

A Generation Back

by Cat Feral

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Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 12

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DISCLAIMER: I do not own the Harry Potter books or any of these characters. (Except Robert, and if JKR wants to use him, I'll be incredibly flattered!) Nor do I own any of the other books, poems, etc., that I quote from here.

NOTE: After reading several hilarious versions of the Marauders-Read-Harry-Potter (and, in fact, writing the first several chapters of one which I can only hope will measure up) I have been inspired to try this variation in which we go you guessed it A Generation Back.

NOTE: I am aware that speaking in Canon terms the teachers are not really close enough to the same age to have all been in the same couple of years at school, (especially Flitwick, who we learned in OotP is actually older than Dumbledore!) For purposes of this story, I am falling back on "Literary License."

SCENE: The Ravenclaw Common Room, circa 1937. Filius Flitwick, Ravenclaw, Sixth Year is studying with a few friends: Robert McGonagall, Ravenclaw, Fifth Year; Minerva Duncan, Gryffindor, Fifth Year; Alastor Moody, Slytherin, Sixth Year; Xiomara Hooch, Hufflepuff, Sixth Year and Pomona Sprout, Hufflepuff, Fifth Year. Filius has just set a potted plant with several hard little green buds on a table.

Filius: ...and in theory the spell should make this come into full bloom in less than two minutes.

Pomona: Flit, it really isn't good for plants to force them like that.

Filius: It's just an exercise. You can nurse it back to health afterwards. (Points his wand at the plant.) Tempus Expedites!

The plant trembles and then vanishes with a loud sucking sound. As the students are staring at the spot, a book suddenly appears in its place with a loud "POP"! (It should also be noted that in the year 2000, a potted plant appeared on the edge of a shelf in a Scottish book shop, fell to the floor with a crash and, before the astonished gaze of an employee, bloomed and then withered in the space of about two minutes. The employee cleaned up the mess and *never, ever spoke of the incident to anyone*.)

Filius: Well...that didn't go too well.

Robert: You turned the plant into a book, Flit?

Filius: I think I exchanged the two. The plant must have ended up somewhere else...or some~~ew~~when.

Alastor: Bloody suspicious if you ask me!

Pomona: "Somewhen"? Is that a word?

Minerva: What's the copyright date on that book, Flit?

Filius: (picks up the book and checks) Nineteen ninety-eight! (The others gasp in amazement.)

Minerva: What sort of book is it?

Filius: (reading the title) **"Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone"** Some kind of novel?

Minerva: (eagerly) Well? Shouldn't we read it?

Alastor: I don't know...dodgy. Book no one's ever heard of appears out of thin air...I'd think twice.

Filius: This book is a gift from the future, Alastor! It would be ungrateful not to read it! Gather around, children. It's story time! (The others settle down with varying degrees of anticipation, curiosity or unease as Filius begins.)

"Chapter One: The Boy Who Lived."

Xiomara: Well, that sounds promising.

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.

Alastor: I'll reserve judgment on that.

Pomona: If that's all they have to be proud of, I feel sorry for them already!

Xiomara: Who needs normalcy?

Minerva/Robert: Look at us!

Filius: Shall I go on reading?

Others: Sorry.

They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with that nonsense.

All: Muggles.

Mr. Dursley was the director of a firm called Grunnings, which made

Robert: Earmuffs.

Minerva: Bookbindings.

Pomona: Fertilizer.

drills.

Alastor/Xiomara: *Drills??*

Pomona: Now, now, *somebody* has to do it.

He was a big, beefy man with hardly any neck, although he did have a very large moustache.

Minerva: He sounds rather unpleasant.

Filius: Now, Minna, you can't judge that from a physical description. We all know size doesn't matter.

(The others nearly choke trying to hide their snickers.)

Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors.

Minerva: Honestly! Can't she find something to *read*??

Alastor: I wouldn't scoff, Minna-lass. It sounds like the woman might have the makings of an Auror.

The Dursleys had a small son called Dudley

Robert: *Dudley?*

Filius: I think I just became more resigned to "Filius"!

and in their opinion there was no finer boy anywhere.

Alastor: And we've already seen what *their* opinion is worth!

(The others snicker.)

The Dursleys had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret,

Alastor: Hah! I knew it!

and their greatest fear was that somebody would discover it. They didn't think they could bear it if anyone found out about the Potters.

Robert: Learning how bowls and vases are really made is so traumatic!

Mrs. Potter was Mrs. Dursley's sister, but they hadn't met for several years; in fact, Mrs. Dursley pretended she didn't have a sister,

Minerva: (seriously) It's sad when families fall out like that.

because her sister and her good-for-nothing husband were as unDursleyish as it was possible to be. The Dursleys shuddered to think what the neighbors would say if the Potters arrived in the street.

Robert: Probably, "Oh, did the Dursleys have visitors yesterday? We didn't notice."

Minerva: "Unlike *some* people, *we* have better things to do than spy on our neighbors!"

The Dursleys knew that the Potters had a small son too, but they had never seen him.

All: Then how did they know he was small???

This boy was another good reason for keeping the Potters away - they didn't want Dudley mixing with a boy like that.

Pomona: You don't mix with a boy; you mix with a spoon!

When Mr. and Mrs. Dursley woke up on the dull, gray Tuesday our story starts, there was nothing strange about the cloudy sky outside to suggest that strange and mysterious things would soon be happening all over the country.

Xiomara: They could have asked Sybil, eh Minna?

(Minerva and Robert snicker.)

Mr. Dursley hummed as he picked out his most boring tie for work and Mrs. Dursley gossiped away happily as she wrestled a screaming Dudley into his highchair.

Minerva: If her husband is humming and picking out his tie, who is she gossiping with?

Robert: Dudley?

Minerva: No wonder the poor lad is screaming!

None of them noticed a large tawny owl flutter past the window.

Minerva: (sharply) Well, pay attention! Really, these people!

At half-past eight, Mr. Dursley picked up his briefcase, pecked Mrs. Dursley on the cheek

Robert: Pecked? Was she sure it wasn't the owl?

and tried to kiss Dudley goodbye but missed, because Dudley was now having a tantrum and throwing his cereal at the walls.

Pomona: And it's *lovely* rice pudding for dinner again!

(The others look at her oddly.)

Pomona: What? Hasn't the wizarding world heard of A. A. Milne?

"Little tyke," chortled Mr. Dursley as he left the house. He got into his car and backed out of number four's drive.

It was on the corner of the street that he noticed the first sign of something peculiar - a cat reading a map.

Minerva: Kneazle.

Xiomara: Minna, this is a Muggle book. They wouldn't know about kneazles.

Minerva: How do you explain it, then?

Alastor: How do you know it's a Muggle book?

Filius: Well, I didn't recognize the publishers.

For a second, Mr. Dursley didn't realize what he had seen - then he jerked his head around to look again. There was a tabby cat standing on the corner of Privet Drive, but there wasn't a map in sight. What could he have been thinking of? It must have been a trick of the light.

Robert: Light can be pretty tricky. Got to keep your eye on it, eh, Al?

Alastor: Are you making fun of me?

Robert: Of course!

Alastor: Ah. Right then, just so we're clear on the point.

Mr. Dursley blinked and stared at the cat. It stared back. As Mr. Dursley drove around the corner and up the road, he watched the cat in the mirror. It was now reading the sign that said Privet Drive - no, *looking* at the sign; cats couldn't read maps *or* signs.

Alastor: It's a plot! That "cat" is an animagus spy!

Pomona: Honestly, Al, you don't trust anyone, do you?

Alastor: Remember this, lassie; it's not paranoia if they really are out to get you!

Mr. Dursley gave himself a little shake

Robert: And didn't stop jiggling for an hour!

and put the cat out of his mind. As he drove toward town he thought of nothing except a large order of drills he was hoping to get that day. But on the edge of town, drills were driven out of his mind by something else. As he sat in the usual morning traffic jam,

Filius: What's a traffic jam?

Pomona: Trust me, you don't want to know!

he couldn't help noticing that there seemed to be a lot of strangely dressed people about. People in cloaks. Mr. Dursley couldn't bear people who dressed in funny clothes -

Xiomara: They sound like perfectly normal clothes to me!

the getups you saw on young people!

Pomona: Should they have been wearing coonskin coats?

Others: Huh???

Pomona: Never mind.

He supposed this was some stupid new fashion. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and his eyes fell on a huddle of these weirdos standing quite close by. They were whispering excitedly together. Mr. Dursley was enraged to see that a couple of them weren't young at all; why, that man had to be older than he was, and wearing an emerald-green cloak! The nerve of him!

Filius: More power to him, I say!

Minerva: Emerald green, that's a lovely color.

Alastor: Sorry, lass, my house has dibs.

Filius: My favorite is violet.

But then it struck Mr. Dursley that this was probably some silly stunt - these people were obviously collecting for something... yes, that would be it. The traffic moved on a few minutes later, Mr. Dursley arrived in the Grunnings parking lot, his mind back on drills.

Mr. Dursley always sat with his back to the window in his office on the ninth floor.

Alastor: Bad idea. You think a determined enemy can't levitate nine floors?

Minerva: Or hire a flying carpet...

Xiomara: Broom...Hippogriff...

Filius: Suspensor Nonus charm...

Robert: Hey, great idea! Minna, we could get into...

Alastor: Don't even think about it!

Pomona: Or they could just tie a rope and climb down from the roof.

Others: Climb down? That's so...Muggle!

If he hadn't, he might have found it harder to concentrate on drills that morning. He didn't see the owls swooping past in broad daylight, though people down in the street did; they pointed and gazed open-mouthed as owl after owl sped overhead. Most of them had never seen an owl even at nighttime.

Xiomara: Then how did they ever get their mail?

Pomona: I'll explain later.

Mr. Dursley, however, had a perfectly normal, owl-free morning. He yelled at five different people.

Filius: That's normal?

He made several important telephone calls and shouted a bit more.

Minerva: What exactly is a "telephone call"?

Pomona: It's how Muggles communicate over long distances. And let me tell you, it's a lot less weird than seeing someone's head in the middle of your fireplace!

He was in a very good mood until lunchtime, when he

Alastor: Shouted at the wrong man and got his teeth knocked out?

Xiomara: How do you know it was *aman*?

thought he'd stretch his legs and walk across the road to buy himself a bun from the bakery.

He'd forgotten all about the people in cloaks until he passed a group of them next to the baker's. He eyed them angrily as he passed. He didn't know why, but they made him uneasy. This lot were whispering excitedly, too, and he couldn't see a single collecting tin.

Pomona: Whatever they're all so excited about, his wife is missing it. She'll be livid!

It was on his way back past them, clutching a large doughnut

Robert: Around his middle.

in a bag, that he caught a few words of what they were saying.

"The Potters, that's right, that's what I heard -

Robert: Sounds like the secret's out.

" - yes, their son, Harry - "

Mr. Dursley stopped dead.

Minerva: And left his little boy fatherless?

Robert: It's just an expression, Minna.

Minerva: Oh. Good.

Fear flooded him. He looked back at the whisperers as if he wanted to say something to them, but thought better of it. He dashed back across the road, hurried up to his office, snapped at his secretary not to disturb him,

Xiomara: I'll bet this chap goes through a lot of secretaries!

Pomona: I don't know. Jobs are hard to come by in the Muggle world these days.

Filius: I heard about that - they're having a Great Sadness or something?

Pomona: I think you mean a Great Depression.

seized his telephone and had almost finished dialing his home phone number before he thought better of it. He put the receiver back down and stroked his moustache, thinking... no, he was being stupid.

Xiomara: That's belaboring the obvious!

Potter wasn't such an unusual name.

Alastor: That's right, isn't there a Potter in your house, Minna?

Minerva: Harriet. Seventh year. Two brothers, one graduated, one starting next fall.

He was sure there were lots of people called Potter who had a son called Harry. Come to think of it, he wasn't even sure his nephew was called Harry. He'd never even seen the boy. It might have been Harvey. Or Harold.

Minerva: He doesn't even know his own nephew's name? (Makes disapproving noises.)

There was no point in worrying Mrs. Dursley; she always got so upset at any mention of her sister.

Robert: Come off it, Mrs. D., if old Dumbles can shrug it off when his brother gets hauled up for practicing inappropriate charms on a goat...

He didn't blame her - if he'd had a sister like that...

Minerva: I wonder if he has a sister of any sort?

but all the same, those people in cloaks...

He found it a lot harder to concentrate on drills that afternoon and when he left the building at five o'clock, he was still so worried that he walked straight into someone outside the door.

Robert: Who sank into his stomach and was never heard from again.

Pomona: Yuck!

"Sorry," he grunted as the tiny old man stumbled and almost fell. It was a few seconds before Mr. Dursley realized that the man was wearing a violet cloak.

Filius: Now there's a man with taste!

He didn't seem at all upset at being almost knocked to the ground.

Pomona: Good-natured chap.

On the contrary, his face split

Robert/Minerva: OUCH!

into a wide smile and he said in a squeaky voice that made passers-by stare, "Don't be sorry, my dear sir, for nothing could upset me today! Rejoice, for You-Know-Who has gone at last! Even Muggles like yourself should be celebrating, this happy, happy day!"

(Pause as they all look at each other.)

Filius: Right, I think we've just established that this is not a Muggle book.

Minerva: Who is You-Know-Who?

Xiomara: Yeah, *we* don't know who!

Alastor: I'll be interested to know why they're all so glad to see the last of him!

Filius: Settle down, children, or no more story!

And the old man hugged Mr. Dursley round the middle and walked off.

Mr. Dursley stood rooted to the spot.

Pomona: He's part dryad?

He had been hugged by a complete stranger.

Minerva: That would unsettle me, too!

He also thought he had been called a Muggle, whatever that was.

Xiomara: If you don't know, trust me, you *are* one!

Pomona: Not necessarily. I didn't know till I was eleven.

He was rattled. He hurried to his car and set off home, hoping he was imagining things, which he had never hoped before, because he didn't approve of imagination.

Robert/Minerva: No wonder he's mixed up!

Xiomara: It's weird when you two do that.

Robert/Minerva: Do what?

As he pulled into the driveway of number four, the first thing he saw - and it didn't improve his mood -

Minerva: Was the entire Potter clan, down to the last cousin, having a picnic on his lawn!

was the tabby cat he'd spotted that morning. It was now sitting on his garden wall. He was sure it was the same one; it had the same markings round its eyes.

"Shoo!" said Mr. Dursley loudly.

The cat didn't move. It just gave him a stern look.

Minerva: I don't blame it! If I were sitting on a wall minding my own business and some great lout told me to "shoo!" a stern look is the least of what I'd give him!

Was this normal cat behavior? Mr. Dursley wondered.

Xiomara: Who knows? Cats behave any way they feel like!

Robert: (thoughtfully) I like cats.

Trying to pull himself together, he let himself into the house. He was still determined not to mention anything to his wife.

Alastor: Keeping secrets from his own wife? I knew I didn't trust this bloke!

Mrs. Dursley had had a nice, normal day. She told him over dinner about Mrs. Next Door's problems with her daughter and how Dudley had learned a new word ("Won't!").

Xiomara: That's it, boy, learn to stick up for yourself!

Filius: Quiet down, Xia.

Xiomara: Won't! (Sticks her tongue out.)

Mr. Dursley tried to act normally.

Minerva: There's that word again...

When Dudley had been put to bed, he went into the living room in time to catch the last report on the evening news:

"And finally, bird-watchers everywhere have reported that the nation's owls have been behaving very unusually today.

Alastor: Bird-watchers?

Pomona: Some Muggles do that. It's sort of a hobby.

Alastor: Are you sure it's really birds they're watching?

Although owls normally hunt at night and are hardly ever seen in daylight, there have been hundreds of sightings of these birds flying in all directions since sunrise. Experts are unable to explain why the owls have suddenly changed their sleeping pattern." The newscaster allowed himself a grin.

Pomona: If it was on the radio, how could they tell he was grinning?

Filius: Maybe Muggles have figured out how to use scrying crystals?

Minerva: Don't be ridiculous!

Alastor: Worth looking into. You never know what Muggles'll get up to.

Pomona: Well, I didn't hear anything about it last time I was home.

"Most mysterious. And now, over to Jim McGuffin with the weather. Going to be any more showers of owls tonight, Jim?"

Pomona: Wait a minute, the owls are flying, not falling. How could it be a shower?

Alastor: (succinctly) Pellets.

Pomona: Yuck!

"Well, Ted," said the weatherman, "I don't know about that, but it's not only the owls that have been acting oddly today.

Filius: Muggles have been stomping around taking offence at perfectly normal wizard robes and objecting to being hugged by strangers on the street!

Robert: Now that is odd!

Viewers as far apart as Kent, Yorkshire, and Dundee have been phoning in to tell me that instead of the rain I promised yesterday, they've had a downpour of shooting stars!

Robert: We should try that some day, Minna.

Filius: Oh, Lord!

(Minerva looks speculative)

Xiomara: Count me in, you two!

Perhaps people have been celebrating Bonfire Night early - it's not until next week, folks! But I can promise a wet night tonight."

Minerva: I hope that cat has a home to go to!

Mr. Dursley sat frozen in his armchair.

Xiomara: (managing to make it sound naughty) Oh, his wife won't like that!

Pomona: (Blushing) Xia!!

Shooting stars all over Britain? Owls flying by daylight? And a whisper, a whisper about the Potters...

Mrs. Dursley came into the living room carrying two cups of tea. It was no good. He'd have to say something to her. He cleared his throat nervously. "Er - Petunia, dear - you haven't heard from your sister lately, have you?"

Xiomara: *Petunia?* Her name is *Petunia?*

Pomona: I think it's rather nice.

Robert: Mona, you only like it because it's a plant name. Someone could name their child "Devil's Snare" and you'd think it was cute!

Pomona: Well...it would depend on the child.

As he had expected, Mrs. Dursley looked shocked and angry. After all, they normally pretended she didn't have a sister.

Minerva: I can't imagine that.

"No," she said sharply. "Why?"

"Funny stuff on the news," Mr. Dursley mumbled. "Owls... shooting stars...and there were a lot of funny-looking people in town today..."

Alastor: It's not the funny-looking ones you have to watch out for, Dursley, me lad. The really dangerous ones'll make a point to blend in!

"So?" snapped Mrs. Dursley.

Pomona: Come on, Petunia, he's trying to communicate. Meet the poor fellow half-way.

"Well, I just thought ... maybe ... it was something to do with ... you know...her crowd."

Mrs. Dursley sipped her tea through pursed lips.

Robert: Is that possible?

Minerva: I'll make some tea! (Points wand at fireplace, starts a fire and materializes a teakettle in the same instant.)

Mr. Dursley wondered whether he dared tell her he'd heard the name "Potter." He decided he didn't dare. Instead he said, as casually as he could, "Their son - he'd be about Dudley's age now, wouldn't he?"

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Dursley stiffly.

"What's his name again? Howard, isn't it?"

