
DRACENIA
Libro I



DRACENIA

BOOK I

Reading edition

DRACENIA Collection



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CHAPTER 1

The Letter That Wasn't a Mistake

Harry

Harry had two clothes pegs between his teeth when Dudley decided it was time to get his bike out.

‘Move.’

There was room to get past on the path. Dudley chose to squeeze between Harry and the washing line, with one of his friends behind him. Harry held the sheet over his arm to keep them from treading on it.

‘You'll get it dirty.’

His cousin stuck his tongue out. A pedal hit the basket; pegs scattered across the paving slabs, and the shirt Harry had set aside landed beside the tap. The two boys were already leaving when he bent to pick it up.

The blue sleeve had fallen in a puddle.

‘That one goes in the shade!’ Aunt Petunia shouted from the kitchen.

Earlier, she'd said the same about the green one. Harry remembered because he'd moved it twice. He could remind her and get told off, or hang the blue one where she wanted it now and finish sooner. He chose the second. Then he saw the soaking cuff.

The kitchen door opened.

Harry squeezed the sleeve. He had no time to wash it again, or even explain what Dudley had done. He wished it would dry, so hard that he shut his eyes.

The water fell onto his shoes.

He opened his eyes and spread his hands. The cloth unfolded between them, light and dry. He felt inside the cuff to check.

'What are you doing?'

Petunia took the shirt from him. Harry's fingers were still curved around the sleeve that was no longer there.

'It fell.'

His aunt inspected the small mud stain, then his wet shoes.

'Be more careful.'

She handed it back and went into the kitchen. Harry waited for the door to close before touching it again. Not a single bit was damp.

He hung it in the shade. Then, as he collected the pegs, he tried wishing his socks dry. Nothing happened.

The letter turned up that afternoon, tucked between the pages of a catalog Uncle Vernon had left on the floor.

Harry was about to close it when he recognized his name. Someone had written *Harry Potter* in green ink on a thick envelope. It didn't say *the nephew* or *to be handed to the responsible adult*. It said Harry Potter.

He pulled it out.

'Leave that where it was,' Vernon ordered from the sofa.

'There's a letter for me.'

Vernon held out his hand. Harry was slow to give it to him; he wanted at least a look at the stamp. His uncle snatched it away and slit the envelope with the edge of a ruler.

He read a few lines. He stopped breathing through his nose in that noisy way Harry knew so well.

‘Petunia.’

Harry looked from one to the other. His aunt had a cloth in her hands; she twisted it when she saw the sheet.

‘Who is it from?’ he asked.

‘A school,’ said Vernon. ‘They've made a mistake.’

Harry tried to read it from the side. He saw a long word, Hogwarts, before his uncle folded the paper.

‘How can it be a mistake if it's got my name on it?’

Vernon looked at him. Harry lowered the catalog, which was still open against his legs.

The letter ended up in a kitchen drawer. Petunia locked it.

That night, lying under the stairs, Harry repeated the name so he wouldn't forget it. Hogwarts. It sounded far away. If it was a mistake, he hoped it would take them a very long time to find out.

Two days later, the person who knocked at the door was far too big to turn up at the wrong house without someone noticing.

Harry opened it with one of Dudley's shoes in his hand. The visitor's beard was a long way above his head.

‘I'm looking for Harry Potter.’

‘That's me.’

The man looked him over and smiled. Harry had the strange impression that he was pleased to find him.

‘Hagrid. I work at Hogwarts. Can I come in?’

Vernon appeared behind Harry.

‘We've already replied.’

‘Well, we didn't get it,’ said Hagrid.

He had to duck to come in. Petunia came to meet him and, for once, didn't tell Harry to pick up the shoe he'd left in the middle of the hall.

None of the kitchen chairs looked as if it could hold Hagrid. Harry pulled one out, just in case.

‘Thanks. Better stand. If I sit down, you'll have to get the table out as well.’

Harry smiled. Vernon didn't.

‘The boy will go to a normal school.’

‘First he needs to read what they sent him.’

Hagrid waited. Petunia opened the drawer.

This time the letter reached Harry's hands. He read that he had a place at a school of magic, that he was to arrive on the first of September, and that he would need a wand. He went back to the first line to make sure he hadn't misunderstood.

‘Me?’

‘You,’ Hagrid confirmed.

‘Things happen around him,’ Petunia said, without looking at Harry. ‘That doesn't mean he should go.’

Harry looked up. She knew.

He thought of the shirt, and the door at his old school that had opened when he couldn't get out. He'd been punished for both. Never given an explanation.

‘Was the thing with the washing magic?’

‘Could be,’ said Hagrid. ‘You'll learn to control it.’

‘What if I can't?’

‘That's what lessons are for. If everyone arrived knowing how, the teachers could go fishing.’

Harry looked at the word *wand* again. Vernon was talking about expenses; Hagrid said something back, but Harry couldn't follow the argument any more.

He sat on the garden step to read the list. Hagrid came out afterward and settled on the path, because there wasn't room for both of them on the step.

‘Did my mother know?’ Harry asked.

Hagrid took off his hat.

‘Your mother was a witch. Your father was a wizard. They went to Hogwarts.’

The news ought to have made him happy. Instead, Harry looked at the kitchen window, where his aunt was putting away some cups.

‘They told me they died in a car.’

Hagrid kept his hat between his knees. He told Harry about Voldemort without softening the name or hurrying when Harry looked away. That man had killed his parents. He'd tried to kill Harry too. Harry touched his scar.

‘Is that why I've got this?’

‘Yes.’

A fly landed on the edge of the step. Harry followed it with his eyes. The whole garden was just the same.

‘Why did he come to our house?’

‘I don't know.’

Harry swallowed.

‘Did I do something?’

Hagrid put down his hat.

‘You were a year old. He came to hurt you all. It wasn't your fault.’

Harry gripped the list until one corner crumpled. He wanted to know more and he wanted Hagrid to stop talking. The worst thing was that, for the first time, someone would have gone on answering if he could find another question.

‘Did you know them?’

‘Yes. James and Lily.’

Harry sat listening to those names. Hagrid didn't immediately go on to say how they'd died. He waited with him, while the fly came back to the same spot and Petunia closed the window.

After a while, he showed Harry a photograph of Hogwarts. Clouds moved over the towers.

Harry tilted the picture. A bird flew out of one edge and back in at the other.

‘Am I going to sleep there?’

‘If you want to go.’

‘I do.’

He said it quickly, in case they could still change their minds.

In London, Hagrid led him through a pub and stopped in front of a brick wall. Harry just managed to see where he touched it before it began to open.

The bricks moved aside, one after another, letting in the noise of a street. Harry walked forward without letting go of the list. One shop advertised cauldrons; further along, a pair of empty boots was kicking at a shop window, and a man was arguing with a sign that kept saying *Closed*.

A strip of sky showed between two awnings. Harry saw it when he looked up to read the signs jutting out from the buildings. Then he looked for the window with the boots again: people walked past without stopping, as if there were nothing to see.

Harry laughed. He looked at Hagrid to make sure he could see it too.

‘Bank first,’ Hagrid reminded him.

At Gringotts, after a journey that left his stomach somewhere on a bend, they opened a vault full of coins. They had belonged to his parents. They would be his.

Harry stayed in the doorway.

‘Can I buy all the books?’

Hagrid showed him how to work out what he needed. They took out a bagful; then, on an errand for the school, Hagrid collected a small package from another vault and put it inside his coat. Harry was still trying to get used to the idea of his coins.

On the way back, the wheels screeched around another bend. Harry leaned over with the bag clamped against his legs; he didn't want any coins ending up at the bottom of the cart. When he could sit up straight, he found he was smiling and had no idea when he'd started.

Outside, the wind folded the list over. He caught it and spotted a stationer's. In the window, a quill was writing by itself.

Harry stopped. The list said nothing about notebooks.

‘Can we look in that shop?’

Hagrid turned back.

‘Of course.’

Harry put his hand in his pocket. The coins were still there.



CHAPTER 2

The Right Shade of Green



Dracenia

Dracenia knew she'd chosen the dark green one. She remembered perfectly. So did her mother, although she was now looking at the notebook as if choosing another one were still possible.

'The light one matches your pencil case,' said Narcissa.

'But I like this one better.'

The shop assistant set both on the counter. Dracenia put her hand on the dark one. No one was taking it away while they discussed the pencil case.

She rested her forearms on the counter and edged closer, her feet together. The corner of the cover disappeared beneath her fingers. As she leaned in, she pushed the blonde hair off her forehead with her wrist, keeping her other hand on the notebook. Narcissa was still looking at the light one.

She'd waited all summer for this day. Her father had promised she could choose her school things, as long as she took something more useful to Hogwarts than a box of extremely expensive quills.

'Quills are useful too,' she'd told him.

'Depends what you write.'

Dracenia intended to write better than everyone else. Her handwriting was excellent and she knew the names of several



ingredients. She also knew which families she'd find at school; Lucius had gone over them at dinner until she could tell apart two cousins she always confused. Hogwarts would be full of people she didn't know, and her father couldn't come into the classroom with her. The less she had to ask, the better.

The shop assistant opened the notebook. Dracenia's lines finished straightening themselves.

‘With the guiding charm, the ink—’

‘I know how it works.’

‘Then wait for it to dry.’

Dracenia lifted her hand. There was a mark below her thumb, but she wasn't going to show anyone her palm.

The bell rang and a black-haired boy came in. Hagrid appeared behind him and had to push one sleeve of his coat through so it wouldn't be left outside. Dracenia moved closer to her mother; she was surprised they let Hagrid into such a small shop. The boy wore mended glasses and clothes that were much too big.

‘I'd like a notebook,’ he said.

The shop assistant showed him three. When the clasp on one caught his finger, he jumped.

Dracenia had seen it coming.

‘That one shuts itself.’

The boy managed to get free and looked at her.

‘I know that now.’

He didn't seem particularly grateful. Dracenia turned back to her notebook.

‘Take off the thing with the lines. I can do it better without that.’

Her mother raised an eyebrow.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

The shop assistant undid the guiding charm. Dracenia wrote another line: *Dracenia Malfoy*. It came out perfectly straight. She hadn't noticed the boy coming closer until his elbow appeared on the other side of the counter.

‘Do you learn that in first year too?’ he asked.

He meant the enchantment. Dracenia shut the notebook so he couldn't keep looking.

‘If you can do it.’

‘I haven't tried.’

‘It shows.’

Hagrid put his hat on the table. The shop assistant smiled at the boy.

‘Mine's been practicing one word all morning. It still gets it wrong.’

The boy laughed. Dracenia looked at the notebook with the clasp. What a ridiculous comparison: that notebook didn't even know it was getting things wrong.

‘Let's wrap yours,’ the woman added.

She spread out a sheet of silver paper and asked her to hold a corner. Dracenia did. The paper folded itself up at the sides, but a crease spoiled the edge in front of her. She smoothed it down.

The crease sprang up again.

Dracenia flattened it with her nail.

‘Leave it,’ the shop assistant warned.

She let go just as the paper began to unfold. A strip shot toward the boy; he caught it and found his wrist fastened to the counter.

Dracenia's eyes widened. The boy put down his other hand to pull himself free, and the paper wrapped that one too.

Hagrid stepped forward. The table creaked under his weight.

‘Please don't lean on it,’ the shop assistant said, taking out her wand.

Narcissa picked up the notebook. Dracenia wished she'd thought of doing that sooner, but she was still looking at the boy's hands.

‘Why did you catch it?’

‘Because it was coming towards me.’

‘You could've moved.’

He moved his hands, and the paper tightened around his knuckles.

‘Thanks. Next time I'll let it wrap my head.’

Hagrid made a noise behind his hat. Dracenia couldn't see what was funny.

The shop assistant touched the folds with her wand. The paper opened and the boy stepped back, with a silver star stuck to the back of his hand. His hair was a mess. More of a mess.

Then Dracenia saw a green streak on the corner of her notebook.

‘Mum.’

Narcissa turned it around. The boy looked at the mark.

‘I didn't touch it.’

‘You were right here,’ said Dracenia.

‘You've got ink on your finger.’

Dracenia closed her hand, too late. Her mother gently took her wrist and turned it over.

‘And on your palm.’

The shop assistant cleaned the cover. Nobody asked the boy to apologize. Dracenia tried to rub the ink off with a handkerchief and spread it down to the base of her finger.

Her mother paid for the notebook and the bottle of ink. The shop assistant prepared a new wrapper, this time without asking for help.

Someone's shadow filled the shop window for a moment as they passed. Dracenia saw her own face in the glass, very close to her mother's, and lifted her chin before stepping away from the counter. Narcissa was already picking up her handbag; Dracenia looked a little longer, her lips pressed together.

Before they left, Dracenia saw that the boy had chosen the ordinary blue one.

‘That one doesn't do anything.’

He ran his hand over the cover.

‘I know.’

Dracenia waited. If he knew, why was he buying it? The boy didn't explain. She followed her mother out with the package held tight to her chest.

Lucius was waiting near the bookshop. He looked up from a newspaper as they approached.

‘Did you manage to decide?’

Dracenia showed him the package.

‘They took the enchantment off. It was no use.’

Narcissa studied a shop window.

‘Ink still needs time to dry.’

Lucius saw his daughter's hands and offered her his handkerchief. It was softer than hers. Dracenia took it without commenting on what had happened.

Hagrid went past a few meters away with the boy. Lucius stopped folding his newspaper.

‘Look who's there.’

Dracenia turned at once, expecting someone important. She saw the same boy, who nearly walked into a woman because he was looking at a cage.

‘Him?’

Her father gave her an amused look.

‘Harry Potter.’

It took Dracenia a second to remember the scar she'd seen beneath his hair. Then she looked at the silver star on Potter's hand, still visible as he pointed to a shop.

‘He didn't seem that clever,’ she said.

Lucius put his newspaper away.

‘You'll have a chance to find out.’

Dracenia gave back his handkerchief. She'd left a mark on that too. Her father took it as if it didn't matter and adjusted the package so she wasn't carrying it by the edge.

‘Ice cream before we go on?’

She chose the biggest flavor on the list, until her mother reminded her that flavors didn't come in sizes. Dracenia asked for two.

Term hadn't even started and Potter had already laughed at her. Remembering it was enough to make the ice cream taste a little less sweet.



CHAPTER 3

Things That Could Be His



Harry

The shop assistant lent him a quill to try the blue notebook. Harry wrote his name, waited for it to dry and brushed a letter with his finger.

It didn't correct itself. It didn't move. If he wanted to fill the rest of the page, he'd have to decide what to put there.

He bought it with a bottle of ink and a new quill. When the woman picked up another sheet of silver paper, he shook his head so quickly that Hagrid burst out laughing.

They left with most of the list still to buy. In the robe shop, a pin refused to stay in its cushion; at the bookshop, Harry had to hold on to a volume that was trying to return to its shelf. His excitement didn't fade until they reached the wand shop.

Ollivander moved a ladder aside to let him reach the counter, then opened a narrow box.

The street sounds were muffled by the glass. Inside, he could clearly hear the scrape of the box sliding over the wood and the small click of its lid. Harry leaned forward to look inside. The paper seemed very old for wrapping something brand new.

Harry picked up the wand so carefully that the man told him not to hold it as if it might break. He tightened his grip a little. He felt nothing.



‘Try a small movement.’

Harry did. One corner of the paper in the box folded over and unfolded again.

He looked at Hagrid, who waited by the door with a patience Harry couldn't make anything of.

‘Does that count?’

Ollivander was already looking for another box.

‘It counts as a reason to try another.’

The next one tickled his fingers, but the man took it away before he could ask whether that was better. Harry began to feel the way he did when he was picked last for teams: he was there, willing, and nobody seemed able to find anything for him to do.

‘What if there isn't one?’ he asked.

Ollivander set a third box on the counter.

‘We've only just started looking, Mr Potter.’

Harry looked at the shelves. There were boxes all the way to the top. He wasn't sure whether that ought to reassure him.

When he took the new wand, he felt a pleasant warmth from his palm to the base of his fingers. He held it without adjusting his grip. Sparks lit up the wall and he laughed in surprise.

‘This one,’ he said, before anyone asked.

The light went out before Harry could see where the sparks had landed. The same dark boxes stood in front of him, but he kept seeing them lit up whenever he blinked. Hagrid had stopped leaning against the door. Harry wanted him to look, but Hagrid was already smiling.

The wandmaker examined it with a different sort of attention.

Harry expected a warning, but he only explained how to put it away and asked him not to leave it loose among his books. The box

seemed too small for something that had just answered him like that.

Hagrid still had a surprise: a white owl who looked at him from her cage as if she were deciding where to put him.

‘For your birthday.’

Harry looked from the cage to Hagrid.

‘Can I take her with me?’

‘That's why I bought her.’

The owl settled on her perch. Harry watched her breast feathers fluff up as she tucked away one foot. He kept watching until she brought it out again. He didn't want to miss anything his owl did.

He couldn't manage to thank Hagrid without saying it several times. In the end Hagrid took him for something to eat so he could have something else to do as well.

Harry opened the notebook beside his plate. He wrote down the questions that had been building up, then stopped at one.

‘Is there anyone at school who remembers my parents?’

Hagrid put down his glass.

‘I remember them.’

‘But from before.’

The owl turned her head. Harry kept looking at Hagrid.

‘Your dad asked me for some leather once. Lost the sole off a shoe.’

Harry tried to picture him hopping on one foot.

‘Did you give him some?’

‘Of course. He still owes me what was left over.’

Harry laughed. He liked having a question that didn't end in that house where everyone had died.

During August he read his books out of Dudley's sight and filled several pages with questions. He named the owl Hedwig after finding the name in *A History of Magic*. She accepted it, or at least stopped looking at him when he tried calling her something else.

On the first of September, Vernon left him at King's Cross with a trunk, the cage and a ticket for a platform that didn't exist.

Harry found nine, then ten. There was a barrier between them. The instructions insisted on being discreet, which was difficult with a trolley whose wheel squeaked every time he turned.

A red-haired boy caught it before it hit a suitcase.

‘I think it wants to go another way.’

Harry pulled back. The wheel swiveled and ran over his shoe.

‘So do I.’

The boy laughed. His mother called them from a few steps away, and Harry went over with the ticket in his hand. She looked at the destination without surprise.

‘Through the barrier. Straight ahead.’

Harry looked at her again, in case she was joking. A pair of twins had already disappeared between the bricks.

‘I'm Ron,’ said the boy. ‘I'll go behind you. Try not to stop in the middle.’

Harry pushed forward, bracing for the crash. Instead he found steam and a red train.

He stopped.

Ron appeared behind him and swerved his trolley in time.

‘I told you not to.’

‘It's just—’

Harry pointed at the train. Ron looked at it and seemed to understand.

‘Yeah. I did that the first time too.’

They found a carriage with an open door and a suitcase blocking the steps. Behind it stood a boy with a box full of air holes in his arms.

‘Is it yours?’ Ron asked, pointing at the suitcase.

The boy nodded.

Harry set the cage on his trunk and went over. Between them they could lift the case, but when they pushed, it dropped back onto the first step. Something was pulling at it from underneath.

‘Don't pull,’ the boy said.

The strap of his box was caught under a wheel. Harry crouched to free it. From there he heard a soft thump inside the cardboard.

‘What's in there?’

‘A toad.’

Ron stopped pushing.

‘That would've been useful to know earlier.’

Harry lifted one corner. The boy freed the strap and hugged it against the box; Ron pushed with his shoulder until the suitcase went through. For a moment they looked at the gap they'd made.

‘Now for ours,’ said Ron.

A girl appeared in the corridor with a book tucked under her arm. She'd found a ribbon that had come loose from the suitcase.

‘If you tie it here, it won't fall off,’ she explained to the boy.

He tried to hold the box and both ends at once. Harry held out his hands.

‘I'll hold it.’

The boy took a moment to hand it over. The girl tied a knot, pulled to test it, and was left with one loose end between her fingers.

Ron pressed his lips together. Harry had to look at the box so he wouldn't laugh too.

‘That wasn't it,’ she said.

She started again, putting down her book this time. The boy took the ribbon and gave it a smaller tug. It held.

‘I'm Neville,’ he said. Then he lifted a corner of the lid to check inside. ‘He's Trevor.’

The toad seemed less worried than any of them.

‘Hermione,’ the girl added, picking up her book. ‘We can put the cages in first.’

Harry fetched Hedwig's. Ron stayed below to push the first trunk, and Harry climbed up to take it. As he pulled on the handle, the girl moved Trevor's box away from his feet.

By the time all four of them were inside, Harry was hot and had one sleeve rolled up to his elbow. He said his name while trying to pull it down. The other three stared at him.

Harry wished he'd said it after sitting down.

‘Are you really him?’ Ron asked.

‘Looks like it.’

Hermione opened her mouth. Ron pointed to a compartment.

‘Come on. If we stay here, I'll have to spend the journey hugging your trunk.’

Harry sat by the window. Ron's mother kissed her son goodbye; a red-haired girl waved her arms as the train began to move. Harry waved back, though he wasn't sure she meant him.

Ron saw the coins he took out when the food trolley came past.

‘You don't need to buy everything.’

‘I don't know what any of it is.’

That seemed a good enough reason to Harry. They chose a bun that let out a puff of sweet air when they broke it open, and some Chocolate Frogs Harry didn't manage to examine before one leapt under the seat.

Ron had to lie on the floor to retrieve it.

‘Hold on to it next time.’

‘I thought it was chocolate.’

‘It is. That's the good part.’

Neville shielded Trevor's box from the crumbs. Hermione came back from asking a prefect questions and found one of Ron's knees under the table.

‘Has the toad escaped?’

‘My food,’ Harry explained.

She crouched to help. She didn't know about the frogs either.

During the afternoon they talked about things Harry could ask without feeling he was years behind on everything. Ron had five older brothers and a sister who wasn't at Hogwarts yet. Hermione had read so much about the school that she was worried she couldn't find a book explaining how they would be Sorted. Neville didn't seem keen to find out.

‘My gran's already explained which house I ought to be in,’ he said.

‘Which one do you want?’ Harry asked.

Neville looked at the lid of the box.

‘One where they won't send me back.’

Harry passed him the rest of the bun. Anything he could think of telling Neville was something he wanted someone to tell him, too.

Outside the window, houses became fields and fields became dark hills. Harry put on his new robes before they arrived. They fitted him. He had to get used to not pulling back the sleeves to find his hands.

On the platform, Hagrid held a lantern above everyone's heads.

‘First-years! Over here. The older ones know where they're going; stop getting in the way of the ones who don't.’

Harry recognized his voice and stopped looking for directions. He followed his friends down the path to the boats.

The shoes of the children ahead kept disappearing into the darkness. Harry looked down to find the next place for his foot, then straight up again: he didn't want to lose the lantern. All around him came the rustle of new robes, all too dark to tell anyone apart from behind.

He put a hand on the side as he climbed into the boat and discovered that the water was much closer than it had looked from the bank. The wood tilted under his weight. He sat down quickly and felt about with his feet for somewhere firm, hoping Ron hadn't noticed how tightly he'd held on.

The castle appeared as they rounded a bend along the shore. He'd looked at the photograph many times. It hadn't prepared him for windows so high, for the water repeating them below him, or for the thought that behind one of them a bed was waiting for him.

He tried to follow a row of windows to the top. He had to lean back and lost sight of the boat's edge. There were lights he couldn't tell apart; when he looked at the water, they broke up again. The boat kept moving, but Harry still hadn't finished looking at the castle.

Ron tried to point something out. It took Harry a moment to hear him.

He'd even forgotten the notebook.



CHAPTER 4

A Bed Beside the Lake



Dracenia

Pansy had spent half an hour trying to work out who each pupil looked like.

‘That one's just like his father.’

Dracenia looked toward the compartment door.

‘You don't know his father.’

‘I saw him at your house.’

‘That was his uncle.’

‘Well, just like his uncle, then.’

Dracenia laughed. They'd eaten too many sweets, and Pansy was hiding the wrappers in her luggage so a prefect wouldn't see them. Dracenia didn't understand why: nobody had said you weren't allowed to eat until you felt a bit sick.

Her father had said goodbye before the other Malfoys she knew arrived. He'd told her to write, listen to her teachers and not let anyone make a fool of her. Dracenia had promised all three. Now she suspected they might be more work than he imagined.

Narcissa had checked her hair clip and asked for the second time where she'd packed her dry stockings. Dracenia had answered impatiently. On the way to the lake, with one wet foot, she wished her mother had asked a third time.



