured with his hand, "Gifts from your friends and admirers. There are as many from the other houses as there are from Slytherin. Miss Granger and Mr Malfoy have told me and the whole school what you did."

Harry looked at Dumbledore, who said, "Harry, through your friendship with them, you have started to build a bridge between two houses that have been in opposition for centuries. It may be more important than anything else that happens while you are at this school and have lasting impact into the future."

Harry felt a lump in his throat. But he had questions, many questions.

"Sir, why couldn't Quirrell touch me in the Mirror chamber?" asked Harry. "I shook hands with him when I met him in the Leaky Cauldron."

"I do not think Lord Voldemort was physically possessing Professor Quirrell when you first met him. Possession usually involves the mind alone, but Lord Voldemort, given his state, was able to take transformative physical possession. Professor Quirrell did not start wearing his turban until after the failed break-in at Gringotts, right before the start of the school year. Now as to why he could not touch you in the chamber..."

Dumbledore explained that when Harry's mother sacrificed her life for him, it created an ancient magical protection against Lord Voldemort that lives in Harry's flesh and blood.

"I remember Hermione telling me that Voldemort was gone. Could he be dead?" asked Harry hopefully.

Dumbledore sighed. "I am afraid not. Lord Voldemort was only *possessing* Quirrell even though it included the incredibly unusual Dark Magic physical manifestation you saw. His *spirit* is still out there. Unfortunately, my trap in the Mirror chamber only works on physical beings."

"Then he *still* might get the Stone!" exclaimed Harry, "And now he knows *how* to get it."

"Do not worry, Harry. The Philosopher's Stone is safe; I can assure you. And Lord Voldemort does *not* know how to get it," said Dumbledore.

"Why weren't Quirrell or Voldemort able to get the Stone, anyway? They could see it in the Mirror," said Harry.

"Did *you* see it in the Mirror?" asked Dumbledore.

"No," said Harry. He was reluctant to say what he saw.

"I should think not under the circumstances," said Dumbledore very seriously. He paused and then explained further. "You *know* how the Mirror works. The complex series of magical obstacles culminating in the Mirror was the perfect ruse. The whole setup convinced the person seeking the Stone that the Mirror *must* have been protecting it. The Mirror made them believe the Stone was concealed within it because of their own intense desire to possess it. They saw themselves holding it when they looked into the mirror. But the Stone was *never* there."

"*Never there!*" exclaimed Harry in astonishment. "Then where *is* it?"

"It has been in my pocket since Hagrid delivered it to me before school started," said Dumbledore with a wink.

Harry's jaw dropped. Then he asked, "But now what?"

"Well, I have talked with Nicholas," said Dumbledore. "He and I agree that now that the story is out, the Stone must be destroyed. It is too great a risk even if we doubled the number of protections. And besides, Fluffy is in desperate need of real exercise... and the contract with the security Troll is up at the end of term. At this point, I doubt he will want to renew -- though he did say the food was good. Our excellent kitchens provided him as much as he could eat."

“Why did Quirrell... or Voldemort only start drinking the unicorn blood near the end?” asked Harry.

“I think Lord Voldemort’s possession of Quirrell was slowly consuming the poor man,” explained Dumbledore. “I am sure you noticed how his health seemed to be declining. As Lord Voldemort got stronger, Quirrell got weaker. The unicorn blood was actually used to keep Quirrell alive rather than to keep Lord Voldemort alive. I am inclined to think that if Lord Voldemort had gotten the Stone and drunk the Elixir of Life, he would have completely consumed Quirrell’s body and returned to life.”

Harry shuddered, then he asked, “Why did Quirrell wait so long to go after the Stone?”

Dumbledore pondered for a moment, then said, “I suspect it took him that long to figure out what the other teachers had used for their obstacles and how to get past them. However, you can be assured that by himself, Quirrell could never have made it to the Mirror without Lord Voldemort’s help.”

“But we did,” said Harry proudly.

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore. “Quite remarkable.”

Dumbledore took a breath and then continued, “Hagrid told me he let slip to you about how music made Fluffy fall asleep. It can be difficult for people to keep secrets from others, especially friends and colleagues. But also, Lord Voldemort was said to be the greatest ever Legilimens -- able to read people’s emotions and memories. However, I can confidently say while possessing Professor Quirrell, Lord Voldemort never discovered my secret, as I consider myself an equally accomplished Occlumens -- able to conceal my thoughts and emotions. If he had, he would have simply... picked my pocket.” At this Dumbledore laughed at his own joke.