"Harry. Nasty, common name, if you ask me."

Robert: We didn't.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Dursley, his heart sinking horribly. "Yes, I quite agree."

He didn't say another word on the subject as they went upstairs to bed. While Mrs. Dursley was in the bathroom, Mr. Dursley crept to the bedroom window and peered down into the front garden. The cat was still there. It was staring down Privet Drive as though it was waiting for something.

Alastor: For one of those owls to land nearby!

Pomona: Yum!

Was he imagining things? Could all this have anything to do with the Potters? If it did...if it got out that they were related to a pair of - well, he didn't think he could bear it.

Minerva: Courage, man!

Filius: Quoth our token Gryffindor.

The Dursleys got into bed.

Xiomara: And soon Dudley had a little sister.

Pomona: Xia!

Mrs. Dursley fell asleep quickly but Mr. Dursley lay awake, turning it all over in his mind. His last, comforting thought was that even if the Potters were involved, there was no reason for them to come near him and Mrs. Dursley.

(Minerva snorts disbelievingly.)

The Potters knew very well what he and Petunia thought about them and their kind ... He couldn't see how he and Petunia could get mixed up in anything that might be going on - he yawned and turned over - it couldn't affect them...

Minerva: A wee word of advice, Dursley: When it comes to the crunch, blood's thicker than water! You'll be in it up to your ears before this is over!

Pomona: Home is a place where, when you have to go there, they have to let you in.

Filius: Is that a quote, Mona?

Pomona: Robert Frost; a Muggle author.

How very wrong he was.

Minerva: I knew it!

Mr. Dursley might have been drifting off into an uneasy sleep, but the cat on the wall outside was showing no signs of sleepiness. It was sitting still as a statue, its eyes fixed unblinkingly on the far corner of Privet Drive. It didn't so much as quiver when a car door slammed in the next street, nor when two owls swooped

overhead. In fact, it was nearly midnight before the cat moved at all.

Minerva: I could *never* sit still that long!

A man appeared on the corner the cat had been watching, appeared so suddenly and silently you'd have thought he'd just popped out of the ground. The cat's tail twitched and its eyes narrowed.

Robert: (as the cat) I wonder if I can bring it down? It's damn big, but if it came up out of the ground it must be ~~some~~ kind of rodent!

Nothing like this man had ever been seen in Privet Drive. He was tall, thin and very old, judging by the silver of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to tuck into his belt. He was wearing long robes, a purple cloak which swept the ground and high-heeled, buckled boots. His blue eyes were light, bright and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles and his nose was very long and crooked, as though it had been broken at least twice.

This man's name was Albus Dumbledore.

Alastor: YOU'RE MAKING THAT UP!!!

Filius: I'm not! It's written right here!

(The others crowd around and read over his shoulder.)

Xiomara: Since when does Dumbledore have silver hair?

Filius: Well this book is from the future, Xia.

Albus Dumbledore didn't seem to realize that he had just arrived on a street where everything from his name to his boots was unwelcome. But he did seem to realize he was being watched, because he looked up suddenly at the cat, which was still staring at him from the other end of the street. For some reason, the sight of the cat seemed to amuse him.

Robert: But practically everything amuses him!

He chuckled and muttered, "I should have known."

He had found what he was looking for in his inside pocket. It seemed to be a silver cigarette lighter.

Xiomara: Since when does Dumbledore smoke?

He flicked it open, held it up in the air and clicked it. The nearest street lamp went out with a little pop.

He clicked it again - the next lamp flickered into darkness. Twelve times he clicked the Put-Outer, until the only lights left in the whole street were two tiny pinpricks in the distance, which were the eyes of the cat watching him.

Alastor: I told you that cat was a spy!

If anyone looked out of their window now, even beady-eyed Mrs. Dursley, they wouldn't be able to see anything that was happening down on the pavement.

Alastor: If it were anyone but Dumbledore, I'd be calling in the Aurors at this point.

Dumbledore slipped the Put-Outer back inside his cloak and set off down the street towards number four, where he sat down on the wall next to the cat. He didn't look at it, but after a moment he spoke to it.

"Fancy seeing you here, Professor McGonagall."

Robert: McGonagall? *I'm* in this story? I'm a *Professor*? I'm an *Animagus*???

Filius: (reading the next few lines) er, I don't think so, Robbie.

He turned to smile at the tabby, but it had gone. Instead he was smiling at a rather severe-looking woman who was wearing square glasses exactly the shape of the markings the cat had had around its eyes. She, too, was wearing a cloak, an emerald one. Her black hair was drawn into a tight bun. She looked distinctly ruffled.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked.

"My dear Professor, I've never seen a cat sit so stiffly."

Minerva: (snorting) You'd be stiff if you'd been sitting on a brick wall all day.

"You'd be stiff if you'd been sitting on a brick wall all day," said Professor McGonagall.

(Moment of silence.)

Pomona: Okay, now that was weird.

"All day? When you could have been celebrating? I must have passed a dozen feasts and parties on my way here."

Alastor: Is this because of that You-Know-Who person?

Professor McGonagall sniffed angrily.

Pomona: Hay fever makes me furious!

"Oh yes, everyone's celebrating, all right," she said impatiently. "You'd think they'd be a bit more careful, but no - even the Muggles have noticed something's going on. It was on their news." She jerked her head back at the Dursleys' dark living room window. "I heard it. Flocks of owls...shooting stars...Well, they're not completely stupid. They were bound to notice something. Shooting stars down in Kent - I'll bet that was Dedalus Diggle.

Alastor: And who is Dedalus Diggle?

He never had much sense."

Alastor: Oh. Hufflepuff.

Pomona/Xiomara: Watch it!

"You can't blame them," said Dumbledore gently. We've had precious little to celebrate for eleven years."

"I know that, " said Professor McGonagall irritably. "But that's no reason to lose our heads.

Robert/Minerva: Tell that to Sir Nicholas!

Filius: I *knew* you were going to say that!

People are being downright careless, out on the streets in broad daylight, not even dressed in Muggle clothes, swapping rumors."

Robert: (to Minerva) I'll swap you two Suspected-Of-Practicing-Dark-Arts for one Allegations-Of-Gross-Sexual-Misconduct.

Minerva: Throw in a They-Say-She-Cheats-On-Her-Final-Exams and you've got a deal.

Filius: You two are very strange.

She threw a sharp, sideways glance at Dumbledore here, as though hoping he was going to tell her something, but he didn't, so she went on. "A fine thing it would be if, on the very day You-Know-Who seems to have disappeared at last, the Muggles found out about us all. I suppose he really has gone, Dumbledore?"

Robert: Check to see if he left his book bag on the chair. That's how I can always tell if Minna's coming back.

"It certainly seems so," said Dumbledore. "We have much to be thankful for. Would you care for a lemon drop?"

Robert/Minerva: A what?

"A what?"

Pomona: They're a Muggle sweet. Not as good as peppermints, but...

"A lemon drop. They're a kind of Muggle sweet I'm rather fond of."

"No, thank you," said Professor McGonagall coldly, as though she didn't think this was the moment for lemon drops.

Pomona: Was it more of a moment for peppermints?

Robert: Try offering her some catnip.

"As I say, even if You-Know-Who has gone - "

Robert/Minerva: We *DON'T* know who!!!

"My dear Professor, surely a sensible person like yourself can call him by his name? All this 'You-Know-Who' nonsense - for eleven years I have been trying to persuade people to call him by his proper name: *Voldemort*."

Pomona: Vole-de-mort? Small Rodent of Death?

Filius: I think it means *Wind* of Death, actually. ^{*1}

Robert: That happened to me once.

Minerva: I remember. You should lay off the haggis.

Professor McGonagall flinched, but Dumbledore, who was unsticking two lemons drops, seemed not to notice. "It all gets so confusing if we keep saying 'You-Know-Who'. I have never seen any reason to be frightened of saying Voldemort's name."

"I know you haven't," said Professor McGonagall, sounding half exasperated, half admiring. "But you're different. Everyone knows you're the only one You-Know- oh, all right, Voldemort, was frightened of."

Xiomara: That's our Dumbles!

"You flatter me," said Dumbledore calmly. "Voldemort had powers I will never have."

Minerva: *That* I don't believe!

"Only because you're too - well - *noble* to use them."

Robert: Think she fancies him a bit?

Xiomara: (looking at Minerva) Lot of that going around.

Minerva: (turning slightly pink) Oh, be quiet.

"It's lucky it's dark. I haven't blushed so much since Madam Pomfrey told me she liked my new earmuffs."

Xiomara: Get a room, you two!

Pomona: Xia!

Minerva: Who is Madam Pomfrey?

Alastor: And just why is she so interested in Dumbledore's ears?

Professor McGonagall shot a sharp look at Dumbledore and said, "The owls are nothing to the rumors that are flying around. You know what everyone's saying? About why he's disappeared? About what finally stopped him?"

Pomona: Tell us! Tell us!

It seemed that Professor McGonagall had reached the point she was most anxious to discuss, the real reason she had been waiting on a cold hard wall all day, for neither as a cat nor as a woman had she fixed Dumbledore with such a piercing stare as she had now. It was plain that whatever "everyone" was saying, she was not going to believe it until Dumbledore told her it was true. Dumbledore, however, was choosing another lemon drop and did not answer.

Xiomara: Tease!

"What they're saying," she pressed on, "is that last night Voldemort turned up in Godric's Hollow. He went to find the Potters.

Minerva: Hah! Now the Dursleys are in it good and proper! I'll bet they'll change their tune now that their embarrassing relatives have become heroes!

The rumor is that Lily and James Potter are - are - that they're - dead."

Robert: Uh-oh.

Dumbledore bowed his head. Professor McGonagall gasped.

"Lily and James...I can't believe it...I didn't want to believe it...Oh, Albus..."

Xiomara: Sounds like Petunia can stop pretending.

Minerva: I don't want to be there when she finds out.

Dumbledore reached out and patted her on the shoulder. "I know...I know..." he said heavily.

Professor McGonagall's voice trembled as she went on. "That's not all. They're saying he tried to kill the Potters' son, Harry.

Minerva: (appalled) He tried to kill a little baby?!

Alastor: Wouldn't be the first. Not the last, either.

Minerva: No wonder everyone's so glad he's gone!

But - he couldn't. He couldn't kill that little boy.

Robert: Those big sad eyes'll get you every time.

No one knows why, or how, but they're saying that when he couldn't kill Harry Potter, Voldemort's power somehow broke - and that's why he's gone."

Dumbledore nodded glumly.

"It's - it's true?" faltered Professor McGonagall. "After all he's done...all the people he's killed...he couldn't kill a little boy? It's just astounding...of all the things to stop him...but how in the name of heaven did Harry survive?"

Robert: I told you; he gave this Wind-of-Death chap the big, sad eyes!

"We can only guess," said Dumbledore. "We may never know."

Professor McGonagall pulled out a lace handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes beneath her spectacles.

Robert: Black hair, a tough act but a big softy underneath - and she likes emerald green - this woman's starting to sound a lot like you, Minna.

Minerva: Since when do I wear a bun and spectacles? Besides, they said her name was McGonagall; if she's me, that would mean...(stops short and turns beet-red.)

Alastor: Ah-HAH!

(Pomona giggles and Xiomara hums a few bars of the wedding march.)

Minerva: Shut up!

Dumbledore gave a great sniff as he took a golden watch from his pocket and examined it. It was a very odd watch. It had twelve hands but no numbers; instead, little planets were moving around the edge.

Pomona: Huh?

Alastor: Lunar watch.

It must have made sense to Dumbledore, though, because he put it back in his pocket and said, "Hagrid's late. I suppose it was he who told you I'd be here, by the way?"

Filius: What's a Hagrid?

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall. "And I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you're here, of all places?"

Robert: It's his night job, selling Put-Outers door to door.

"I've come to bring Harry to his aunt and uncle. They're the only family he has left now."

"You don't mean - you can't mean the people who live here?" cried Professor McGonagall, jumping to her feet and pointing at number four. "Dumbledore - you can't. I've been watching them all day. You couldn't find two people who are less like us. And they've got this son - I saw him kicking his mother all the way up the street, screaming for sweets.

Pomona: Sounds like he'd had enough sugar already!

Harry Potter come and live here!"

"It's the best place for him," said Dumbledore firmly.

"His aunt and uncle will be able to explain everything to him when he's older. I've written them a letter."

"A letter?" repeated Professor McGonagall faintly, sitting back down on the wall. "Really, Dumbledore, you think you can explain all this in a letter?"

Minerva: Dear Mrs. Dursley, I regret to inform you of the untimely deaths of your sister Lily and her husband. I am aware that the two of you had had your differences in recent years, but never doubt that she loved you and knew that you loved her. Here is her son, Harry, whom I deliver into your care. I hope he will be of some comfort to you in your loss.

With deepest sympathy, Albus Dumbledore.

Robert: Minna, you're my best friend, but you're a bit sickening at times.

These people will never understand him!

Xiomara: We never understand Robbie and Minna, but we love them anyway.

He'll be famous - a legend - I wouldn't be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter day in the future -

Filius: I wonder how they'd celebrate it?

Pomona: I hope there are feasts involved.

there will be books written about Harry -

Alastor: Like this one, for instance?

every child in our world will know his name!"

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, looking very seriously over the top of his half-moon glasses. "It would be enough to turn any boy's head.

Pomona: And living with these people won't? Look how they spoil the child they've already got!

Alastor: I wouldn't count on them treating young Harry the same, lass.

Famous before he can walk and talk! Famous for something he won't even remember! Can't you see how much better off he'll be, growing up away from all that until he's ready to take it?"

Minerva: (opens her mouth, changes her mind and swallows.)

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, changed her mind, swallowed and then said, "Yes - yes, you're right, of course. But how is the boy getting here, Dumbledore?"

Xiomara: He's catching the Knight Bus.

She eyed his cloak suddenly as though she thought he might be hiding Harry underneath it.

Xiomara: (Doing a pretty good Mae West) Is that a baby under your robes, or are you just glad to see me? See, Mona, I do know something about Muggle culture!

"Hagrid's bringing him."

"You think it - wise - to trust Hagrid with something as important as this?"

"I would trust Hagrid with my life," said Dumbledore.

"I'm not saying his heart isn't in the right place," said Professor McGonagall grudgingly,

Xiomara: But what about his other parts?

Pomona: Xia!!!

Xiomara: Did I say anything about which parts? Someone here has a dirty mind!

(Pomona smacks her.)

"but you can't pretend he's not careless. He does tend to - what was that?"

Xiomara: The teakettle, I think.

(Minerva takes the kettle off the fire and scrounges some cups while the story goes on.)

A low rumbling sound had broken the silence around them. It grew steadily louder as they looked up and down the street for some sign of a headlight; it swelled to a roar as they both looked up at the sky - and a huge motorcycle fell out of the air and landed on the road in front of them.

Filius: What's a motorcycle?

Pomona: Sort of a ground-running broomstick for Muggles.

Alastor: Then why was it flying?

Pomona: I guess Hagrid isn't a Muggle.

Filius: Isn't it illegal to enchant Muggle artifacts?

Alastor: It bloody well is! I'd say this Hagrid has some explaining to do!

If the motorcycle was huge, it was nothing to the man sitting astride it. He was almost twice as tall as a normal man and at least five times as wide.

Filius: He sounds as though he might be half-Giant.

Alastor: Who'd entrust a baby to a half-Giant?

All: Dumbledore!

He looked simply too big to be allowed, and so wild - long tangles of bushy black hair and beard hid most of his face, he had hands the size of dustbin lids and his feet in their leather boots were like baby dolphins.

Xiomara: You want to tell him he has some explaining to do, Al?

Robert/Minerva: Definitely half-Giant!

In his vast, muscular arms he was holding a bundle of blankets.

"Hagrid," said Dumbledore, sounding relieved. "At last. And where did you get that motorcycle?"

Alastor: Yes, we all want to know that!

"Borrowed it, Professor Dumbledore, sir," said the giant, climbing carefully off the motorcycle as he spoke. "Young Sirius Black lent it me.

Xiomara: I wonder if he's related to Orion Black?

I've got him, sir."

"No problems, were there?"

"No, sir - house was almost destroyed

Alastor: That sounds like a problem to me!

but I got him out all right before the Muggles started swarmin' round. He fell asleep as we was flyin' over Bristol." Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall bent forward over the bundle of blankets. Inside, just visible, was a baby boy, fast asleep.

Pomona: If he's all wrapped up, how can they tell he's a boy?

Xiomara: Don't be so literal!

Under a tuft of jet-black hair over his forehead they could see a curiously shaped cut, like a bolt of lightning.

Robert: Ouch!

"Is that where -?" whispered Professor McGonagall.

"Yes", said Dumbledore. "He'll have that scar forever."

Alastor: Poor kid.

"Couldn't you do something about it, Dumbledore?"

"Even if I could, I wouldn't. Scars can come in useful. I have one myself above my left knee that is a perfect map of the London Underground.

Minerva: What's an Underground?

Filius: A covert resistance organization, I think.

Pomona: It's what Muggles have instead of the Floo network.

Well - give him here, Hagrid - we'd better get this over with."

Dumbledore took Harry in his arms and turned towards the Dursleys' house.

"Could I - could I say goodbye to him, sir?" asked Hagrid. He bent his great, shaggy head over Harry and gave him what must have been a very scratchy, whiskery kiss.

Pomona: Well now you've gone and woke him up, you big lug!

Then, suddenly, Hagrid let out a howl like a wounded dog.

Robert/Minerva: He's a werewolf?!

"Shhh!" hissed Professor McGonagall, "you'll wake the Muggles!"

Minerva: You'll wake the baby!

"S-s- sorry," sobbed Hagrid, taking out a large spotted handkerchief and burying his face in it. "But I c-c-can't stand it - Lily an' James dead - an' poor little Harry off ter live with Muggles - "

"Yes, yes, it's all very sad, but get a grip on yourself, Hagrid, or we'll be found," Professor McGonagall whispered, patting Hagrid gingerly on the arm

Alastor: She's showing damn good sense! I knew there was a reason she was wearing green.

Minerva: Excuse me? You think no-one but a Slytherin can show good sense? Or wear green, for that matter?

as Dumbledore stepped over the low garden wall and walked to the front door. He laid Harry gently on the doorstep, took a letter out of his cloak, tucked it inside Harry's blankets and then came back to the other two.

For a full minute the three of them stood and looked at the little bundle; Hagrid's shoulders shook, Professor McGonagall blinked furiously and the twinkling light that usually shone in Dumbledore's eyes seemed to have gone out.

Filius: I wonder if he tried saying "Lumos"?

"Well," said Dumbledore finally, "that's that. We've no business staying here. We may as well go and join the celebrations."

Robert: We've just lost two friends and left their baby on the doorstep of some very unpleasant people; let's go celebrate!

"Yeah," said Hagrid in a very muffled voice, "I'll be takin' Sirius his bike back.