‘Don't move about so much,’ she told Pansy in the boat.

‘I'm sitting down.’

‘Then sit more still.’

She liked the castle as much as she'd expected. More, though she wasn't going to admit the pictures in her books hadn't done it justice. The only thing spoiling their arrival was that everyone seemed to think the same. Even Potter was staring at the towers with his mouth slightly open.

Professor McGonagall received them without a special welcome for anyone. Dracenia waited for her to check the list, then asked where their trunks would be taken.

‘To your dormitories.’

‘Mine has—’

‘A label, I hope.’

Pansy looked at the floor so she wouldn't laugh. Dracenia finished saying she had delicate things in it, although McGonagall was already showing them where to go.

When she saw the Hat, Dracenia thought they could at least have given it a better stool.

She was more worried about having to share it with the whole queue than about the Sorting. Her family belonged in Slytherin. Pansy would go there too. They'd decided over the summer, sitting on her bedroom floor while a housekeeper asked them to stop putting their shoes on the cushions.

It hadn't occurred to her that the Hat might have a different opinion.

She waited her turn, tugging at a sleeve. Granger got Gryffindor and stood up before the professor could take the Hat off. Longbottom almost walked away wearing it.

Dracenia squeezed Pansy's arm when her name was called. She didn't know why she'd had to do that. She walked to the stool and sat as straight as she could under the thing beginning to cover her eyes.

'Malfoy,' said a voice beside her ear.

Yes, she thought.

'I knew that already.'

Dracenia went very still.

'You want to prove a few things.'

She couldn't think of denying it. She wanted the best marks, a bed beside Pansy's and somewhere she wouldn't have to explain who her family were. She wanted her father to be pleased when he got her first letter. She also wanted to take off that hat.

'Slytherin,' the voice announced.

Dracenia began getting up before McGonagall had removed it. She had to sit down again. Someone laughed behind her, and she made herself not look to see who it was.

They made room for her at the green table. An older pupil asked about Lucius; she took the opportunity to tell him he was her father, although he obviously knew that already.

Pansy arrived soon afterward. Dracenia put a hand on the empty bench to keep another girl from sitting there.

'I saved you a place.'

'I saw. You nearly sat in my plate.'

Dracenia moved a dish aside. Suddenly she was hungry.

When Harry Potter's name was called, the sound of the whole room changed. Pansy craned her neck. A boy stopped listening to what Dracenia had just been telling him about the stationer's.

Dracenia cut a potato in half and waited.

The common room was underground. She hadn't expected to like that. Greenish light from the windows moved over the walls, and when she approached one, Dracenia saw something dark pass on the other side of the glass.

‘It's the lake,’ the prefect explained. ‘Knocking on the glass won't call anyone. And don't try to open it.’

Pansy put her nose almost against the window.

‘What if something calls us from outside?’

‘Come and find me.’

The prefect went on to explain the stairs. Dracenia waited for her to move away before looking into the water too.

As she left the window, Dracenia rubbed her hands. It was cold by the glass. The stone ceiling was much lower than the one in the dining hall. Beyond the line of first-years, some older pupils were still bent over a table. The lake light made their faces green when they looked up. Dracenia straightened her back in case they were looking at her. One reached for his cup, passed a piece of parchment to the next and bent over his work again.

In the dormitory, someone had already chosen the bed she wanted. Dracenia pointed to her trunk.

‘Mine would look better there.’

The other girl, Millicent, sat down on the blanket.

‘So would mine.’

Dracenia waited for an explanation. Millicent started taking off her shoes. Pansy chose the bed next to a free one and put her bag on it before anyone could take it.

‘Come on. You can see the water from here.’

Dracenia accepted because she wanted to, not because the other bed was taken. She said so as she opened her trunk. Pansy didn't answer; she was trying to peel a chocolate wrapper off her scarf.

From the bed she could hear suitcases scraping against stone. Dracenia's trunk was only half open; the greenish light reached inside and changed the color of the clothes on top.

Before going to bed, Dracenia wrote to her parents. She announced Slytherin in large letters. She added that the castle was enormous, the food was all right and she'd had to explain to a teacher that she'd brought delicate things.

She stopped at the bottom of the page. At home, her mother would be taking off her earrings now. Dracenia knew which dish she'd leave them in and which window she'd ask to have shut.

‘Shall we turn the lights out?’ Pansy asked.

‘Wait.’

Dracenia added a question about the garden. Then she crossed it out: her father might think she wanted to come home.

In the end she wrote that the stockings were in the right place. She folded the letter before she could change her mind.

The bed was comfortable. The one at home was more comfortable.

A girl coughed very close by in the dark. Dracenia couldn't tell which bed it came from. She listened until she recognized Pansy's blankets rustling on the side where they ought to be, and turned her head toward her.

‘Pansy.’

‘What?’

‘Don't wake me too early.’

‘Then don't wake me up to tell me that.’

Dracenia smiled in the dark. Another shadow passed outside the glass, and they both sat up at once to see it.



CHAPTER 5

Where Everyone Else Was



Harry

While he waited for his name to be called, Harry had imagined two things: the Hat finding nothing to do with him, or sending him back.

He hadn't imagined the voice asking what he wanted.

'To learn,' he thought, unsure how to speak to it.

'That's part of it. There are other things you want too.'

Harry gripped the edge of the stool. The Hat fell silent. It didn't explain what it was looking for or which house it had in mind.

For a moment, Harry wondered if he would end up in Slytherin. He remembered the blonde girl from the stationer's sitting at the green table and looking around as if everyone would need her permission to use it. They couldn't all be like her. But he'd spent the journey with Ron, Neville and Hermione. He wanted to sit next to someone without having to defend his clothes or how much he knew first.

He thought of Ron holding his trunk, and Neville saving him a piece of bun when he'd thought there was none left.

'I want to go with them.'

The Hat took another moment.

'Gryffindor.'



The room reappeared as McGonagall lifted it off. Harry found his friends before remembering everyone else was clapping. There was a place next to Neville. Soon Ron sat down too, looking so relieved that neither of them felt obliged to mention it.

Voices rose toward the candles until he couldn't hear them separately. Harry turned to look for the people still clapping and found more benches, more tables and a wall of windows reflecting the light. Ron brought a serving dish almost up to Harry's chest; until then, Harry hadn't noticed what they were going to eat.

At the green table, the girl from the stationer's turned to her friend. Her blonde hair was swept off her forehead and her chin was raised. Harry didn't want another question about what he couldn't do.

Harry ate until he forgot to check how much was left on the dishes. Afterward, he listened to the headmaster explain the limits of the grounds and a third-floor corridor closed to pupils. Ron nudged his arm to remind him which way to follow Percy.

They climbed so many stairs that Harry began wondering whether he'd sleep up by the dining hall candles. A portrait moved aside after hearing the password, revealing armchairs, a fire and tables with abandoned books. Two older pupils broke off an argument to let them through.

He felt the warmth at his knees first. Pupils sat on the floor so close to the fire that Harry wondered how their books didn't burn. A laugh made half the group turn, and someone drew their legs in to let them pass. Harry followed Ron, still watching the fire between the heads. Nobody here was in a hurry to go to bed.

There were five beds in the dormitory. Harry found his trunk at the foot of one and touched the scrape on its side to make sure it was his.

‘Is this one mine?’ he asked.

Ron was undoing his luggage strap.

‘Unless you fancy swapping with me.’

Harry shook his head at once. It had curtains, a whole blanket and room to stretch out without working out where the wall would be. He took out the blue notebook and put it on the bedside table. He waited a moment. Nobody told him to move it.

A curtain brushed the pillow. Harry drew it back and saw that he could close both sides from inside. He held the cloth for a moment; he'd still be able to hear Ron and Neville on the other side without having to stay where everyone could see him.

Neville put Trevor somewhere he wouldn't be trodden on. Dean and Seamus were arguing about which window faced the field. Ron pointed to the next bed.

‘I'll be there.’

Harry sat on the blanket and pressed a hand into it. He didn't need to do anything else to keep his place that night.

The next day, Harry's first important discovery was that the staircase wasn't taking him toward breakfast.

They went back with Hermione, who insisted on remembering where they'd turned. Ron insisted that wouldn't help if the stairs had changed. Neville found a suit of armor missing a gauntlet that they'd seen the night before, and Harry used it to get his bearings.

They arrived as Percy was finishing. He showed them where the bread had been left and didn't ask how they'd taken so long.

In Potions, nobody had saved them anything.

The smell reached out into the corridor. Ron covered his nose with his robes before they got to the door.

‘Don't do that,’ Hermione whispered.

‘Then breathe for me.’

Harry bit his lip so he wouldn't laugh. They lowered their voices as they went in.

Snape waited beside a blackboard. Harry made out several jars with things suspended inside and was glad they weren't on the table he was sharing with Ron.

They were making a liquid for cleaning cauldrons. They had to crush a root, heat the mixture and take the cauldron off the heat before adding some scales. Harry read the instructions twice.

‘What are they from?’ Ron muttered, looking at the scales.

‘If you needed to know that to follow the recipe, Weasley, I would have told you.’

Ron straightened the mortar. Harry concentrated on the root, which was harder to crush than it looked.

At the next table, Neville left the spoon in his cauldron. The handle snapped and Hermione stepped away from a cloud of smoke. Snape put out the fire at once.

‘The spoon is removed when you've finished stirring.’

He gave them clean water and told them to start again. Neville didn't look up.

When Harry's mixture cleared, he put out the flame and took hold of the handle. He let go with a stifled cry.

‘It isn't a toy, Potter.’

Harry pressed his finger against a cloth. Ron showed him the glove at the other end of the table.

‘Do I have to wait for it to cool before I move it?’ Harry asked.

‘You have to use the equipment you're given.’

‘Yes, but—’

‘Two points off. For arguing with the instructions.’

Harry felt everyone at every table looking at him. He still had his finger against the cloth; he hadn't meant to argue about anything. He pulled on the glove too quickly and spilled a little as he moved the cauldron.

Ron held the container of scales.

‘Slowly now.’

Harry took off the lid. They finished by following each step with a care that did nothing to improve his mood.

The potion worked. Snape checked how it loosened the dirt on a plate and went on to the next without congratulating them.

In the corridor, Hermione pointed to the glove.

‘It was there.’

‘I've seen it now,’ said Harry.

‘I'm only saying—’

‘He saw it after he got burnt,’ Ron put in. ‘Like Neville saw about the spoon after it broke.’

Neville shrank back. Harry wished the comparison hadn't included him.

‘Ours worked,’ he said, looking at Hermione.

She seemed to have to remember that part.

‘Yes. It worked.’

Harry wasn't used to being able to stay angry with a teacher after another child agreed with him. It lasted until Defense.

Quirrell had caught a sleeve under several books. It took him a while to free it, and he gave an embarrassed smile when he saw them waiting.

‘You can sit down. I... I meant to say that before.’

He didn't take points off for laughing.

He handed out cards showing similar creatures and taught them which parts to look at to tell them apart. Harry got two right, got another wrong and was allowed to try again. Then they practiced Lumos.

Harry smoothed the card with his palm before putting it beside his book. The corners were worn. Behind him, people were still trying out creature names under their breath.

For the first time, Harry's wand lit something up because he'd asked it to. The light was small, but it showed the creases in his hand. Ron stopped trying and looked at Harry's.

‘Don't turn it off.’

Harry smiled and lost the light.

At another bench, a glow moved across a book cover whenever someone waved their arm. Harry followed it to the tip of the wand, then looked back at his own.

Quirrell asked them to repeat the movement without rushing. At the end, Harry stayed to ask about a chapter whose title he didn't understand. The professor showed him another place in the book.

‘This first. You can come back to the rest when you need it.’

Harry listened with relief. Ever since he'd entered the alley, he'd seemed to be trying to catch up on eleven years of things everyone knew. Being told by a teacher that he could wait lifted a weight he hadn't even known how to name.

After Defense, Harry and Neville followed directions from a portrait that had forgotten the clock corridor was closed.

They stopped at a chain. There was a notice and, beyond it, a reinforced door. Something scraped on the other side, first near the floor, then higher up.

Neville stepped back.

‘It's the one Dumbledore told us about.’

Harry looked at the chain without touching it. The noise came from the door again.

They went back the way they'd come. The portrait tried to argue about the route until a woman in the next painting reminded him how long it had been since he'd looked out into the corridor.

When they found Percy, Harry told him where they'd been sent. The prefect made a note and showed them the right staircase. Neville didn't let his breath out until the clock was out of sight.

That evening, Ron found a newspaper under a board.

Harry recognized Gringotts in the photograph and took it before a chess rook could step on the edge. The article was about an attempted robbery. It had happened on his birthday.

‘I was there.’

Ron moved a knight aside.

‘When they robbed it?’

‘That day. With Hagrid.’

Harry remembered the coins and the small package they'd collected afterward. The article didn't say what the thief was after. He read the whole thing to Ron, skipping some words he didn't know.

‘If they don't say what it was, it'll be because they don't want someone else trying again,’ Ron suggested.

Harry looked at the date once more. It might have nothing to do with it. Hagrid worked for Hogwarts and must collect lots of things.

He wrote it down in the notebook anyway.

Ron offered him the white pieces.

‘Do you play?’

‘A bit.’

The first knight he moved asked him to make up his mind where he wanted it to go. Harry apologized and Ron laughed.

‘Don't say sorry to it. It won't listen to you after that.’

Harry straightened the knight and left the newspaper beside the armchair. For tonight, he'd learn something easier to ask about.

Before bed, he wrote to Hagrid. He told him about Gryffindor and the bed. Then he asked whether Lily had known the greenhouses, and left the letter ready to take to Hedwig in the morning.



CHAPTER 6

Two Inches



Dracenia

Flitwick had put them with Potter, Weasley and Granger.

Dracenia counted the chairs in case the professor hadn't noticed. There were five. He thanked her for pointing it out and put another feather on the table.

‘Then you'll be able to watch more closely.’

It wasn't the answer she'd expected.

The table stood in a strip of light falling across the floor from the high windows. Beyond it, the benches disappeared into shadow. Dracenia looked for a moment at all that empty space, then at the five chairs she'd been given. Potter could perfectly well have sat somewhere else.

Potter sat opposite her. Dracenia recognized him before he looked at her, but went on checking her notebook.

Potter had a crumpled sleeve and a crooked robe collar. He pushed his glasses up with a knuckle before resting his arms on the table. Dracenia looked at her own cuff, smooth and fastened, and left it as it was.

‘They said your name yesterday,’ he remarked.

‘I heard.’

‘We all heard.’

Pansy bent to get her pencil case. Dracenia couldn't see her face.

Flitwick explained the wrist movement and asked them to measure how far the feather rose. Dracenia put her ruler with its metal base beside the wooden one they'd been lent. Hers could stand up by itself.

Across the classroom, a feather rolled to the edge of a table and someone caught it in both hands. Another had caught in the wool of a sleeve; its owner was trying to pull it free without breaking it. Dracenia watched hers. It was whole and clean, its shaft lying straight on the table.

‘My father does it without measuring,’ she remarked.

‘Then he doesn't need one of those,’ said Weasley.

Dracenia pretended not to hear. She volunteered to go first before Granger finished asking them to choose a fixed point to measure from.

The tip of the feather rose.

Dracenia raised her wand a little higher. The feather tipped over and fell.

‘Two.’

Granger brought her nose close to the ruler.

‘That wasn't two centimeters.’

‘I didn't say centimeters.’

‘What, then?’ Potter asked.

‘Inches.’

Dracenia knew they were marked on the other side. It was a perfectly possible result, although perhaps she'd looked when the feather was already starting to fall.

Granger pointed at the middle of the feather.

‘It never left the table here.’

‘It moved,’ said Pansy.

‘But we aren't measuring the tip moving. Otherwise you could just bend it.’

Potter made a cross on his paper and put the feather on top.

‘We can always look here.’

Dracenia was quick to say that was the idea. The professor passed just then and approved Potter's cross. He reminded her to write the unit beside the number.

She wrote *inches* harder than she needed to.

Granger lifted the feather on her second attempt. Dracenia was watching Weasley's and Potter's hands; neither had touched the table. The feather stayed in the air until Granger lowered her wand in surprise.

‘I put it down.’

‘We saw,’ said Dracenia.

It would have been better to say nothing. Now Granger knew she'd been watching.

Dracenia took her turn again and repeated the movement. Her wand tip shook. There must have been too much noise at the table: Weasley was laughing because his own feather had rolled toward the floor.

‘Can you be quiet?’

He stopped laughing and looked at her.

‘I wasn't talking to you.’

Pansy returned her feather. Dracenia tried again, this time without raising her head. For two seconds she felt the object really answering her. A smile escaped her.

The shaft cast a narrow line on the table. Dracenia could see it beneath the hovering feather without lowering her head. Light passed through a gap that hadn't been there before; she wanted to call Pansy over to look too.

Then she looked at the ruler and let the feather fall.

Granger wrote down the correct result.

At the end they had to hand in one sheet between them. Dracenia offered hers because her handwriting was best. Granger agreed, but crossed out the two inches.

‘That has to stay there with a correction.’

‘I can do it again,’ said Dracenia.

‘You already have.’

Flitwick confirmed that they had to keep the mistakes too. Dracenia looked at Pansy. Her friend merely moved an inkwell that was too close to the green notebook.

The sheet was full of low numbers and one enormous correction. Potter seemed delighted with his half a centimeter. Dracenia didn't understand why he was celebrating when Granger had done more.

On the way out she discovered something worse: Granger's parents were dentists. They weren't a little-known magical family or foreigners with a difficult surname. They were Muggles.

‘So they didn't explain any of this at home.’

Granger stopped putting away the parchment.

‘That's why I read.’

‘Reading isn't knowing how to do it.’

‘I did it today.’

Dracenia had no answer she could give without going back to the feather.

‘Today,’ she repeated.

She walked on. Pansy had to hurry to catch up.

In the dormitory, Dracenia put the notebook on a box and practiced again. She'd made sure there was no ink near the feather. She lifted it a little, counted and lowered it.

Pansy was lying back with an open book upside down on her knees.

‘Why don't you use the table?’

‘Because you block the light there.’

‘I can do that here too.’

Pansy raised a hand between the lamp and the feather. A rabbit with uneven ears appeared on the wall.

‘I'm working.’

‘I know. You've been saying that since we got here.’

Dracenia put down her wand. Her forearm ached. Her notebook said three seconds, four seconds, two. She hadn't managed four again, and it annoyed her that Pansy was still doing the rabbit.

‘Will you count the next one?’

Her friend lowered her hands.

‘Properly, or like you?’

Dracenia turned.

Pansy wasn't smiling.

For a moment she wanted to say she could count for herself. She looked at the feather, the notebook and the bed where she'd have to sleep two steps away from Pansy all year.

‘Properly,’ she said at last.

Pansy began counting when the feather left the box. She reached five.

Dracenia lowered it slowly, with a satisfaction she didn't want to share too freely.

‘See?’

‘Yes, this time.’

Dracenia wrote down five. Then she covered the two inches on the previous page with her hand. She didn't rub them out; she couldn't tear out a page without it showing.

‘Granger will have to practice too,’ she said.

Pansy went back to her book.

Dracenia lifted the feather once more, just to make sure she still knew how.

CHAPTER 7

A Place in the Air

Harry

The morning before their first flying lesson, Harry and Neville had shared a pot in Herbology.

The greenhouse was warm. Harry wiped his glasses on his sleeve and, when he put them back on, found Neville trying to put his hand into a glove with the thumb on the wrong side.

‘It's the other one,’ he said.

Neville looked in his bag. He took out another just like it.

Harry went with him to swap one for a right-hand glove. They returned to the table with all four thumbs where they needed them.

The glass was misted on the inside. Small heaps of dark earth and still-empty pots covered the benches; whenever someone brought a pot closer, its base scraped against the wood. The smell of wet earth reached out into the aisle between the plants.

Sprout handed out pink seeds. Harry held theirs while Neville arranged the earth. Something moved against the leather.

‘It's opening.’

He parted his fingers a little. The seed moved again and a pale root appeared. Harry raised his other hand, unsure where to hold it.

‘Don't squeeze it. Bring your hands down to the pot.’

Neville made a hole with two fingers. Harry lowered his hands; his partner supported the seed from below until the roots touched the earth. Then Harry let go.

Another seed fell at the next table. A flower opened beside a shoe, and the boy jumped.

‘Stay still,’ Sprout said. ‘It isn't going to eat you.’

Harry laughed, his hands still open over the pot. Neville pushed earth around the sides and turned the label so it wouldn't hide the shoot.

Damp soil clung to the seams of their gloves. Neville worked near the rim, his head bent over the root, and Harry could follow what he was doing without losing sight of him among the other plants.

‘Here,’ Neville told Harry. ‘You can hold it on this side.’

This time he knew where to put his fingers.

When they finished, Neville separated the gloves before putting them away. Harry checked his own thumb; his friend saw him do it, and they both laughed.

The next morning, a few days after Harry had sent his first letter, Hagrid brought the answer to breakfast.

The folded paper almost disappeared between his fingers. He handed it over, apologizing for not knowing which classes Lily had had near the greenhouses, but he remembered something else.

Harry unfolded the sheet. Hagrid wrote that his mother had once held a basket while he repaired the fastening. Lily knew he could fix it more quickly with his wand. She didn't say so. She waited, then carried the side that still wasn't properly fastened.

Harry read that part again.

‘She didn't go?’

Hagrid stopped trying to find somewhere to put his hands without knocking over a glass.

‘She wasn't in that much of a hurry.’

Harry liked imagining her waiting for something that had nothing to do with him. He put the sheet in his notebook, beside the name of the school and his first questions.

That morning, Ron's broom tried to roll away across the grass.

He stopped it with his shoe.

‘I know this one already.’

Harry looked at the number painted on his own handle. There was a repaired crack near the twigs. It wasn't like the one in the window, but if it could lift him off the ground, he was willing to forgive it.

The brooms lay in an uneven line on the grass. Beyond the bags, the stakes left room for everyone to see the course; Harry could feel the damp at the toes of his shoes.

Hooch made them put their bags well away from the grass and taught them to call their brooms. Harry's jumped straight into his hand. He looked at Ron with a smile he couldn't stop.

Neville's only rose at one end.

‘Perhaps it wants his gran to come,’ Malfoy remarked.

Pansy laughed. Neville lowered his hand before trying again.

Harry remembered the pale roots on his gloves and Neville showing him where to put his fingers. It annoyed him that nobody remembered that now.

‘Watch your own broom,’ he told Malfoy.

‘Mine's already come.’

‘Then say something to it.’

Hooch told them to be quiet. Harry pretended to adjust his glove; Malfoy looked at him through narrowed eyes.

Malfoy's blonde hair was still in place, though the breeze moved its ends against her robe collar. She stood very straight, holding the handle beside her leg. Harry had the impression that even waiting for her turn seemed like a competition to her.

Neville managed to lift the handle before the instructions ended. Harry smiled at him. It was nice being able to be pleased for him without getting a nasty comment in return.

Then they learned to mount and brake. Neville landed before reaching the first stake. Harry hoped he'd have time to watch someone else when Hooch told him to begin.

The ground moved away from his feet.

There was no jump or jolt. The broom took him forward, and Harry leaned before remembering the explanation. He passed the stake. Air rushed up his sleeves; he saw the stands around the pitch further away and felt an absurd urge to keep going until he reached them.

‘Brake,’ Hooch ordered.

He did it too late. A branch brushed his shoe as he stopped, and the teacher pointed to the start of the course.

‘Again. Listen before you get there this time.’

Harry obeyed. On the second circuit he knew when to shift his weight. On the third he had to stop himself going faster than he was allowed.

He looked at Malfoy when he landed. She was waiting for her turn.

The wind had blown his black hair over his glasses and puffed his robes out behind him. Malfoy looked down at his shoes before returning to his face. Harry was still smiling.

'I've never flown before,' Harry said, though nobody had asked.

Ron burst out laughing.

Malfoy flew the course confidently, although she braked so close to Pansy that Pansy had to move. Harry said nothing. He didn't need to: Malfoy turned to look at him before Hooch sent her around again.

'If I ever say Malfoy's my friend, lock me up,' Harry whispered to Ron.

Ron turned to him, amused.

'Where?'

'Anywhere you like.'

'Slytherin, then. You can tell her yourself.'

Harry laughed.

At the end, Harry wanted to stay by the brooms. He pretended he was having trouble undoing his bag. Hooch noticed and came over.