“But how was Voldemort able to deceive us *all year*?” asked Harry, still looking for answers.

Dumbledore sighed, “We must not forget, Harry, Lord Voldemort is perhaps the greatest dark wizard ever known and it is easy to underestimate his powers -- especially when we believed his powers to have been destroyed when he tried to kill you as a baby. His possession of Quirrell was quite subtle and clever. I did detect a slight change in Quirrell from when I interviewed him for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position before his world tour. When he returned, he seemed to have lost his

enthusiasm and zest for life. So, I asked Professor Snape to keep an eye on him, but that was all. In short, yes, I admit he *fooled* me.”

“I have one more question, sir,” said Harry, for now his head was swimming from Dumbledore’s detailed answers.

“Just *one* more?” chuckled Dumbledore.

“Well... for now,” admitted Harry.

Dumbledore smiled. “Go on.”

“Voldemort asked me to *join* him, but I figured he was just trying to use me to help him get the Stone... So... why did he try to kill me as a *baby*?” This was the question which Harry most desperately wanted answered.

“Ah, Harry... that question I *cannot* answer... not until you are *older*. Please do not ask me again. In time, you will know and understand,” said Dumbledore, looking a little sad.

Harry hated Dumbledore’s answer, especially after what he had been through. But he knew it would do no good to pursue it now. But he was determined to learn the truth as soon as he could.

Madam Pomfrey let Draco and Hermione visit Harry after Professor Dumbledore left. She had been making them wait in the corridor.

Harry told them what Dumbledore said, though he left out the part about their friendship bridging the two houses.

Draco explained how he used a broomstick from the room of flying keys to fly up to the trap door. It had so surprised Fluffy, it did not have a chance to bite him. Draco had even flown the broom through the castle and out the front door all the way to Hagrid’s hut. He joked he was going to put in a suggestion to start having broom races in the castle. Then he said he found Filch and Madam Pince both waiting by Hagrid’s hut because they were afraid to go into the Forest, so he flew the broom over the forest shooting sparks from his wand and shouting until Professor McGonagall saw him and called him down.

Professor McGonagall contacted Professor Dumbledore and he took Draco's broom and flew back to the castle.

"All I had to tell Dumbledore was Quirrell had gone after the Stone and you two were past the Troll," explained Draco. "Hermione's told me her part, but what happened when she was knocked out?"

When Harry finished recounting his story, including explaining about the Mirror of Erised and where Professor Dumbledore had hidden the Philosopher's Stone, their mouths were hanging open.

Draco was intrigued about what the Dark Lord said about seeing himself in Harry.

"I don't think I'm *anything* like him," said Harry angrily.

"Well, you *are* a Parselmouth," countered Draco.

Harry looked at him sharply.

Draco changed the subject. "It was sort of decided in a house meeting that you deserved to have the Quidditch Cup," pointing to Harry's bedside table. "Killing a rogue teacher is pretty incredible... even brilliant, some are saying. And with you defeating the Dark Lord *again*, it's causing a lot of talk -- and *not* just in Slytherin."

Draco was clearing drifting back to the subject Harry did not want to talk about.

This time Hermione changed the subject. "Oh, I forgot. Professor Dumbledore knows you have the Invisibility Cloak. He had me collect it and your wand when we left and told me to keep it a secret. I have it, by the way."

"He already knew," said Harry. "He told me over Christmas when he told me to stop visiting the Mirror... That reminds me... He said he didn't need a cloak to become invisible. I meant to ask him about Quirrell being invisible in the Forbidden Corridor."

"It was a Disillusionment Charm. I did the research in the library while you were here," said Hermione.

Draco and Harry just stared at her.

"What?" she said, sounding a little put out.

The next day, Hagrid came by to apologize for spilling the secret about Fluffy to Quirrell. He gave Harry a leather-bound album of pictures of his parents that he asked their old friends to send to him.

It was the best present Harry had ever received.

Fred and George Weasley also came by to say hello. They wanted to apologize personally for what Ron had done months back.

Finally, Madam Pomfrey said Dumbledore had told her Harry was to be released in time to attend the End of Year Feast.

Avery welcomed Harry when he arrived in the Great Hall. He made Harry come sit next to him near the High Table. Harry insisted that Draco be permitted to sit next to him too. Harry noticed that Hermione was no longer sitting alone at the Gryffindor table. He gave her a wave and she waved back.