Alastor: And tell him to expect a visit from the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department in the morning!

G'night, Professor McGonagall - Professor Dumbledore, sir."

Wiping his streaming eyes on his jacket sleeve, Hagrid swung himself onto the motorbike and kicked the engine into life; with a roar it rose into the air and off into the night.

Pomona: You know, the noise from that motorcycle didn't wake Harry, Hagrid's howling didn't wake him...do you think his run-in with this Vole of Death person damaged his hearing?

Filius: If so, it might save him having to listen to his cousin's tantrums.

"I shall see you soon, I expect, Professor McGonagall,"

Robert: Yes, and then we'll figure out who you are!

said Dumbledore, nodding to her. Professor McGonagall blew her nose in reply.

Pomona: Well, that was courteous.

Dumbledore turned and walked back down the street. On the corner he stopped and took out the silver Put-Outer. He clicked it once and twelve balls of light sped back to their street lamps so Privet Drive glowed suddenly orange and he could make out a tabby cat slinking around the corner at the other end of the street.

He could just see the bundle of blankets on the step of number four.

Pomona: Loud noises don't wake him up, sudden flashes of light don't wake him up, getting kissed by a brillo pad doesn't wake him up...

Xiomara: Hey, he's had a hard day. Defeating powerful dark wizards can really take it out of you!

Alastor: And what's a brillo pad?

A breeze ruffled the hedges of Privet Drive, which lay silent and tidy under the inky sky, the very last place you would expect astonishing things to happen.

Robert: Which makes them all the more astonishing.

Harry Potter rolled over inside his blankets without waking up. One small hand closed on the letter beside him and he slept on, not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous,

Alastor: (grimly) not knowing he was an orphan,

not knowing he would be woken in a few hours' time by Mrs. Dursley's scream

Filius: Then he can still hear.

as she opened the front door to put out the milk bottles, nor that he would spend the next few weeks being prodded and pinched by his cousin Dudley... he couldn't know that at this very moment, people meeting in secret all over the country were holding up their glasses and saying in hushed voices: "To Harry Potter - the boy who lived!"

Filius: And, that is the end of Chapter One.

^{*1} Actually, it turns out to mean "*Flight* of Death" but by the time I found this out, I'd based one of my favorite jokes on "Wind" so I was reluctant to change it.

^{*1-A} Then again, there is a quote in the fic "Werewolves of London" by DrWorm: "Vol de morte" means "theft of a body" in French.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 12

It's Minerva's turn to read.

Chapter Two:

Disclaimer: Everything I said in the Chapter One Disclaimer still applies:

(Minerva hands around the cups of tea to general comments of thanks. Alastor sniffs his suspiciously.)

Minerva: All right, now we find out if it's possible.

Pomona: If what's possible?

Robert: To sip tea through pursed lips, remember?

(Minerva purses her lips in a pretty good show of sour disapproval, and then tries to sip her tea. The others can't resist following suit.)

Minerva: OW!

Robert: (SLUURRRPP!!)

Alastor: Merlin's Beard, McGonagall, they must have heard that all the way to Hogsmeade!

Xiomara: Well, you can't say he's doing anything secretly!

(This causes Filius and Pomona to laugh so hard that hot tea comes out both their noses.)

Filius/Pomona: *OW!*

Minerva: Morgan's Wand, are you two all right?!

Filius: I think so, but breathing is going to be an interesting proposition for a day or two.

Pomona: Guys, if I ever try that again, promise you'll put the body bind on me until I come to my senses!

Alastor: Right. I think we've worked out that it can be done - if you like living dangerously.

Xiomara: If everyone's ok, is anyone up for another chapter? (General murmurs of agreement.)

Filius: Er, I'd just as soon not talk much for a bit. Would someone else like to take a turn? (Minerva settles her teacup on a side table and takes the book.)

Minerva: **Chapter 2, The Vanishing Glass.**

Nearly ten years had passed

Pomona: Oh, Harry should be getting his letter then.

Xiomara: Be funny if Dudley got one too!

since the Dursleys had woken up to find their nephew on the front step, but Privet Drive had hardly changed at all. The sun rose on the same tidy front gardens and lit up the brass number four on the Dursleys' front door; it crept into their living room,

Robert: Head's up, Al, that light is behaving very suspiciously! Creeping into people's living rooms...

Alastor: Oh, sod off. (The others snicker.)

which was almost exactly the same as it had been on the night when Mr. Dursley had seen that fateful news report about the owls.

Only the photographs on the mantelpiece really showed how much time had passed. Ten years ago, there had been lots of pictures of what looked like a large pink beach ball wearing different-colored bonnets - but

Xiomara: Dudley had thrown so much food at the walls instead of into his mouth that he'd slimmed down amazingly!

Dudley Dursley was no longer a baby, and now the photographs showed a large blond boy riding his first bicycle, on a carousel at the fair, playing a computer game with his father, being hugged and kissed by his mother.

Alastor: Playing a *what*?

Robert: Must be a Muggle thing. Mona?

Pomona: (shrugs) Never heard of it. Computer... Compute... Maybe some kind of game meant to improve his Math skills?

The room held no sign at all that another boy lived in the house, too.

Robert: Professor McGonagall had come back in secret and given Harry Animagus training. The neighbors now believed that the Dursleys owned a half-grown male kitten with an odd fur-pattern on its head.

Yet Harry Potter was still there, asleep at the moment, but not for long. His Aunt Petunia was awake and it was her shrill voice that made the first noise of the day.

Filius: Definitely no permanent damage to his ears then.

"Up! Get up! Now!"

Robert: Now, why does that sound familiar? (Looks pointedly at Minerva.)

Minerva: Robbie, you were about to sleep through a Final Exam!

Harry woke with a start. His aunt rapped on the door again.

"Up!" she screeched.

Xiomara: And her broomstick slowly rose into the air...

Harry heard her walking toward the kitchen and then the sound of the frying pan being put on the stove.

(Filius opens his mouth. Minerva looks sternly at him.)

Minerva: We've established his continued good hearing, Flit. Find another topic!

He rolled onto his back and tried to remember the dream he had been having. It had been a good one. There had been a flying motorcycle in it.

Alastor: Which was still being investigated by the Ministry...

He had a funny feeling he'd had the same dream before.

Filius: And come to think of it, it was his Aunt's shrieking that woke him up from it the last time, too!

His aunt was back outside the door. "Are you up yet?" she demanded. "Nearly," said Harry. "Well, get a move on, I want you to look after the bacon. And don't you dare let it burn, I want everything perfect on Duddy's birthday."

Filius: She can't pronounce "Dudley"?

Harry groaned.

"What did you say?" his aunt snapped through the door.

Robert/Minerva: He said, "Oooooohh."

"Nothing, nothing."

Pomona: (as Harry) I said "Ooooh! Dudley's birthday, what fun!"

Dudley's birthday - how could he have forgotten?

Harry got slowly out of bed and started looking for socks. He found a pair under his bed and, after pulling a spider off one of them, put them on. Harry was used to spiders,

Alastor: Good, since they're useful in a lot of spells.

because the cupboard under the stairs was full of them, and that was where he slept.

All: *The cupboard???*

Xiomara: Maybe he should get an Acromantula egg and raise it.

Minerva: In a cupboard?

Xiomara: Sure, and then when it's big enough, he could sick it on the Dursleys!

Pomona: What's an Acromantula?

Alastor: Think spider. Then think huge. They live in Borneo, and you'd barely make a snack for a full-grown one. I'm interested in the way your mind works, Miss Hooch.

Filius: Ease up, Al, we're all on the same team here.

When he was dressed he went down to the hall into the kitchen. The table was almost hidden beneath all Dudley's birthday presents.

It looked as though Dudley had gotten the new computer he wanted, not to mention the second television and the racing bike.

Filius: What's a computer?

Pomona: (shrugs) What's a television?

Exactly why Dudley wanted a racing bike was a mystery to Harry,

Robert: Call in the Department of Mysteries!

as Dudley was very fat and hated exercise - unless of course it involved punching somebody.

Pomona: That's odd. The fat kid is usually the one who gets bullied.

Minerva: (sharply) Have the Bulstrodes been after you again, Mona?

Pomona: (smugly) Not since last spring.

Minerva: Er, not that I was implying...

Dudley's favorite punching bag was Harry, but he couldn't often catch him. Harry didn't look it, but he was very fast.

Perhaps it had something to do with living in a dark cupboard, but Harry had always been small and skinny for his age.

Pomona: Lack of sunlight can stunt a plant's growth - I don't know about a human being.

He looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was because all he had to wear were old clothes of Dudley's,

Xiomara: Ah, the Hand-Me-Down game! You're lucky you're at the top of the food chain, Minna.

and Dudley was about four times bigger than he was. Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes.

Robert: Your favorite, Minna!

He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape

Robert: Scotch *what*?

Pomona: Scotch tape - it's what Muggles use instead of spell-o-tape.

because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose.

Alastor: I wonder what his nose is held together with?

The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning.

Minerva: Trust a *boy* to like having a scar on his face!

He had had it as long as he could remember, and the first question he could ever remember asking his Aunt Petunia was how he had gotten it.

"In the car crash when your parents died,"

All: *Car crash???*

Filius: Seems they've kept a few things from the boy, doesn't it?

she had said. "And don't ask questions."

***Don't ask questions* - that was the first rule for a quiet life with the Dursleys.**

Minerva: But how is he ever supposed to learn anything?

Uncle Vernon entered the kitchen as Harry was turning over the bacon.

Xiomara: So Harry cut a few slices off him and threw them in the pan in case anyone wanted seconds.

Pomona: Yuck!

"Comb your hair!" he barked,

Pomona: And good morning to you, too!

by way of a morning greeting.

About once a week, Uncle Vernon looked over the top of his newspaper and shouted that Harry needed a haircut. Harry must have had more haircuts than the rest of the boys in his class put together, but it made no difference, his hair simply grew that way - all over the place.

Minerva: You know, so does Harriet's. And both her brothers, too, I've seen pictures.

Harry was frying eggs by the time Dudley arrived in the kitchen with his mother. Dudley looked a lot like Uncle Vernon. He had a large pink face, not much neck, small watery blue eyes, and thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head.

Aunt Petunia often said that Dudley looked like a baby angel -

Filius: Well that just put *me* off religion for life!

Harry often said that Dudley looked like a pig in a wig.

Xiomara: I'm with Harry on that one!

Harry put the plates of egg and bacon on the table, which was difficult as there wasn't much room. Dudley, meanwhile, was counting his presents.

His face fell.

"Thirty-six," he said, looking up at his mother and father. "That's two less than last year."

Robert: Who gets 36 presents?

Minerva: Who keeps a record of how many they got last year?

"Darling, you haven't counted Auntie Marge's present, see, it's here under this big one from Mommy and Daddy."

Pomona: Mommy and Daddy? And he's *how* old?

"All right, thirty-seven then," said Dudley, going red in the face. Harry, who could see a huge Dudley tantrum coming on, began wolfing down his bacon as fast as possible in case Dudley turned the table over.

Aunt Petunia obviously scented danger, too, because she said quickly, "And we'll buy you another *two* presents while we're out today. How's that, popkin?

All: *Popkin?*

(They all go stiff in the face as if controlling themselves rigidly.)

Filius: (carefully) Is that a Muggle expression, Mona?

Pomona: I have *never* known *anyone* who called their child that!

Minerva: (her voice is beginning to shake) So it's alright if we laugh?

Pomona: (giggling) Why not? I'm going to!

(The whole group explodes into laughter that rises almost to hysteria. Pomona and Filius stop first, wincing a little. Their sinuses are still sore. Even so, it's several minutes before the group is back under control.)

Two more presents. Is that all right?"

Minerva: "Is that all right?" Who's running that house?

Dudley thought for a moment. It looked like hard work. Finally, he said slowly, "So, I'll have thirty, thirty..."

Filius: He's turning eleven and he can't count up to thirty-nine? I could almost feel sorry for the boy!

Pomona: So much for improving his Math skills.

"Thirty-nine, sweetums," said Aunt Petunia.

Minerva: He'll never learn if you don't make him work it out for himself!

"Oh." Dudley sat down heavily and grabbed the nearest parcel. "All right then." Uncle Vernon chuckled. "Little tyke wants his money's worth, just like his father. 'Atta boy, Dudley!" He ruffled Dudley's hair.

Pomona: Ok, I need to say something here; on behalf of ninety-nine percent of all Muggle families in the world; that is NOT normal!

At that moment the telephone rang and Aunt Petunia went to answer it while Harry and Uncle Vernon watched Dudley unwrap the racing bike, a video camera, a remote control airplane, sixteen new computer games, and a VCR.

Robert/Minerva: A what?

Pomona: That's a new one on me.

He was ripping the paper off a gold wristwatch when Aunt Petunia came back from the telephone looking both angry and worried.

"Bad news, Vernon," she said. "Mrs. Figg's broken her leg. She can't take him."

She jerked her head in Harry's direction. Dudley's mouth fell open in horror, but Harry's heart gave a leap. Every year on Dudley's birthday, his parents took him and a friend out for the day, to adventure parks, hamburger restaurants,

Pomona: (dreamily) A whole day at a hamburger restaurant... I could get used to this family.

or the movies. Every year, Harry was left behind with Mrs. Figg, a mad old lady who lived two streets away.

Minerva: That's so unfair!

Harry hated it there. The whole house smelled of cabbage and Mrs. Figg made him look at the photographs of all the cats she'd ever owned.

Robert: The woman is delusional! Nobody owns a cat - the cat owns you!

"Now what?" said Aunt Petunia, looking furiously at Harry as though he'd planned this.

Alastor: If he did, he's one of mine! Hail Slytherin!

Harry knew he ought to feel sorry that Mrs. Figg had broken her leg, but it wasn't easy when he reminded himself it would be a whole year before he had to look at Tibbles, Snowy, Mr. Paws, and Tufty again.

Minerva: "Mr. Paws"? That's almost as bad as "Dudley"!

"We could phone Marge," Uncle Vernon suggested.

"Don't be silly, Vernon, she hates the boy."

Xiomara: Then he should feel right at home!

The Dursleys often spoke about Harry like this, as though he wasn't there - or rather, as though he was something very nasty that couldn't understand them, like a slug.

Minerva: I really don't like these people.

"What about what's-her-name, your friend - Yvonne?"

Xiomara: *That woman has friends?!*

"On vacation in Majorca," snapped Aunt Petunia.

Robert: Where is Majorca?

Filius: Near Spain, I think.

"You could just leave me here," Harry put in hopefully (he'd be able to watch what he wanted on television for a change and maybe even have a go on Dudley's computer).

Aunt Petunia looked as though she'd just swallowed a lemon.

"And come back and find the house in ruins?" she snarled.

Robert: Hey, that wasn't Harry's fault! That was that Moldy-Wart person!

Filius: Voldemort.

Minerva: And he prefers to be called You-Know-Who, if you don't mind!

"I won't blow up the house," said Harry, but they weren't listening.

"I suppose we could take him to the zoo," said Aunt Petunia slowly, "and leave him in the car...."

Minerva: Bring a good book, Harry-lad!

Xiomara: What happens when he needs the loo?

"That car's new, he's not sitting in it alone."

Robert: I guess Uncle Vernon thought of that too, Xia.

Dudley began to cry loudly. In fact, he wasn't really crying - it had been years since he'd really cried - but he knew that if he screwed up his face and wailed, his mother would give him anything he wanted.

Minerva: Honestly, if I'd ever tried that, there would have been hell to pay!

"Dinky Duddydums, don't cry, Mummy won't let him spoil your special day!" she cried, flinging her arms around him.

All: *Dinky Duddydums?!?*

Robert: No wonder this kid's a mess!

"I...don't...want...him...t-t-to come!" Dudley yelled between huge, pretend sobs. "He always sp-spoils everything!" He shot Harry a nasty grin through the gap in his mother's arms.

Just then, the doorbell rang - "Oh, good Lord, they're here!" said Aunt Petunia frantically and a moment later, Dudley's best friend, Piers Polkiss,

(Xiomara suddenly goes into a coughing fit, which doesn't quite cover up the fact that she's laughing. The others look blank for a moment, then one by one they catch on. Alastor snorts, Robert grins, Minerva gives Xiomara a look that would do her future self proud, Filius turns a little pink, while poor Pomona blushes so hard she's nearly purple.)

Minerva: I think I'll go on reading now.

walked in with his mother. Piers was a scrawny boy with a face like a rat.

Minerva: (half to herself) That's strange...

Robert: What is?

Minerva: Why do I suddenly feel hungry?

He was usually the one who held people's arms behind their backs while Dudley hit them.

Robert: How charming!

Minerva: Well, Robbie, we did that once.

Robert: We did it to Barnabus Bulstrode, who was bigger than both of us put together, and who bloody well deserved it after what he did to Mona, here!

Dudley stopped pretending to cry at once. Half an hour later, Harry, who couldn't believe his luck, was sitting in the back of the Dursleys' car with Piers and Dudley, on the way to the zoo for the first time in his life.

Alastor: Why bother going to the zoo? If he's with Piers and Dudley, he's already *seen* the animals!

His aunt and uncle hadn't been able to think of anything else to do with him, but before they'd left, Uncle Vernon had taken Harry aside.

"I'm warning you," he had said, putting his large purple face

Filius: That man is a heart attack waiting to happen!

right up close to Harry's, "I'm warning you now, boy - any funny business, anything at all - and you'll be in that cupboard from now until Christmas."

Pomona: Well what did they think that I went there to do?

And why should I want to be bad at the zoo?

And should I be likely to say if I had?

So that's why it's funny, how Mummy and Dad...

(She notices that the others are looking at her strangely.)

Pomona: You lot have *got* to read some A. A. Milne!

"I'm not going to do anything," said Harry, "honestly."

Alastor: Saying "honestly", now that's suspicious.

But Uncle Vernon didn't believe him. No one ever did.

Robert/Minerva: Nobody ever believes us, either!

The problem was, strange things often happened around Harry and it was just no good telling the Dursleys he didn't make them happen.

Alastor: Especially since he probably did!

Once, Aunt Petunia, tired of Harry coming back from the barbers looking as though he hadn't been at all, had taken a pair of kitchen scissors and cut his hair so short he was almost bald except for his bangs, which she left "to hide that horrible scar."

Robert: Now somebody enlarge the scar, to hide that horrible hair!

Dudley had laughed himself silly at Harry,

Pomona: Who probably *still* looked better than Dudley ever would!

who spent a sleepless night imagining school the next day, where he was already laughed at for his baggy clothes and taped glasses.

Minerva: That is *so* unfair!

Next morning, however, he had gotten up to find his hair exactly as it had been before Aunt Petunia had sheared it off.

He had been given a week in his cupboard for this,

Filius: and when they let him out, his hair was down to his waist.

(The others snicker.)

even though he had tried to explain that he *couldn't* explain how it had grown back so quickly.