'Do you know what a Seeker does?'

Ron answered for him, too quickly at first, then using his hands to point at the hoops in the distance.

The teacher listened until he finished.

'I'm going to speak to McGonagall. I'm not promising you anything, Potter.'

Harry put his bag away, now he couldn't pretend he was having trouble opening it.

He thought of nothing else over lunch.

Wood didn't start by letting him look for the Snitch. He showed him all the balls, explained the positions, then sent him after a practice ball while the rest of the team trained.

Harry spotted the ball, accelerated and almost collided with Angelina.

She braked so close that he had to shut his eyes.

‘The Snitch isn't the only thing up here.’

Harry apologized. He'd rushed to show how well he could fly before wondering where everyone else was going.

Next time, he waited too long. The ball touched the ground.

Wood made him do it again until his legs hurt. When he landed, he couldn't hide his disappointment.

‘Does that mean no?’

‘It means we're finished for today.’

The captain handed him a glass of water.

‘You spot the balls very early. That's useful. If you then knock over a Chaser, that's less useful.’

Harry drank, watching the people who might still become his teammates. Fred and George were arguing about which of them had hit a Bludger toward Wood.

‘Both of you,’ the captain said without looking at them.

Harry smiled into the glass.

They let him come back. After the second trial, McGonagall confirmed the exception: he could play if he kept up with classes, training and the adults' instructions. Harry agreed to every condition. Afterward, Ron asked if he remembered them all.

‘She wrote them down for me.’

‘Good. In case she said you had to do my homework at the end.’

The Nimbus 2000 arrived two days later. McGonagall didn't give him a bill or say it belonged to the school. It was his, with permission to use it.

Harry opened the package in the team room. Ron rested a hand on the edge of the table and didn't bring it near the handle until Harry asked whether he wanted to touch it.

The paper covered almost the whole table. Between the brooms propped against the wall and the team benches, the Nimbus looked newer still: no marks on the varnish, no dried grass among its twigs.

‘Are you sure?’

They spent a while examining it. Harry had seen the same model behind glass; now he could take it to training.

He wanted to show Hagrid. They had to wait until Friday, because the gamekeeper was busy and because Harry already had more things to do than would fit into an afternoon.

The hut smelled of cut wood. Hagrid had left the door open and a plank where the seat of a bench ought to have been. Ron stepped over it; Harry went around.

Fang decided Ron's shoe was an excellent place to sleep.

‘I've only just got here,’ Ron explained.

The dog closed his eyes.

Hagrid brought over two crates and a jug of juice. There was no room for glasses on the table until he moved some pieces of wood; he did it with one hand, still holding the bench with the other.

Harry perched on the edge of his crate, in case that was being used to build something too.

They told him about training. Ron added the part about Angelina before Harry could skip it, and had to tell it again because Hagrid started laughing.

‘You've learnt something already,’ said Hagrid.

Harry looked at the plank Hagrid was holding crookedly.

‘Still plenty to learn.’

‘Of course.’

Hagrid said it so calmly that Harry stopped feeling he had to apologize.

Ron wanted to know if Hagrid had seen his brothers play. He'd been expecting a story about goals, but the first was about boots someone had left too close to the fire to dry. One had ended up smaller than the other.

‘They didn't tell me that.’

‘Can't have been very proud,’ said Hagrid.

Ron looked at his shoe. Fang was still on it.

‘Don't you try to fix it.’

Harry laughed. Hagrid picked up the plank and tried to fit it into another. As he lifted one side, the opposite end slipped off the edge. Harry put down his glass and caught it before it fell.

‘Here?’

‘A bit higher.’

Ron pulled his foot out from under the dog and got up to help on the other side. The wood was rough beneath Harry's fingers. It occurred to him that his mother must have had to change hands with the basket if Hagrid had taken so long over its fastening. He imagined her settling it against her hip and waiting.

‘You can let go now,’ Hagrid said.

Harry slowly opened his hands. The bench stayed in place.

All three tried it. The wood creaked when Hagrid sat down, and Ron put a foot on the ground, ready to get up. The bench held.

‘You could've done it with magic,’ he observed.

‘It's done now.’

Ron looked at the plank. Harry settled on the seat, with no wish to help take it apart to find out who was right.

‘Did my father play too?’ Harry asked.

Hagrid smiled.

‘He flew well. Sometimes forgot he needed to land.’

Harry pictured a boy who looked like him only because he had no other face to give him yet. He would have liked to ask how you braked without sticking out a foot. He would have liked to tell him about the Nimbus.

Ron nudged him to show him Fang asleep on his shoes.

Harry laughed and stayed on the bench until it was time to go back.



CHAPTER 8

First Things First



Dracenia

Dracenia checked the rulebook before writing to her father. She didn't want to get this particular thing wrong.

First-years weren't allowed to bring their own brooms.

Potter had a Nimbus.

She read the sentence again and put her finger beneath it, in case it disappeared when Snape looked at the page. The professor saw her after Potions.

'I wanted to ask about the team trials.'

Snape looked at the book she was carrying.

Behind him stood unlit cauldrons and a dark cloth on a table. The last pupils were collecting their bags without coming near the desk. Dracenia held the open rulebook against her chest; she'd been careful to leave the right page showing.

'They've already been held.'

'Potter had his afterwards.'

'Potter isn't in Slytherin.'

Dracenia noticed his tone, but she'd prepared more things to say.

'I could fly before I came here. My father—'

‘You may write to your father. He still won't be the team captain.’

The answer left her motionless. At home, nobody ever spoke about Lucius as someone who couldn't solve a problem.

Snape closed a box of ingredients.

‘There are two wrong names in today's work. Start with those.’

Dracenia took the book away without mentioning that Pansy had written one of them. She'd mention it later. First she needed to find where they'd been corrected.

Pansy didn't congratulate her for complaining.

‘What did you expect him to say?’

‘That the rules are the same for everyone.’

‘You wouldn't have asked if Potter didn't have a broom.’

Dracenia sat beside her on a courtyard bench. The stone was cold even through her robes.

Drops from the night remained on the part of the seat they weren't using. Other pupils' shoes sounded under the covered walkway, where it was better than being outside. Pansy had the packet of biscuits on her knees, with a hand over it to keep it from opening.

‘Because I wouldn't need one until next year.’

Pansy broke a biscuit. She offered the smaller half, then swapped them when she saw Dracenia's expression.

‘Hooch lets people practice on Saturdays. You can prove it there.’

Dracenia knew she did. She'd planned to go, although she didn't like waiting her turn with school brooms. She thought of Potter on a new Nimbus and crushed a crumb against her skirt.

‘I'm going to.’

‘Good.’

‘But you could agree with me first.’

Pansy put the biscuit in her mouth.

Hooch set up a turning course. They had to brake in front of a little flag and come back without going around it. Dracenia completed the first run, improved on the second and asked to go again before the teacher told her to.

She liked flying. Not just winning, although that was what she liked telling people about most. She liked the air cooling her ears, being able to choose a direction and feeling the handle answer beneath her hands.

The little flag bent in the wind and straightened again. From the height of the course, the pupils waiting looked very close together; Dracenia could make out the worn brooms against their robes and Pansy's hair moving as she braked.

Pansy preferred a slow broom. On her second run she dropped a practice handkerchief by the flag and went back to pick it up.

‘You forgot to brake,’ Dracenia shouted.

‘No. I dropped this.’

Dracenia took her place. She wanted to make the turn without slowing down so much. Her father had taught her a similar one in the garden, though she'd had plenty of room there.

The broom answered too late. She passed the flag, tried to correct and ended up sitting on the grass with one shoe still hooked around the handle.

Hooch approached without running. That made the fall more humiliating.

‘Does anything hurt?’

Dracenia shook her head.

‘The broom doesn't turn properly.’

The teacher helped her up.

‘It turns more slowly than you wanted. You find that out before you ask more of it.’

Several pupils had seen. Dracenia looked for Potter and was grateful not to find him. Then she remembered why he wasn't there: he'd have his own training.

Grass clung to one knee and her blonde hair fell over her face. The ground was wetter than it looked from above.

She brushed off the grass and asked to try again. Hooch made her wait for Pansy's turn.

That evening she sat on her bed to write the letter. She said she flew better than almost everyone, the Sorting had been quick and Snape didn't want anyone else on the team. The fall had nothing to do with any of those things.

Pansy was going through the box where she kept her cuttings. She'd found an old Quidditch program and wanted to stick a figure in without covering the team list.

The letter lay on the blanket with its edge slightly bent. Beside it, Pansy had scraps of different sizes and a clear space for her box. The lamp reached both beds, but left the floor between them dark.

Dracenia reached over.

‘It looks wrong there.’

Pansy moved the box away.

‘I like it.’

‘You're covering the name.’

‘I know what he's called.’

Dracenia went back to her letter. It annoyed her that other people's things were allowed to look wrong on purpose.

When she finished, she realized she'd spent nearly half a page on Potter. She tore it out. If her father was going to intervene, he needed good reasons, not an account of everything Gryffindor did.

In the next version she asked if she could keep practicing over Christmas. She described the turn she wanted to learn and added that school brooms were slow. Her father would understand that part.

The answer came several days later. Lucius promised to look into the team when the time came and praised her for wanting to work. Narcissa had added that she hoped not to get another letter written in a rush.

There was a small photograph of the garden. The hedge moved in the wind.

Dracenia put it beside her bed. Then she picked up the letter and read *when the time came* again.

Hogwarts turned out to have a lot of people whose job was deciding when the time came.

The following Saturday, she went to practice again. This time she braked before the flag.

CHAPTER 9

The Pumpkin's Mouth

Harry

Harry cut away too much paper and the pumpkin lost a tooth.

Ron lifted the hoop to examine it.

‘Better. Now it looks as if it bites.’

Neville laughed. Hermione wanted to show them how to stick the spare piece back on, but Harry was already cutting the other side.

‘It doesn't matter. We'll leave it like that.’

She drew back her hand. She'd helped prepare the strips, hold the hoop and remind them not to put their fingers where they'd just applied glue. Harry had been grateful for all three until he began feeling he couldn't touch anything without being corrected.

Orange strips were stuck together, with cuttings under the chair legs. The smell of glue mingled with the wood of the hoops. Neville had a mark on his cuff; Ron had left scraps on the notebook.

At another table, Malfoy was practicing lifting her lantern. Pansy counted the seconds.

‘Seven.’

‘You started late.’

‘Seven,’ Pansy repeated.

Flitwick came between them and asked them to compare results. Hermione was given the green notebook to copy a set of numbers. Malfoy handed it over after checking the table was dry.

‘I want it back before dinner tomorrow.’

‘You've said that.’

Harry looked at Hermione. He'd never heard her answer Malfoy like that.

Malfoy was still holding the notebook by the edge, her chin up and a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. Her table had fewer scraps than Harry's. She didn't seem to be enjoying herself any more for it.

The professor would finish enchanting the lanterns so they could float by themselves. For now they had to learn to hold up the hoops. Ron managed to lift his, then dropped it when Hermione came over to straighten the paper.

‘Wait until I've finished!’

She took her hands away.

‘I was only going to—’

‘You're always saying you were only going to help.’

Flitwick asked them to do it again in turns. Harry managed to raise the pumpkin hoop. It wobbled over the table and ended up lying beside the inkwell.

Ron caught it before it touched the ink.

‘Doesn't know how to sit down,’ he muttered.

Harry laughed.

Ron handed in a three-line explanation. Hermione said it wasn't enough to write that the first attempt had gone wrong. Harry could see what she wanted: they had to explain what they'd corrected. He could also see Ron's face as she told him again.

‘I understand.’

‘Then write it down.’

Ron picked up the quill and left a drop on the sheet. Hermione brought over a piece of paper to blot it.

He pulled his arm away.

‘Can you let me do something?’

Hermione put the paper aside. She packed her things and left with the green notebook under her arm.

Neville waited for the portrait to close.

‘She was helping you.’

‘I know what she was doing,’ said Ron.

Harry checked his own explanation. He didn't want to argue with Ron; he wanted to finish before training. He added a line and passed it over to show how he'd dealt with his.

When they came back from the pitch, they still had to find a pencil case Ron had left in class. They found Hermione by a window, talking to another girl. Harry raised a hand. She turned to her companion without saying hello.

The glass showed partial reflections of them against the dark courtyard. Harry still had earth from the pitch on his shoes, and his collar felt damp after training. Ron's voice sounded clearly between the corridor walls.

‘At least she won't be checking how we walk now,’ said Ron.

A laugh escaped Harry.

Ron heard and raised his voice a little.

‘Bet she's writing down how many times we breathe. So she can tell us afterwards we did it wrong.’

Hermione turned. The girl with her stopped smiling.

Harry felt as if the laugh had stayed on his face long after he'd finished.

Hermione left without speaking to them. Ron walked on; when Harry said she'd heard him, he quickened his pace.

‘Well, I've been hearing her all day.’

Harry didn't know what to say. He'd wanted her to be quiet too. That didn't help when he remembered the way she'd just looked at them.

On Halloween, the lanterns turned in the corridors. Their pumpkin had been put in the east-wing entrance hall, beside a door to the courtyard. Harry recognized it by the tooth and wanted to show Hermione. She passed with her book open and didn't look up.

Neville came back to the dormitory at midday to fetch her a notebook.

‘She's studying in the small classroom. Says nobody interrupts her there.’

Ron stopped looking for something in his trunk.

‘We don't interrupt her.’

Neville looked at him and put the notebook away without answering.

Harry thought of going down to talk to her. He came up with several things to say that seemed to make matters worse as soon as

he tried them in his head. In the end, he stayed where he was, getting nowhere with his homework.

Malfoy stopped them before dinner.

‘Is Granger with you?’

Ron pointed to the dining hall entrance.

‘We're here.’

‘I asked about her.’

Harry pointed toward the east-wing entrance hall.

‘She's working,’ Ron added.

‘Lucky you. She even does your share.’

Harry straightened up.

‘We've handed ours in.’

‘Well, mine's missing.’

Malfoy went to find the notebook. Pansy called after her to ask how long she'd be.

‘As long as it takes her to give it back.’

Harry went into the dining hall with his stomach tight rather than hungry. Ron sat beside him. For a few moments, they heard only the other pupils talking.

Steam rose from the dishes between the arms of people helping themselves. Near Harry, a knife tapped against a plate and someone asked for a jug to be passed. There was a fold in the tablecloth beside the cutlery.

‘I'm going to talk to Hermione afterwards,’ Harry said.

Ron tore off a piece of bread.

‘Me too.’

Harry left a space for her on the bench, even though he didn't know if she was coming.



CHAPTER 10

Before Dinner



Dracenia

Granger still had the green notebook open.

Dracenia recognized it from the small classroom's doorway. One corner rested on the girl's forearm, and an uncapped inkwell stood much too close to the pages.

There was room for more pupils at the table, but only Granger's end was occupied. Papers lay together at one side, and one chair stood apart from the others. Voices drifted away through the entrance hall toward dinner; in here she could hear the quill scratching.

‘You said before dinner.’

Granger looked up. Her eyes were red.

Dracenia looked at the notebook so she wouldn't stare at her. She didn't want to know what had happened; if she asked, she might have to wait for an explanation.

‘I've finished,’ said Hermione.

She let a line dry before closing it. Dracenia held out her hand.

‘You could've brought it to the dining hall.’

‘I'm not going.’

‘They're going to count everyone.’

Granger gave her a tired look.

‘I'll go to my common room later.’

Dracenia took the notebook and checked the cover. There were no new marks. She felt better at once and decided it was none of her business if Granger wanted to miss dinner.

In the entrance hall, a draft made the pumpkin lantern turn. A side door had been shut; Dracenia pushed the one she always used and discovered a bench beside the wall.

A crash sounded across the corridor.

She turned. A piece of wood broke off a service door. Something gray came through, ducking to fit.

At first she couldn't tell what she was looking at. It seemed like a badly made person, with enormous arms and a head much too small for it. Then she saw the club.

She dropped the notebook.

Dracenia backed away so quickly that she hit the bench. Granger appeared in the classroom doorway.

‘What was—?’

Dracenia raised her wand.

The troll struck the frame it had just come through. The noise filled her ears. She said the first word she remembered, and one end of the bench rose a few centimeters. She let it drop when the creature turned.

She couldn't lift a troll. She couldn't do anything about a club. It was unbearable to have her wand in her hand and not know what to ask it for.

Granger caught her sleeve.

‘To the courtyard.’

‘Don't pull me!’

The girl let go and went to the door. She pulled; it opened barely a handspan. The bench was blocking its path.

Dracenia got behind a desk at one side of the entrance hall. From there she could see her notebook on the floor and the troll between her and the way back to the corridor.

There was dust on her tongue and hair stuck to one cheek.

The smell reached her. She wanted to cover her nose, but didn't dare take a hand off the desk. The creature looked from side to side, sniffing. It didn't seem to have quite found them yet.

Granger put her shoulder against the bench. Dracenia tried to remember whether trolls heard better than they could see. She'd read something in Defense. The page had a blue drawing. She couldn't remember a single word.

‘Help me,’ Granger whispered.

Dracenia took a step. The edge of her shoe brushed a desk leg.

The troll turned.

The club hit the desk and tore off a plank. Dracenia ducked so sharply that she banged a knee on the floor. Granger shouted something. For a moment, all she could see was dust.

She could get out the way the creature had come in if it moved a little closer. The idea came to her whole and clear, almost a relief.

Then she heard footsteps behind the troll.

Potter was pressed against the wall. Weasley was with him.

Dracenia felt relieved before thinking they were a pair of idiots. A teacher hadn't come. They had.

Potter's glasses shone by the wall. He was hunched inside his robes, with Weasley almost on top of him, and for once neither seemed to have an answer ready.

Granger saw them and opened her mouth.

Potter raised a hand.

The troll followed Granger's gaze and turned toward the new arrivals.

Dracenia backed up until she touched the wall. The way out she'd imagined was no longer clear. A shower of dust covered the green notebook and, for the first time since buying it, she stopped looking at it.

CHAPTER 11

A Shadow with Teeth

Harry

Percy had already sent a prefect for Hermione and Malfoy when Harry left the line.

He knew it even as he did it. They'd told someone. There were teachers. The troll was downstairs, and Harry didn't know where to find stairs a creature that size could use.

But Hermione hadn't heard the alarm. Harry had seen Malfoy heading for the east wing, and he couldn't stop picturing the two girls waiting for a dinner nobody was going to serve them.

Ron followed him. They had no time to ask whether it was a good idea before they found the broken door.

Now the club was smashing the desk in front of them, and Harry's back was against his friend's chest.

They ducked together. A plank spun past the window. Harry put a hand down as he got up, and a splinter cut his palm.

Hermione was by the courtyard door.

‘We have to move the bench!’

Ron ran to her. Harry looked at the troll, which was beginning to turn again, and shouted before thinking what he'd do next:

‘Here!’

The creature followed him. Harry pressed against the window and avoided the next blow so narrowly that he felt hot dust against his ear.

He'd drawn it away from the door. He didn't know how to keep it there.

He lit his wand. The light made the troll blink, but also showed it where he was. Harry lowered his arm, terrified.

Malfoy had backed up to the bench. One hand was grazed, and she was looking at the way out to the corridor. Hermione pulled a wooden leg out of the fallen plaster; Ron tugged at the other end.

‘Don't lift it,’ she told him. ‘Roll it!’

A broken lantern fell from between the legs. The pumpkin still had its crooked mouth.

As he turned, Harry shone his wand light on it. An enormous shadow appeared on the wall.

Ron stared over the bench.

‘The hoop. Malfoy, lift the hoop!’

‘I'm—’

‘Harry, put the light behind it.’

The troll looked toward the shadow's mouth. Harry brought his wand closer to the paper and watched it grow across the stone. Ron was right. If they could move it, perhaps the creature would stop following them.

Malfoy tried to lift the pumpkin with her fingers. The paper tore.

‘By the wood,’ Hermione told her.

Dracenia took her hand away. She said the charm and the hoop jumped. It fell back with a small thump that made Harry hold his breath.

The troll growled.

‘Again,’ Harry asked.

She gave him a furious look. He was still beside the window; he had nothing to put between that club and his head.

Malfoy said the words again. The hoop rose off the floor. It shook more than it had in class.

Harry put the light behind it and the shadow climbed the wall. The creature raised an arm toward it. Harry wanted to step back, but if he moved his wand the pumpkin head would disappear.

‘It doesn't need to go any higher,’ he said.

‘I know.’

Malfoy gripped her wand so tightly that her fingers had gone white.

The light reached her forehead and her blonde hair, now gray with dust. Her mouth was pressed shut. Harry couldn't tell whether her arm was shaking or his own light was moving.

The bench turned. Ron left it against the wall and pulled the door open. Hermione went into the courtyard, checked the step and turned to hold the door from outside.

‘This way!’

The club fell on the shadow. Harry flinched. The floor shook; a shower of plaster covered his glasses.

He wanted to wipe them and remembered the cut. He couldn't even see his fingers clearly.

Malfoy's way was clear. She only had to lower her wand and leave. Harry saw her look at the door, then at the distance he still had to cross.

The hoop sank.

Harry moved the light forward to keep it on the paper. Malfoy swallowed and raised it again.

‘Run, Potter.’

Harry took a step beneath the lantern. The shadow moved with him. The troll followed the enormous mouth, furious at something it couldn't catch.

Ron reached him from the door. Harry felt a tug on the sleeve of his good arm and ran the last few steps without looking where the club fell. His friend lost his balance and hit his knee on the step.

‘Now!’ Hermione shouted.

Malfoy dropped the hoop and came out behind Harry. Ron half got up; Hermione let go of the door and it slammed shut.

For a second, the four of them stood breathing the cold air.

Harry's robe collar was full of plaster. It scraped his skin as he breathed, and the courtyard cold reached right through to his shirt.

The first shudder sent them running.

Hermione led them to the covered walkway. Ron limped. Harry had to look at his wand twice to remember why it was still lit.

McGonagall arrived from the other end with Flitwick and another teacher. The prefect was behind them.

‘Beside me!’

Harry obeyed before thinking he'd have to explain how he'd gotten there.

Flitwick moved them behind a column. By the time the door gave way, the teachers were ready. Harry saw a flash, the falling club and the troll collapsing with a crash that traveled up his legs.

Even then, he couldn't put his wand out on the first try.

Pomfrey opened his fingers and Harry discovered how much his palm hurt. Ron's knee was swollen. Hermione held a hand over a scratch on her arm; Malfoy stared at her knuckles with an expression she didn't seem to know how to put into words.

McGonagall listened to the prefect and told them to go to the hospital wing.

‘You'll be examined first. Then we'll talk.’

Harry wanted to say he'd told someone. He remembered Percy sending help and the teachers arriving along the route they'd just left, and shut his mouth.

As he began walking, his legs gave way. Ron came closer without saying anything.

Behind them, Malfoy asked about her notebook.

‘Nobody is going back for anything,’ the professor answered.

She didn't argue.

In the hospital wing there were clean sheets and water in a glass. Harry sat down, still looking at the water. It didn't smell of troll. He could rest his feet without feeling the floor shake.

The sheet rustled beneath his good hand. Between the beds, bedside tables shone in the lamplight. Harry still had dust in his hair; he could see it falling onto the white cloth whenever he lowered his head.

Hermione took the bed opposite. Harry remembered how it had hurt to watch her walk away down the corridor before any of this.

Now he had her pale face in front of him, and hands that still seemed to be holding a door.

‘About yesterday…’ he began.

Hermione looked up.

Harry looked down at his bandage. Escaping together didn't change the fact that he'd laughed.

‘I was an idiot too,’ he said.

Ron put the glass on the table.

‘Yeah,’ he added very quietly. ‘I was worse.’



CHAPTER 12

The Hardest Letter



Dracenia

Potter and Weasley were apologizing for something they'd said the day before. Dracenia heard enough to decide it had nothing to do with her.

Granger made them wait. Then she said:

‘You could've asked me to let you work.’

‘I did,’ Weasley answered.

‘Without shouting.’

He opened his mouth, closed it and nodded.

Pomfrey brought them food before they could argue any further. Weasley pulled his plate closer as soon as the nurse finished putting it down.

Dracenia was hungry too. It was unpleasant to discover: she'd seen a troll, and her stomach seemed to have forgotten before she had.

Trays rested on the sheets, and the room smelled of hot food. Potter's black hair stuck up on one side, and his glasses were low on his nose. The bandage made one hand look much bigger than the other. Granger was still sitting very straight.