Dumbledore stood up to announce the winner of the House Cup.

“The points stand thus. In fourth place, Slytherin, with two hundred and seventy-two points; in third place, Gryffindor, with three-hundred and twenty-two points; in second place, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two points, and in first place, Ravenclaw, with four-hundred and twenty-six points.”

As each house was announced, the cheers got louder. The biggest cheer, naturally, was from the Ravenclaws.

“Yes, yes. Very well done, Ravenclaw,” said Dumbledore holding his hands up. “But recent events, of which you are all aware, must be taken into account. I, therefore, have a few last-minute points to award.”

The Great Hall suddenly became very quiet.

“For Mr Draco Malfoy, for bravery and the best game of chess played at Hogwarts in many years, I award one-hundred points.”

Cheers erupted from the Slytherins, but many also from the other houses.

“For Mister Harry Potter, for pure nerve, bravery and determination, I award one-hundred points.”

Again, tremendous cheers from the Slytherins, but even more cheers from the other houses, particularly Gryffindor.

“For Miss Hermione Granger, for cool intellect, resourcefulness and bravery while facing great danger in *both* the Forbidden Forrest and the Forbidden Corridor, I award... one-hundred fifty points.”

The Gryffindor table positively exploded. Gryffindors were standing on their benches cheering. Fred and George Weasley ran over and hoisted Hermione onto their shoulders, chanting, “Her-mi-o-ne! Her-mi-o-ne!” over and over.

No one noticed that Ron remained seated looking sullen.

Those who could count realized Gryffindor and Slytherin were now tied for first place.

Professor Dumbledore smiled. He did not try to bring order. Instead, he magically amplified his voice and declared, “This year, the House Cup is awarded to both Gryffindor and Slytherin.”

Dumbledore clapped his hands and the house banners, which had all been Slytherin, fluttered briefly and suddenly all over the hall now alternated between Gryffindor and Slytherin.

More cheers went up at both the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables. Ravenclaws looked crestfallen, but the Hufflepuffs good-naturedly joined in the applause.

Avery clapped Harry and Draco on the back and many Slytherins crowded around them to give their congratulations.

Harry saw Professors Snape and McGonagall congratulating each other at the High Table. Snape caught Harry’s eye and he knew he was in store for another lecture.

So be it.

The last day of school flashed by, including the expected lecture from Professor Snape. Draco got one too. But Harry was convinced Snape did not have his heart in it. They had tied for the House Championship and had won the all-important Quidditch Cup.

The next thing Harry knew, he was sitting with Draco and Hermione on the Hogwarts express talking about the summer holiday. Hermione promised to write and said she would ask her parents if Harry and Draco could visit her.

Draco said he was sure he would not be able to, saying his parents always had plans for the summer. In truth, he knew his parents would never approve of him visiting a Mudblood.

Then they heard a scuffle outside their compartment. As Harry got up to look, Fred -- or George -- Weasley opened the door and asked if he and his brother could come in. They all said yes. The twins came in and settled down across from them.

Hermione asked, "What was that in the corridor?"

"Oh nothing," said George -- or Fred. "We caught Ron about to throw a Dungbomb in here, so we stuffed it down his pants."

"Stupid git," said the other twin.

They spent the rest of the journey telling stories about the school year and playing Exploding Snap. The twins were clearly after all the gory details of the trio's adventure.

When they arrived at King's Cross, Mrs Weasley greeted the twins who got off with Harry, Hermione and Draco. She nodded briefly to Harry and hushed up Ginny who was pointing at Harry and whispering to her.

Draco said goodbye and walked off to meet a beautiful but haughty looking woman who must have been his mother.

Hermione accompanied Harry through the ticket barrier.

Uncle Vernon and a couple that turned out to be Hermione's parents were waiting beyond. Hermione introduced them to Harry. Harry tried to introduce them to Uncle Vernon, but he just said, "Come on, boy," then turned and walked away.

Hermione and her parents were shocked, but Harry said, “Never mind. He *hates* magic.”

Hermione said, “I hope you have a nice summer,” while her eyes followed Uncle Vernon. She looked disgusted.

“Oh, I will,” said Harry with a wide grin, “They don’t know I’m not allowed to use magic out of school.”

The End

End Notes:

Without citation, the nature of this alternate universe fan fiction story requires liberal use of terms, concepts, characters, paraphrased conversations, and story lines from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* by J.K. Rowling.