Another time, Aunt Petunia had been trying to force him into a revolting old sweater of Dudley's (brown with orange puff balls).

Minerva: Well, Harry, cut the puff balls off and give them to Mrs. Figg's cats to play with, and then you've got a nice brown sweater.

The harder she tried to pull it over his head, the smaller it seemed to become, until finally it might have fitted a hand puppet, but certainly wouldn't fit Harry.

Aunt Petunia had decided it must have shrunk in the wash

Minerva: Well if you'd put a proper anti-shrinking spell on it...!

and, to his great relief, Harry wasn't punished.

On the other hand, he'd gotten into terrible trouble for being found on the roof of the school kitchens. Dudley's gang had been chasing him as usual when, as much as Harry's surprise as anyone else's, there he was sitting on the chimney.

(stunned silence.)

Xiomara: He's not quite eleven and he can Apparate?

Filius: (jubilantly) Look out, Hogwarts; here comes Harry! He'll be a Ravenclaw or I'll know the reason why!

The Dursleys had received a very angry letter from Harry's headmistress telling them Harry had been climbing school buildings.

Minerva: Pity she didn't pay more attention to *why* he'd "climbed" it. She might have written an angry letter about that Dudley!

But all he'd tried to do (as he shouted at Uncle Vernon through the locked door of his cupboard) was jump behind the big trashcans outside the kitchen doors. Harry supposed that the wind must have caught him in mid-jump.

Xiomara: Put a tail on him and you could fly him like a kite.

Pomona: Wouldn't you need some string too?

Xiomara: Don't be so bloody literal.

But today, nothing was going to go wrong.

Alastor: I wouldn't count on that.

It was even worth being with Dudley and Piers to be spending the day somewhere that wasn't school, his cupboard, or Mrs. Figg's cabbage-smelling living room.

Robert: Has he ever been in Mrs. Cabbage's fig-smelling living room?

While he drove, Uncle Vernon complained to Aunt Petunia. He liked to complain about things: people at work, Harry, the council, Harry, the bank, and Harry were just a few of his favorite subjects.

Robert: Did they forget anything on that list?

Minerva: I don't know...did they mention Harry?

This morning, it was motorcycles.

"Roaring along like maniacs, the young hoodlums," he said, as a motorcycle overtook them.

Alastor: Right, that tears it. Illegal or not, I'm getting a motorcycle!

Robert/Minerva: We want one too!

"I had a dream about a motorcycle," said Harry, remembering suddenly. "It was flying."

Uncle Vernon nearly crashed into the car in front.

Filius: That's the second time in this chapter alone that they've talked about cars crashing. The Muggle world sounds like a dangerous place!

He turned right around in his seat and yelled at Harry, his face like a gigantic beet with a mustache:

Filius: There's a project for you, Mona: Can you grow a gigantic beet with a mustache?

Pomona: (eagerly) I'll see what I can do, that could be fun!

"MOTORCYCLES DON'T FLY!"

Alastor: Not legally, anyway.

Dudley and Piers sniggered.

"I know they don't," said Harry. "It was only a dream."

But he wished he hadn't said anything. If there was one thing the Dursleys hated even more than his asking questions, it was his talking about anything acting in a way it shouldn't, no matter if it was in a dream or even a cartoon - they seemed to think he might get dangerous ideas.

Robert: An idea can be a dangerous thing!

It was a very sunny Saturday and the zoo was crowded with families. The Dursleys bought Dudley and Piers large chocolate ice creams at the entrance and then, because the smiling lady in the van had asked Harry what he wanted before they could hurry him away, they bought him a cheap lemon ice pop.

Minerva: That's so...so...

Robert: Unfair?

Minerva: Exactly!

It wasn't bad, either, Harry thought, licking it as they watched a gorilla scratching its head who looked remarkably like Dudley, except that it wasn't blond.

Filius: Now that's unkind!

Xiomara: Well you can't really blame him...

Filius: Gorillas are noble, intelligent beasts!

Harry had the best morning he'd had in a long time.

Pomona: What about the afternoon?

He was careful to walk a little way apart from the Dursleys so that Dudley and Piers, who were starting to get bored with the animals by lunchtime, wouldn't fall back on their favorite hobby of hitting him.

Filius: There, see how bright he is? One of mine, or I'll know the reason why!

They ate in the zoo restaurant, and when Dudley had a tantrum because his knickerbocker glory didn't have enough ice cream on top, Uncle Vernon bought him another one and Harry was allowed to finish the first.

Alastor: Right, Mona, what is a knickerbocker glory?

Pomona: I don't know, but it sounds like it involves pants.

Xiomara: Somehow the idea of Harry finishing the ice cream on Dudley's pants...

Minerva: *Enough*, Xia!

Harry felt, afterward, that he should have known it was all too good to last.

Pomona: (gloomily) I knew it!

After lunch they went to the reptile house. It was cool and dark in there, with lit windows all along the walls. Behind the glass, all sorts of lizards and snakes were crawling and slithering over bits of wood and stone.

Alastor: Ah-hah, I think I like this place!

Dudley and Piers wanted to see huge, poisonous cobras and thick, man-crushing pythons. Dudley quickly found the largest snake in the place. It could have wrapped its body twice around Uncle Vernon's car and crushed it into a trash can - but at the moment it didn't look in the mood. In fact, it was fast asleep.

Alastor: That's what it wants you to think!

Dudley stood with his nose pressed against the glass, staring at the glistening brown coils.

Alastor: And wishing he were that sleek and handsome.

"Make it move," he whined at his father. Uncle Vernon tapped on the glass, but the snake didn't budge.

"Do it again," Dudley ordered. Uncle Vernon rapped the glass smartly with his knuckles, but the snake just snoozed on.

Alastor: Stop harassing my house mascot!

"This is boring," Dudley moaned. He shuffled away.

Harry moved in front of the tank and looked intently at the snake. He wouldn't have been surprised if it had died of boredom itself - no company except stupid people drumming their fingers on the glass trying to disturb it all day long. It was worse than having a cupboard as a bedroom, where the only visitor was Aunt Petunia hammering on the door to wake you up; at least he got to visit the rest of the house.

Robert: Not that that was much of a thrill.

The snake suddenly opened its beady eyes. Slowly, very slowly, it raised its head until its eyes were on a level with Harry's.

It winked.

Minerva: That's impossible; snakes don't have eyelids! Unless...

Pomona: What?

Minerva: Never mind.

Harry stared. Then he looked quickly around to see if anyone was watching. They weren't. He looked back at the snake and winked, too.

Pomona: Flirting with snakes? Isn't that a little cold blooded?

Robert: Only on a minor scale.

Minerva: Let's pretend that bit of dialogue never happened.

The snake jerked its head toward Uncle Vernon and Dudley, then raised its eyes to the ceiling. It gave Harry a look that said quite plainly:

"I get that all the time."

"I know," Harry murmured through the glass, though he wasn't sure the snake could hear him. "It must be really annoying."

The snake nodded its head vigorously.

(Silence.)

Alastor: Right, Flit. Now you know the reason why.

Filius: Harry is a parselmouth?

Xiomara: Damn, I was really getting to like the kid.

Minerva: Now come on, be fair. Just because he's a parselmouth doesn't prove he's evil!

Alastor: Come on Minna, there's never been one yet that wasn't!

Pomona: Um...guys? What's a parselmouth?

"Where do you come from, anyway?" Harry asked.

Robert: (to Pomona) I was just about to ask *you* the same question!

Minerva: A parselmouth is a witch or wizard who can speak snake language. It's usually associated with Dark wizards. Or witches.

Alastor: What do you mean "usually"? Have you ever heard of a parselmouth who didn't go to the bad?

Minerva: There's a first time for everything. Anyway, it explains the wink. Parselmouths process what the snake communicates through their own experience of the world. If the snake is thinking something that a human would express with a wink, the parselmouth is likely to *see* a wink.

Alastor: (suspiciously) You seem pretty familiar with the subject, my girl.

Minerva: Of course, I've read all about them.

The snake jabbed its tail at a little sign next to the glass. Harry peered at it.

Boa Constrictor, Brazil.

"Was it nice there?"

The boa constrictor jabbed its tail at the sign again and Harry read on: This specimen was bred in the zoo.

Robert: So the snake can read?

"Oh, I see - so you've never been to Brazil?"

As the snake shook its head, a deafening shout behind Harry made both of them jump. "DUDLEY! MR. DURSLEY! COME AND LOOK AT THIS SNAKE! YOU WON'T *BELIEVE* WHAT IT'S DOING!"

Dudley came waddling toward them as fast as he could.

"Out of the way, you," he said, punching Harry in the ribs.

All: GGRRRRRR....

Caught by surprise, Harry fell hard on the concrete floor. What came next happened so fast no one saw how it happened - one second, Piers and Dudley were leaning right up close to the glass, the next, they had leapt back with howls of horror.

Harry sat up and gasped; the glass front of the boa constrictor's tank had vanished. The great snake was uncoiling itself rapidly, slithering

All: You mean Slytherin!

out onto the floor. People throughout the reptile house screamed and started running to the exits.

As the snake slid swiftly past him, Harry could have sworn a low, hissing voice said, "Brazil, here I come... Thanksss, amigo."

The keeper of the reptile house was in shock.

"But the glass," he kept saying, "where did the glass go?"

Robert: It's on the coast, over to the North.

Pomona: What is?

Minerva: Glasgow.

Alastor: I'm going to check the Ministry records - there's *got* to be a law against puns that bad!

The zoo director himself made Aunt Petunia a cup of strong, sweet tea

Xiomara: Which she drank through pursed lips...

while he apologized over and over again. Piers and Dudley could only gibber. As far as Harry had seen, the snake hadn't done anything except snap playfully at their heels as it passed, but by the time they were all back in Uncle Vernon's car, Dudley was telling them how it had nearly bitten off his leg,

Robert: Pity it didn't!

Alastor: Hey, that's my house mascot! You want to make him sick?!

while Piers was swearing

Xiomara: In front of his friend's mother? Wash that boy's mouth out!

it had tried to squeeze him to death. But, worst of all, for Harry at least, was Piers calming down enough to say, "Harry was talking to it, weren't you, Harry?"

Filius: (as Harry) Yes, and it was the most intelligent company I'd had all day!

Uncle Vernon waited until Piers was safely out of the house before starting on Harry. He was so angry he could hardly speak. He managed to say, "Go - cupboard - stay - no meals,"

Xiomara: Don't worry, Harry, Dudley will eat them for you.

before he collapsed into a chair, and Aunt Petunia had to run and get him a large brandy.

Minerva: Drinking when you're upset is a bad idea.

Harry lay in his dark cupboard much later, wishing he had a watch. He didn't know what time it was and he couldn't be sure the Dursleys were asleep yet. Until they were, he couldn't risk sneaking to the kitchen for some food.

He'd lived with the Dursleys almost ten years, ten miserable years, as long as he could remember, ever since he'd been a baby and his parents had died in that car crash.

All: Which wasn't a car crash!

He couldn't remember being in the car when his parents had died. Sometimes, when he strained his memory during long hours in his cupboard, he came up with a strange vision: a blinding flash of green light and a burning pain on his forehead. This, he supposed, was the crash, though he couldn't imagine where all the green light came from.

Alastor: (grimly) I can.

Pomona: Green light...isn't that...?

Minerva: The Avada Kedavra. We learned about it in Defense Against the Dark Arts last month.

Filius: And Harry survived? But no one's ever...! I don't care, parselmouth or not, he's a Ravenclaw!

He couldn't remember his parents at all. His aunt and uncle never spoke about them, and of course he was forbidden to ask questions. There were no photographs of them in the house.

Minerva: Tsk! That's guilt. She never forgave herself for not having made up with her sister before she died. She can't even stand to look at a picture of Lily.

When he had been younger, Harry had dreamed and dreamed of some unknown relation coming to take him away, but it had never happened; the Dursleys were his only family.

Minerva: Nonsense, what about his Great-Aunt Harriet? Unless she's his Gran, of course.

Yet sometimes he thought (or maybe hoped) that strangers in the street seemed to know him. Very strange strangers they were, too. A tiny man in a violet top

hat had bowed to him once while out shopping with Aunt Petunia and Dudley. After asking Harry furiously if he knew the man,

Robert: And why he hadn't introduced her to him, she thought he was kind of cute.

Xiomara: Well after twelve years of being squashed under Vernon...

Others: *X/A!!!*

Aunt Petunia had rushed them out of the shop without buying anything. A wild-looking old woman dressed all in green had waved merrily at him once on a bus. A bald man in a very long purple coat had actually shaken his hand in the street the other day and then walked away without a word. The weirdest thing about all these people was the way they seemed to vanish the second Harry tried to get a closer look.

Robert: They Disapparate as soon as Harry sees them?

(Alastor opens his mouth.)

Others: Don't say it, A!!!!

At school, Harry had no one. Everybody knew that Dudley's gang hated that odd Harry Potter in his baggy old clothes and broken glasses, and nobody liked to disagree with Dudley's gang.

Xiomara: I'd like to "disagree" with Dudley's gang!

Minerva: And that's the end of Chapter 2.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 12

Minerva's still reading.

Chapter Three

Alas, 'tis not mine. Would that it were!

Robert: So how about it, Minna? Want to pick a night and see if we can manage some shooting stars?

(Xiomara manages to choke back a snicker.)

Minerva: I don't know, Robbie. It sounds like fun but it might be going too far. I don't want to do anything to ...

Robert: Risk your scholarship, I know. You may have a point. Oh, hey, I meant to ask, who's the author of that book?

Minerva: (Checking the front of the book) Someone called J. K. Rowling.

Robert: Rowling; why does that sound familiar?

Alastor: Old wizarding family. Lives down in Kent. Powerful, most of 'em, but the family throws up a squib every couple of generations.

Minerva: **Chapter Three: The Letters From No One.**

The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started

Minerva: Does that mean he missed his Final Exams?

Alastor: You'd think even those bloody Muggle teachers would have suspected something wasn't right!

and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.

Xiomara: And her cats all swarmed after him with vengeance in their hearts and devoured him down to the bone!

Pomona: Yuck!

Robert: (musingly) I like cats.

Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day.

Filius: Why didn't Dudley ever go to their houses?

Xiomara: Merlin's Beard, Flit, you think any mother but Petunia would let that mob into her house?

Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid,

Minerva: Weren't they saying earlier that Piers was scrawny?

Alastor: Well done for noticing lass. When a witness tells conflicting stories...

Pomona: Maybe he had a growth spurt.

but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.

Pomona: The unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable.*¹

Alastor: Knowing Dudley, I wouldn't be too sure of that.

Minerva: How did the Unspeakables get into this?

Pomona: Er... never mind.

This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around

Alastor: Talking with any snakes he met...

and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss

(Xiomara can't help snickering again. The others ignore it.)

was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to

All: *HOGWARTS!*

Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.

Filius: Dudley is easily amused.

"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"

Pomona: (wryly) They do that at Hogwarts too!

Minerva: Only if you run afoul of the Bulstrodes!

"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it ... it might be sick."

All: Hurrah! Bravo!

Xiomara: That's telling him, Harry!

Filius: Yes, but he'll have to run for it, now!

Minerva: Only if Dudley is bright enough to work out what he said!

Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.

Alastor: I wonder how long that took?

Xiomara: Put it this way; Harry had crossed the border into Hampshire by the time Dudley yelled.

One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before.

Robert: Doesn't she know, if you trip over the cat it's your fault, not the cat's?

She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.

Xiomara: Isn't chocolate supposed to be better when it's aged?

Alastor: No that's wine.

Pomona: Or cheese.

Xiomara: Oh.

That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers,

Robert: With ice cream?

Filius: Maroon with orange?! (Shudders)

and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.

Minerva: Well, now we understand a lot more about Vernon!

As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears

Filius: That color combination would make *anyone* cry!

and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up.

Pomona: Nicknamed "The Handsome!" There he sat.

And (think of it!) The man was fat!

Filius: (Ignoring Pomona) This woman has *very* strange ideas of attractiveness.

Pomona: Well, she married Vernon, after all.

Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might have already cracked from trying not to laugh.

Minerva: Dudley always seems to be cracking Harry's ribs one way or another, doesn't he?

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast.

Xiomara: Dudley had gotten up early.

It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.

Robert: Ah-hah! The secret's out! Petunia is really a highly skilled potions brewer!

Alastor: I knew there was something she wasn't telling us!

Pomona: What kind of potion would have things that looked like dirty rags in it?

Alastor: Trust me, lass, you don't want to know!

"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared ask a question.

"Your new school uniform," she said.

Harry looked in the bowl again.

"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet."

Robert: Neatly done, Harry! Stopped just short of anything she could legitimately call a wisecrack!

Minerva: Probably safest in the circumstances.

"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished."

Robert: If it does, I'll have some doubts about that school!

Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High ... like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.

Xiomara: And he'll *still* look better than Dudley!

Filius: The thing about gray is, it doesn't clash with anything!

Robert: The thing about Dudley is, *he* clashes with *everything*!

Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.

They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.

"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.

Xiomara: Since you'll never get the female!

Others: Xia!

"Make Harry get it."

"Get the mail, Harry."

"Make Dudley get it."

Alastor: Boy's not too ground down yet.

"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley."

Filius: Oh for Merlin's sake, you two, I'll get it myself!

Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and ... *a letter for Harry.*

Robert: From Professor McGonagall, asking if he was keeping his litter-box clean and reminding him to only eat mice that had been approved by the Board of Health.

Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band.

Minerva: (looking at Pomona) Elastic band?

Pomona: It's sort of...(fishes around in her robes, pulls out an elastic band, stretches it and twangs it to demonstrate.)

No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives ... he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back.

Filius: How sad to be nearly eleven and never had a rude note from the library!

Robert: Now Minna, here, writes rude notes to the library!

Minerva: Well they *had* misfiled "Love Charms and Passion Potions".

Robert: Minna, it wasn't misfiled, it was in the Restricted Section!

Minerva: Where it wasn't doing anyone any good!

Alastor: What were you meaning to do with a book like that anyway, Miss Duncan?

Minerva: Maybe someday I'll show you, Mr. Moody.

(There are several whoops and catcalls. If Robert's grin is just the tiniest bit forced, no one, not even his best friend, notices.)

Yet here it was, a letter, addressed to him so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter

The Cupboard under the Stairs

4 Privet Drive

Little Whinging

Surrey

Pomona: That's got to be his Hogwarts letter! No Muggle address would include the cupboard!

The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink.

Filius: It sounds like the Hogwarts letter, but mine wasn't written in green ink.

Minerva: The duty of writing them has obviously been taken over by someone with excellent taste!

There was no stamp.

Alastor: What's a stamp?

Pomona: It's... well, it's sort of like paying the owl for delivery ... only without the owl.

Minerva: Um...right.

Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.

Pomona: Purple with green?

Filius: After the Maroon and Orange fiasco, I'll believe anything!