Potter put down his fork to settle his bandaged hand. Weasley pointed to part of his own dinner.

‘You can have that.’

‘What is it?’

‘I've asked. That's why I'm not eating it.’

Granger tried it.

‘It's good.’

‘That's what they told me.’

Potter let out a laugh. Granger smiled at her plate and went on eating. Dracenia waited for another argument about what they were supposed to do. There wasn't one.

She cut off a piece of the same thing. It wasn't bad. She wasn't going to announce it and let Granger be right about something else, either.

Then she adjusted the bandage over her knuckles. She'd kept a charm going in front of a troll and needed to rest.

She couldn't sleep.

Whenever she shut her eyes she heard the plank breaking again. When Snape came in for Pomfrey to look at his leg, Dracenia was glad of something else to watch. The professor was limping. McGonagall spoke to him about a closed entrance, but they both moved away before she could make out what was happening.

In the morning, their things were brought back. The green notebook's corner was damp and dark. Dracenia smoothed it with her thumb. The cardboard crumbled a little more.

‘Let it dry,’ Granger told her.

Dracenia took her hand away.

McGonagall listened to what had happened. Potter and Weasley would lose three points each for leaving the evacuation line after alerting someone. Granger and Dracenia wouldn't lose points for being in the classroom before the alarm.

Dracenia waited. Professor Flitwick had said she'd held the hoop well when it was needed most.

There was no reward.

In the common room, Pansy stood up as soon as she saw her.

Open books lay on the armchairs and an abandoned game on a table. The greenish reflection of the lake shifted over the wall. Dracenia could make out the faces looking at her; the bandage stuck out from her uniform cuff.

‘Is it true you lifted the troll?’

Dracenia could have let the story go on for a few seconds more.

‘The lantern. If I lifted the troll, it wouldn't fit through the door.’

Pansy took her hand and let go at once when she saw the bandage.

‘Does it hurt?’

‘Not any more.’

‘Then don't hide it like that.’

Dracenia loosened her fingers. Everyone wanted to know. She began with the charm and let Pansy explain where the courtyard was. She didn't tell them about the moment when she'd thought of leaving alone.

Or how close she'd come to lowering her wand.

The gloves arrived before she'd finished writing home. Narcissa had received the school's notice and sent protection for hands Pomfrey considered almost healed.

Dracenia put on the right one. Her quill slipped. She took it off again.

Her father wanted to know exactly what had happened. He'd underlined *exactly*, as if she regularly invented trolls to ask for more gloves.

'Tell them about the hoop,' Pansy suggested.

'I am.'

'You've been staring at the page since I got here.'

Dracenia turned a little away. She wrote that she'd used Wingardium Leviosa under pressure. It sounded like a class exercise. She crossed it out and began again.

Pansy picked up a glove to look at the stitching. Dracenia took it away before she could put her whole hand in.

The box filled the gap between the two notebooks. The leather was soft and still creased from its journey; beside it, Dracenia's crossed-out sheet looked much more used.

'They're made to measure.'

'I wasn't going to keep it.'

A chess piece knocked against a nearby table. Dracenia pressed her quill into the page. A black drop spread over the word *lantern*.

Pansy looked toward the players.

'I can ask them to keep the noise down.'

'They're not bothering me.'

Dracenia took another sheet. Her hand shook less as she began again.

She said she was well. Granger had borrowed her notebook and she'd gone to collect it. The troll had appeared before she could come back. She'd done the charm needed to get into the courtyard, and the teachers had dealt with the creature.

It didn't say she'd done it alone. Her parents didn't need a list of every word Weasley had shouted.

‘Granger opened the door,’ Pansy pointed out as she read.

‘I didn't write that I opened it.’

Her friend put the glove on the box.

Dracenia finished by asking when they would collect her for Christmas. She added that she was getting much better at Charms. That was true.

She sealed the envelope, pressing until her whole surname appeared in the wax.

The next day in class, Flitwick put another hoop on the table. Dracenia lifted it before looking at Potter. He was watching her, one bandaged hand beside his book.

Window light reflected in one of his lenses. He wasn't laughing or looking to Weasley for a comment.

Dracenia held the hoop until Pansy reached eight.

This time she didn't argue with the number.

On the way down to the dining hall, she met Granger. There was a queue at the door. The girl asked whether she wanted to try bookbinding glue on the corner of her notebook.

Dracenia clutched it to her chest.

‘My mother can buy me another one.’

Granger stopped looking at the cover.

‘Then buy another one.’

She went to sit with Potter and Weasley. Dracenia stood in the doorway a moment, gripping the cover.

Then she caught up with Pansy. She wasn't going to replace the notebook.

CHAPTER 13

The Borrowed Broom

Harry

The first match began badly before the balls were released. Harry's fingers were so stiff around the handle that Fred had to remind him they were still in the changing room.

‘Save something for the broom when you get up there.’

Angelina laughed. Harry loosened his grip a little and looked toward the door. Out there, the whole school was going to watch him try something he hadn't known existed until September.

There were gloves on the bench and a strap poking out from under a team robe. The changing room smelled of damp wood. Harry's glasses were on properly, but he felt one arm press against his temple whenever he clenched his jaw.

Wood went over the instructions. They weren't expecting Harry to score goals or chase every reflection. He had to look for the Snitch, watch his teammates and listen for the whistle.

Harry nodded. He wanted to prove McGonagall hadn't been wrong.

The stands took his breath away as he came out. Ron was waving beside Hermione and Neville. Hagrid looked much taller than the people around him; Harry found him even before making out his beard.

Lee Jordan was commentating from a tower. McGonagall corrected his first remark about Slytherin before Hooch had finished gathering the players.

Higgs, the other Seeker, didn't look nervous. Harry made himself stop watching him.

The air over the pitch cooled the sweat on the back of his neck. Scarves moved above the heads in the stands, and the noise changed as he turned his face from side to side.

The whistle sent them into the air.

For the first few minutes he didn't see a single golden thing. He saw Alicia score and Wood save a shot; he saw a Bludger George knocked away before Harry could move. He began to hear individual shouts instead of a wave of noise.

Higgs feinted toward the hoops. Harry followed him a few meters, noticed he was looking back and braked, furious with himself.

The Nimbus's first jolt seemed to be the result of pulling too hard on the handle. He adjusted his position.

The second knocked one foot out of place.

Harry looked at the twigs. They were shaking. The broom rose without him telling it to and turned when he tried to bring it down.

A whistle blew.

Harry couldn't look for Hooch now: the stadium was tilting beneath his knees. He bent over the handle, gripping it in both hands. Wind struck the back of his neck. For an instant he was almost lying along the broom.

He heard Angelina nearby.

‘Harry. Look at me.’

He found her face at a different height from where he'd expected. She was pointing downward. He tried to obey and the Nimbus shook again.

A wooden clatter came from the stands. Someone shouted. A green flag waved where people had been sitting.

The broom stopped pulling.

It took Harry a second to believe it. He pointed the handle toward the ground. Hooch came alongside and escorted him down to the pitch. When his feet touched the ground, his fingers wouldn't open.

Flitwick took the Nimbus away. Hooch asked questions to check he was all right and examined his hands. Wood waited without hurrying him.

Harry looked at the stands. People were still on their feet.

‘Is it over?’

‘It's been stopped,’ Hooch answered. ‘The game can wait.’

She told him she'd seen nothing in his flying to cause those movements. Harry was glad to hear it, then felt a worse fear at once. If it hadn't been him, what had happened?

They brought a school broom. He recognized the one he'd used in the trials.

‘You don't have to carry on,’ Wood told him.

Harry rested his palms on his knees. They hurt. He'd imagined a bad match in all sorts of ways, but none ended with him sitting while other people decided if he could get up again.

He looked at the worn handle.

‘I want to try.’

Hooch let him fly a short circuit under her supervision. The broom answered slowly, without a single jolt. Harry came back, braked and waited.

The teacher gave permission to restart. The staff stayed near the pitch.

Slytherin were leading ninety to seventy. Lee repeated the score, and Harry was glad of something definite to think about.

The Snitch appeared beside the south stand.

This time he didn't follow the first reflection: he made out the wings before accelerating. Higgs saw him and began closing from above. His broom was faster than the borrowed one.

Harry stayed below. The Snitch dropped near the front rows, and he had to look away to judge the gap between the stand's supports. He couldn't brake the school broom the way he braked the Nimbus.

Higgs was trying to beat him to the Snitch from above. Harry slowed for an instant, let the ball enter the gap and turned toward the exit, where he thought he'd see it again.

Gold appeared beside his hand.

He closed his fingers. A wing struck his wrist. Harry pulled on the handle and came out on the other side of the tower with room to brake.

Higgs was still searching when he saw Harry raise his fist.

The stadium shouted all at once.

Two hundred and twenty to ninety.

Wood hugged the air out of him. Ron arrived pointing at the broom, unable to say anything except, ‘On that one!’ Harry tried to describe the catch and had to start again because everyone was talking at once.

Afterward, Hermione told him what they'd seen in the stands.

Snape had been watching him and moving his lips. She and Ron had tried to interrupt him with a flag; the pole had come loose and struck a seat back. Just then, the broom had stopped shaking.

‘Did you tell McGonagall?’ Harry asked.

Hermione nodded. The professor had asked for exact words and positions. They didn't know all that.

Harry remembered Snape limping after the troll. The closed entrance. The two points for asking a question.

Malfoy heard them mention the professor as she passed with Pansy.

Her scarf was crooked and her uniform bunched beneath her coat. A strand of blonde hair had caught in the wool. Harry was still hot, but she looked like someone who'd spent a long time sitting outdoors.

‘He stood up after your broom started moving.’

Ron turned.

‘He was already talking.’

‘To someone. Then he looked at the pitch.’

Harry was cold even though the match was over.

‘Did you see what he was doing?’

‘I saw what I've just told you.’

Pansy pulled her scarf to get her moving. Malfoy straightened it.

‘You could finish a match without everyone having to watch to see if you fall off.’

‘I did finish,’ said Harry.

She looked at the borrowed broom and couldn't find anything to add before Pansy called again.

Harry went back to Gryffindor with his friends. There, Dean drew the tower and Harry showed him how he'd gone through.

Ron wanted to add the flag. The pencil tip caught in the creases, and he had to rub it out twice. Hermione began reaching over, then left her hand beside the paper.

‘Do you want me to hold it for you?’

Ron looked at her before nodding.

‘But don't straighten it.’

‘The paper?’

‘The flag. That's how it ended up.’

Hermione held the corners. Ron finished the bent pole, looked at his drawing and asked Dean not to make it longer.

The sheet had gray marks where they'd rubbed things out. The four of them crowded around a low table, with their books pushed to one end. Harry could see Ron's shoes beneath the drawing and Hermione's arm holding the paper down.

Harry leaned in to point out where he'd come through. Dean passed him the pencil. He drew the curve so close to the support that Ron asked whether he was describing a catch or explaining how not to do it again.

Harry laughed and drew it again. For a while he could describe the end of the match without feeling the handle fighting his hands.

Later, as he put away the note about the next training session, he looked at his empty hands.

Someone had tried to throw him off.

He didn't want that thought to take over everything else he'd managed to do that day.



CHAPTER 14

The Portrait That Wouldn't Go Back



Dracenia

Pansy had gotten permission to search the portraits in the west corridor for an inventory ribbon someone had painted the wrong color.

Dracenia listened to half of this.

‘Why?’

‘Because I want to see it.’

‘It's a ribbon.’

‘It's a ribbon in three different paintings. Professor Binns said the artist put it wherever he could, even if it had nothing to do with anything.’

Dracenia didn't remember that part of the lesson. Binns had spent too long talking about a dispute between two families with similar surnames.

Pansy had a sheet of paper and a pencil. She hadn't asked for help measuring anything and wasn't trying to win points. Dracenia went with her because it was raining and she wasn't going to spend another afternoon listening to the older pupils explain how Potter had beaten them on an old broom.

Rain darkened the corridor windows. It was colder by the glass. The frames were different sizes, with shoe marks at the foot of the lower ones.

The first ribbon was on a hat. Pansy drew it and pointed to a door in the next painting.

‘The other one must be there.’

Dracenia went closer. A man in a blue coat was eating in front of the door.

‘Move a bit.’

He went on cutting something on his plate.

‘I'm having lunch.’

‘We won't be long.’

‘I wasn't planning to be long either, before you arrived.’

Pansy asked permission so politely that Dracenia could have done just the same, if she'd thought of starting like that. The man turned his plate but didn't get up.

Dracenia saw the end of a green ribbon behind his shoulder.

‘There it is!’

The man looked back over his shoulder.

‘That one's mine.’

He left the painting with the ribbon and his plate. He appeared in the portrait of a girl with a dog; the animal began barking at his food.

Pansy burst out laughing.

Dracenia followed him.

‘You can't take it! We're looking for something.’

‘So am I. Somewhere quiet.’

The man moved into the next frame. Pansy folded her sheet and followed at a distance, still laughing. Dracenia had to hurry to keep her from going alone into a corridor they didn't know.

They found him in a narrow painting, squeezed beside two ladies playing cards. One made him move his plate whenever she needed to lift a card.

‘You'll have less room in there,’ Pansy pointed out.

The man gave her a resentful look.

Dracenia folded her arms. They couldn't waste the whole afternoon because of a stubborn portrait.

‘If you go back, we'll leave.’

Pansy turned to her.

‘I still need to draw it.’

‘Afterwards.’

‘No. That's what we came for.’

Dracenia's ears grew hot. She'd almost reached an agreement, and her own friend was undoing it in front of a painted man.

Pansy took out her pencil.

‘Can I draw it here? You don't have to go back.’

The man nodded at once. Dracenia watched him arrange the ribbon so it showed better, and decided not to suggest anything else.

They found the last ribbon on the collar of a dog who refused to stay still. Pansy drew the same crooked blob three times and finally gave up. She stuck a note beside it saying *the dog wouldn't cooperate*.

Dracenia laughed when she read it.

‘You can't hand that in.’

‘I'm not going to hand it in. It's for me.’

They sat by a window where rain ran down the glass and nobody was talking about Quidditch. Pansy gave her the pencil to finish the collar. Dracenia drew it better, though she couldn't resist adding enormous ears.

‘The dog wasn't like that.’

‘The dog wouldn't cooperate,’ Dracenia repeated.

They laughed so much that a portrait asked them to find somewhere else. Pansy asked where, and he pretended to fall asleep.

Dracenia went back in a good mood. It lasted until she saw Potter coming down the stairs with the blue notebook.

‘Do you still think it was Snape?’ she asked.

Potter stopped.

His tie was slightly crooked and his black hair flattened on one side, as if he'd been resting his head on something. From the step above, his glasses looked tilted. Dracenia didn't understand how he could walk about like that without putting them straight.

‘We don't know.’

‘Weasley did, from what I heard.’

‘Do you know it wasn't?’

Dracenia opened her mouth. She'd seen when Snape stood up, not everything he'd done before. It annoyed her that Potter demanded an impossible answer after she'd explained what she'd seen.

‘I know you like everyone paying attention to you.’

He gripped the notebook.

‘I didn't like what happened with the broom.’

Pansy touched Dracenia's arm. This time she let herself be led away.

In the common room they put the dog drawing in the cuttings box. Dracenia didn't think of apologizing to Potter. She'd started by asking a reasonable enough question.

Pansy stuck the sheet over the Quidditch program.

‘You've covered it,’ Dracenia pointed out.

‘I know what they're called.’

Dracenia rested a finger on the ears she'd drawn. She didn't correct the placement again.

CHAPTER 15

A Scarf and a Door

Harry

Hagrid had three enormous dishes beside a bag of food. Ron stopped asking about Snape as soon as he saw them.

‘Have you got more dogs now?’

‘They're Fluffy's.’

‘All three?’

Hagrid turned toward the dishes. Harry remembered the noise he and Neville had heard behind the forbidden door.

‘The one on the third floor.’

The gamekeeper put the bag on the floor.

‘Keep your voices down.’

Hermione looked at the dishes without touching them. Harry could have fitted his whole hand inside one of the marks around the rim.

‘Are there three dogs?’ Ron asked.

‘One.’

Ron stared at him. Harry watched Hagrid's face and knew the answer before he heard it.

Hermione's feet had stopped moving under the bench.

‘Has it got three heads?’

Hagrid rubbed his beard.

‘I'm looking after him for the headmaster, and you've no business going anywhere near him.’

‘What is he guarding?’

‘That's between Dumbledore and Flamel.’

Hagrid moved the dishes out of the way, stacking them. The metal sounded too loud inside the hut.

Harry waited until he'd put them by the wall.

‘Who's Flamel?’

‘I'm not telling you any more. I've already told you to keep away.’

‘We haven't been,’ Harry said.

‘Good. Keep it that way.’

Harry looked again at the marks on the top dish.

‘Snape hurt his leg the night of the troll.’

Hagrid sat down opposite them.

‘I've heard about the broom already. You don't know what words he said.’

Harry wanted him to make the connection with the leg, the teeth and the blocked entrance too. Hagrid only pushed the bread toward them and asked Ron not to leave crumbs where Fang would look for them.

Harry broke off a piece. He didn't know whether Flamel was someone they ought to have heard of. Hagrid offered no more clues.

They left knowing one more name, without having managed to make Hagrid suspicious of Snape.

Harry had brought the newspaper with the Gringotts story to the library. Hermione wanted to know whether she could get another

copy with more details. Ron was looking for a biography of Dumbledore because he was sure he'd seen his name in a magazine article.

The castle's voices were muffled among the shelves. Harry heard footsteps without seeing who was passing; now and then a sleeve appeared between two rows of books. They sat down in the light from a window.

They didn't find the magazine. They found a list of the headmaster's work and, beside a study of alchemy, the name Nicolas Flamel.

The edge of the cover was soft from use. Harry ran his finger along a loose thread before pulling the book closer to copy the name.

Harry wrote it down before the library closed. Hagrid had collected a package for Hogwarts; a three-headed dog was guarding something for the headmaster and Flamel. Harry drew a line between the two things, though he couldn't yet prove they were connected.

‘I'd have given Fluffy three names,’ Ron said.

Hermione looked at the name they'd just copied.

‘I'll look him up after Christmas.’

Harry nodded. They still didn't know what the dog was guarding. They had a package, a robbery and a name. Together they seemed more than they did separately, but that didn't make them an answer.

Staying at Hogwarts for the holidays, Harry discovered that the castle could be too quiet.

Ron stayed too. His parents were going to see Charlie, and his brothers had plans which, according to him, were best left undisturbed. On the first morning they went down late for breakfast. Conversations came from the far end of an almost empty table; Harry could hear his own knife scraping against the bread.

‘It's easier for Percy to find us now,’ Ron observed.

His brother was close enough to hear, but preferred to carry on reading.

They spent the afternoon making a snowman. Harry wanted to put the head on before the body was firm. When he stepped back, the ball rolled sideways and split on the ground.

Ron looked at it.

‘It doesn't need a head.’

‘What are we making, then?’

His friend took a step back, hands on his hips.

‘Now I don't know.’

Harry started laughing. Fred arrived with George and offered to sort it out. Between the four of them they made a crooked head and a pair of ears that neither twin would admit to having made.

They came back with snow inside their collars. Sir Nicholas found them shaking themselves off by the door and explained that he'd never understood why the living went outside to get cold if they were going to complain about it afterward.

‘You complain too,’ Ron said.

The ghost raised a transparent finger.

‘With more years of experience.’

Harry laughed as he tried to get a lump of snow out of his sleeve. He didn't have to finish the washing or pick up whatever Dudley

had dropped. He left his gloves to dry beside Ron's and turned them over after a while, because they were still wet inside.

On Christmas morning there was a scarf for Harry among the packages. Mrs Weasley had made it. He ran his thumb over the wool before reading the note. One end was a little narrower than the other; he held them together to check, then carefully moved them apart again.

Ron recognized the handwriting from his bed.

‘My mum asked me about you.’

Harry looked at his name on the note. Ron waited a moment, then opened one of his packages and held it out.

‘Here. Before George comes.’

Harry chose a sweet and put the scarf on before he'd finished opening his presents. It brushed his chin. He folded the note and left it on the notebook.

The unsigned package was different: a light piece of fabric, some stitched initials and a card. It had belonged to James Potter.

Harry held it without unfolding it until Ron sat down beside him. When he covered his hand, he couldn't see it any more.

‘Harry.’

Ron's voice had changed so much that he looked up.

They covered themselves together. A foot stuck out, then disappeared as they gathered up the fabric. Ron looked for them in the dormitory mirror and let out a cry.

Harry would have liked to shout too. He stared at the empty space where his father's body ought to have appeared when he wore it.

He went out that night because he wanted to ask questions without all the faces that recognized his name coming with him.

A portrait had told him it remembered red-haired pupils, and that his mother might have been one of them. Harry wasn't expecting to find an important answer. He only wanted someone to look at his face and remember something other than the scar.

The cloak let him cross the corridors, though he had to walk slowly to avoid treading on it. The portrait was asleep when he arrived. Another directed him to a corridor where old paintings were kept.

Harry found a door ajar and went in.

There was covered furniture, frames leaning against the walls and a very tall mirror. Harry saw it before he'd come all the way up to it: there was someone behind him in the glass.

He turned, his heart thumping against his ribs.

Nobody.

He looked again. A red-haired woman was smiling at him over his shoulder. Beside her stood a man with glasses.

Harry backed away until the edge of the cloak brushed his heels. They were both still there.

He took one hand out from under the fabric. The Harry in the mirror did the same. The woman bent a little, as if she wanted to straighten his scarf.

‘Mum?’

The word sounded too loud in the room.

She didn't come out. She didn't answer. But she was looking at him as nobody had ever looked at him before, with such simple happiness that Harry moved closer to the glass without realizing.

He had her eyes. He knew it before he could properly compare them. The man raised his hand, and Harry recognized something of his own awkward way of adjusting his glasses.

‘Dad.’

He rested his fingers on the glass.

It was cold.

He looked behind him once more. The room was still empty. His parents' reflection stayed with him.

Harry sat on the floor so he wouldn't get tired. He told them he had a broom and a friend who played chess much better than he did. The woman smiled; his father seemed to lean down to listen.

He'd spent the whole school year searching for questions. Now he had someone to ask, and no answer could cross the glass.

He stayed until his feet hurt with cold.

Back in the dormitory, Ron sat up with a start.

‘Where were you?’

Harry took off the cloak. His hands were freezing.

‘I saw them.’

Ron moved the blanket aside.

Harry looked at the place on the fabric where the initials were stitched. He wanted to go back that very instant. He wanted to take Ron so he could see, and might think of a way to talk to them that hadn't occurred to Harry.

‘My parents,’ he said.



CHAPTER 16

Christmas Visitors



Dracenia

Narcissa noticed the corner of the notebook before Dracenia had finished unpacking her clothes.

‘We can replace it.’

‘I can still use it.’

Her mother left it on the table. Dracenia expected more questions. Instead she was told where to put her stockings, and a hand pushed her hair off her forehead for a better look.

‘You've grown.’

Dracenia straightened her back. She liked hearing that until they repeated it in front of visitors, as if she'd done it to entertain them.

Here the voices didn't come from every direction. Her mother spoke beside her, and when she fell silent, Dracenia could hear a branch brushing against the window. She didn't have to wait for the others to finish putting their things away before she could close her trunk. She dropped the lid a little harder than necessary.

The house smelled of freshly cut branches and the tea her father drank after lunch. There was a package in her room and another beside the tree. Neither was wrapped in silver paper.

Lucius made her wait until he'd finished reading a report. Dracenia told him about the feather without waiting for him to ask about her marks.

‘I can hold it up much longer now.’

‘How long?’

Dracenia gave him her best time, not her average. Her father seemed satisfied.

Dracenia stayed by the arm of his chair, trying not to start talking again. The tea had left a wet ring on the saucer. Her father moved the spoon aside, laid the report on top of the other papers and looked at her again.

Then he wanted to know why Granger appeared so often in her letters.

‘Because she talks a lot.’

‘So do you,’ Narcissa said from the window.

Lucius gave a faint smile. Dracenia didn't.

‘That's different.’

Her mother called her over to choose a ribbon before the guests arrived. She'd bought two shades of green. Dracenia asked for the dark one, and Narcissa picked it up as if she'd already known the answer.

The adults asked about Hogwarts without always listening to her answers.

A man wanted to know whether Potter enjoyed applause as much as his father had. Dracenia said he enjoyed anything that made a match stop. Lucius gave her a look that stopped her going on with the story about the broom.

Later, a woman asked whether she'd made good friends.

‘Pansy,’ Dracenia replied.

‘The Parkinsons, naturally.’

The woman was already talking to Narcissa. Dracenia was left with her explanation about the portraits, unable even to begin. Pansy hadn't found the ribbons because she came from the right family. She'd gone looking because she wanted to.

Dracenia took another cake. The one in the middle had a sugar star on it, and she managed to get it before a cousin saw.

When Pansy arrived the next day, Dracenia took her into the garden to practice. Lucius checked the brooms and marked out a safe route for them. Dracenia approached the first turn so eager to do it perfectly that she lost height too soon.

Her father didn't correct her position from the ground. He asked her to land and showed her with the handle in his hands.

‘You're trying to turn before you've looked where you're going.’

Dracenia flew the route again. This time she managed it.

When she landed, she looked for Lucius's face.

‘Better,’ he said.

That was enough to make her want to go up again.

Pansy didn't want to practice all afternoon. She preferred to open the games and look through an illustrated book she'd been given.

‘I'm winning,’ Dracenia protested as Pansy put away her broom.

‘We weren't competing.’

‘That's why.’

Pansy pulled a face and carried on toward the house. Dracenia waited a minute before following, so it wouldn't look as if she obeyed the moment she was called.

In her room they found a game with pieces that changed color if you lied while answering questions. Pansy wanted to test whether it could tell a lie from something you remembered wrongly. Dracenia was certain it could.

She lost the first round because she said she'd lifted the lantern on her first attempt.

The piece turned red.

Pansy said nothing. That was worse.

‘The game's asking whether you did it,’ Dracenia said.

‘It asked whether you did it first time.’

Dracenia turned the piece until the red was hidden underneath. Pansy burst out laughing. She ended up laughing too, though she forbade her to choose any more questions about school.

Before Pansy went home, Narcissa found them sitting on the floor, surrounded by pieces. She asked them to tidy up before coming down to dinner.

Dracenia pointed at her friend's pile.

‘She got more out.’

‘Then you'll have to be all the quicker to help her,’ her mother replied.

On the last night of the holidays, Dracenia opened the green notebook. She'd stuck a strip over the damaged corner. The shade didn't match, and the more she tried to hide the repair, the more it seemed to show.

She thought of buying another. She remembered the crossed-out two inches, the numbers that improved afterward and Flitwick's signature beside a difficult exercise.

She didn't want to copy them. She wanted them to be there.

Her mother appeared in the doorway.

‘Have you packed everything?’

Dracenia pointed at the trunk.

‘Just this left.’

Narcissa looked at the repair, but didn't offer another notebook. She kissed her forehead and told her to go to bed.

Dracenia put the garden photograph between the pages. She liked going to Hogwarts; she also liked knowing that when she came home, this room would still be waiting for her.

She fell asleep thinking about the next turn she wanted to learn.

CHAPTER 17

What Ron Saw

Harry

On their second visit, one of those Christmas nights, Ron didn't see James or Lily.

Harry made him move closer to the mirror, then back, then stand exactly where Harry had stood. Ron did as he was told, with a patience that began to wear thin on the third attempt.

'They're not there.'

'Look behind you.'

'I have.'

Harry stood beside him. His parents appeared again, one at each shoulder, and he felt the relief of recognizing them.

Ron frowned.

The cloak reached Harry's shoes. Ron looked small beside the tall frame. Cold seeped up from the floor through Harry's soles; he barely noticed as he went on searching for the faces behind them.

'Why is there a cup?'

Harry looked at him.

'What cup?'

His friend moved a little closer to the glass. His expression had changed. Harry knew that look from the chessboard, when Ron saw a move nobody else had found.

‘I'm with everyone. With my family. They're listening to me.’

Harry waited for him to say what he'd done to make them listen like that.

‘It's for chess,’ Ron added. ‘I think I won it.’

There was no cup in Harry's reflection. He looked back at his parents. His mother was still smiling, as if she couldn't hear what they'd just said.

They returned to the dormitory without quite understanding each other. Ron wanted to try again the next day; so did Harry, but he didn't want to wait for Ron to stop talking about his prize.

He felt ashamed afterward. Ron hadn't asked him to stop talking about his parents.

He made the next visit alone.

In the dining hall he'd said he wasn't hungry. During the day he'd lost a game without noticing how he'd started to lose. Ron had stopped moving the pieces to ask if he was listening.

Harry said he was. Ron put the board away.

Now, in front of the mirror, Harry tried to ask questions that could be answered with a nod or a shake of the head. His father smiled before he'd finished. His mother bent toward him when he wanted her to.

He noticed, and went on asking.

‘Can you hear me?’

The glass didn't change.

‘Sometimes it's harder to leave once you understand,’ said a voice.

Harry turned so quickly that he trod on the edge of the cloak. Dumbledore stood in the doorway. He didn't look like a teacher who'd found an excuse to punish you.

‘The portraits have seen you coming,’ he explained. ‘I was worried you'd been here so long.’

Harry barely moved away from the mirror.

‘Is it them?’

Dumbledore looked at the image over his glasses.

‘They look like what you want to see.’

Harry went back to the glass. His father had a hand on his reflection's shoulder.

‘I couldn't remember their faces.’

‘The mirror can show more than you remember. It doesn't mean they're on the other side.’

Harry swallowed. He hadn't thought of being wrong in a way that could hurt so much.

Dumbledore pulled up a chair. Harry didn't sit down. He was afraid his father would stop looking at him if he looked away.

The chair scraped across the floor, a dry sound Harry heard without taking his eyes off the glass.

‘Erised doesn't show what's happening somewhere else,’ the headmaster explained. ‘It shows what you want most.’

Harry looked at his mother's hands. She held them out before he raised his own.

‘I've told them things.’

Dumbledore waited.

‘About school. About Ron.’

He was embarrassed to have said it. He'd have been embarrassed to stay quiet and leave without asking, too.

‘The glass doesn't carry your words to them,’ the headmaster replied.

Harry curled his fingers against the cloak. His mother was still holding out her hands, as close as before. He wished she'd move differently, look at something he wasn't expecting.

‘Then why can I see them?’

‘Because you want to see them. And you can stay here until you forget the people waiting for you outside.’

Harry lowered his eyes to his shoes. There was dried mud on one. He couldn't remember when he'd gotten it there.

Harry was angry with him. He wanted to ask what Dumbledore could know if his parents weren't here.

He didn't. He only said:

‘Ron saw a cup.’

‘Your friend will have wishes of his own.’

Harry looked at the edge of the cloak. He remembered Ron putting the board away before the game was finished.

‘Will you take it away?’

‘Yes. This door shouldn't have been left open.’

The answer took away the idea of coming back another time, when Dumbledore wasn't there. Harry felt anger, sadness and a relief he didn't want to admit to.

The headmaster didn't ask him to be pleased. He waited while Harry looked for the last time.

His mother was still smiling. Harry raised his hand, though he knew they couldn't see him, and turned toward the door.

Ron was awake when he got back.

‘We could go outside tomorrow,’ Harry said.

His friend took a moment to nod.

‘There's snow.’

Harry put the cloak away. His feet were so cold he struggled to untie his shoes.

Hermione came back after the holidays with the books she'd promised to look for. She asked them to tell her everything about the mirror before showing them what she'd found about Flamel.

She hadn't found a way to bring Harry's parents back. When he asked if alchemy could bring someone back, she looked down at the book and shook her head.

The Philosopher's Stone produced gold and an elixir that could prolong life. It didn't bring back the dead.

Harry let Ron go on asking how much elixir someone very old would need. It took him a while to start listening again.

They'd found a reason for someone to try to rob Gringotts.

The next day, McGonagall put a wooden button on each table. They had to turn it into metal and keep all four holes. Ron examined both sides before raising his wand.

‘At least this one doesn't run.’

Harry managed one silver side. When he turned it over, the other was as brown as before. He tried again; the surface hardened, but the edge was still wood.

On the neighboring tables, buttons made tapping sounds against the wood. Some didn't shine at all; others reflected the window light like Harry's. The test threads lay in pale curves across the tables.

Beside him, Ron made something shiny without a single hole.

‘I could sew round the outside.’

‘Then this would be a sewing class,’ McGonagall replied.

Ron turned the button over. Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing before she'd gone.

Hermione had managed all four holes. When she slid a thread through one, the edge cut it. She stared at the two ends.

‘You'll have to round it off,’ the professor told her.

Neville raised his hand at the table behind them.

‘Mine's got six.’

McGonagall asked him to put it down before another one formed. Harry turned his own until he could see the line between the metal and the wood. This time he knew what to try.

On their way out, Ron was still looking for somewhere to stitch his disk. Hermione showed him the cut thread and advised him not to try it on his robes yet.

Harry put the button away with his class materials.

When classes finished, they went to see Hagrid.

Hagrid couldn't hide his reaction when they asked about Flamel. He took them to sit down and confirmed what they'd already worked out: the object was at Hogwarts. He wasn't going to tell them where, or what other protections it had.

‘And if you think there's danger, tell a teacher,’ he added.

Harry hadn't forgotten the broom. Or Snape. They'd told McGonagall and still didn't know who wanted to throw him off.

On the way back, Hermione asked to see the cloak. They all got underneath it in the empty dormitory; they fitted if they stood close together. Ron complained about an elbow, Harry about a shoe, and Hermione that nobody walked at the same speed.

They came out laughing after a circuit of the beds.

The blanket on the nearest bed was rumpled where they'd rested the fabric. Harry's glasses were crooked, and Ron's robe collar was tucked in. Once they were apart, there was more than enough room between the trunks again.

Harry put it away carefully. He didn't need to use it that night any more.

Ron set the board on a table.

‘Play this time.’

Harry chose a pawn and moved it somewhere it could go.



CHAPTER 18

Both Sides of a Leaf



Dracenia

Longbottom had gone half the lesson without making a mistake.

Dracenia wouldn't have noticed if Snape hadn't asked him to compare two samples. He always seemed to apologize before answering, but now he spoke about stems and edges with a confidence that looked odd on him.

'Finally, a lesson with leaves,' she remarked.

Longbottom went on writing.

Pansy leaned closer to the book to look for the next sample. Dracenia pointed to a drawing, then looked at Potter's table. Snape was showing him a mark on the underside of a flower.

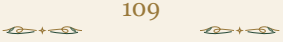
'You'll have to check both sides.'

Potter went red. Dracenia straightened her labels.

There was something especially satisfying about the professor asking him to take a proper look at something right in front of him. Potter had learned to catch a ball, and suddenly everyone seemed to expect him to discover everything else before they did too.

Snape called Longbottom over. The boy took some of his materials and left the rest by the edge of the bench, with the labels underneath.

Dracenia looked at two almost identical leaves.



She could swap them. Longbottom would come back, look for the names and say something wrong. Snape would see that leaving him alone with the samples wasn't so simple.

She reached out.

When Dracenia had finished swapping them, Pansy leaned toward her.

‘You switched them,’ Potter said.

Dracenia picked up her quill.

‘What?’

He pointed to the tray. He was looking at her over his book. Dracenia had forgotten he could see the end of her arm from there.

‘The two leaves.’

Longbottom was coming back. Dracenia searched for an explanation that didn't sound like one.

‘If he can't recognize them, he shouldn't be using them.’

‘He'd already recognized them.’

Longbottom looked at the names, then the leaves. He went red. Dracenia felt a little relief: perhaps he'd change everything back without asking questions.

Potter picked up a leaf.

‘They were the wrong way round.’

‘Leave my tray alone,’ Longbottom told him.

Potter let go at once. Pansy closed the book a little.

Snape came over.

Dracenia explained that she'd moved the leaves aside because they'd been close to her table. Weasley looked at the whole aisle between them.

‘You moved them quite a way.’

The professor silenced him. Then he asked Potter whether he'd seen her do it. He said yes without hesitating.

Dracenia waited for Snape to examine Potter's tray. Instead, he called Longbottom over and asked him about each sample.

Longbottom answered. He didn't look at the book. As he explained the difference between the stems, Dracenia realized he wasn't going to get it wrong.

‘Three points from Slytherin,’ Snape said. ‘And you'll stay behind to put the materials in order.’

Dracenia lowered her quill.

He hadn't asked her to show what she knew. He hadn't asked about the two leaves she'd identified correctly from the start. He took the points away in front of everyone and went back to Potter to remind him that there were still mistakes on his tray.

That last part made nothing better.

Once she was alone, Dracenia had to clean containers other people had left dirty. Grime had gotten under her nails. Snape was marking work. Whenever she finished a row, he pointed to another without looking up.

The cloth snagged on the rims of the containers. When she wet it again, the water left a gray film on her fingers. Dracenia wrung it harder. In the empty classroom, every knock of a jar against the table seemed to last too long. Snape's quill kept scratching.

‘I know which ones they are,’ she said at last.

The professor put down his quill.

‘Then you won't be able to put it down to a mix-up.’

Dracenia looked at the empty jars.

She didn't speak again until she was allowed to leave.

In the common room, Pansy had saved her an armchair. Dracenia preferred the table.

‘He'd have taken more off Potter,’ her friend remarked.

Dracenia opened the notebook.

She wanted that to help. She couldn't stop hearing the benches as everyone left and she had to stay behind picking things up.

She sat without unfolding her robes properly. The fabric pulled beneath her legs, but she wouldn't adjust it while Pansy was waiting. She rubbed a nail against the seam of her sleeve and left her hand under the table.

Pansy opened the Potions book. Dracenia covered the names with a piece of parchment.

‘That's the one you got wrong,’ she pointed out.

‘Yes. I changed it before I handed it in.’

‘Because I told you.’

‘Yes, Dracenia.’

Longbottom had recognized them without looking at the names. She could do the same. If Pansy had seen her working, she could have explained it to Snape.

But that wasn't what the professor had asked.

Dracenia moved the parchment over another pair of samples. She pulled the book closer to the lamp and checked the stems.

Pansy waited before asking for the Charms notebook.

‘Not yet,’ Dracenia said.

Her friend took out her own sheet. Dracenia heard her writing as she went on looking at the drawing.

A while later she lent her the notebook, open at the page she needed. She warned her not to touch the repaired corner.

Pansy didn't touch it.

Dracenia covered another name. She had no intention of giving Potter anything new to point out the next day.

CHAPTER 19

Ninety from Everyone Else

Harry

Neville hadn't wanted Harry touching his tray. The memory stayed with him until Herbology, where he reached out again to adjust a pot for him and stopped in time.

‘Shall I hold it?’

‘Yes. Underneath.’

Harry obeyed. Neville loosened the soil without pulling up the roots and showed him how to hold them.

Then Sprout gathered them around a protected box. Inside was some Devil's Snare that looked like an abandoned tangle. A push with a stick was enough to make it close around the wood.

Harry stepped back.

‘If you pull, it tightens,’ Sprout explained.

She eased the pressure and the plant loosened a little. Neville raised his hand to speak about damp and darkness; the professor removed a cover and applied heat. The stems released the stick.

Ron looked at his own shoes.

‘I'd rather remember not to step on it.’

Harry wrote that down too. Neville laughed, then Sprout called him to help at another table. His friend went without waiting for anyone to go with him.

In February they learned Incendio with a small wick and a snuffer to put it out. Harry managed it on his third attempt. The flame wouldn't have frightened a troll, but it warmed his face enough to remind him why he shouldn't practice beside the scarf.

Flitwick made him put it out before lighting it again. Ron managed it once, then spent ten minutes explaining that the new wick wasn't the same.

The following Saturday, Wood went over the Nimbus with Harry. It had been returned after many tests. Nothing was broken; that didn't prove someone couldn't have interfered with it during the match.

‘Snape's going to watch from the pitch,’ the captain explained.

Harry stopped fastening a glove.

‘Hooch is still refereeing,’ Angelina added.

That didn't reassure him as much as it should have.

Hufflepuff scored first. Harry saw Snape beside the pitch whenever he looked down, and missed a whole move checking that he wasn't moving his mouth.

Katie received a pass, slipped between two opponents and scored. Harry almost flew across her path as he turned to look for the Snitch.

She had to point out the clear space to him.

Harry raised a hand to apologize and decided that if Snape wanted to do something, watching him from twenty meters up wouldn't stop him.

He returned to the game.

The Snitch appeared beneath a yellow sleeve and vanished before he could get close. Harry followed the player without copying his course: he watched the air the player had just left clear. Gold flashed again lower down.

He leaned forward. The Nimbus descended with a smoothness that still brought relief. An opponent blocked his way, and Harry went around rather than trying to squeeze through a gap too small for him.

He brushed a wing. He didn't close his fingers until he could see the ball again.

This time he caught it without flying through a stand.

The score was two hundred and forty to sixty: a hundred and fifty for the Snitch, and ninety his teammates had earned while he stopped watching a teacher.

When he landed, Wood congratulated him, then congratulated the Chasers. Harry stayed to listen. It was pleasant that the team's happiness didn't depend on telling the story of his catch over and over.

Snape passed behind them.

‘It's worth remembering there are other players, Potter.’

Harry squeezed the ball and said nothing. It irritated him that this particular observation was true.

Ron turned twelve at the beginning of March. His mother sent sweets and a letter asking him to share. He'd already handed them around before reading that part.

Fred took one and George another. Percy pointed to the rest of the table.

‘You've got more people to feed.’

Ron closed the box before his brothers found a reason to take a third.

Neville had made a birthday card with a plant drawn on it. Dean added some squares at the bottom. Ron held it by the corners to look at both things.

‘It's not poisonous,’ Neville explained.

‘Good.’

Harry gave him the package he'd ordered by owl. He'd chosen a quill like the one he used in class and paid without needing Hagrid to count the coins. Now he waited while Ron took off the paper.

‘Mine's the same,’ he told him. ‘It writes well.’

Ron opened his mother's letter to find a space at the bottom and wrote his name.

Harry leaned over to look at the letters. The R came out whole, and the quill didn't catch at the start of the o.

‘See?’ Ron said, showing Hermione.

She looked at Harry first.

‘I hadn't said anything.’

‘Just in case.’

Harry laughed. Scabbers came out of the folds of a sleeve, sniffed the card and bit the corner before Neville could move it away.

‘Perfect. He's signed it too.’

Ron rescued the card and passed Neville a sweet. Then he opened the box again for anyone who hadn't had one yet.



They spent the afternoon playing. Lee wanted to organize a tournament in the common room. At first Ron kept watching the game in front of him as he agreed; he looked up when Lee suggested knocking out anyone who lost once.

‘Then some people won't get to play for more than an afternoon.’

Dean stopped moving a pawn.

‘I want to learn before I'm knocked out.’

‘Nobody should be out for losing once,’ Ron said. ‘We can organize it another day.’

Hermione found some paper to make a list. She stopped with her quill over the first line.

‘Shall I write down who's playing who?’

Ron nodded.

‘No comments beside the names.’

‘I have to put whether they won or lost.’

‘Those are allowed.’

Neville lost a game and asked for another. Ron pushed the pieces toward him; Harry, who'd already pulled up a chair, had to wait his turn.

The fireplace was to one side of the group. Whenever someone stood up, Harry saw a patch of fire between the chair backs; when they sat down, they hid it again. They'd brought so many seats together that the conversations in the rest of the room seemed to be happening far away.

He put the box of sweets within everyone's reach and stayed to watch. Neville moved his knight back. Ron opened his mouth, closed it and let him finish the move.

The murmur quieted when Neville reached for a piece. Harry found himself waiting with the others. There was only the small knock against the board; then someone breathed out too loudly and the voices returned.

Harry leaned back in the armchair, Molly's scarf beside his bag and his legs still tired from the match. There were exams, a three-headed dog and someone who could curse brooms.

There was also an afternoon none of them wanted to end.



CHAPTER 20

News That Was Too Good



Dracenia

The program Pansy was making for her box of cuttings didn't include Potter.

Dracenia checked the list twice.

‘He's played both matches.’

‘And there's only room for three names here,’ Pansy replied, smoothing the cutting. ‘He won't fit.’

It was a program of invented matches between impossible teams. Millicent had chosen three guards from portraits; Pansy had a witch from a chocolate card and two relatives who didn't speak to each other. Dracenia had chosen the best Seeker she knew from the magazines.

‘Potter wouldn't even be any good in this lineup,’ she added.

‘Then I don't know why you want to put him in.’

Dracenia pointed to a spot of glue. Pansy wiped it off without letting her change the names.

The table had pencil marks and unusable scraps of paper on it. In the light from the windows, fresh glue shone beside the dry marks. At the far end of the room they were still talking about the next practice sessions.

Dracenia left her Potions book open on the space Pansy had just cleared.

‘We can still go over the samples.’

‘We've finished the homework.’

‘You didn't get them all right.’

Pansy moved the book away from her cuttings. There were two spots of glue on one corner, dry now.

‘I'm doing this now.’

Dracenia held a figure by the edge. If Pansy moved it a little, it wouldn't cover the name of the lineup.

‘Wait. It looks better—’

Her friend held out her hand. She said nothing until she had the figure back.

Dracenia gave it to her.

‘I didn't break it.’

‘I wanted it there.’

Pansy put it back where it had been. Dracenia turned a page of Potions loudly enough for her to hear.

In recent weeks Pansy had preferred staying inside when Dracenia wanted to practice. She'd also stopped studying some afternoons as soon as the homework was finished, even though they could still get ahead. Dracenia used to be able to persuade her a little more.

Millicent appeared with her three guards drawn on a sheet. One guard's spear had a bend just before the edge.

‘Spears aren't like that,’ Dracenia remarked.

‘A straight one wouldn't fit,’ Millicent replied.

Pansy laughed and picked up her program.

‘Let's go and look at yours.’

Dracenia waited for Pansy to look at her. Pansy took the pencil and the figure Dracenia had wanted to move.

She could finish on her own. She thought that quite angrily until she discovered she had nobody to show the mistake she'd just found in an illustration.

The next day, Granger appeared with a book about dragons.

It wasn't a class textbook. Dracenia knew because she'd gone through her own to check how much they still had to learn. The volume had a burn on its spine, and Granger pressed it against her robes whenever anyone came near.

Potter was waiting for her beside Weasley, his bag slung across his robes. His fringe left one end of his scar showing. He didn't look toward the stairs where Dracenia was standing. The three of them went out into the grounds.

Dracenia stopped on the stairs.

She'd seen Hagrid carrying a bag of meat to his hut that morning. She'd also heard him ask Potter to come back later. Perhaps it was only another of their visits. Perhaps reading about boring animals was no longer enough for Granger, so she was reading about dragons.

But the following evening, Hagrid didn't come to dinner.

Dracenia looked at the Gryffindor table. The three were whispering over a letter. Weasley laughed, then stopped when Granger pointed to something written there.

They didn't look like people who'd received a box of sweets.

‘Coming?’ Pansy asked.

Dracenia looked at the way out.

‘I'm going for a walk.’

‘It's raining.’

‘Not much.’

Pansy picked up her bag.

‘I'm not getting wet because Potter's had a letter.’

Dracenia would rather not have heard the obvious. She let her go and waited a few minutes before going out.

There was mud on both sides of the path to Hagrid's. Dracenia walked slowly to avoid spoiling her shoes, and stopped where she could see the side door without approaching the windows.

The rain chilled her forehead and left dark spots on her sleeves. Near the hut it smelled of wet earth and smoke. Her blonde hair was beginning to stick to her neck; from the castle, the rain had seemed much smaller.

She heard a harsh noise. Something struck wood inside the hut. Hagrid spoke in a ridiculously sweet voice for someone who might be dealing with a dragon.

Dracenia stood still.

The door opened to let a container through. For a second she saw a dark membrane, the edge of a wing and a small cloud of smoke.

It wasn't a dog.

She stepped back, and a branch caught her sleeve. She tore it free too hard, making a noise. The door closed.

Dracenia waited until she was sure nobody was coming to look for her.

She could keep the information to herself, watch Potter get into trouble and then announce she'd known from the start.

Or she could tell Snape before Granger took the credit for finding a dragon at Hogwarts too.

She walked up to the castle. There was mud on the hem of her robes and a twig stuck to her arm that she didn't notice as she went in.

For the first time in several weeks, she had news her Head of House couldn't dismiss as a complaint about Potter's broom.

CHAPTER 21

A Small Animal

Harry

Days earlier, the first crack had made Harry put his glass on the floor.

Hagrid held the egg in his hands, resting on a piece of cloth. A dark line spread across the shell. Ron leaned forward; Hermione moved the book closer to the lamp.