"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.

Minerva: What's a letter bomb?

Pomona: Er, ... sort of what Muggles use instead of a Destructus Totalus curse.

Alastor: Happens often in the Muggle world, does it?

Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.

Alastor: I don't like this. He should have opened it out in the hall.

Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.

"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk..."

Robert: I wonder what was funny about it?

Alastor: Well, its jokes were probably better than yours, laddie!

"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"

Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.

Minerva: Charming manners they have in that family!

"That's *mine*!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.

"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon,

Minerva: And so pleasantly spoken!

shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.

"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.

Pomona: (Sings) K-K-K-Katie...

(The others look at her oddly.)

Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.

"Vernon! Oh my goodness ... Vernon!"

Minerva: Well, what were you expecting, you idiot? Your sister was a witch; she must have gotten a letter like that! Now her son's the same age and you're acting shocked when his letter arrives?

They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.

"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.

"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine."

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.

Harry didn't move.

"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.

"Let *me* see it!" demanded Dudley.

"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between the door and floor.

Minerva: I hope Dudley doesn't step on Harry, or this is going to be a very short book!

"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address ... how could they possibly know where he sleeps?

Alastor: The *real* question, lassie, is do they know where *you* sleep??

You don't think they're watching the house?"

"Watching ... spying ... might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.

Alastor: Now you're catching on, laddie!

Filius: Alastor, I think you may have a little *too* much in common with this Muggle.

"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want ... "

Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.

"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer... Yes, that's best... we won't do anything... "

"But ... "

"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"

Alastor: Now that's just stupid! If you think a trained wizard is dangerous, try one who has no idea how to control his powers!

Filius: No offense, Al, but that's the problem I've always had with Salazar Slytherin.

That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.

"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"

"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it."

Pomona: Where they burn letters, they will eventually burn people.

Minerva: I think it's "Where they burn *books*," Mona. But you have a point.

"It was *not* a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it."

"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.

Robert/Minerva: Good!

"Er ... yes, Harry ... about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking... you're really getting a bit big for it... we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom."

Alastor: (as Vernon) Now that we know we're being watched.

"Why?" said Harry.

"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle.

Robert: The Dursley Motto!

"Take this stuff upstairs, now."

Minerva: Including the spiders?

Robert: He wouldn't want to leave his little mates behind!

The Dursley's house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge),

Robert: They do keep bringing up this Marge person, don't they?

Filius: Suppose she'll turn out to be a witch and she's been hiding it from her brother all these years?

one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit in his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room.

Filius: Yes, we get the point, they mistreat the boy.

He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog;

Minerva: He runs over a dog, he runs down an old woman on crutches... in *any* normal neighborhood, something would be done!

in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled;

Pomona: I do wish they'd tell us what a television is!

there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle,

Pomona: Dudley with a gun?! Now *that's* a terrifying thought!

which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it.

Robert: Dudley should get bent!

Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.

Minerva: Ah-hah! Harry-lad, you've struck gold!

From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, "I don't*want* him in there... I *need* that room... make him get out...."

Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.

Alastor: Good choice, lad.

Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse room,

Pomona: Oh, that poor tortoise!

and he still didn't have his room back.

Xiomara: Welcome to the real world, Duds!

Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.

Pomona: Through a glass?

Others: What?

Pomona: Never mind.

When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way up the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, Four Privet Drive ... ' "

With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him,

Pomona: You'd think after yesterday, even *Dudley* would be bright enough to keep his mouth shut and read it in the hall!

which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard ... I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley ... go ... just go."

Pomona: And don't come back!

Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter.

Xiomara: (mistily) The Inner Eye tells me all! (Everyone snickers.)

Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.

The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.

Filius: He really needs a Hand of Glory.

Alastor: And just what would you know about that little device, Mr. Flitwick?

Xiomara: Oh, go kiss a broomstick, Al, we learned about those in DADA last year!

Alastor: Oh... right.

He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door ...

"AAAAARRRGH!"

Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat ...

Robert: Revenge of the dog next door!

Pomona: Yuck!

something *alive*!

Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big squashy something had been his uncle's face.

Alastor: Then I hope he stomped good and hard!

Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go make a cup of tea.

Robert: Complaining that he had a frog in his throat...

Minerva: ... and Harry blinked, and suddenly Vernon choked and a large frog hopped out of his mouth.

Robert: Followed by several more...

Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink. "I want..." he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.

Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.

Robert: It wouldn't take more than an hour to nail up a mail slot. What did he do with the rest of the day, hmmm?

Minerva: Why don't they just let Harry go to Hogwarts and be rid of him? They don't want him around anyway!

Robert: Minna, these are the Dursleys. They're not rational.

"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't *deliver* them they'll just give up."

Xiomara: Pity that didn't work when Dudley was born.

Pomona: Xia!

"I'm not sure that'll work Vernon."

"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon,

Minerva: Yes, for one thing, most of us don't think making a child sleep in a cupboard is a good idea.

Filius: And how would you know how a wizard's mind works, Dursley, you nitwit? Have you ever exchanged two words with one?

Alastor: Unless he knows more than he's telling...

trying to knock in a nail with a piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just bought him.

Pomona: He's slipping...

Robert: Always knew that fruitcake was good for something.

Filius: I usually use it as a paperweight.

Pomona: Actually, if you soak it in butterbeer for about an hour, it's not bad.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot, they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.

Robert: Why don't they slip a few through the window into Harry's room?

Minerva: Or send it as a Howler! That way no matter where in the house he was, he'd hear it. And we know what happens if you try to destroy a Howler unread, don't we?

Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out.

Alastor: Including him! The first rule is, *Never* nail yourself into a trap!

He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.

Pomona: "Tiptoe Through the Tulips"? He really is slipping!

Xiomara: Hear-hear!

Pomona: "On The Good Ship Lollipop" is a *much* better song! (All look at her strangely.)

On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman

Filius: *Milkman*? That's a biological impossibility!

Pomona: No, no, they *deliver* milk to people's houses! And eggs too, some of them.

had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.

Minerva/Robert: *DON'T EAT THE COLESLAW!*

"Who on earth wants to talk to *you* this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.

Minerva: Someone with taste, apparently!

On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.

Xiomara: He and Petunia had had quite a night!

Pomona: Xia!

"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today ... "

Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one ...

Alastor: No, laddie, NO! You don't jump around trying to catch it in plain sight! Use a little cunning! You'll*never* make it into Slytherin at this rate!

"Out! OUT!"

Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.

"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling out great tufts out of his mustache at the same the time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"

Alastor: You can run, laddie, but you can't hide!

He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffing in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

Alastor: Good!

Minerva: I don't usually believe in hitting children, but I've got to admit...

They drove. And they drove.

Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.

"Shake 'em off...shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.

Minerva: And each time he said it, he shook himself and a few more spiders from Harry's cupboard fell out of his hair...

They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling.

Alastor: Was there a full moon?

He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.

Robert: What's an alien?

Pomona: No idea! Maybe they haven't been invented yet.

Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering....

They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.

"Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk."

She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:

Mr. H. Potter

Room 17

Railview Hotel

Cokeworth

Minerva: She ought to borrow a few of those "H"s, it sounds like she could use them!

Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.

"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.

* * *

"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew.

Alastor: (grimly) A place to dispose of Harry, if the blighter's as far gone as I think he is.

Minerva: It's only the third chapter, Al. Even if the book ends tragically, they couldn't kill the hero this soon.

He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.

Alastor: Damn good places for tossing people off, those last two.

"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon.

Robert/Minerva: Ah, glimmerings of intelligence!

Filius: How do you two *do* that?

Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.

Xiomara: Drips outside and drips inside.

"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a *television*."

Xiomara: And just who is the Great Humberto?

Pomona: I don't know, but the name sounds like a stage magician.

Minerva: I'm amazed Vernon and Petunia would let him watch it!

Alastor: Queer thing, how Muggles'll make a great fuss over a phony magician with a bag of tricks, but fight to the death to try to prove real magic doesn't exist.

Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it *was* Monday ... and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days of the week, because of television ... then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday.

Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun ... last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.

Robert: If you were, you'd never get out of First Year!

Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling.

Alastor: Bad sign.

He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.

Robert: Petunia, you forgot the Dursley Motto!

"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"

It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea.

Alastor: I don't like the sound of that.

Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.

Pomona: Poor Dudley.

"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"

Alastor: I *really* don't like the sound of that.

Pomona: I wonder if there are any sea snakes around that Harry could call on for help?

A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.

Alastor: You don't suppose he's this Voldy-person, do you?

"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"

It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.

The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed,

Pomona: Even worse than cabbage!

the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.

Xiomara: And if there's any sort of a cupboard, guess where Harry'll end up!

Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.

"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.

Xiomara: That's right, rub it in!

Minerva: Don't worry, Vernon, I'm sure you'll have some soon enough.

He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

Robert: Just how long do you think the storm will last, Vernon?

Minerva: And how long can you stay holed up on that rock after it passes?

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa.

Xiomara: Any hope that the moths will eat Dudley?

Pomona: Poor moths!

She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.

Pomona: I hope he's still got that old pair of socks ... he'll need to keep his feet warm!

The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of

Pomona: Cinnamon?

Xiomara: They wish!

thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all,

Robert: A boy can always use an extra coat hanger.

wondering where the letter writer was now.

Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did.

Xiomara: You know, if he'd cut Dudley's stomach open and burrow inside, he could stay warm for at least...

Pomona: YUCK!

Minerva/Robert: Shut *UP*, Xia!!!

Alastor: I've heard of people doing that in blizzards, but they usually use a horse or something.

Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.

Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise?

Xiomara: Dudley eating the furniture in his sleep.

Was the rock crumbling into the sea?

One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds...twenty...ten...nine ... maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him ... three...two...one...

BOOM.

The whole shack shivered

Pomona: Who wouldn't in that weather?

and Harry sat bolt upright, staring that the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

Minerva: And, that's the end of Chapter Three.

Filius: Amazing books they have in the future!

Alastor: If it's really from the future...I'm still not saying I buy that.

(They all look at him. Pause.)

Alastor: Oh, all right, I admit I'm getting caught up in the thing. If only to see if Harry-the-Parselmouth manages to escape going to the Dark.

Pomona: Er, guys? Suspense is strong but hunger is even stronger. Isn't it almost dinnertime?

Filius: The lady has a point. Minna, I think if you tuck the book into a drawer of that side-table it should be safe enough for now.

(Minerva does so, and the whole gang gets to their feet and goes trooping off, leaving the book to keep its secrets and the used teacups for the house elves to clean up.)

* ¹ Oscar Wilde's famous quote about fox hunting.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 12

As Robbie takes his turn reading, the group learns more things about the future -- some exciting, some disturbing.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter belongs to J. K. Rowling.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to The Petulant Poetess for posting this and to the equally wonderful Dark Beta for... well, being my Beta.

Scene: Hufflepuff Common Room, the next afternoon. Our superb sextet are all sitting around doing various types of homework. Minerva is coaching Pomona and Robert in some of the finer points of Transfiguration. Xiomara, Filius and Alastor are having a minor argument over their DADA books.

Filius: Al, one of the most potent defenses there is against Dark Wizardry is the Fidelius Charm.

Alastor: Agreed.

Filius: Which requires absolute trust on the part of both participants.

Xiomara: He does have a point, Al.

Alastor: Which explains why not everyone is cut out to use the Fidelius Charm, just as not everyone is cut out to be a Healer or a potions maker - only a very rare few people can become Animagi, for that matter. (Robert and Minerva look up briefly at the sound of the word.) Just because a spell is good, doesn't mean that it's the only one or that everyone should be expected to be able to use it.

Xiomara: What about Aurors, Al? Most Aurors have to rely on their partners in a dangerous situation. That means they have to be able to completely trust their partner or when it really comes to the crunch...

Minerva: I think you're still snapping your wrist a little too abruptly on that last flick, Mona. Try doing it more smoothly - even if you have to slow it down a little.

Robert: Minna, I'm worn out, Mona's worn out, and I know perfectly well that you're worn out! Let's take a break. Even a Gryffindor needs a rest now and then.

(Pomona digs into her book bag and pulls out some chocolate frogs, hands one each to Minerva and Robert, and then reaches over to nudge Filius and hand over three more.)

Filius: Oh thank you, Mona. Are we taking a recess?

Pomona: Definitely.

Alastor: (grumbling good-naturedly) Thank Merlin for that! These frogs can't be any more sugary than the lecture on the value of trust I've been getting!

Xiomara: Al, I dare you to eat that frog without sniffing it for poison.

(For a minute or two they all just eat their chocolates in silence. There's a hint of tension in the air. Nobody quite meets anyone else's eye and we get the feeling everyone is waiting for someone else to speak first. Finally...)

Alastor: All right, who's got it?

Robert: (pulling out the book) I do.

Pomona: Whose turn is it to read?

Minerva: Well, Robbie hasn't read yet, and he's got the book in his hands anyway...

Robert: Right. (Opens book) **Chapter Four: The Keeper of the Keys**

BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.

"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.

Xiomara: Quite in character, then.

There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.

Pomona: A gun? He bought a gun just to keep his nephew from going to Hogwarts? He's completely insane!

Alastor: We've already established that.

"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you - I'm armed!"

Robert: What does he mean, "armed"?

Pomona: With a gun.

Alastor: I've heard about those. They're what Muggles use instead of the Avada Kedavra, aren't they?

Pomona: Sort of.

There was a pause. Then -

SMASH!

The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash, landed flat on the floor.

Alastor: Watch out, Harry! Might be that "Voldemort" person. Have a curse handy and get ready to duck.

Xiomara: He doesn't *know* any curses. Poor doomed little blighter.

Pomona: It's a very thick book. I don't think we need to worry.

Alastor: Yet.

A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.

Minerva: Oh, it's that Haggis fellow.

Filius: Hagrid.

The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.

"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey...."

Robert: That depends. Can you drink it through pursed lips?

He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.

"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.

Pomona: That's a bit rude!

Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.

Xiomara: And Vernon ran around to hide behind Dudley and then Petunia ran around...

"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.

Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.

"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes."

Filius: Really? That's more than we knew.

Pomona: I think it's more than Harry knew.

Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.

Minerva: After spending the night on that damp, cold rock, I'm amazed the whole family isn't rasping!

"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"

Alastor: And soon he'll do some more breaking.

"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.

Filius: Notice how the Dursley men always seem to get their guns bent? Don't say it, Xia!

Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.

Robert: First Dudley squeaks and then Vernon makes this "mouse being trodden on" noise... are they all rodents in that family?

Filius: Don't be too quick to scoff at a squeak, Robbie. I've been known to squeak myself occasionally!

Pomona: Yes, but *you* squeak bravely!

(Filius turns a bit pink.)

Minerva: (half under her breath) Don't be too quick to scoff at a squeak... no. Don't be too squick...Drat! Don't be too slick to scoff at a squeak... Oh, never mind!

"Anyway - Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here - I mighta sat on it at some point,

Filius: I hope it's not another mouse!

but it'll taste all right.

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with *Happy Birthday Harry* written on it in green icing.

Alastor: Green eyes, green ink, green icing... I think this is foreshadowing. He's going to be one of mine!

Pomona/Xiomara: You wish!

Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth,

Robert: No, no; turn *right* at Gullet Way, not left!

and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"

Alastor: Well done, lad, get to the basic questions first. And don't eat any of that cake until you've seen him eat a good-sized piece!

The giant chuckled.

"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts."

Alastor: What's happened to old Ogg, then?

Minerva: Well, by 1998, he'll have retired.

He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.

"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind."

His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there.

Xiomara: He's got a baby dragon in his pocket!

Alastor: Not if he knows what's good for him, he doesn't!

It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.

The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea.

Minerva: Well that answers that.

Robert: What?

Minerva: He doesn't know what's good for him. Drinking when he's almost certainly going to be taking a boat back to shore in a storm?

Pomona: Maybe he'll spend the night.

Minerva: With the Dursleys?

Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little.

Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley."

Pomona: Vernon, the lad's had nothing all day but stale chips and...

The giant chuckled darkly.

"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry."

Pomona: Neither does your mouth, you big... Dudley may not be Little Sir Wonderful, but I'd like this Hagrid better if he wouldn't make nasty "Fat" jokes at a child he hardly knows! (Mumbling) I guess it just hits a little too close to home.

Minerva: Mona, you are *not* fat! A little rounded at most.

Xiomara: Pleasingly plump.

Filius: A cozy armful! Er...(blushes)

Pomona: (Dimpling at him and obviously feeling better.) I'll deal with *you* later, sir!

(This prompts the usual round of whoops.)

He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful,

Alastor: I wonder what's in those sausages. Drugged, no doubt.

Minerva: Al, *never* ask what's in a sausage. It won't make you happy to know.

but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are."

Filius: Something tells me you don't really know who *you* are either, Harry.

The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Minerva: I can see they don't have napkins on that rock, but doesn't this man at least use a handkerchief?

"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts - yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course."

Robert: Somehow I doubt it.

"Er - no," said Harry.

Hagrid looked shocked.

"Sorry," Harry said quickly.

Minerva: Don't apologize for ignorance; remedy it!

Alastor: And find out why they were plotting to keep you ignorant in the first place.

"Sorry?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't getting' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know about' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"

"All what?" asked Harry.

"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"

He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut.

Alastor: Hah! Now we'll see some action! You know what giants are like when they get riled!

The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.

"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy - this boy! - knows nothin' about' - about ANYTHING?"

Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.

"I know *some* things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff."

Minerva: Well, that's a good start.

Robert: And if he's been to school, it means he can read so how about that letter?

But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About *our* world, I mean. *Your* world. *My* world. *Yer* parents' world."

"What world?"

Robert: Well, you see, there's this planet called "Earth" and...

Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.

Xiomara: That could be messy.

"DURSLEY!" he boomed.

Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble."

Minerva: I don't consider that a legitimate excuse.

Robert: We'll have to try it on old Pringle sometime.

Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.

"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're *famous*. You're *famous*."

Minerva: (sternly) Use your head, man! They're famous in the wizarding world, which this boy has obviously not grown up in!

"What? My - my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"

"Yeh don' know... yeh don' know..." Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.

"Yeh don' know what yeh *are*?" he said finally.

Pomona: Hungry?

Minerva: Confused?

Filius: Cold?

Alastor: Cut the dramatics and just tell the lad!

Uncle Vernon had suddenly found his voice.

Xiomara: It was in his back pocket.

"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"

Minerva: I forbid it to rain on a Quidditch match but it does anyway.

A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him;

Pomona: Vernon quailed, because he's chicken.

Filius: I'll think I'll duck that whole issue!

Xiomara: (aside to Pomona) But he might give you a goose, later.

Pomona: Xia!

Robert: Yes, Xia, that was definitely fowl. Now cut it out, you lot, you're robbing me of the spotlight!

when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.

Minerva: Because he'd heard that round of puns, I expect.