'You shouldn't help it yet,' she said, following a sentence with her finger.

Hagrid moved his thumb away from the edge that was beginning to come off. Not touching was harder for him than holding the whole thing still.

The heat of the hut had risen to Harry's face. Lamplight fell across the pages of Hermione's book and Hagrid's knuckles. His hands looked enormous around the egg.

A claw came through the opening. Ron jumped and Harry laughed, until another foot knocked a piece of shell down beside his shoe.

The snout appeared next. It was more wrinkled than he'd expected. The creature opened its mouth, breathed and let out a small cloud of smoke.

The shell was wet inside. Under the lamp, the new legs looked too thin for the claws on their ends. Harry could hear them scratching the cloth.

Harry stared at it, his glass still forgotten by his foot.

‘Norbert,’ Hagrid said.

Hermione looked up from the book.

‘You've named him already?’

The dragon was still getting its tail out.

Hagrid gathered him onto the cloth with a happiness Harry had only seen when they'd talked about the Nimbus. For a moment it seemed impossible that anything bad could come of a creature that had only just discovered its own feet.

Ron laughed when Norbert tried to bite a piece of shell. Hermione came closer to check his breathing. Harry picked up his glass before the tail knocked it over.

None of them wanted to be first to say he couldn't stay.

The cloth was already scorched when they had to say it again. Norbert had grown, taking up the space where they used to sit.

‘He can't stay here,’ Hermione repeated.

Hagrid held on to a pot the dragon was trying to bite.

‘He's not staying forever.’

He'd been saying that for days.

Harry had wanted to believe it too. Hagrid had gotten the egg in exchange for repairing straps for a stranger who didn't know how to look after it. He told the story as if he'd rescued a cat from the rain. Ron pointed out that an egg like that ought to be worth far more than some straps.

Hagrid didn't find the difference strange. The seller was in a hurry, and he'd offered to help.

They wrote to Charlie. His reply made one thing clear: he could find professionals and a place on a reserve, but Hogwarts had to know.

Harry read it to Hagrid. The gamekeeper promised to speak to Dumbledore as soon as he'd collected a few facts.

The facts seemed to grow along with Norbert.

Hermione decided that if Hagrid didn't tell anyone the next day, they would.

‘We'll tell him first,’ Harry insisted.

‘Yes. And then we'll go.’

Ron nodded. He still asked whether Norbert would have enough food when they left that afternoon.

Harry understood. Hagrid had been the first person to come to his house and ask for him. He'd bought Hedwig, answered questions about his parents and saved him a place on a bench. Telling something that could cost Hagrid his job felt worse than getting into trouble himself.

But there was less and less room in the hut for anyone who wasn't the dragon.

When they returned to give him Charlie's final answer, Fang took shelter by the door. Norbert tried to follow him, and his tail swept two tools away.

Hagrid managed to hold the dragon. Fang moved away from the fire, knocking a bucket onto a piece of cloth.

Ron tried to move it before the cloth caught fire.

He let go of the metal with a cry.

Harry saw the red thumb. Then the closed hand, Ron's face and Hermione asking for water in a voice that left no room for argument.

Hagrid shut Norbert in the protected space and turned on the tap. He kept apologizing as they cooled the hand; he wanted to pick something up, put something down, do several things at once.

Harry held Ron's wrist. The dragon struck a board behind them.

‘The hospital wing,’ Hermione said.

This time Hagrid didn't ask them to wait.

Pomfrey applied something cold and made him move his fingers.

‘How did it happen?’

Ron looked at his hand.

‘A hot bucket. At Hagrid's.’

The answer was true. It said almost nothing about what had happened.

Pomfrey asked whether they'd been working with fire. Hermione gripped Charlie's letter inside her bag. Ron looked at Harry.

Harry stepped forward.

Ron's arm rested on a clean cloth. Harry could still feel the heat of the hut in his face, though the air here was cool.

‘There's a dragon.’

The nurse put the lid on the jar before asking him to repeat it.

Harry told her. He felt ashamed explaining how long they'd known it was there, and relieved when he'd finished. Ron didn't

seem angry with him. His hand hurt; that left little room for pretending that keeping quiet was protecting anyone.

Pomfrey sent for McGonagall.

Snape arrived first, with Malfoy.

Harry saw the mud and the twig on her sleeve. He understood where she'd been before she looked at Ron's bandage.

Malfoy's blonde hair was damp beside her ears, and there was a drop of water on the tip of her nose. She held her chin up beside Snape. She looked as if she'd arrived with much more than a twig to show them.

'What have you done?' his friend asked.

'You first.'

'We've already told them,' Hermione said.

Malfoy's face changed slightly. Harry felt a brief, unkind satisfaction at seeing her lose her chance to break the news.

'Before or after you burnt his hand?' she asked him.

'I didn't burn him.'

Hermione stood beside him.

'Well, Harry didn't burn him.'

Malfoy pulled the twig off her sleeve and explained how she'd seen the wing. She hadn't gone into the hut. She didn't know how big the whole dragon was. She had to admit both things when McGonagall arrived and questioned her.

Harry had wanted to hate her for telling. He looked at Ron's thumb and couldn't make it that simple.

They were forbidden to return to the hut without permission. Hagrid would have to explain his decisions, and the professionals would collect Norbert once the transfer was authorized.

They lost ten points each for the days they'd let pass while knowing about the danger. McGonagall distinguished the delay from the confession: telling Pomfrey in the hospital wing had been the right thing to do. That wasn't why she was taking the thirty points. They would also be given a safe task to put things right.

‘Will he be sacked?’ Ron asked.

McGonagall wouldn't promise something she didn't yet know.

Harry waited for her to turn to him with Vernon's look when he found something broken. The professor asked what they could contribute to getting the animal out without anyone being hurt.

Hermione gave her the letter. Ron explained who Charlie was.

Snape listened without letting them off for telling at last. Malfoy seemed to be waiting for congratulations, which she didn't get either.

That night, Harry wrote while Ron dictated a new letter to his brother. His friend's thumb was protected, and he couldn't write properly with the other hand.

They weren't asking to keep a secret any more. They were asking for a place where Norbert could grow.

Before finishing the letter, Harry passed him the sheet. Ron corrected a name and told him to carry on.



CHAPTER 22

What the Sign Said



Dracenia

McGonagall had told her to stay in the castle.

Dracenia hadn't forgotten. She remembered when she saw the cart beside the hut, already looking for somewhere to watch without being seen.

She'd raised the alarm. She had more right to know what was happening than half the people talking about the dragon in Slytherin. She didn't want to come back after dinner and discover Potter had told the story first.

The professionals were checking an enormous crate. Hagrid knelt beside an opening and spoke to Norbert. Dracenia couldn't hear the words, only the tone he'd used on the other side of the door.

The wheels had left two wide ruts in the mud. The wooden crate hid almost all the hut's lower wall, and the adults' gloves stood out against the straps. Dracenia could find only small gaps to look through.

She'd seen part of a wing. Suddenly she wanted to see the rest, to confirm she hadn't exaggerated for the sake of having something important to tell.

She followed the cart's tracks.

A new sign blocked her path. Dracenia read the prohibition, looked at where the adults were and decided to go around one side. She wasn't going to touch the animal. Surely that was what the order was meant to prevent.

The slab over the drain gave way beneath her foot.

She fell on her bottom. Her shoe went into the gap, and her robes caught on a corner. She pulled at her ankle; a sharp pain shot up her leg.

The cart was starting to turn.

Dracenia saw a wheel coming closer. There was room for her, but she didn't know whether there still would be when the cart finished the turn. She tried to stand and pulled again.

‘Wait!’ Potter shouted.

The woman in gloves looked up. A man stopped the cart with his wand.

Potter appeared at the foot of the wall. Granger came behind him, hastily gathering up some fabric so she wouldn't tread on it.

Potter's robes were crooked at the shoulder, and he was frowning behind his glasses. He was looking at her trapped shoe. Dracenia's face felt hot, and the mud beneath her leg was cold.

‘Don't pull,’ he told her.

‘I know.’

Dracenia pulled again. Potter caught her sleeve to stop her falling backward, and she pushed his hand away.

Hagrid arrived before she could argue with him. He knelt, lifted the slab and freed her shoe so easily that it made her feel smaller still.

Norbert struck a panel of the crate.

‘Behind the wall,’ the woman ordered.

Dracenia wanted to say she could walk on her own. She put her foot down and had to let Hagrid hold her elbow.

From there she watched the adults check the crate again. The dragon hadn't escaped. The cart hadn't run over her. Her ankle hurt so much that none of that could comfort her.

McGonagall arrived and looked at all three of them.

‘I was the one who told,’ Dracenia said quickly.

The professor didn't seem impressed.

‘And I told you where to stay.’

Potter didn't smile. Dracenia would have preferred it if he had; at least she'd have had something to say back.

Pomfrey examined and treated the sprain before allowing her to stand. It wasn't serious. Dracenia checked inside her shoe to make sure it hadn't broken.

Twenty points from Slytherin.

McGonagall didn't say it as if it were a negotiation. Potter and Granger lost twenty each for coming out to watch under the cloak after they'd been forbidden to. The professor kept the fabric for the time being.

Dracenia couldn't enjoy that. Her own twenty still filled her whole head.

She was given a safe, supervised task to repair some of the damage to the paths. They would do it when the ground and the weather allowed.

When she returned to the common room, Pansy got up to help.

Dracenia said she didn't need it. Her friend waited without answering until she had to stop by the table.

‘The floor's wet,’ Dracenia explained.

Pansy looked at the dry tiles.

‘Sit down.’

This time she let her pull out a chair.

The older pupils wanted to know how many Gryffindor had lost. Dracenia counted the forty on the path and the earlier thirty for the secret. Seventy altogether. It sounded much better than twenty.

A boy whistled.

‘Potter really is working for us.’

Dracenia smiled. She didn't mention that he'd stopped the cart.

Later, Pansy waited until they were alone to ask why she'd gone past the sign.

There was dried mud beside the sole of Dracenia's shoe. Pansy held the cushion in her hands. A door made a noise on the other side of the dormitory, but nobody came in.

‘You couldn't see from there.’

‘That's probably why they put it there.’

Dracenia raised her chin.

‘You're not my mum.’

Pansy left the cushion she'd gone to get for her on the bed.

‘I know. That's why you can talk to me differently.’

She went out before Dracenia found an answer.

Dracenia sat there with her shoe loose and the cushion in sight. She didn't use it until her back began to hurt.

CHAPTER 23

Seventy

Harry

A pupil lifted his bag off the bench as Harry approached. Not to make room: to put it where Harry was about to sit.

Harry stopped with his plate in his hand.

Ron called from the other end of the table.

‘Here.’

Seventy points didn't take long to say. Harry discovered they could last all through breakfast. Lavender wanted to know if it was true; Seamus asked how they could lose so many in an afternoon, and someone said there was no point winning the next match now.

Hermione sat beside him. She didn't take out a book.

Between their plates was a bowl with a spoon sunk in it and a piece of unfinished bread. Further along, people were still serving themselves breakfast and passing jugs from hand to hand.

Harry would have liked to tell them about the wheel. If he hadn't gone out, he wouldn't have seen Malfoy trapped. They'd managed to stop the cart.

But that wasn't why they'd gone out.

His friend had been right before anything happened.

‘I told you not to go,’ Ron said as soon as they were alone.

‘I know.’

Harry answered too loudly. Ron frowned.

Hermione looked at the bandage.

‘There wasn't a good reason.’

Harry turned toward her. Hearing her say it like that made him wish she'd argue a little more, remember how much they'd wanted to say goodbye. She didn't. She was just as tired of the looks in the dining hall.

They walked without speaking until they found Neville waiting outside the classroom.

‘Why did you go out?’

Harry adjusted his bag.

‘We wanted to see him leave.’

Neville took a second to answer.

‘But he left.’

Harry didn't know what to add.

Neville didn't raise his voice. Saying it was hard enough without having to shout as well.

‘When I make a mistake and lose points, everyone hears about it. You didn't have to lose these.’

Harry felt his neck grow hot. He'd defended Neville against Malfoy, helped him with Trevor and waited for him after class. None of that gave him the right to ask him to be quiet now.

‘You're right.’

Neville didn't seem any happier. He didn't back down to soften it either.

Ron admitted that he'd kept the dragon secret too. Neville listened and said that had been wrong as well.

Then Dean called him, and he went with him to Herbology.

Harry followed. He felt worse than he had before apologizing. Perhaps because this time nobody could tell him he'd done any of it right.

For several days, the common room seemed too small.

Harry sat where he wouldn't have to ask anyone to move a bag. Hermione worked more than usual. Ron could have left them alone to learn their lesson, but he started setting up the chessboard on the table where they finished their homework.

Lee wanted his rematch. Dean had learned how to move the pieces and was willing to lose as long as nobody explained every move. Neville found a way of getting a pawn to listen without raising his voice.

The boards were scattered among closed notebooks and plates of snacks. There was a forgotten scarf on the windowsill; near the fire, two older pupils went on working even when someone protested about a capture.

The tournament would run over several afternoons, up to the end of the school year. On the first, Harry watched Ron directing a rook. His friend didn't need to know who was watching him to play better.

Harry lost to Dean through carelessness. He almost blamed the knight, which had been complaining for several turns. Then he saw Neville smile and accepted the result.

He went to get bread for everyone. When he came back, someone had pulled out a chair beside the table.

He didn't know who. He sat down.

Charlie confirmed that Norbert had arrived safely. Ron took the letter to Hagrid when they found him in the grounds, without breaking the ban on going to the hut.

Hagrid read the note twice.

'He'll have space.'

Harry nodded. He was glad and sad for reasons that got in each other's way less than he'd expected.

Hagrid apologized for making them choose between telling and helping him.

'It wasn't my place to ask that of you.'

Ron showed him that he could move his thumb without protection now. Hermione wanted to know whether the book needed returning. Hagrid had given it to McGonagall, and he still had several jobs to do.

He hadn't lost his post. They hadn't pretended everything was settled because the dragon had gone either.

Harry put the letter from the reserve with the ones Ron wanted to keep.

McGonagall returned the cloak a few days later.

Harry checked the initials before folding it. The professor didn't ask him to promise never to use it again. She reminded him that it belonged to his family, and that a valuable possession could also help him make a bad decision.

Harry put it away without arguing.

The repair work would be done in April, in daylight, with Hagrid and Sprout. They would clean signs at the outer edge of the forest. Ron, Hermione, Malfoy and Harry would work in sight of both adults.

Neville asked whether they needed to borrow gloves.

Harry looked up.

‘Aren't you angry any more?’

His friend looked surprised.

‘I still think you shouldn't have gone.’

Harry nodded.

Neville opened his bag and looked for the pair that fitted him best. Harry took one to try it for size.



CHAPTER 24

By Hand



Dracenia

Dracenia gave Pansy the cushion back before she came looking for it.

‘Thanks.’

Pansy took it. She didn't seem willing to finish the conversation for her.

Dracenia held on to her own sleeve.

‘You didn't have to talk to me like my mum.’

‘I didn't.’

There was an awkward silence.

‘My foot hurt,’ Dracenia said.

Pansy put the cushion on her bed.

‘You could've said that.’

Dracenia thought about explaining that it wasn't so simple, that everyone was looking at her and she'd just lost twenty points. She couldn't find a way to do it that didn't sound like another complaint.

‘Next time, don't keep asking.’

Her friend looked at her.

‘Next time, say it hurts.’

It wasn't a reconciliation Dracenia could describe as winning an argument. That night they played with the colored pieces, and Pansy chose a question about her last flying practice. Dracenia told the truth and won the round.

By April, her ankle no longer hurt. Hooch had let her return to practice before the end of the previous month, and she'd improved her turn in both directions. She told her father about it with drawings, so she wouldn't have to explain the drain again.

His reply asked about the twenty points as well.

Dracenia put the letter face down.

She didn't mind being punished for something that had gone wrong. She minded it going wrong all over again whenever someone remembered.

Pansy announced that she and Millicent had found a portrait where a dog had carried off a different ribbon. Dracenia wanted to go, but she had to finish her Potions work before the task in the grounds.

‘We can wait for you tomorrow,’ Pansy offered.

‘If you want.’

‘If *you* want.’

Dracenia turned the sheet so the ink wouldn't run.

‘Yes.’

Pansy went off with Millicent. Dracenia finished more quickly once she stopped thinking they were abandoning her by doing something without her.

The brushes Hagrid handed out were too big to clean the letters properly.

Dracenia explained this to Sprout.

‘Start with the mud round the edges,’ the professor replied.

‘By hand?’

Weasley had already dipped his in the bucket. Potter was helping Granger spread a cloth on the ground so they wouldn't have to kneel in the water.

There wasn't another one for Dracenia.

She bent over the sign with her robes gathered up. The first words said they mustn't enter. The next said who they should tell. The teachers couldn't possibly have missed how unpleasant it was to clean that particular sign.

There was a layer of mud at the bottom of the bucket. The bristles left wet furrows between the letters, and Dracenia felt the seam of her cuff against her wrist whenever she reached out. Beside her, she could hear another brush working much faster.

‘This sign would've been useful before,’ Weasley said.

Dracenia didn't give him the satisfaction of laughing.

Sprout had checked the area that morning. They weren't going into the forest or following tracks. Hagrid was working a few steps away with a post and a toolbox. It was a damp afternoon, but there was still plenty of light.

Dracenia cleaned an edge and discovered that beneath the mud the letters had a gold finish like the frame of a portrait at home. The ones there didn't need a brush because nobody let them get this dirty.

Potter watched her holding the handle with two fingers.

He had a wet patch on his knee, and his black hair had fallen forward. He was looking at the brush over his glasses, one corner of his mouth raised. Dracenia still had no mud on her robes and wanted to keep them that way.

‘It won't bite.’

‘I didn't say it would.’

‘You're holding it as if it will.’

Dracenia gripped the brush and splashed his sleeve. Only a little. It could have been an accident.

Potter picked up the bucket and moved it away before she could do it again.

Sprout called them to hold the post. Dracenia wanted to correct its angle; the professor checked that Potter had set it straight and left it as it was.

Dracenia went back to concentrating on a mark on her cuff.

She heard a crack among the trees.

When she looked up, she saw something white first, then a leg bending in a way it shouldn't.

The unicorn took another step toward the path.

Dracenia dropped the brush.

CHAPTER 25

Silver in the Grass

Harry

Harry had imagined unicorns as white, still and distant. The one coming toward them had a stained flank and was breathing with an effort he could see from where he stood. It didn't reach the path: it fell among the first trees, at the foot of the low slope beside the path.

Hagrid dropped his tool. Sprout ordered them back beside the sign.

Ron moved the bucket out of the way. Hermione caught his sleeve to make him leave the path clear. Harry let go of the post, and then his scar began to hurt.

He put a hand to his forehead. The stab of pain was so strong that for a moment he couldn't see the animal.

Something moved behind the trees.

Hagrid went forward, but before he could get down to the animal, Sprout raised her wand and the ground shook beneath Harry's feet.

He didn't see where the force came from. He saw earth rising, a root pulling taut and the thick branch beginning to fall on them.

The professor stopped it in mid-air.

‘Stay still!’

Harry had already moved aside. The earth gave way, and he fell a short way down. He hit his knees, caught hold of a root and felt someone collide with his shoulder.

Malfoy had ended up beside him.

There was soil on her cheek and a leaf in her blonde hair. Harry's glasses were crooked; the frame cut across his sight as he looked up.

The branch lay between them and the path. Above it, through the leaves, Harry caught sight of Hermione's hand before it disappeared.

‘Here!’ he shouted.

Hagrid answered, but he couldn't make out the words. His scar burned again.

Malfoy pointed to a gap on the left.

‘That way.’

Harry tried to climb. A black root pulled taut in front of his hand, and the earth crumbled where he put his foot. This wasn't the way Sprout's plant had moved. Something was pushing from the other side.

The professor cast a spell. Some of the wood opened up, but the branch was still threatening to fall toward Ron and Hermione. Harry saw the strain in her arm before losing sight of her behind the leaves again.

A shrill signal sounded above the forest. They'd called for help.

Then he heard a wet sound.

The figure had knelt beside the unicorn.

Harry could make out dark robes, the edge of a hood and a hand that didn't seem to be holding anything. The animal no longer raised its head.

There was silver in the grass.

The figure bent toward the neck, and Harry understood enough to want to stop looking.

Malfoy caught his sleeve. She said nothing. Her fingers were tight in the fabric.

Harry raised his wand.

‘Lumos.’

The light trembled in front of his hand. The figure raised its head. Harry didn't see its face, but he felt it was no longer paying attention to the unicorn.

Pain shot through his forehead. He doubled over, leaving the light too low.

‘Come on,’ Malfoy said.

He tried to turn. One knee gave way.

Dracenia stopped pulling his sleeve and held him near the elbow, bracing her feet to keep him from falling toward the clearing. Harry leaned on her without meaning to. There wasn't room for them to pass one behind the other.

Malfoy's robes were wet against his arm. Harry felt the edge of a root beneath his sole, but couldn't find anywhere to put more weight. The light shook over both their uniforms.

The figure began to rise.

Harry tried to remember another spell. Everything he knew was for things too small. The lit wick, a feather, a button. He kept the light up because he couldn't think of anything better.

Something large crossed the clearing.

He heard hooves before he could make out the legs. Then a torso, an arm pushing aside a branch and a face turned toward the hood.

The figure retreated. A flash struck the earth beside the hooves, but the centaur had already moved.

Harry looked at him, unable to put everything he saw together into one body. His wandlight reached part of the pale hair and a hand stained with bark.

‘This way,’ the centaur said.

Hagrid had managed to make his way through behind him.

Malfoy kept holding Harry until the gamekeeper reached him. Only then did she let go of his elbow.

The figure was gone. The silver still shone between the roots.

Sprout got them out first. She didn't try to question them about what they'd seen as she did it.

Ron had mud up to his knee, and Hermione had lost a hair ribbon. Hagrid led them behind the clean sign, now lying beside the post. The centaur stayed facing the trees until Flitwick and another professor arrived.

Harry could breathe, but his forehead still burned.

The mud was beginning to feel cold inside his shoes. Beyond the post, the leaves were still moving.

‘Did you hurt yourself?’ Hagrid asked.

He pointed to the scar.

Sprout raised a barrier. The centaur came closer once the way was protected.

‘Firenze,’ Hagrid called him.

Harry repeated the name to himself. Malfoy was looking at a silver stain beyond the path.

‘It drank blood,’ Firenze said.

Ron went still.

‘From the unicorn?’

The centaur nodded.

‘It can sustain a fading life. Whoever takes it like that doesn't leave without paying for what they've done.’

Harry looked toward the tree trunks. He thought of Flamel's elixir and someone who couldn't wait to get it.

He didn't ask for a name. Firenze hadn't said he recognized the figure.

When the centaur turned to go back into the forest, Harry thanked him. He looked at Harry for a moment before disappearing among the trees.

Pomfrey took out a splinter and healed his grazes. She checked Malfoy's wrist. This time she hadn't sprained her ankle again.

Harry heard her asking for water behind the screen. She wasn't making fun of anyone. He didn't feel like talking either.

Hermione stayed nearby until she was told to go and change out of her damp clothes.

‘I heard you,’ Harry told her before she left.

She looked up.

‘I couldn't get through.’

‘I know.’

Ron took away the tools Hagrid had collected. Harry looked at the finger marks on his sleeve, then at the door, where his friends were leaving together.

The next day they had to tell what they remembered. They hadn't been sent to hunt creatures. They'd been where they were supposed to be, and the danger had come from the forest.

When Dumbledore asked him about the scar afterward, Harry dared to say the name.

‘Could it have been Voldemort?’

The headmaster didn't promise him it couldn't.

‘It's a possibility. We don't know who was under the hood.’

Harry gripped the edge of the chair. He'd wanted an answer that would help him sleep better.

Dumbledore asked him to report it if the pain came back. Then he listened to what Harry knew about the Stone without making him pretend he hadn't found anything out.

‘I don't know who it is,’ Harry admitted at last.

He returned to the dormitory with that sentence and a name he could no longer separate from the memory of the silver.



CHAPTER 26

What No One Had Seen



Dracenia

Dracenia corrected Potter's drawing in front of the teachers.

Firenze had come into the clearing from the other side. It mattered. If they were going to ask so many questions about a branch, they could put the centaur who'd gotten them out in the right place.

Snape listened with his arms folded. Dracenia had chosen the chair nearest him when she came in. She didn't want Sprout to think she was hiding, but she couldn't find another chair she liked better either.

The drawing lay in the middle of the table. Dracenia's wrist brushed the edge each time she pointed to something, and the back of the chair felt cold through her uniform. Potter sat opposite, his mouth set.

She told them about the hood, the blood and the ground moving. She hadn't heard a voice. She hadn't seen a face.

She said it twice, and no one demanded that she invent a third answer.

When they finished, she learned that the repair work had been canceled for them. The adults would put up the signs. No one asked why she hadn't left the clearing sooner, and it took Dracenia until that night to realize they didn't blame her.



In Slytherin, someone said she'd cried.

Dracenia looked up so quickly that Pansy stopped going through her notes.

‘Who told you?’

The boy pointed vaguely toward the door. He hadn't seen anything; someone had heard that someone else had said it.

Dracenia stopped listening. Potter had been there. Granger too, but behind the branch. Weasley couldn't see her properly.

She waited two days to find Potter without his friends beside him.

She caught up with him near the library.

‘It wasn't how they said it was.’

He stopped, a ruler sticking out of his bag.

His uniform was clean, but his black hair still pointed in several directions.

‘What wasn't?’

‘They say I cried.’

Potter didn't smile. Dracenia had prepared an answer for that, and had to leave it unused.

‘I didn't say that.’

‘Someone did.’

‘I don't know who.’

Dracenia shifted the notebook to her other arm. The repaired bit brushed her fingers. She'd come with an accusation and found she had nothing to point to.

‘You didn't get us out,’ she said.

Potter looked down the corridor.

‘I know.’

‘The centaur would've come anyway.’

He didn't argue with that either. Dracenia was beginning to wish he'd say something irritating.

‘You held me up when I was going to fall,’ he said at last.

Dracenia straightened her back.

‘You were in my way.’

Potter nodded once. He didn't seem to believe her, but he didn't try to prove it.

She left before the conversation could get any worse.

Pansy didn't ask whether she'd cried. She showed her the latest ribbon she'd found in a portrait and left the drawing on the bed.

Dracenia examined it.

‘The dog's come back.’

‘The man hasn't. He's still eating at the ladies' house.’

Dracenia gave a brief laugh. It felt good to laugh at something that couldn't break a branch or appear behind the trees.

That night she wrote to her mother. She explained that her wrist was fine, that Sprout had said they hadn't disobeyed, and that she wasn't going to waste any more time on rumors.

She wanted to add a question about unicorns. She stared at the word before crossing it out.

Narcissa replied with a long letter. Lucius had added that he would speak to the school. Dracenia folded the paper carefully; she

liked her father being able to demand answers she didn't know how to ask for.

She didn't stop going out into the grounds. At her first flying practice, it took an effort to wait for a shadow among the trees to disappear. Then she took off and found the course where she'd left it.

On one circuit she went around the wrong side. Hooch made her do it again.

Dracenia complained that the wind kept changing.

‘It does for everyone else too,’ said the teacher.

When she landed, Pansy offered her a sweet. Dracenia took two, then gave one back after Pansy looked at her.

They walked on toward the castle, talking about exams. Dracenia asked about Slytherin's next match before Pansy had finished telling her about Millicent.

CHAPTER 27

The Price of an Egg

Harry

In the Transfiguration exam, one of the button's holes stayed smaller than the others.

Harry looked at it, not daring to try to fix it. It was completely metal, didn't break when he touched it, and he could still pass a thread through. McGonagall took it with an expression that gave away nothing about his mark.

In Potions, Harry turned each sample over before choosing. Across the aisle, Malfoy was reading all the instructions. Neither of them had a notebook on the table.

Malfoy's lips were pressed together, her face very close to the sheet. The only sounds from the tables were quills and containers being moved. Harry could feel his uniform sticking between his shoulder blades.

The Defense test ended with a question about how to get out of a dangerous place. Harry chose the clear exit. Quirrell collected his sheet and thanked him for his work in a tired voice.

Harry emerged into a sunny afternoon that, for the first time in weeks, he didn't have to split between assignments.

Ron wanted something to eat before looking at another book. Hermione agreed, after warning them that they couldn't know how they'd done yet. Neville went to check on a plant with Sprout.

Harry wanted to take Hagrid their news. They'd arranged to see him after the last test. There was room to sit down in the hut again, and Norbert was growing up somewhere they didn't have to ask him to hide under a table.

Hagrid showed them another note from the reserve. He smiled as he read how much Norbert was eating.

The report about the egg still lay open beside a strap.

Hermione saw it as she moved a glass aside.

‘Is there still more to do?’

‘I'm finishing it. They want to know what he asked me, apart from the work.’

Hagrid looked at the page and stopped searching for Charlie's note.

‘I thought he was talking about straps. Now I'm putting it all together…’

Ron looked up.

‘What was he talking about?’

‘Dogs. Big ones. How to make them stay still without hurting them. Said he had a harness for one with more than one head.’

Hermione put down the glass.

‘Did he ask you about Fluffy?’

Hagrid sat down.

‘He didn't say his name.’

Harry looked at the three round marks the bowls had left on the floor. He remembered what Ron had said about the egg's value.

‘Did you tell him how to calm him down?’

Hagrid rubbed his beard.

‘Music. Sends him to sleep. Told him there was no need to hit him.’

Fang was scratching himself by the door. Harry could hear each little tap of his paw against the boards.

‘The egg wasn't for fixing the straps,’ he said. ‘He said he didn't know how to look after it so you'd explain. Then he got you talking about the dog.’

Hagrid looked at the sheet as though someone had just written a different story over it.

Hermione stood up.

‘We have to tell someone.’

Hagrid was already looking for his coat.

McGonagall listened without interrupting. When they reached the part about the music, she put down the pile of exams and took out her wand.

Harry felt relieved. He didn't have to convince her it was serious.

The teacher told Hagrid to stay in the entrance hall while she checked the way in and alerted the staff. Dumbledore had left at the Ministry's request, but they would try to bring him back.

‘We aren't going to wait before we act,’ she added when she saw Harry's face. ‘You three, back to your common room.’

She went with them as far as the stairs. Hagrid stayed below, the report folded in his enormous hands.

Harry followed his friends. His pulse was still racing, but the teacher was on her way to the corridor and knew what to do.

When they reached the third-floor landing, they heard music.

Ron stopped first.

The chain no longer closed off the north corridor. A door had been left open; something metal, torn from its place, shone on the floor.

‘It'll be McGonagall,’ said Ron.

Harry wanted to believe it. He went just close enough to look from the doorway.

There were no teachers. An enormous body lay asleep near a trapdoor. The tune coming from the harp was losing notes; one of Fluffy's heads moved when a string failed.

Harry stepped back.

‘We have to tell someone again,’ said Hermione.

They went to find a prefect. They told him where it was, about the music and the open door. Hermione wrote a note so none of the details would be lost.

The boy left by the staff staircase. They waited.

The afternoon light reached some of the steps and left the others dark. Harry had an ink stain on his finger, and he could feel his pulse in the hand holding his bag. Every voice from below made him look toward the landing.

Harry counted the footsteps he heard in the corridors. None ended where he wanted them to. The memory of the forest mingled with the notes he could no longer hear from there.

If that man needed blood to stay alive, he wasn't going to stop looking for the Stone. He'd found a way to put the dog to sleep. Perhaps he was already down there.

‘We don't know who it is,’ said Hermione.

‘I know.’

‘Or what's behind there.’

Harry looked at the stairs. He wanted McGonagall to appear so he could go back to the dormitory and discover he'd been frightened over nothing.

When Harry looked at the clock again, ten minutes had passed.

Ron slipped his bag off one shoulder.

‘Let's go and look for her again.’

Harry didn't move.

He thought of his parents, of the name Hagrid had said without hiding it, and of the forest where that name had come to seem possible again.

He was afraid. Of more than going down.

‘I'm going to the third floor,’ he said.

Hermione tightened her grip on the note she still had.

‘And what are you going to do if you find him?’

Harry looked at her. He didn't know.



CHAPTER 28

Before Potter

Dracenia

Snape wasn't in his office.

Dracenia had gone to ask about a comment on her exam. She wasn't trying to change her mark, which she didn't know yet, but to make it clear that she'd recognized the ingredient even if the cut didn't look exactly like the drawing.

An older pupil found her waiting.

‘I saw him with McGonagall. He left a while ago.’

Dracenia asked him which way. The boy couldn't remember, and carried on walking without offering a better solution.

Then she saw Potter, Granger and Weasley by the stairs. They had a rope and a water bottle.

Potter's jaw was tight, his robes pulled taut where the strap crossed them. His glasses had slipped a little low and he was staring at the steps above.

‘What are you going to tie up this time?’

Potter didn't stop. Granger did.

‘If you see Snape, tell him the door in the north corridor is open. There's music. We've already told someone.’

Dracenia looked at the rope again.

‘Then someone must be sorting it out already.’

Potter turned.

‘Tell him anyway.’

He didn't have the expression he wore when he wanted to win an argument with her. That irritated her almost as much as the rope.

‘What's in there?’

‘We don't know everything,’ Granger replied.

Weasley moved toward the steps.

Dracenia could let them go. If they lost another seventy points, all the better for Slytherin. If they found something interesting, they certainly wouldn't get through an afternoon without announcing it.

She looked at the corridor the older pupils had been avoiding since September. She thought of a door opening before a wing came out, and the sound of the forest when she couldn't see what was coming toward them.

‘This time I'm going to tell him where you've gone before you have to explain it,’ she announced.

Granger nodded.

That wasn't what Dracenia had meant to achieve.

She let them go up and went in the opposite direction.

She found Pansy in the entrance hall with Millicent. Dracenia asked Pansy whether she'd seen Snape.

‘About the exam again?’

‘No.’

Pansy stopped smiling.

Dracenia explained about the door, the music and the rope. She didn't know what was behind it. She wasn't going to look. She repeated that when Pansy asked whether she should come with her.

Millicent pointed to a staircase.

'A teacher went down there. I didn't see who.'

Dracenia went toward it, annoyed at every second she was losing without knowing where to look. She knocked on a door in the staff corridor. No one answered. At the next, a voice told her to wait.

It was Snape.

He came out with his wand in his hand before she'd finished saying *north corridor*.

He made her repeat where she'd seen the three of them and who had received the earlier warning. Dracenia told him what she knew. When she had to admit she didn't know the prefect's name, she expected a telling-off.

The teacher called to another adult passing on the stairs.

'Take Malfoy to her prefect. Everyone is to stay in their common rooms.'

Dracenia took a step forward.

'I can show you…'

'I know where the door is.'

He left before she could find another reason to follow him.

Pansy was waiting where they'd been told to gather. Dracenia sat beside her, and it took her a while to realize she was still holding her exam parchment.

She spread it over her knees. The ingredient she wanted to discuss had become very small among all the other words.

On the other tables, homework lay half put away. The pupils were talking close together, although the prefect was in sight. The tip of Dracenia's parchment had bent against her skirt and wouldn't lie flat.

‘What did he say?’ Pansy asked.

‘That we're to stay here.’

She didn't want to invent anything more important. Her friend looked at her for a moment, then made room for her to rest her arm.

Dracenia waited. For once, she didn't feel like being the first to tell everyone what Potter was doing.

CHAPTER 29

What Neville Wouldn't Promise

Harry

Before they met Malfoy on the stairs, Neville had found them getting the rope ready.

Harry had spent several minutes trying not to think about what Hermione had said. They could go and look for McGonagall again. They ought to. He still couldn't get the thought of the Stone leaving the castle out of his head while they searched for another door to knock on.

Ron had decided to go with him. Hermione didn't think having three of them made the idea sensible, but she didn't want them going down without someone who thought about coming back.

Then Neville placed himself in front of the dormitory door.

One loop of rope lay on the blanket and another hung toward the floor. Harry's trunk was still open. Neville stood in the doorway with his feet apart, his bag still in his hand. Harry couldn't remember ever seeing him so still.

‘Not again.’

Harry stopped folding the cloak. All three of them fitted if they moved slowly, but they weren't going to move slowly or agree on what to do under the cloth in the middle of a staircase. He left it in his trunk.

‘Something's open that ought to be shut,’ he explained.

Neville looked at the rope.

‘Tell a teacher.’

‘We already have.’

‘Then wait for them.’

Harry had first met Neville clutching a box with a toad in it. He'd seen him look down when someone mocked him. Now he wouldn't move aside, though his fingers trembled beside his bag.

‘I'm going to the third-floor corridor,’ Harry said. ‘If you find McGonagall…’

‘I'm going to look for her.’

Harry looked up.

‘Not because you're asking me to,’ Neville added. ‘Because I don't think you should go down.’

Hermione gave him a note with their names and the place. Neville took it without promising them silence or an apology afterward.

Harry left the way clear for him. He was glad Neville was going to tell someone, and hurt that he wouldn't understand. He wasn't sure there was anything more to understand.

After that they'd gone on up the stairs. Harry hadn't stopped to explain what he knew about the Stone to Malfoy, even when Hermione asked her to tell Snape.

Harry went on toward the music.

Fluffy filled a part of the room that seemed far too big for a dog's body. One head breathed against the floor; another rested on a paw. The third moved when the harp lost a note.

The air smelled of a cooped-up animal and wood. Each breath could be heard beneath the music. Harry could see the claws against the stone and the narrow space left beside the edge of the trapdoor.

Hermione caught hold of his robes.

Harry looked at the trapdoor. There was a ladder, not a hole to jump into without knowing what lay below. A cut piece of rope hung from the first rung.

Another harp string failed.

Ron began to hum.

The moving head lowered its muzzle again. Ron kept going, barely opening his mouth. Harry recognized a simple song, the sort that could be sung over and over without getting tired of it.

‘My mum,’ his friend murmured between two notes.

Hermione went down first to the visible landing. Harry followed, and Ron came after him without stopping his song. The music grew fainter as they left it above them.

When they reached the floor, Harry heard a harp string fall.

The plant pot was broken. Among the pieces lay a black furrow and a tangle of stems that seemed to have spilled across their path.

Ron stepped on one. The plant gripped his ankle before he could lift his shoe.

Harry pulled at him and felt another stem closing around his own boot.

‘Don't pull,’ said Hermione.

Harry remembered Sprout's box. He relaxed his leg, though his whole body wanted to pull. Ron let go of the water bottle's strap so it wouldn't ride up toward his neck as he crouched.

Harry lit his wand. The plant moved, but didn't let him go.

Hermione looked at the light, then the stems.

‘It was heat. Not just light.’

She picked up a dry piece of wood, keeping her hands away from the plant. The first spell came out shakily. On the second, a small flame caught at the end.

Harry made himself keep his foot still. The heat came closer; the stems loosened enough for him to get it out without pulling his boot off.

Ron came out behind him. Hermione moved the wood away, and all three put out the embers before going on.

A deep noise came from above.

Fluffy was waking up.

The next door was metal. School brooms leaned beside the entrance, and a swarm of keys wheeled near the ceiling.

Harry recognized the movement of the wings before he understood what they were carrying. For a second, he thought someone had set everything up for a strange lesson and left it there. Then he saw the marks on the door and the crooked lock plate.

Someone had come through with much less patience.

The wings filled the upper part of the room with a dry buzzing. The keys flashed now and then as they turned; below were the

brooms with their scuffed handles and the door with its bent metal. Harry felt cool air as he raised his face.

Ron took a broom and examined it. Harry chose another.

The first key he chased had a bent wing. It looked like the one someone else might have used before. He reached it, took two blows to his fingers, and had to bring it to the floor because it wouldn't stop twisting.

Hermione held it by its body, keeping the wings aside.

‘Not this one.’

‘It's broken,’ said Harry.

‘There are others that are broken. Look at the hole.’

The plate had shifted when someone forced the edge. Harry had been looking for a key the size of that cover; behind it was a narrow, much smaller lock.

Hermione moved the plate without pulling it off completely.

‘Smaller, Harry. One that'll fit in there.’

Ron sent the big key back into the air.

Harry went up again, looking at the metal bodies this time, not just the wings. Ron stayed lower to stop the small ones dropping into a corner. Hermione watched from the floor and shouted to them when she saw one shaped like the exposed keyhole.

Harry followed it. He waited for it to stop circling the others and cut it off from below, making use of the broom's slow response as he'd learned to in the match.

He caught it in one hand. The metal scraped his palm.

Hermione took it and tried it without forcing it. The door opened.

Harry wanted to leave it in the lock to save time.

‘We can use it to get back,’ she said.

She put it away before following them.

On the other side came the sound of stone scraping.

Ron looked up.

‘Chess.’

CHAPTER 30

The Missing Move

Harry

Ron took less time to understand the room than Harry took to count the pieces.

There were three stations at the edge of the board, each marked with a chess piece. They didn't need to stand on the squares. The stone pieces waited in front of them, with weapons and cracks Harry wished had been painted on.

The white rook had a broken corner. The station that controlled it was damaged too.

The pieces' faces were higher than Harry's head. There was white dust in the cracks and fragments beside the edge of the board.

Hermione crouched to examine it.

‘Someone's burnt this.’

Harry looked back toward the Devil's Snare they'd just left. The intruder hadn't come through without trouble. That ought to have reassured him. It didn't.

Ron's eyes moved over the squares.

‘The knight covers here. The bishop, over there. I'll take the rook.’

‘Why can't I take it?’ Harry asked.

‘Because you have to see the diagonal from that side.’

His friend sounded the way he did in the common room when he stopped listening to what people around him were saying. Harry looked at the broken station again.

Ron hadn't touched it yet. They could turn back.

The far door was still shut. Behind them, above the ladder and the keys, an enormous dog was beginning to wake.

Harry took his place at the knight's station.

Light wrapped around his fingers as soon as he put his hand down. Ron moved a pawn and black replied. Hermione took the bishop; lines of light joined the three stations, and the entrance door closed until the game was over.

Ron stopped talking for a moment.

‘That would've been good to know,’ he said.

Harry tried to lift his hand. The light tightened without hurting. He couldn't pull it away.

The first capture made him forget his fingers. A black piece struck a pawn and knocked it onto its back. The sound ran up his arm.

The pieces had been designed for playing. Someone had left several broken and a burn on Ron's control. Harry had no way of knowing which parts still worked as they had before.

His friend was looking at the board, not the damage.

He asked Hermione to move the bishop and Harry to keep the knight where it was, even though it looked exposed. Black advanced.

Ron let them take a pawn. Then another.

Harry wanted to protest and bit his tongue. He'd lost to Ron often enough to recognize the difference between a bad move and one he didn't understand.

Hermione pointed along a diagonal.

‘If I move here, I cover the king's escape.’

Ron nodded without looking at her.

‘But wait. The rook has to come over first.’

The broken station crackled.

Ron flinched. Harry saw a spark on the metal edge.

‘Did it get you?’

His friend flexed two fingers.

‘A sting.’

Hermione tried to let go. The light wouldn't let her.

Ron changed his rook's position and the black one responded. The far door seemed as distant as when they'd come in.

Ron found another move. He studied it, looked at the station beneath his hand, then went back to the king.

‘It's not enough,’ he said.

Harry realized he wasn't asking them for an idea. He was saying goodbye to the alternative he'd have preferred himself.

The white rook had to offer itself up to open the way for the knight. Hermione would cover the square the king would try to escape through. Harry would finish the attack.

Ron pointed to the three positions. He explained it slowly so they could do it without him.

Harry looked at the burn.

‘It's going to get you again.’

Ron swallowed.

‘Yes.’

Hermione opened her mouth, looked back at the door, and could think of nothing to suggest.

His friend gave the order to move the rook.

The black piece hurled itself at it. The blow split the stone, and a blue spark leapt from the broken station to Ron's wrist. His body was flung backward.

Harry shouted his name.

Ron fell near the entrance. His hand was no longer on the control. His chest was moving, but he didn't sit up.

Hermione pulled at her own arm.

‘Let me go!’

The light shone more brightly.

Harry looked at the knight. He remembered the square, the diagonal, Ron's voice asking them to wait one more turn.

‘The bishop,’ he said.

Hermione turned toward him. Her eyes were full of angry tears.

Harry pointed to the place. She gave the order. Black's reply left the king exactly where Ron had foreseen.

Harry moved the knight.

The king turned its head, searched for a way out, and dropped its weapon. The lights went out.

They both ran to Ron.

Hermione moved his sleeve away from his face. Harry knelt on the other side and called him until he saw his eyelids move.

‘Did we win?’ Ron murmured.

Hermione gave a laugh that broke halfway through.

‘Yes.’

Harry brought the water bottle closer. He didn't make him drink. Ron's wrist was red, and his shoulder hurt when he tried to sit up.

There was dust in his red hair, and one sleeve was covered in white specks. Harry could see his friend's chest rising and falling from very close by; the stone was still cold beneath his own knees.

The far door was open. Through it they could see a short passage and another door ajar. Harry could make out light on the floor of the last room.

Harry felt relief, and was ashamed of it at once.

Hermione folded her robe and put it under Ron's shoulder.

‘He can't keep running,’ she said.

Harry knew. He also knew they'd gotten this far because he hadn't been willing to wait.

‘I'll go and look.’

It didn't sound the way he'd imagined an important decision would sound. It sounded like an excuse to get up before saying sorry.

Ron looked at him.

‘We'll catch up with you.’

Hermione took out the key. She'd seen the way and knew which parts had been tampered with. The teachers would need to know that before putting another hand on a broken control.

Harry stood up. From the doorway, he checked that Ron was still moving the fingers of his unhurt hand.

‘If you can get out, get out,’ Hermione told him. ‘You don't have to stay to do something else.’

Harry nodded. He didn't promise he'd know when enough was enough.

He stepped into the passage with his wand in his hand.



CHAPTER 31

The Teacher Who Listened to Him



Harry

Quirrell stood in front of the mirror.

Harry stopped so suddenly that the door brushed his shoulder. For a moment he felt relieved. A teacher had arrived first. He could tell him about Ron, the board, what had been broken on the way through.

‘My friend's...’

Quirrell turned. He looked at Harry's wand and lifted it with a movement of his own wand. The wood flew out of the boy's fingers before he understood what was happening.

It fell near the wall.

Harry backed toward the door. It closed behind him.

Quirrell looked at the mirror again, annoyed by an interruption that didn't seem to worry him.

‘I thought you'd take longer.’

Harry recognized his voice. It was hard to find in it the teacher who'd waited while he searched for a page, who'd let him repeat an exercise without taking away points.

‘Where's Snape?’

Quirrell gave a short laugh.

‘Asking questions, I imagine.’

Harry looked at the door.

‘You…’

The teacher came closer. Speaking no longer seemed to take so much effort.

‘Your broom wasn't broken, Potter.’

Harry felt as if there wasn't room inside his chest.

The flag. Snape watching from the stands. Malfoy saying he'd stood up afterward. Quirrell had been there too.

‘You tried to throw me off.’

‘And your friends interrupted more than one person when they started moving that pole about.’

Harry looked away from his fallen wand. Quirrell had noticed.

The mirror was a few steps away. There was no covered furniture or dust around it. Its frame shone with a light that seemed far too calm for what was happening.

Harry could see himself between the frame and the teacher's shoulder: black hair stuck down in places, crooked glasses, and robes stained from the earlier rooms. The clear floor left his fallen wand in full view.

Harry wanted his parents to appear as they had that night. He wanted someone to be behind him.

There was only a closed door.

The voice came from somewhere a voice couldn't come from.

Harry looked at the teacher, then at the turban. Quirrell put his hands to the cloth and began unwinding it.

Harry didn't move. The air getting into his lungs had dwindled. It wasn't enough.

When the teacher turned, a face appeared on the back of his head.

The scar burned.

Harry knew the name before he heard it. Hagrid had said it in the garden, his hat between his hands.

Voldemort was looking at him from a teacher's body.

‘Bring him to the mirror.’

Quirrell caught him by the robes and brought him to the frame. Harry stumbled, put a hand on the edge, and saw his reflection lift its head.

His parents weren't behind him.

Quirrell was staring at the glass as if he could force it to hand something over. Harry understood that he hadn't managed to get the Stone out. He'd gotten past the dog, the keys and the board without being able to finish what he'd come to do.

‘What do you see?’ he asked.

Harry looked at his own face.

He didn't want them to get the Stone. He didn't want Ron to have been hurt for nothing. He wanted to keep that object away from the mouth that had drunk the unicorn's blood.

His reflection closed one hand.