"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left for him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept *what* from me?" said Harry eagerly.

"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.

Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.

"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid.

Xiomara: I don't think Dudley's quite *that* hungry!

"Harry - yer a wizard."

Minerva/Robert: Well, FINALLY!

There was silence in the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.

"I'm a *what*?" gasped Harry.

"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be?"

Robert: A half-grown male kitten with an odd fur pattern on its head? *

An' I reckon it's about time yeh read yer letter."

Robert: And *what* have I been saying all this time?

Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL *of* WITCHCRAFT *and* WIZARDRY

~*~

Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

(*Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock,*

***Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. Of Wizards*)**

Alastor: So Dumbledore is Headmaster!

Minerva: Did you ever doubt he would be someday?

Filius: Hogwarts must be an interesting place to go to school in the 1990's!

Pomona: Hogwarts has *always* been an interesting place to go to school!

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall,

Deputy Headmistress

Xiomara: Minerva McGonagall, eh? (smothers a laugh)

Filius: Deputy Headmistress! Congratulations, Minna!

Alastor: Been keeping a few secrets from us, you two?

Minerva: (turning red) Stop it! It's nothing like that!

Pomona: Things can change over the years...

Minerva: They will *never* change *that* much!

Robert: Well, you don't have to say that as if I were a Flobberworm!

Xiomara: Right. I'm not touching that one!

Minerva: Robbie, you're my best friend! It would be like - like marrying my brother!

Pomona: Minna, you don't have a brother.

Minerva: Don't be so bloody literal! And the first person who says the Ancient Pharaohs did it is going to spend the rest of their life as a lawn-chair!

Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"

"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl - a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl - a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Given Harry his letter.

Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.

Hagrid

Xiomara: Weather is horrible and so are the Dursleys!

Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.

Filius: Someday I'd like to see a telephone.

Alastor: (As if he suspects the bloody Muggle contraption already.) So would I!

Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.

"Where was I?" said Hagrid,

Xiomara: A shack on an island in the middle of the sea. Try to keep track of these things.

but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.

"He's not going," he said.

Filius: They don't want him around, and they don't want him to leave. Make up your minds, you silly Muggles!

Hagrid grunted.

"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.

"A what?" said Harry, interested.

"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on."

Pomona: Excuse me, would you mind rephrasing that? My parents are Muggles!

"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"

"You *knew*?" said Harry. "You *knew* I'm a - a wizard?"

Minerva: Obviously, or the letters wouldn't have upset them so much!

"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "*Knew*! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that - that *school* - and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was - a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"

Robert: Hmm? Jealous, you think?

Minerva: Interesting.

Alastor: What is?

Minerva: For all her ranting about her "freakish" sister, her first complaint was that Lily *disappeared*.

Pomona: Turning teacups into rats over summer? Wouldn't she get in trouble for that?

She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.

Pomona: Let it all out, dear, you'll feel better.

"Then she met that Potter at school

Alastor: Or at least that's what she told you.

and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as - as

Robert: Brilliant?

Pomona: Loyal?

Minerva: Brave?

Alastor: Cunning?

- *abnormal* - and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"

Minerva: And if you people were half as "normal" as you claim, you'd have been glad to have a nice little lad like him!

Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"

Alastor: And you didn't check their story, boy?

Filius: Al, how does an eleven-year-old go about checking a story like that?

"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter?

Pomona: Well, I suppose if they didn't see it coming in time to Apparate out...

It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

Minerva: It's going to be embarrassing when he doesn't know theirs!

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.

The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.

"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don't know if I'm the right person to tell yeh - but someone's gotta - yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'."

Filius: Well, school is where we go to learn the things we didn't know. Good heavens, that rhymes!

He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.

Xiomara: Splat!

Minerva: I don't think a look can splat, Xia, no matter how dirty it is.

Xiomara: I bet it can if a giant throws it!

"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh - mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it..."

He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with - with a person called - but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows - "

"Who?"

All: *VOLDEMORT!*

"Well - I don't like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does."

Robert: This is getting ridiculous! I mean, this Voldemort can't be any worse than Grindelwald, can he?

"Why not?"

"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry,

Pomona: Leapin' lizards, Sandy!

people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went... bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse.

Xiomara: We get the idea - he wasn't a nice person.

His name was..."

Robert/Minerva: Spit it out!

Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.

"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.

"Nah - can't spell it.

Robert/Minerva: Starts with a "V"!

All right - *Voldemort*."

(All cheer "He did it!" "Yea, Hagrid!" and so on.)

Hagrid shuddered. "Don't make me say it again. Anyway, this - this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too - some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was getting' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches...terrible things happened. He was takin' over.

Minerva: Morgan's Wand, it sounds like he *might* actually be worse than Grindelwald!

Robert: Grindelwald's trying to take over...

Minerva: Yes but the wizarding world isn't showing quite the same level of paranoia.

Alastor: That's our first mistake.

'Course, some stood up to him - an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of.

Minerva: So he's not *completely* insane.

Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.

"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head Boy an' Girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before...probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

Pomona: Strange, even though I know better, when I hear anyone talk about "going over to the Dark Side," it always sounds like it should be *place*.

Xiomara: Somewhere near Uranus?

Minerva: That is *such* an old joke, Xia.

Robert: "I'm just going over to the Dark Side, chaps, I'll be back by noon."

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em...maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago.

Pomona: And we all know the rule about that; If someone comes to your door on Halloween dressed as the latest Dark Menace, do NOT say "Oh what a cute costume!" and give them a piece of candy!

You was just a year old.

Minerva: You *were* just a year old! Could we *dosomething* about this man's grammar?!

He came ter yer house an' - an' -"

Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.

Filius: Well, a rock out in the sea is a good place for one!

Minerva: I guess it's a good thing he didn't use his handkerchief as a napkin earlier!

"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad - knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find - anyway...

"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then - an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing - he tried to kill you, too.

Robert: That's a hell of a piece of news to spring on a lad!

Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh - took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even - but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided to kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age - the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts - an' you was only a baby an' you lived."

Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind.

Minerva: Something very painful is going on in *my* mind! All those names are...

Robert: ...people we know.

Pomona: Marjorie Bones is in our House, Xia...

Xiomara: I'd noticed. You think she's the Bones the giant was talking about?

Alastor: If it's Thaddeus Prewett - or his sister, for that matter - this bloody "Voldemort" is going to have a problem with the Moodys!

Filius: We have to show this book to someone! If any of this is true, maybe it can be averted.

Alastor: Better read it all first, laddie. Make sure we know what we're talking about.

As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before - and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.

Minerva: Why do villains always laugh when they've done something horrible?

Robert: Because they're mad?

Filius: Trying to drown out what little conscience they have left would be my guess.

Hagrid was watching him sadly.

"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot..."

"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon.

Robert: Yes, you are.

Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.

"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -

Minerva: Now just a minute!

Pomona: Harry would have been better off in an orphanage!

Filius: What's an orpheus-age?

Pomona: *Orphanage*. It's where Muggle children get sent to live if their parents die and no one else will take them in. Of course, life isn't always so good in those places, but...

and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdos, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -

Xiomara: Something tells me he's treading on thin ice, here.

asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types - just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end - "

Minerva: The Avada Kedavra isn't sticky, one of the reasons Dark Wizards prefer it is that there very little mess to clean up. And yes, Alastor, I know a lot about it! So do you. We studied it in DADA, remember?

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley - I'm warning you - one more word..."

Xiomara: Beware the Deadly Pink Umbrella Of Doom!

Minerva: I think putting "Deadly" and "Of Doom" in the same sentence is redundant.

In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella

Robert: A *pink* one, no less! What an...*un-manly* way to die!

by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.

Xiomara: When is *Hagrid* going to flatten him?

"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.

Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.

"But what happened to Vol -, sorry - I mean, You-Know-Who?"

Pomona: Now that we all *do* know who.

"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see...he was getting' more an' more powerful - why'd he go?

Pomona: It's a plot device, obviously!

Minerva: My guess is, he got a whiff of little Harry's diaper.

Filius: I doubt that would have been enough to defeat a powerful Dark Wizard, Minna.

Minerva: Flit, have you ever *smelled* a really nasty diaper???

"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.

Alastor: Are you sure they're not just in more subtle trances now, waiting until he returns? Or that they weren't faking it about having been in a trance to begin with?

Pomona: Honestly, Al, is there *anyone* you completely trust?

"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on - / dunno what it was, no one does - but somethin' about you stumped him, all right."

Pomona: "Stumped" him? You know new sprouts - no pun intended - can grow out of stumps. You think this Volde-person is going to turn out to have a son?

Xiomara: Why not a daughter?

Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake.

Robert: First, Voldemort made one when he tried to kill Harry, then Dumbledore made one when he left Harry with the Dursleys, then the Dursleys made one with the way they treated Harry, then...

A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard?

Minerva: When you think about it, it's surprising there aren't more cases of magical children cursing their parents or siblings without knowing it. Every child hates his parents sometimes!

Pomona: (Uncomfortably) Er, well... since I've known I was a witch, I have kind of wondered about that nasty rash my Mum got that time...

If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

Filius: Football?

Pomona: Sort of a Quaffle you kick along the ground.

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard."

To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.

"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"

Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it...every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry...chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach

Robert: That should have given him a clue right there!

...dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back...and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?

Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.

"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard - you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts."

But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give up without a fight.

"Haven't I told you he's not going?"

All: (Sighing) Yes, you've told us.

Minerva: (as Vernon) I *said* Mumblewimble and, by Heaven, I *meant* Mumblewimble!

he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish - spell books and wands and - "

"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had, Albus Dumbled - "

"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.

Minerva: *HOW DARE YOU?!*

Robert: Whoo-boy, it's a good thing Minna's not in this chapter or Vernon would be dead!

Alastor: And why would that be a bad thing?

But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER - " he thundered, " - INSULT - ALBUS - DUMBLEDORE - IN - FRONT - OF - ME!"

Minerva: Damn right!

He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley - there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Minerva: And that's an insult to some pigs I've known!

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.

Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.

Xiomara: Why does that sound vaguely -

Minerva: Xia...!

"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do."

Pomona: There he goes again.

He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.

"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm - er - not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff - one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job - "

"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.

Alastor: Well, if he's half-giant...

Filius: I find it rather impressive that he can do magic at all.

"Oh, well - I was at Hogwarts meself but I - er - got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore."

Pomona: The plot thickens!

"Why were you expelled?"

Alastor: I'd like to know that.

"It's getting' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that."

Minerva: That's called changing the subject.

He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.

"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' dormice in one o' the pockets."

Pomona: What shall I call my dear little dormouse?

His body is small, but his tail is enor-mouse!

Robert: And thus ends Chapter Four.

* If you don't get it, check the beginning of Chapter Two.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 12

Pomona Sprout takes a turn reading -- will the plant world ever be the same?

Disclaimer: It all belongs to J. K. Rowling (except Robert and I'd be honored to make her a gift of him if she ever wants him.)

Acknowledgements: Big fuzzy "Kitty-Glumps" to NotSoSaintly for all her help in posting this and Dark Beta for making sure it's fit to post!

Xiomara: Come on, you lot, we have time for another chapter!

Minerva: Well... I should be ashamed of myself, but...*one* more. But after that, we really have to get back to studying!

Xiomara: (slightly annoyed) Look who's making the rules for us all!

Robert: The one who has a scholarship to worry about!

Xiomara: Er... good point.

Robert: Who's going to read the next chapter?

Pomona: Oh, me! Me! (Realizes she's sounding like a little kid.) Er... if that's okay with everyone.

Pomona: **Chapter Five: Diagon Alley.**

Harry woke early the next morning. Although he could tell it was daylight, he kept his eyes shut tight.

"It was a dream," he told himself firmly. "I dreamed a giant called Hagrid came to tell me I was going to a school for wizards. When I open my eyes I'll be at home in my cupboard."

Minerva: The poor lad has a rather negative outlook, hasn't he?

Pomona: Hey, when I woke up the morning after I got my letter, my first thought was, "What an incredible dream!" Then I heard my Mum on the phone to my Gran saying, "I didn't say she'd sold her soul to the Devil, Mother. I only said she was a witch!" and I knew it was all true.

There was suddenly a loud tapping noise.

***And there's Aunt Petunia knocking on the door,* Harry thought, his heart sinking. But he still didn't open his eyes. It had been such a good dream.**

Tap. Tap. Tap.

(Without leaving her chair, Pomona does a couple of tap-dance steps.)

"All right," Harry mumbled, "I'm getting up."

He sat up and Hagrid's heavy coat fell off him. The hut was full of sunlight, the storm was over, Hagrid himself was asleep on the collapsed sofa, and there was an owl rapping its claw on the window, a newspaper held in its beak.

Harry scrambled to his feet, so happy he felt as though a large balloon was swelling inside him.

Alastor: Better see the mediwitch, boy. Sounds like one of the more esoteric inflating curses.

He went straight to the window and jerked it open. The owl swooped in and dropped the newspaper on top of Hagrid, who didn't wake up. The owl then fluttered onto the floor and began to attack Hagrid's coat.

"Don't do that."

Robert: How does he know owls aren't supposed to attack wizards' coats?

Xiomara: He doesn't. He just doesn't want it to spoil its appetite. He's hoping it'll eat Dudley.

Pomona: It would take a Roc to eat Dudley!

Minerva: Mona, Rocs are mythical.

Pomona: Are they?

All: Yes!

Pomona: Unlike dragons, unicorns, werewolves...I *still* have so much to learn!

Harry tried to wave the owl out of the way, but it snapped its beak fiercely at him and carried on savaging the coat.

"Hagrid!" said Harry loudly. "There's an owl - "

"Pay him," Hagrid grunted into the sofa.

"What?"

"He wants payin' fer deliverin' the paper. Look in the pockets."

Pomona: Uh-oh.

Alastor: What?

Pomona: Last night Hagrid told Harry he had live dormice in his coat pockets. Now he's telling him to look in the pockets to pay an owl. If you were from the Muggle world and didn't know anything about delivery owls, what would you think?

Hagrid's coat seemed to be made of nothing *but* pockets - bunches of keys, slug pellets, balls of string, peppermint humbugs, teabags...finally, Harry pulled out a handful of strange-looking coins.

Alastor: See, Mona? The dormice were smart enough to hide.

"Give him five Knuts," said Hagrid sleepily.

Minerva: Five? For a newspaper? That's ridiculous!

Robert: Good, Minna, start getting in practice now...

Minerva: Oh, Morgan, I know what's coming...

Robert: ...so when you're a Gran, you'll be able to rant about how when you were a girl you could get the paper delivered for one Knut and still have change!

Minerva: How do you get change from one Knut, Robbie?

Robert: Details!

"Knuts?"

"The little bronze ones."

Harry counted out five little bronze coins, and the owl held out his leg so Harry could put the money into a small leather pouch tied to it. Then he flew off through the open window.

Alastor: And across the border with the Daily Prophet's money, never to be heard from again.

Pomona: The Case of the Embezzling Owl.

Hagrid yawned loudly, sat up, and stretched.

"Best be off, Harry, lots ter do today, gotta get up ter London an' buy all yer stuff fer school."

Harry was turning over the wizard coins and looking at them. He had just thought of something that made him feel as though the happy balloon inside him had got a puncture.

Xiomara: Guess you can cancel that call to the mediwitch, Alastor.

"Um - Hagrid?"

"Mm?" said Hagrid, who was pulling on his huge boots.

"I haven't got any money - and you heard Uncle Vernon last night...he won't pay for me to go and learn magic."

Robert: That's okay. Hagrid can just turn Vernon upside-down and shake the money out of his pockets.

"Don't worry about that," said Hagrid, standing and scratching his head.

Xiomara: ...being careful not to disturb the indigenous wildlife.

"D'yeh think yer parents didn't leave yeh anything?"

Alastor: I wouldn't say that too loud if the Dursleys are still in the next room.

"But if their house was destroyed - "

"They didn't keep their gold in the house, boy! Nah, first stop fer us is Gringotts. Wizards' bank. Have a sausage, they're not bad cold - an' I wouldn' say no to a bit o' yer birthday cake, neither."

Minerva: Cake for *breakfast*? Bleagh!

Pomona: I don't know - it sounds good to me.

"Wizards have *banks*?"

Filius: *Have* banks? We *invented* the concept!

Minerva: Yes, but Muggles don't know that, Flit.

"Just the one. Gringotts. Run by goblins."

Harry dropped the bit of sausage he was holding.

Robert: And Dudley came scrambling out of the other room, snatched it up off the floor...

"Goblins?"

"Yeah - so yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it, I'll tell ya that. Never mess with goblins, Harry. Gringotts is the safest place in the world fer anything yeh want ter keep safe -

Minerva: Excuse me?

'cept maybe Hogwarts.

Minerva: That's better!

As a matter o' fact, I gotta visit Gringotts anyway. Fer Dumbledore. Hogwarts business." Hagrid drew himself up proudly. "He usually gets me ter do important stuff fer him. Fetchin' you - gettin' things from Gringotts - knows he can trust me, see.

Pomona: Don't say it, Al!

"Got everythin'?

Robert: He didn't have anything to start with.

Come on, then."

Harry followed Hagrid out onto the rock. The sky was quite clear now and the sea gleamed in the sunlight.

Minerva: How symbolic!

The boat Uncle Vernon had hired was still there, with a lot of water in the bottom after the storm.

"How did you get here?" Harry asked, looking around for another boat.

Robert: Hitched a ride with the giant squid!

"Flew," said Hagrid.

"*Flew?*"

Xiomara: That must have been some broomstick!

"Yeah - but we'll go back in this. Not s'pposed ter use magic now I've got yeh."

They settled down in the boat, Harry still staring at Hagrid, trying to imagine him flying.

Filius: What I'm wondering is how the Dursleys are going to get to shore?

Xiomara: They're so scared of Hagrid, they probably swam home during the night!

"Seems a shame ter row, though," said Hagrid, giving Harry another of his sideways looks. "If I was ter - er - speed things up a bit, would yeh mind not mentionin' it at Hogwarts?"

Alastor: Setting a bad example there. Suppose he's trying to turn Harry to the dark side?

"Of course not," said Harry, eager to see more magic. Hagrid pulled out the pink umbrella again, tapped it twice on the side of the boat, and they sped off toward land.

"Why would you be mad to try and rob Gringotts?" Harry asked.

"Spells - enchantments," said Hagrid, unfolding his newspaper as he spoke. "They say there's dragons guardin' the high-security vaults. And then yeh gotta find yer way - Gringotts is hundreds of miles under London, see.

Pomona: Hundreds of miles? Doesn't that put you into the magma?

Filius: Is that Muggle science? What it does is bring you into salamander territory.

Deep under the Underground. Yeh'd die of hunger, even if yeh did manage ter get yer hands on summat."

Harry sat and thought about this while Hagrid read his newspaper, the*Daily Prophet*. Harry had learned from Uncle Vernon that people liked to be left alone while they did this,

Robert: Merlin's Bones!