Harry felt a weight against the palm resting on the frame. A small, uneven red stone lay between his fingers.

He didn't look down at it. He drew his hand back as if to wipe sweat on his robes and hid it against his side.

‘I see myself…’ he began.

Quirrell pulled at his sleeve.

Harry stepped back.

‘I see myself out of here.’

The teacher grabbed his wrist.

The scream reached Harry before he understood what he was seeing. Quirrell's skin had reddened where it touched Harry. The man let go of Harry's hand and covered his own with the other.

Harry stared at him.

He hadn't cast a spell.

Voldemort ordered him to use the cloth. Quirrell lifted part of his own sleeve and came closer again.

Harry shoved the Stone into his pocket, clumsily, almost dropping it. He tried to get past to the door, but the teacher blocked his way and pushed him against the wall.

The blow knocked the breath out of him.

The stone wall was cold against his back. The rim of his glasses pressed into his cheek.

His wand lay on the floor. He could see it beneath an arm, too far away to reach.

Quirrell had his sleeve wrapped over his hand. He felt for Harry's pocket.

Harry didn't want to touch him. He'd seen what happened, and the sound was still in his head. He couldn't let him take out the Stone either.

He caught his wrist where the cloth didn't cover the skin.

The teacher recoiled with a scream. Harry lost his footing and fell onto one knee. He didn't let go.

‘Get him off!’

He couldn't tell who'd shouted. Quirrell's face was twisted in pain. Harry's fingers were cramped, his forehead burning, and he was so terrified he couldn't think a whole sentence.

The teacher tried to crush him against the wall. Harry grabbed the other wrist. The Stone slipped out of his pocket and struck the floor once before rolling toward the mirror.

Quirrell saw it. So did Harry.

He held on tighter.

Footsteps came from the other side of the door. Harry couldn't turn to find out whether they were his friends.

The teacher's body arched. Something left it with a cold that didn't feel like air; Harry felt the force against his hands vanish and all the weight fall toward him.

Someone opened the door.

Harry saw a pale sleeve, glasses, and a hand picking up the Stone before it could roll any further.

Dumbledore said his name.

Harry tried to tell him about Ron.

He couldn't finish.

CHAPTER 32

The People Who Came Back

Harry

When Harry woke, he tried to close his hand, and the pain made him stop trying.

There were bandages, a clean sheet and too many sweets on a table. Ron sat in a chair, guarding his shoulder. Hermione held a closed book on her knees.

The colored wrappers reached the base of a jug. Harry was warm under the blanket, but his fingers lay outside it, beside the fold in the sheet. His hair had been flattened against the pillow.

Harry looked at his friend's wrist first.

‘Can you move it?’

Ron flexed two fingers.

‘If Pomfrey isn't looking.’

Hermione didn't smile until Harry rested his head again.

Nearly two days had passed. Ron wanted to tell him what had happened after the game; Hermione stopped him when he began with the teachers' arrival without explaining how they'd managed to open the door with the keys.

She'd had the key. She'd gone back with Ron and heard voices on the other side. The adults needed to get in without chasing keys while caring for someone who was hurt. Hermione had been able

to open the door and warn them where the plant and the broken control were.

Flitwick looked after Ron. Snape and McGonagall went on.

‘Neville found them,’ she added. ‘He wouldn't let them tell him everything had been checked.’

Harry looked at the blanket. He remembered his friend in front of the dormitory door.

‘He was right.’

Ron didn't try to deny it.

Harry told them he'd found Quirrell. The words came out wrong when he described the face; he had to start again, and didn't want to lift his hands to show how he'd held him.

Hermione listened without asking unnecessary questions.

Ron looked at his bandaged shoulder.

‘We were sure it was Snape.’

Harry remembered the Defense lesson. How much he'd liked the teacher waiting for his questions.

He didn't tell them that part. He still felt a shame he didn't know where to put.

Dumbledore came when his friends went out to eat.

He returned Harry's wand, which had been checked, and sat where Harry didn't have to sit up to see him.

Harry opened his bandaged hand until his fingers began to feel tight.

‘The Stone came out of the mirror.’

‘I added an enchantment when I brought it there,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Anyone who wanted to find it to use it would go on seeing what they desired, without being able to take it out.’

Harry remembered the small weight against his palm.

‘I didn't want Quirrell to find it.’

‘You wanted to keep it safe, not use its powers. That was the condition.’

Harry closed his fingers again, carefully. Quirrell had been so close that none of it felt easy.

‘Where is it now?’

The Stone could no longer be used. Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel had decided to destroy it; they had enough elixir to put their affairs in order, not to go on living indefinitely.

Harry gripped the blanket with the fingers that didn't hurt.

‘Because of what happened?’

‘Because of what could go on happening. They decided for themselves.’

He couldn't feel as glad at that answer as he'd imagined he would on learning that Voldemort didn't have the object.

Quirrell had died. Voldemort had abandoned the body he'd already been sustaining and harming. Resisting had allowed Harry to stay alive long enough for help to reach him.

Harry looked at his bandages.

‘I kept holding on to him.’

‘He was trying to hurt you.’

Harry remembered not wanting to touch him. Repeating it in his head didn't feel like a victory.

Dumbledore didn't make him describe it again.

He explained Lily's protection. She had stayed between Voldemort and her son when she could have done something else. Harry hadn't cast a spell at Quirrell; contact with a life protected in that way harmed the man Voldemort was trying to act through.

‘My mother,’ said Harry.

The headmaster nodded.

Harry stared at the edge of the sheet. For months he'd imagined small questions, a shoe without a sole, a basket that wouldn't close. Now he had another enormous answer and no way to ask her whether she'd been afraid.

Dumbledore waited.

‘I don't want that to be the only thing people tell me about her,’ Harry said at last.

‘You'll be able to learn more about her.’

Harry nodded, still without looking at him.

The rest found its place between visits, meals and Pomfrey's checks.

Quirrell had used the troll to draw the teachers away. Snape had been hurt by Fluffy when he tried to stop someone taking advantage of the confusion. During the match, the curse and counter-spell had crossed over the Nimbus; the flag had interrupted Quirrell too.

Harry remembered Malfoy correcting the order of what they'd seen. He didn't like having to admit she was right. That didn't make it any less true.

The request that had taken Dumbledore away was false. When he discovered that, the headmaster returned. McGonagall had sent someone to check the door: Quirrell, who was responsible for some

of the defenses, had assured her there was no intruder, then disappeared. The prefect and Neville brought an account that didn't fit that certainty.

‘We should have checked some of the reports more carefully,’ the headmaster admitted. ‘That doesn't mean you knew what you'd find.’

Harry looked toward the chair where Ron had sat.

‘I didn't know.’

He didn't like admitting it in front of the person who'd gotten him out of the last room. Dumbledore didn't turn the answer into a lecture.

He'd also been the one who sent the cloak at Christmas. James had entrusted it to him before he died. Harry touched the card and the initials.

It was enough to know where it had come from.

Neville brought him the blue notebook. He'd put Harry's things away so no one could lend them out while he was in the hospital wing.

Harry thanked him, then couldn't think how to go on.

Neville was still standing beside the bed, his bag hanging from one shoulder and the notebook no longer in his hands. There was a dry soil stain near one cuff.

‘You found McGonagall.’

‘Yes.’

‘You didn't keep quiet.’

Neville adjusted his bag.

‘I told you I wouldn't.’

Harry smiled a little.

‘I know.’

After that Neville told him how Herbology had gone. He'd gotten a good mark and wanted Harry to hear the part about transplanting. Harry listened to all of it.

When he was finally allowed out, Wood was waiting with news of the match they'd lost to Ravenclaw. Katie had played Seeker; a reserve had taken her place among the Chasers. They hadn't managed to win.

Harry lowered his head.

‘You were where you needed to be,’ said Wood.

He didn't seem happy about the result. Harry was grateful he didn't try to pretend.

Slytherin would win the sporting cup on the strength of the whole season. Gryffindor still had several things to improve. Harry was on the list, but he wasn't the whole list.

When Ron could move his wrist properly, they finished the tournament. Lee had agreed to put off the final rather than beat someone Pomfrey still wouldn't allow to lift anything heavy.

Harry sat with Neville to watch. Ron studied the board, his unhurt hand near the edge. There was an exposed rook Lee had been threatening for several moves.

‘He's going to take it,’ Neville murmured.

Harry saw it at the same moment. Ron didn't withdraw it.

Lee made the capture and stared at the diagonal he'd just opened. He looked up. Ron already had his next instruction ready.

Three moves later, Lee leaned back against the armchair.

‘Another one next year.’

Dean handed Ron a drawing of a cup. Fred examined its base and assured him they could get a better one. Ron smoothed the paper before putting it away.

Harry looked at the cup without needing to see it in any mirror. It was in his friend's hands, and everyone had seen how he'd won it.

Hagrid found him that afternoon by the bench in the vegetable garden.

He had two envelopes.

There was a warm strip on the bench where the sun had reached it. Behind lay the rows of the vegetable garden, with dark soil between the plants and the smell of sun-warmed leaves. Hagrid held the envelopes by their corners so as not to bend them.

He'd asked people who'd known Harry's parents whether they had any photographs. Harry touched the first with a slowness he couldn't hide. Inside was a picture of Lily sitting beside some friends, a book on her knees. One tried to read over her shoulder. His mother moved the book away and began to laugh.

Harry brought the photograph close to his face.

There was no sound. She didn't stop looking at her friends to listen to him.

The photograph of James showed him with several books beside a window. One began to slip. He caught it by the spine and laughed at the person taking the picture.

Harry waited until he saw it fall again.

Hagrid sat beside him. Fang rested his head on one of his shoes.

‘The one in the mirror turned round when I wanted her to,’ Harry said.

He didn't know how to explain the rest. Lily, on the paper, had a book she didn't want to lend and an afternoon that went on happening even when he wasn't looking.

Hagrid didn't try to finish the sentence for him.

Harry put both photographs in the blue notebook, protected by the envelopes. His fingers still hurt. He closed them slowly over the cover and stayed on the bench, beside someone who'd known his parents when they still had things to learn too.



CHAPTER 33

Ten Points



Dracenia

Dracenia read her name before looking at the total.

Five points for telling Snape.

She'd expected more. She'd given important information without entering a forbidden room, getting on a cursed broom or making Pomfrey keep her for two days. Five seemed very few compared with all that.

Then she looked at Gryffindor's.

Thirty-five for Weasley. Thirty-five for Granger. Forty for Potter.

Dracenia went back to the previous total. Three hundred and five. She did the sum without moving her lips and reached four hundred and fifteen.

The same as Slytherin, after adding her five to their four hundred and ten.

For a moment she felt a little relief. Perhaps they wouldn't give anyone the cup. Perhaps...

Longbottom had ten.

Dracenia looked at the line. For recognizing the danger and telling the teachers despite disagreeing with his friends.

Four hundred and twenty-five.

The ten points that stopped it being a tie.

Pansy finished reading beside her.

‘They aren't going to change because you look at them again.’

Dracenia let go of the sheet.

The points had been posted before dinner. There was no waiting for the room to change color in front of everyone; Gryffindor's colors were already hanging when they came in.

The dishes made a constant clatter. Dracenia kept following the red between people's heads until Pansy made room for her. She sat without looking toward the Gryffindor table; the colors were visible from the bench too, without having to stretch her neck.

That didn't make Dracenia feel any more like eating.

At the other table, Weasley talked without taking his eyes off Longbottom. Potter had moved the sheet closer so Longbottom could read it without peering over everyone else. Granger said something, and Neville smiled with an embarrassment Dracenia found particularly irritating.

He hadn't had to win a match or go underground to get the points that decided everything.

She took some bread.

Potter's lenses shone as he bent over the sheet. Dracenia couldn't see his expression, only the black hair sticking up on one side. She pulled a crumb from her bread.

Pansy asked her to pass the butter. Dracenia pushed it toward her too hard, and her friend had to catch the dish.

‘It's not my fault.’

Dracenia relaxed her hand.

At the teachers' table, Dumbledore spoke about brave decisions. He didn't tell them what had happened in each room. Dracenia knew Potter had found Quirrell, that the teacher wouldn't be coming back, and that there was an important object the older ones spoke about in lowered voices.

She didn't know the rest. It annoyed her that her five points were for something whose ending she had to guess like everyone else.

Next year she wasn't going to sit waiting for news in the common room.

She decided that as she looked at the Quidditch Cup, which did belong to Slytherin.

Potter appeared by the Charms classroom the next day with permission to pack the Nimbus with his luggage.

Dracenia still had the green notebook with her. Pansy had gone to return a book; she had a minute without any witnesses she knew.

‘What I said at the match was true.’

Potter stopped folding the permit.

‘Yes.’

‘Snape hadn't started before your broom went out of control.’

He looked at the paper.

‘We got the order wrong.’

‘I didn't.’

Potter looked up.

‘You didn't.’

Dracenia had another reply ready, but couldn't find anywhere to put it. He didn't seem willing to argue about a fact he already knew was true.

'Next year they aren't going to stop everything every time you fly badly,' she said at last.

Potter put the permit away.

'Then make sure you notice when I fly well too.'

She watched him walk away. It was very easy to be unbearable with forty new points and a broom he hadn't had to pay for.

Pansy came back before Dracenia could go on thinking about what she should have said.

'Are you finished?'

'He left.'

'I saw.'

Her class results brought better news. Charms was her favorite report; Potions had a comment from January that hadn't grown any smaller among the rest of her marks.

Dracenia arranged the papers so her father would read the best first.

She put the photograph of the garden in the notebook. The repaired corner wasn't coming loose. She hadn't mended it elegantly, but it was still holding all the pages.

On the train, Pansy promised to write. Millicent beat them at a game, and Dracenia tried to claim it hadn't been started properly.

'You didn't say that when you were winning,' Pansy observed.

Dracenia looked at the pieces. She was only one move from finishing, and she'd had it ready since before the last turn.

‘We could do it more quickly.’

Millicent was already collecting her prize. Pansy refused to play the round again. Dracenia set her piece beside the board and took a bun. When the next round began, she still knew which move she wanted to try.

When she reached the platform, she found her parents before they saw her. Narcissa bent to hug her without caring who was watching. Dracenia barely protested, then stayed still inside the hug.

Lucius took the trunk's handle.

‘Does all that weigh more than when you left?’

‘The books don't.’

Her father looked at the notebook under her arm. Dracenia held it by the undamaged edge.

She wanted to get home. She wanted to show them her results before having to explain the three points again.



CHAPTER 34

Without Mentioning Potter



Dracenia

The tea tray was where Dracenia wanted to put her results.

She moved it to the middle. Her father sat opposite, and Narcissa poured her tea the way Dracenia liked it. The first sip tasted of home before the questions began.

The teapot's lid was hot, and the plate of toast left crumbs on the tray. Light from the window reached the sheets of marks. Dracenia was still in her traveling clothes; the collar pulled a little when she leaned over the table.

Lucius picked up the Charms sheet.

‘Good.’

Dracenia leaned a little closer.

‘Flitwick says my control's improved a lot.’

‘I'm reading it.’

She waited for him to reach the end. She wanted to tell him about the hoop, the feather's five seconds, the turn she could finally manage without dropping too low. She also wanted him not to move on to the comment from January.

Lucius moved on to the comment from January.

‘You switched the samples?’

‘Two. I knew which ones they were.’

‘I didn't ask whether you knew.’

Dracenia set her hands beside the cup. Narcissa passed her some toast.

Dracenia's blonde hair hung beside her face, a little untidy after the journey.

‘We weren't going to mix them yet. Snape was checking before he let us light anything.’

‘So you lost three points before you started.’

Dracenia had heard her father talk like that about other people. She liked it when it happened at another table.

‘Potter was waiting for me to do something.’

Lucius kept a finger beside the line.

‘And you decided to give him something?’

Narcissa moved the butter dish aside to reach the teapot.

‘Tell us what happened without starting with Potter.’

Dracenia bit into the toast. She'd rather not have had her mouth full when she found an answer.

‘Longbottom wouldn't have noticed.’

Her father put down the sheet.

‘That doesn't make what went before any better.’

He didn't say it was wrong to do that to him. He seemed more annoyed that Snape had had to correct her in front of everyone. Dracenia could understand that. She'd have preferred him to do it in private too.

‘Severus could have spoken to you alone,’ said Narcissa.

Dracenia drank her tea. Narcissa hadn't agreed with her about the leaves, but she was still on her side in a way Dracenia found hard to explain.

They spent longer on the twenty points over the transfer.

Narcissa wanted to know why she'd kept pulling at her foot. Lucius asked what she'd hoped to achieve by watching the cart leave. Dracenia gave the explanation she'd prepared. It sounded no better aloud.

‘Slytherin won the Quidditch Cup,’ she added.

‘I know,’ her father replied.

‘We'd have won the other one too if they didn't give out points afterwards.’

Lucius gathered the papers.

‘I'm looking at your results.’

Dracenia leaned back in her chair. She hadn't liked waiting for reports from school, and now she was home she didn't like listening to them either.

Then her father went back to Charms.

‘You worked well here.’

She looked up before she could stop herself.

‘And I don't need to know how Granger did to see that,’ Lucius added.

Dracenia put down her toast. She had something to ask for, and if she waited until she'd finished talking about everyone else, she'd never find the moment.

She went to fetch the green notebook.

Narcissa ran her finger beside the repair strip.

‘We can still replace it.’

Dracenia opened it at the most recent practice exercises.

‘This one's got what I did in it.’

Her mother turned the notebook so Lucius could see it better. Dracenia almost warned her it wasn't the best page. She rested her thumb on the repaired corner and waited.

He looked at the numbers and corrections. He didn't ask why the inches had been crossed out. Dracenia wasn't going to start there if she could avoid it.

The notebook didn't lie completely flat where it had been repaired. From her chair, Dracenia could see the writing upside down.

‘I want someone to come and study with me,’ she said.

Lucius looked up.

‘In the holidays?’

‘I used to study here before too.’

Narcissa held the teapot without pouring yet.

‘You have teachers at school.’

‘For everyone at once. I want samples. The sort you can look at without making anything. Someone to tell me whether I'm recognizing everything properly.’

She didn't want to hear Granger explain what she'd found in a library again. She could have better books and a person who'd already had time to read them.

Lucius leaned back.

‘Do you want someone to make the exercises easier for you?’

‘I want to know how to do them.’

The answer came out too quickly. She waited to see whether her father would count it as arguing.

He looked at the notebook again.

‘I'll find out who's available.’

Dracenia could let go of the chair's edge.

Narcissa finally poured.

‘And you aren't going to spend the whole summer shut indoors. Pansy will come, we'll have visitors, and there'll be days without exercises.’

Dracenia nodded. She didn't want to miss the visits. She liked recognizing families without having to ask where they came from.

Her father gave back the notebook.

‘Next time, tell me something good about yourself without mentioning Potter.’

Dracenia closed the cover. She knew plenty of good things about herself. She'd learned to hold up a hoop, tell leaves apart, and fly much better than almost everyone in her year. She could tell him those things without talking about Potter, though she didn't see why she had to when he always managed to interrupt even conversations he wasn't in.

Lucius stood up. As he passed, he rested a hand on her shoulder, briefly and warmly.

‘I'm glad you're home.’

Dracenia smiled without having to choose her expression. Her mother brushed a crumb off her sleeve.

‘Now go and change. You don't put traveling clothes away with clean ones.’

She took the notebook to her room and found paper for Pansy. She began with the private lessons, though her father still had to find out who would come. As she wrote that she'd shown them her results, she turned the quill between her fingers. She remembered Pansy in the Hogwarts dormitory, counting while she struggled to keep her wand up.

Her desk lamp lit the clean paper and the notebook's repaired corner. Her parents' voices came from the corridor, without the noise of girls getting ready for bed.

She added that Pansy should bring the dog drawing when she visited. She wasn't going to hunt for all the ribbons again, but she could still improve its ears.

She could leave out the three points. Her friend knew that story already.

CHAPTER 35

A Window for Hedwig

Harry

The trunk didn't fit under the stairs.

Harry had forgotten. During the school year, that space had stayed in his memory as somewhere unpleasant, but not so small. Now in front of him were the open door, a box of old clothes and the bed where he'd have had to bend his legs.

The air smelled of clothes stored away. The light from the hall reached the corner of the mattress and left the back dark, under the lowest part of the stairs. The trunk's handle pressed into his palm.

Vernon waited behind him.

‘Don't leave it in the way.’

Harry drew the trunk back without taking it toward the street.

‘It doesn't fit in here.’

His uncle looked at the cage, then at the door. Harry didn't let go of the handle.

Petunia came out of the kitchen.

‘The small room.’

Dudley appeared before Harry could ask.

‘I've got things in there.’

‘That you don't use,’ she replied. ‘Get them off the bed.’

His cousin looked at him as if Harry had moved the furniture while they were at the station. Harry lifted one corner of the trunk and began to climb the stairs. Vernon helped him when he nearly hit the wall.

It wasn't a present. Petunia was still annoyed at having to decide what to do with his things, and Dudley was complaining about broken toys he didn't want to pick up.

There was a window.

Harry saw it before he set the trunk on the floor.

Hedwig had had a calmer journey than he had. On the train, Ron and Hermione had taken turns looking at the photographs. Ron asked whether the one of James did the same thing every time you looked at it again; Hermione wanted to read the notes from the envelopes, then apologized for asking.

He'd shown them the photographs without hiding how he kept looking at them for too long.

He also had an address from each of them. Under his address, Ron had written that Harry should tell him soon how he'd managed to put the broom somewhere Dudley couldn't touch it.

Harry looked around the small room. He'd have to work that out.

He put the cage on the table and moved a tower of toys. Dudley told him not to throw any away. Harry put them in a box without arguing about whether a car with no wheels was still a car.

Where the toys had been, a clean rectangle showed among the dust. The curtain didn't reach the floor. Harry could stand beside the bed without ducking his head.

He wanted to finish before dinner. Not because he was afraid they'd take his things away, but because he had other things to do.

He took out the blue notebook. The envelopes had stayed between the last pages, beside Hagrid's letter about Lily's basket.

Harry opened Lily's envelope.

Petunia was passing the door and stopped.

For a second neither of them spoke. The woman in the photograph moved the book away from her friend's hands again.

‘That's my mother,’ Harry said.

His aunt rested her fingers on the doorframe.

‘I know.’

Harry waited. Perhaps she remembered the bench, the dress or something he couldn't find in a note sent by someone else.

Petunia looked at the window.

‘Don't leave the papers there. They'll blow away.’

She went down the corridor.

Harry put the photograph back in its envelope. It hurt that she hadn't said more. He didn't feel he'd done anything wrong by showing it.

The Nimbus fitted behind the door if he put it sideways. The books went on the empty shelf Dudley had left after complaining that it wasn't empty. Harry put his father's cloak under a shirt and the wand box in a drawer.

The drawer stuck.

He thought of using magic and remembered the summer rules. He had to lift one corner and pull with both hands. It opened with a horrible noise that made Vernon shout from downstairs.

‘It's done,’ Harry called back.

This time it was true.

He sat down. His palms were still tender; they didn't stop him writing. Ron had recovered too. Harry remembered how they'd folded the edges of the paper to keep Dean's cup safe without creasing the drawing.

Neville had promised to write as well. They hadn't found a solemn way to say goodbye: Trevor had tried to get out of the box in the middle of the platform, and they'd had to finish between a twisted strap and a grandmother in a hurry.

Harry smiled at the memory.

He opened the window. Hedwig stepped onto the ledge, looked at the garden and turned toward him. The cage could stay open.

Harry put a sheet on the table.

The fresh air cooled his forehead above his glasses, where the black hair left one end of the scar showing. The smell of grass came from the garden, and the curtain moved beside the table.

Ron:

The room has a window. The broom fits behind the door. Dudley hasn't seen it yet, but he's already decided he doesn't want to share the room with me. So far, so good.

He stopped to let the ink dry. He thought of the Hat and how much he'd wanted to sit with his new friends, of Neville's hands holding a plant pot, of Malfoy's face when he agreed with her and didn't let her go on arguing.

He didn't need to tell him everything in the first letter.

He wrote about the trunk, the drawer, and the game of chess he wanted to play when they saw each other again. By the time he finished, it had grown a little darker, and Hedwig was waiting with her feathers raised against the cool air.

Harry tied on the letter as Ron had shown him.

The owl flew away over the rooftops. He watched until she was out of sight, then went back to the table, where the photographs were safe between the notebook's pages.

He still had to write to Hermione.