Filius: What?

Robert: My best mate's got something in common with a Dursley! Oh, the shame!

(All look at Minerva and snicker. She tries to look like she's above all this.)

but it was very difficult, he'd never had so many questions in his life.

"Ministry o' Magic messin' things up as usual," Hagrid muttered, turning the page.

Xiomara: And thus we learn that some things remain constant through all time.

"There's a Ministry of Magic?" Harry asked, before he could stop himself.

"'Course," said Hagrid. "They wanted Dumbledore fer Minister, o' course, but he'd never leave Hogwarts,

Minerva: Dumbledore for Minister! Now *that* just might straighten the world out!

so old Cornelius Fudge got the job.

Alastor: Is there anyone named Fudge at Hogwarts?

Filius: Well, I know there's a Fudge family. I don't think any of them are students here just now.

Bungler if ever there was one. So he pelts Dumbledore with owls every day, askin' fer advice."

Robert: I'm trying to picture pelting someone with owls.

Minerva: Seems a little hard on the poor owls.

Filius: They'd never sit still for it. The minute they were thrown, they'd fly away.

"But what does a Ministry of Magic *do*?"

Xiomara: I've often wondered that.

"Well, their main job is to keep it from the Muggles that there's still witches an' wizards up an' down the country."

"Why?"

Minerva: If you knew some of the Muggles in my village back home, lad, you wouldn't have to ask.

"*Why*? Blimey, Harry, everyone'd be wantin' magic solutions to their problems.

Minerva: Starting with the question, "How can we most effectively burn all of you demon-spawn?"

Nah, we're best left alone."

At this moment the boat bumped gently into the harbor wall. Hagrid folded up his newspaper, and they clambered up the stone steps onto the street.

Passersby stared a lot at Hagrid as they walked through the little town to the station. Harry couldn't blame them. Not only was Hagrid twice as tall as anyone else, he kept pointing to perfectly ordinary things like parking meters and saying loudly, "See that, Harry? Things these Muggles dream up, eh?"

Minerva: (sternly) And what was all that talk about keeping the Muggles from finding out about us?

Alastor: And Dumbledore trusts this idiot?

"Hagrid," said Harry, panting a bit as he ran to keep up, "did you say there *are* dragons at Gringotts?"

"Well, so they say," said Hagrid. "Crikey, I'd like a dragon."

Xiomara: On a bun with mustard?

"You'd *like* one?"

"Wanted one ever since I was a kid - here we go."

Filius: Well, that tears it, he's mad. Someone had better inform Dumbledore.

They had reached the station. There was a train to London in five minutes' time. Hagrid, who didn't understand "Muggle money," as he called it, gave the bills to Harry so he could buy their tickets.

People stared more than ever on the train. Hagrid took up two seats and sat knitting what looked like a canary-yellow circus tent.

Minerva: A lot of shepherds do that. Knit, I mean. Not much to do all day while they're watching the sheep. Cold weather and all this wool around, ready to hand...

Alastor: That's not all they do, from what I hear.

Xiomara: Hey, innuendo is *my* trademark!

"Still got yer letter, Harry?" he asked as he counted stitches.

Robert: No, Dudley ate it during the night.

Harry took the parchment envelope out of his pocket.

"Good," said Hagrid. "There's a list there of everything yeh need."

Harry unfolded a second piece of paper he hadn't noticed the night before and read:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL *of* WITCHCRAFT *and* WIZARDRY

~*~

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

- 1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)**
- 2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear**
- 3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)**
- 4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)**

Please note that all pupils' clothes should carry name tags.

Xiomara: Yes, just imagine if Flit got one of Hagrid's robes back from laundering by mistake?

COURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:

***The Standard Books of Spells (Grade 1)* by Miranda Goshawk**

***A History of Magic* by Bathilda Bagshot**

***A Beginners' Guide to Transfiguration* by Emeric Switch**

Pomona: *What?* You mean they aren't using the course books written by Minerva Duncan, the greatest Transfigurationist of the age?

Robert: It's an outrage!

(Minerva blushes.)

***One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* by Phyllida Spore**

***Magical Drafts and Potions* by Arsenius Jigger**

***Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* by Newt Scamander**

***The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection* by Quentin Trimble**

OTHER EQUIPMENT

1 wand

1 cauldron (pewter, standard size 2)

1 set glass or crystal phials

1 telescope

1 set brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad

Pomona: Does it really put so much emphasis on the "OR"s?

Robert: Upper case, see? (Shows her the page.)

Pomona: My letter just said "an owl, cat or toad." There was no big fuss about "OR".

Minerva: It sounds like they changed the wording after some fool tried to bring all three.

Alastor: Someone like young Hagrid, maybe?

PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS

Minerva: There's a reason for that. I found an early-edition of *Hogwarts, A History* in the Restricted Section. There were a couple of fatal accidents in the earliest days before they made that rule. The more recent editions don't seem to mention that.

Alastor: And you wonder why I don't trust what I'm told?

"Can we buy all this in London?" Harry wondered aloud.

"If yeh know where to go," said Hagrid.

Harry had never been to London before. Although Hagrid seemed to know where he was going, he was obviously not used to getting there in an ordinary way.

Pomona: Whenever I walk on a London street,

I'm ever so careful to watch my feet;

And I keep in the squares,

And the masses of bears,

Who wait on the corners all ready to eat

The sillies who tread on the lines of the street,

Go back to their lairs,

And I say to them, "Bears,

Just look how I'm walking in all of the squares!"

(The others look at each other uneasily.)

Filius: (In an undertone) Do you think she's all right?

Xiomara: I'm not sure. It's hard to tell sometimes.

Pomona: Oh, that's it! I've *got* to have my parents owl my old Milne books to school so I can read them to you lot!

He got stuck in the ticket barrier on the Underground, and complained loudly that the seats were too small and trains too slow.

"I don't know how the Muggles manage without magic," he said as they climbed a broken-down escalator that led up to a bustling road lined with shops.

Alastor: Shout it from the housetops why don't you, laddie?

Pomona: Actually, he may be being clever. If he tried to be inconspicuous, people might notice and wonder about it, but if he talks loudly about magic, most Muggles will just write him off as a bit mad and steer clear. (Thinks a moment.) Although they might start to worry about a madman having a child with him.

Hagrid was so huge that he parted the crowd easily; all Harry had to do was keep close behind him. They passed bookshops and music stores, hamburger restaurants and cinemas, but nowhere that looked as if it could sell you a magic wand.

Pomona: I wonder if you could use a piccolo as a wand?

Filius: I doubt it. It doesn't have a core.

Robert: Then again, Dumbledore says that music has a magic all its own.

This was just an ordinary street full of ordinary people. Could there really be piles of wizard gold buried miles beneath them? Were there really shops that sold spell books and broomsticks? Might this not all be some huge joke the Dursleys had cooked up? If Harry hadn't known that the Dursleys had no sense of humor, he might have thought so; yet somehow, even though everything Hagrid had told him so far was unbelievable, Harry couldn't help trusting him.

Pomona: After the Dursleys, he'd have been willing to trust *anyone*!

Alastor: Bad precedent.

"This is it," said Hagrid, coming to a halt, "the Leaky Cauldron. It's a famous place."

Filius: Another constant through all time.

Robert: Have you seen the "Merlin pissed here" plaque in the alley out back?

Pomona: How do you know what it says?

Minerva: You have to be able to read ancient Ogham.

Xiomara: I always thought that plaque said, "If you can read this, you have too much education."

Minerva: Xia, there's no such thing!

It was a tiny, grubby-looking pub. If Hagrid hadn't pointed it out, Harry wouldn't have noticed it was there. The people hurrying by didn't glance at it. Their eyes slid from the big book shop on one side to the record shop on the other as if they couldn't see the Leaky Cauldron at all. In fact, Harry had the most peculiar feeling that only he and Hagrid could see it.

Alastor: I should bloody well hope so! If Grindelwald *really* wants to wreak havoc, he should...(stops.)

Pomona: What?

Alastor: Never mind.

Xiomara: Ah-HAH! Which of us is the spy, Al? Come on, who do you suspect?

Filius: I'm guessing you mean he'd have only to take the disguise spell off of the Leaky Cauldron and let the Muggles start getting curious about the place, and we *deally* be in trouble, eh, Al?

Alastor: Interesting turn of mind you've got, laddie.

Filius: Of course! I'm a Ravenclaw!

Before he could mention this, Hagrid had steered him inside.

For a famous place, it was very dark and shabby. A few old women were sitting in a corner, drinking tiny glasses of sherry. One of them was smoking a long pipe. A little man in a top hat was talking to the old bartender, who was quite bald and looked like a toothless walnut.

Xiomara: Bloody hell! What happened to Tom?

Filius: Tom?

Pomona: The handsome chap who tends bar at the Leaky Cauldron. You must have seen him!

The low buzz of chatter stopped when they walked in. Everyone seemed to know Hagrid; they waved and smiled at him, and the bartender reached for a glass, saying, "The usual, Hagrid?"

"Can't, Tom,

Xiomara/Minerva/Pomona: *NO!*

I'm on Hogwarts business," said Hagrid, clapping his great hand on Harry's shoulder and making Harry's knees buckle.

"Good Lord," said the bartender, peering at Harry, "is this - can this be -?"

Robert: James and Lily's son! I want a word with you about the tab your parents ran up just before they died!

The Leaky Cauldron had suddenly gone completely still and silent.

"Bless my soul," whispered the old bartender, "Harry Potter...what an honor."

He hurried out from behind the bar, rushed toward Harry

Alastor: And Harry, instinctively seeing the rush as a threat, transformed him into a cockroach before he had time to think.

Filius: That won't happen until after *you've* trained him for a few months, Al.

and seized his hand, tears in his eyes.

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter, welcome back."

Harry didn't know what to say.

Pomona: How about "thank you"?

Everyone was looking at him. The old woman with the pipe was puffing on it without realizing it had gone out. Hagrid was beaming.

Then there was a great scraping of chairs and the next moment, Harry found himself shaking hands with everyone in the Leaky Cauldron.

"Doris Crockford, Mr. Potter, can't believe I'm meeting you at last."

Filius: They're joking! Doris Crockford is a Ravenclaw second year!

"So proud, Mr. Potter, I'm just so proud."

"Always wanted to shake your hand - I'm all of a flutter."

"Delighted, Mr. Potter, just can't tell you, Diggle's the name, Dedalus Diggle."

Robert: Ah-hah! The man with the shooting stars!

Xiomara: Going to get his autograph, Robbie?

"I've seen you before!" said Harry, as Dedalus Diggle's top hat fell off in his excitement. "You bowed to me once in a shop."

"He remembers!" cried Dedalus Diggle, looking around at everyone. "Did you hear that? He remembers me!"

Harry shook hands again and again - Doris Crockford kept coming back for more.

Robert: She does that when the house-elves make brownies too, I've noticed.

Minerva: Which is interesting since house-elves are a subspecies of brownie.

A pale young man made his way forward, very nervously. One of his eyes was twitching.

"Professor Quirrell!" said Hagrid. "Harry, Professor Quirrell will be one of your teachers at Hogwarts."

"P-P-Potter," stammered Professor Quirrell, grasping Harry's hand, "c-can't t-tell you how p-pleased I am to meet you."

Pomona: Oh, dear. You know they're working on new treatments for that now.

"What sort of magic do you teach, Professor Quirrell?"

"D-Defense Against the D-D-Dark Arts," muttered Professor Quirrell, as though he'd rather not think about it.

Alastor: Not thinking about it is NOT the answer! (The others all see what's coming and hastily put their fingers in their ears.) *CONSTANT VIGILANCE!*

"N-not that you n-need it, eh, P-P-Potter?"

Minerva: Of course he does! Instinct is a poor substitute for education.

He laughed nervously. "You'll be g-getting all your equipment, I suppose? I've g-got to p-pick up a new b-book on vampires, m-myself." He looked terrified at the very thought.

Minerva: It's a good idea to learn all you can about vampires.

Robert: There's a lot at stake.

(General groans.)

But the others wouldn't let Professor Quirrell keep Harry to himself. It took almost ten minutes to get away from them all. At last, Hagrid managed to make himself heard over the babble.

"Must get on - lots ter buy. Come on, Harry."

Doris Crockford shook Harry's hand one last time, and Hagrid led them through the bar and out into a small, walled courtyard, where there was nothing but a trash can and a few weeds.

Robert: And a small brass plaque.

Hagrid grinned at Harry.

"Told yeh, didn't I? Told yeh you was famous.

Xiomara: Now, now. Nobody likes an I-Told-You-So.

Even Professor Quirrell was tremblin' ter meet yeh - mind you, he's usually tremblin'."

"Is he always that nervous?"

"Oh, yeah. Poor bloke. Brilliant mind. He was fine while he was studyin' outta books but then he took a year off ter get some first-hand experience...They say he met a vampire in the Black Forest, and there was a nasty bit o' trouble with a hag - never been the same since. Scared of the students, scared of his own subject - now, where's me umbrella?"

Vampires? Hags? Harry's head was swimming.

Pomona: I know how he feels!

Xiomara: The backstroke or the crawl?

Pomona: When I first learned that vampires really exist? The *crawls*!

Hagrid, meanwhile, was counting bricks in the wall above the trash can.

"Three up...two across..." he muttered. "Right, stand back, Harry."

He tapped the wall three times with the point of his umbrella.

The brick he had touched quivered - it wriggled - in the middle, a small hole appeared -

(Pomona automatically reaches out and put a hand over Xiomara's mouth.)

it grew wider and wider - a second later they were facing an archway large enough even for Hagrid, an archway onto a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight.

"Welcome," said Hagrid, "to Diagon Alley."

Alastor: Now give us your money and go home.

He grinned at Harry's amazement. They stepped through the archway. Harry looked quickly over his shoulder and saw the archway shrink instantly back into solid wall.

The sun shone brightly on a stack of cauldrons outside the nearest shop. Cauldrons - All Sizes - Copper, Brass, Pewter, Silver - Self-Stirring - Collapsible, said a sign hanging over them.

"Yeah, you'll be needin' one," said Hagrid, "but we gotta get yer money first."

Harry wished he had about eight more eyes.

Alastor: I *knew* he'd been in that cupboard with the spiders too long!

He turned his head in every direction as they walked up the street, trying to look at everything at once: the shops, the things outside them, the people doing their shopping. A plump woman outside an Apothecary was shaking her head as they passed, saying, "Dragon liver, seventeen Sickles an ounce, they're mad..."

Filius: They certainly are! Why, it's only four Sickles in Hogsmeade.

Pomona: Everything is expensive in London.

Filius: And in the future, apparently!

A low, soft hooting came from a dark shop with a sign saying Eeylops Owl Emporium - Tawny, Screech, Barn, Brown, and Snowy. Several boys about Harry's age had their noses pressed against a window with broomsticks in it.

Xiomara: Ah, now it's getting interesting!

"Look," Harry heard one of them say, "the new Nimbus Two Thousand - fastest ever - "

There were shops selling robes, shops selling telescopes

Xiomara: Sod that, get back to the part about the broomstick!

and strange silver instruments Harry had never seen before, window stacked with barrels of bat spleens and eels' eyes, tottering piles of spell books, quills, and rolls of parchment, potion bottles, globes of the moon...

"Gringotts," said Hagrid.

They had reached a snowy white building that towered over the other little shops.

Pomona: Do you suppose goblins are trying to compensate for something?

Standing beside its burnished bronze doors, wearing a uniform of scarlet and gold, was -

Minerva: (smugly) Interesting... Harry is coming to claim his birthright and the first colors we hear about are red and gold... Foreshadowing, I call it.

Robert: Actually, Minna, they did mention bronze just now.

Minerva: As a metal, not as a color.

"Yeah, that's a goblin," said Hagrid quietly as they walked up the white stone steps toward him. The goblin was about a head shorter than Harry. He had a swarthy, clever face, a pointed beard and, Harry noticed, very long fingers and feet. He bowed as they walked inside. Now they were facing a second pair of doors, silver this time, with words engraved upon them:

Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed,

For those who take, but do not earn,

Must pay most dearly in their turn.

So if you seek beneath our floors

A treasure that was never yours,

Thief, you have been warned, beware

Of finding more than treasure there.

"Like I said, yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it," said Hagrid.

Alastor: Plenty of mad folk about. There's always someone who thinks he can outsmart the world.

A pair of goblins bowed them through the silver doors and they were in a vast marble hall. About a hundred more goblins were sitting on high stools behind a long counter, scribbling in large ledgers, weighing coins in brass scales, examining precious stones through eyeglasses. There were too many doors to count leading off the hall, and yet more goblins were showing people in and out of these. Hagrid and Harry made for the counter.

"Morning," said Hagrid to a free goblin.

Robert/Minerva: Free the goblins!

Filius: You're a few centuries too late.

"We've come ter take some money outta Mr. Harry Potter's safe."

"You have his key, sir?"

Pomona: Well, of course, if he's the Keeper of the Keys!

"Got it here somewhere," said Hagrid, and he started emptying his pockets onto the counter, scattering a handful of moldy dog biscuits over the goblin's book of numbers.

Alastor: Good thing Dudley didn't see those last night.

The goblin wrinkled his nose. Harry watched the goblin on their right weighing a pile of rubies as big as glowing coals.

Minerva: Take note, Mr. Moody - more red!

Alastor: We're still ahead on the green references, though.

"Got it," said Hagrid at last, holding up a tiny golden key.

The goblin looked at it closely.

"That seems to be in order."

"An' I've got a letter here from Professor Dumbledore," said Hagrid importantly, throwing out his chest. "It's about the You-Know-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen."

Alastor: Oh, the "You-Know-What". How discrete.

Xiomara: Suppose it has anything to do with "You-Know-Who"?

The goblin read the letter carefully.

"Very well," he said, handing it back to Hagrid, "I will have someone take you down to both vaults. Griphook!"

Griphook was yet another goblin. Once Hagrid had crammed all the dog biscuits back inside his pockets, he and Harry followed Griphook toward one of the door leading off the hall.

"What's the You-Know-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen?" Harry asked.

Filius: Doesn't he mean vault You-Know-Which?

"Can't tell yeh that," said Hagrid mysteriously. "Very secret. Hogwarts business. Dumbledore's trusted me. More my job's worth ter tell yeh that."

Griphook held the door open for them. Harry, who had expected more marble, was surprised. They were in a narrow stone passageway lit with flaming torches.

Minerva: Well, it could hardly be lit with *un*-flaming torches, could it?

It sloped steeply downward and there were little railway tracks on the floor. Griphook whistled and a small cart came hurtling up the tracks toward them.

Filius: And sat up and begged for a dog biscuit.

They climbed in - Hagrid with some difficulty - and were off.

At first they just hurtled through a maze of twisting passages. Harry tried to remember, left, right, right, left, middle fork, right, left, but it was impossible.

Alastor: Good try though. Always pay attention to where they're taking you!

Robert: In case they're taking you You-Know-Where?

Alastor: (Suspiciously) What do you know about...that place?

Robert: (Mysteriously) Everyone knows it... nobody says it.

Pomona: All right, you two. I am Mistress of the Book at the moment, so settle down.

The rattling cart seemed to know its own way, because Griphook wasn't steering.

Harry's eyes stung as the cold air rushed past them, but he kept them wide open. Once, he thought he saw a burst of fire at the end of a passage and twisted around to see if it was a dragon, but too late - they plunged even deeper, passing an underground lake where huge stalactites and stalagmites grew from the ceiling and floor.

"I never know," Harry called to Hagrid over the noise of the cart, "what's the difference between a stalagmite and a stalactite?"

Minerva/Robert: Stalagmites grow from the floor and stalactites grow from the ceiling.

Pomona: Show offs!

"Stalagmite's got an 'm' in it," said Hagrid. "An' don' ask me questions just now, I think I'm gonna be sick."

He did look very green,

Alastor: *More* green! Yes!

and when the cart stopped at last beside a small door in the passage wall, Hagrid got out and had to lean against the wall to stop his knees from trembling.

Griphook unlocked the door. A lot of green smoke came billowing out,

Alastor: Still more green! He's *mine*!

and as it cleared, Harry gasped. Inside were mounds of gold coins. Columns of silver. Heaps of little bronze Knuts.

"All yours," smiled Hagrid.

All Harry's - it was incredible. The Dursleys couldn't have known about this or they'd have had it from him faster than blinking. How often had they complained how much Harry cost them to keep?

Minerva: How much could he cost? They don't feed him properly, they don't buy him clothes, they...

Robert: Minna, I think we're supposed to understand all that.

And all the time there had been a small fortune belonging to him, buried deep under London.

Hagrid helped Harry pile some of it into a bag.

Xiomara: He should hide some of it in his bra to be safe. (Pause) Oh. Right.

Filius: At the risk of being ungentlemanly, Xia, I now have a theory about that jingling sound I heard when you were hit by the Bludger last month.

"The gold ones are Galleons," he explained. "Seventeen silver Sickles to a Galleon and twenty-nine Knuts to a Sickle, it's easy enough. Right, that should be enough fer a couple o' terms, we'll keep the rest safe for yeh." He turned to Griphook. "Vault seven hundred and thirteen, please, and can we go more slowly?"

"One speed only," said Griphook.

They were going even deeper now and gathering speed.

The air became colder and colder as they hurtled round tight corners.

Pomona: Which makes absolutely no sense. The deeper they go, the warmer it should get. Especially if they're anywhere near Salamanders!

They went rattling over an underground ravine, and Harry leaned over the side to try to see what was down at the dark bottom, but Hagrid groaned and pulled him back by the scruff of his neck.

Vault seven hundred and thirteen had no keyhole.

Filius: Oh, Petunia would hate that!

"Stand back," said Griphook importantly. He stroked the door gently with one of his long fingers

All: *Don't say it, Xia!*

and it simply melted away.

"If anyone but a Gringotts goblin tried that, they'd be sucked through the door and trapped in there," said Griphook.

"How often do you check to see if anyone's inside?" Harry asked.

"About once every ten years," said Griphook with a rather nasty grin.

Robert: I think I'd want my money washed before I took it away!

Filius: Muggles have something called "money laundering," don't they, Mona?

Pomona: Yes, but it's not quite the same thing.

Something really extraordinary had to be inside this top security vault, Harry was sure, and he leaned forward eagerly, expecting to see fabulous jewels at the very least - but at first he thought it was empty. Then he noticed a grubby little package wrapped up in brown paper lying on the floor. Hagrid picked it up and tucked it deep inside his coat. Harry longed to know what it was, but knew better than to ask.

Pomona: It's the You-Know-What, of course!

"Come on, back in this infernal cart, and don't talk to me on the way, it's best if I keep me mouth shut," said Hagrid.

Alastor: A lesson to us all!

One wild cart ride later they stood blinking in the sunlight outside Gringotts. Harry didn't know where to run first now that he had a bag full of money. He didn't have to know how many Galleons there were to a pound to know that he was holding more money than he'd had in his whole life - more money than even Dudley had ever had.

Robert: I thought pounds were something to do with weight? In which case *nobody* has more pounds than Dudley does.

Filius: That's only in America. In Britain, they're the name of one denomination of Muggle currency.

Alastor: "Denomination"? I thought that was something to do with religion?

Pomona: (ruefully) For *some* Muggles, money *is* a religion!

"Might as well get yer uniform," said Hagrid, nodding toward Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. "Listen, Harry, would yeh mind if I slipped off fer a pick-me-up in the Leaky Cauldron? I hate them Gringotts carts."

Minerva: Now he's going to go pour alcohol into a queasy stomach?

He did still look a bit sick, so Harry entered Madam Malkin's shop alone, feeling nervous.

Madam Malkin was a squat, smiling witch dressed all in mauve.

Minerva: You don't suppose that's Mimi Malkin, do you? I wouldn't call her "squat" exactly, but...

"Hogwarts, dear?" she said, when Harry started to speak. "Got the lot here - another young man being fitted up just now, in fact."

Pomona: Ah! Harry's first school friend!

In the back of the shop, a boy with a pale, pointed face was standing on a footstool while a second witch pinned up his long black robes.

Alastor: Uh-oh.

Pomona: What?

Alastor: Nothing, probably just coincidence.

Madam Malkin stood Harry on a stool next to him, slipped a long robe over his head, and began to pin it to the right length.

"Hello," said the boy, "Hogwarts, too?"

Robert: That's got to be the most inane introduction line of all time. Where else would he be going?

"Yes," said Harry.

"My father's next door buying my books and mother's up the street looking at wands,"

Minerva: How is a wand going to choose a wizard by examining his *mother*? That sounds like matchmaking taken to an extreme degree! Not that I'd let my parents choose my wand *or* ... (trails off as this brings the whole "Minerva McGonagall" issue back to her mind.)

said the boy. He had a bored, drawling voice. "Then I'm going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don't see why first years can't have their own. I think I'll bully father into getting me one and I'll smuggle it in somehow."

Harry was strongly reminded of Dudley.

Alastor: Sorry, Mona. Bad guess.

"Have *you* got your own broom?" the boy went on.

"No," said Harry.

"Play Quidditch at all?"

"No," Harry said again, wondering what on earth Quidditch could be.

Xiomara: Better than rubies, to seize and hold,

A perfect sphere with wings of gold!

Pomona: Did you just make that up, Xia?

Xiomara: Beats that Milne fellow, eh?

"I do - Father says it's a crime if I'm not picked to play for my House, and I must say, I agree. Know what House you'll be in yet?"

All: *MINE!*

"No," said Harry, feeling more stupid by the minute.

"Well, no one really knows until they get there, do they, but I know I'll be in Slytherin, all our family have been -

Alastor: Please, no! Don't let this be who I think it is...!

imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?"

Xiomara: That anemic little twerp couldn't make it into Hufflepuff if he got down on his knees and begged!

Pomona: Not even if he took a blood-oath of loyalty!

Xiomara: Not even if he promised to scrub the entire castle once a week!

Pomona: Not even if he...

Robert: Right, you two, we get the idea.

"Mmm," said Harry, wishing he could say something a bit more interesting.

"I say, look at that man!" said the boy suddenly, nodding toward the front window.

Xiomara: Appreciating the view are we, dear boy?

Pomona: Xia!

Hagrid was standing there, grinning at Harry and pointing to two large ice creams to show he couldn't come in.

"That's Hagrid," said Harry, pleased to know something the boy didn't. "He works at Hogwarts."

Xiomara: (As Harry) And he's mine, so back off!

(Pomona opens her mouth, presumably to say "Xia!" again. Xiomara claps a hand over it.)

"Oh," said the boy, "I've heard of him. He's a sort of servant, isn't he?"

Robert: Why do I get the feeling that comment's not going to sit too well...?

"He's the gamekeeper," said Harry. He was liking the boy less and less every second.

"Yes, exactly. I heard he's a sort of *savage* -

Xiomara: Who lives with wild, ravaging dormice.

lives in a hut on the school grounds and every now and then he gets drunk, tries to do magic, and ends up setting fire to his bed."

Xiomara: Ooh - Sounds like a recommendation!

"I think he's brilliant," said Harry coldly.

Minerva: That's probably slightly over-fond.

"Do you?" said the boy, with a slight sneer. "Why is he with you? Where are your parents?"

Alastor: Working for the Daily Prophet are you, lad?

"They're dead," said Harry shortly. He didn't feel much like going into the matter with this boy.

"Oh, sorry," said the other, not sounding sorry at all. "But they were *our* kind, weren't they?"

Pomona: I don't think I like this boy.

Filius: We knew that, Mona, and believe me, we all agree!

"They were a witch and wizard, if that's what you mean."

"I really don't think they should let the other sort in, do you?"

Pomona: Well, where am I supposed to go?

Xiomara: Somehow, I don't think you want to ask this boy that question, Mona.

Pomona: Good point.

They're just not the same, they've never been brought up to know our ways.

Minerva: That's what an education is for, laddie!

Some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts until they get the letter, imagine. I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families. What's your surname, anyway?"

Robert: Just call me "Sur".

Xiomara: Just call me gone!

Filius: Better yet, don't call me!

But before Harry could answer, Madam Malkin said, "That's you done, my dear," and Harry, not sorry for an excuse to stop talking to the boy, hopped down from the footstool.

Filius: It sounds like people forget she's there while she pins up their robes. She must overhear some interesting conversations.

Alastor: Hmmm, put an undercover Auror into the right shop...

"Well, I'll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose," said the drawing boy.

Harry was rather quiet as he ate the ice cream Hagrid had bought him (chocolate and raspberry with chopped nuts).

Pomona: I didn't know you could get those in Diagon Alley! And I thought I knew the place backward and forward by now!

Minerva: Maybe it's a shop that hasn't opened yet, Mona. This is more than fifty years into the future, after all.

Pomona: Motivation to live a long life!

"What's up?" said Hagrid.

"Nothing," Harry lied. They stopped to buy parchment and quills. Harry cheered up a bit when he found a bottle of ink that changed color as you wrote. When they had left the shop, he said, "Hagrid, what's Quidditch?"

"Blimey, Harry, I keep forgettin' how little yeh know - not knowin' about Quidditch!"

"Don't make me feel worse," said Harry. He told Hagrid about the pale boy in Madam Malkin's.

Filius: Well, I hope he edited the story a little!

" - and he said people from Muggle families shouldn't even be allowed in -"

"Yer not *from* a Muggle family. If he'd known who yeh *were* - he's grown up knowin' yer name if his parents are wizardin' folk. You saw what everyone in the Leaky Cauldron was like when they saw yeh. Anyway, what does he know about it, some o' the best I ever saw were the only ones with magic in 'em in a long line o' Muggles - look at yer mum! Look what she had fer a sister!"

"So what *is* Quidditch?"

Filius: It's the best game in the world, as long as you're not being used as the Quaffle!

"It's our sport. Wizard sport. It's like - like soccer in the Muggle world - everyone follows Quidditch - played up in the air on broomsticks and there's four balls - sorta hard ter explain the rules."

"And what are Slytherin and Hufflepuff?"

"School Houses. There's four. Everyone says Hufflepuff are a lot o' duffers, but -"

Pomona/Xiomara: WRONG!

"I bet I'm in Hufflepuff," said Harry gloomily.

Xiomara: Yes! I knew it!

"Better Hufflepuff than Slytherin," said Hagrid darkly.

Alastor: How's that again?

"There's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin.

Alastor: That's a blatant lie!

You-Know-Who was one."

Alastor: Slytherin's also turned out some damn good Aurors, "*Shagrid*," but I don't hear you mentioning that! Who do you think is best for hunting down dark wizards? Some Gryffindor who'll rush in where angels and sane people fear to tread?

Minerva: Well, *someone* has to do it!

Alastor: Or a Ravenclaw with their nose in a book and their head in the clouds?

Filius: (Proudly) That's us, Robbie!

Alastor: Or a Hufflepuff, so bloody sweet-natured they wouldn't know evil if it bit them on the bum, and who'd try to reform Grindelwald with a big hug and a nice cup of tea?

Pomona: Has anyone ever tried that?

Alastor: Hah! Take my word for it, people; *it takes* a devious mind to *understand* a devious mind!

"Vol - sorry - You-Know-Who was at Hogwarts?"

"Years an' years ago," said Hagrid.

Minerva: If only he hadn't studied at such a good school, when he went bad it wouldn't have mattered so much!

Robert: That's carrying school pride to a rather odd level, Minna.

They bought Harry's school books in a shop called Flourish and Blotts where the shelves were stacked to the ceiling with books as large as paving stones bound in leather; books the size of postage stamps in covers of silk; books full of peculiar symbols and a few books with nothing in them at all. Even Dudley, who never read anything, would have been wild to get his hands on some of these. Hagrid almost had to drag Harry away from *Curses and Counter-curses (Bewitch Your Friends and Befuddle Your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue-Tying and Much, Much More)* - by Professor Vindictus Viridian.

Alastor: Ha! I always knew Vin'd find a way to make his fortune! Do you think we should tell him?

Minerva: I'm sure he'll figure it out, Al.

"I was trying to find out how to curse Dudley."

Xiomara: How about "Dudley, you..." (spews a string of obscenities that would make a Longshoreman blush.)

Pomona: XIA!!!

"I'm not sayin' that's not a good idea, but yer not ter use magic in the Muggle world except in very special circumstances," said Hagrid. "An' anyway, yeh couldn' work any of them curses yet, yeh'll need a lot more study before yeh get ter that level."

Hagrid wouldn't let Harry buy a solid gold cauldron, either

Filius: Too heavy! Remember, Harry, you'll have to carry it to class three times a week!

("It says pewter on yer list"), but they got a nice set of scales for weighing potion ingredients and a collapsible brass telescope. Then they visited the Apothecary, which was fascinating enough to make up for its horrible smell, a mixture of bad eggs and rotted cabbages.

Minerva: And Hagrid's dealing with this on top of a drink or two, on top of motion-sickness...

Robert: Well, *I'm* not going to clean it up!

Pomona: Yuck!

Barrels of slimy stuff stood on the floor; jars of herbs, dried roots, and bright powders lined the walls; bundle of feathers, strings of fangs, and snarled claws hung from the ceiling. While Hagrid asked the man behind the counter for a supply of some basic potion ingredients for Harry, Harry himself examined silver unicorn horns at twenty-one Galleons each and minuscule, glittery-black beetle eyes (five Knuts a scoop).

Pomona: Say, I've been meaning to ask about that; it's a dreadful crime to kill a unicorn, right?

Others: "Yes"; "Of course!"; "Why do you want to know?" and so on.

Pomona: So how can they sell unicorn horns in Diagon Alley? Knockturn Alley, I could see, but...

Minerva: (Sounding as if she'd swallowed the textbook.) Male unicorns shed their horns at the end of each mating season, the females slightly later. Unlike deer, they begin re-growing them almost immediately...

Xiomara: Psst! Robbie! Where's the off-switch?

Minerva: (Ignoring this.) Unicorns have occasionally been mistaken for horses during the brief period when they are completely hornless.

Pomona: So it's just a question of hiking through unicorn country at the right time of year until you find a horn lying around?

Filius: Some people make a lifetime career of it.

Outside the Apothecary, Hagrid checked Harry's list again.

"Just yer wand left - oh yeah, an' I still haven't got yeh a birthday present."

Harry felt himself go red.

Minerva: Red again? Pay attention, everyone!

Robert: Hmm, red face, gold in his pockets...You could be on to something, Minna.

"You don't have to - "

"I know I don't have to. Tell yeh what, I'll get yer animal. Not a toad, toads went outta fashion years ago, yeh'd be laughed at -

Pomona: *What?*

Filius: And when, may I ask, did toads go out of fashion?

Minerva: Well, sometime between now and the 1990's, obviously.

Filius/Pomona: Humph!

an' I don' like cats, they make me sneeze. I'll get yer an owl. All the kids want owls, they're dead useful, carry yer mail an' everythin'."

Twenty minutes later, they left Eeylops Owl Emporium, which had been dark and full of rustling and flickering, jewel-bright eyes. Harry now carried a large cage that held a beautiful snowy owl, fast asleep with her head under her wing. He couldn't stop stammering his thanks, sounding just like Professor Quirrell.

Filius: A Snowy! Harry must be quite strong for his size; Snowys aren't exactly lightweights!

"Don' mention it," said Hagrid gruffly. "Don' expect you've had a lotta presents from them Dursleys. Just Ollivanders left now - only place fer wands, Ollivanders, and yeh gotta have the best wand."

A magic wand...this was what Harry had been really looking forward to.

The last shop was narrow and shabby. Peeling gold letters over the door read Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 b.c. A single wand lay on a faded purple cushion in the dusty window.

Robert: Ollivander claims it's the wand of Merlin himself.

Filius: Well, that's a better memento than the Leaky Cauldron has!

A tinkling bell rang somewhere in the depths of the shop as they stepped inside. It was a tiny place, empty except for a single, spindly chair that Hagrid sat on to wait. Harry felt strangely as though he had entered a very strict library;

Filius: Yes, but it's the wands that read *you*.

he swallowed a lot of new questions that had just occurred to him and looked instead at the thousands of narrow boxes piled neatly right up to the ceiling. For some reason, the back of his neck prickled. The very dust and silence in here seemed to tingle with some secret magic.

Pomona: I remember feeling that!

"Good afternoon," said a soft voice. Harry jumped. Hagrid must have jumped, too, because there was a loud crunching noise and he got quickly off the spindly chair.

An old man was standing before them, his wide, pale eyes shining like moons through the gloom of the shop.

"Hello," said Harry awkwardly.

"Ah, yes," said the man. "Yes, yes. I thought I'd be seeing you soon. Harry Potter." It wasn't a question. "You have your mother's eyes. It seems only yesterday she was in here herself, buying her first wand. Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow.

Filius: Willow is good for charm work!

Nice wand for charm work."

Filius: I knew it!

Mr. Ollivander moved closer to Harry. Harry wished he would blink. Those silvery eyes were a bit creepy.

"Your father, on the other hand, favored a mahogany wand. Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for transfiguration.

Minerva: Ah-hah! I think I like Harry's father!

Well, I say your father favored it - it's really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course."

Mr. Ollivander had come so close that he and Harry were almost nose to nose. Harry could see himself reflected in those misty eyes.

"And that's where..."

Mr. Ollivander touched the lightning scar on Harry's forehead with a long, white finger.

Minerva: (annoyed) Why do people always assume they can touch children without permission? Mr. Ollivander is a bit strange, but I doubt he would have done that to an adult!

"I'm sorry to say I sold the wand that did it," he said softly. "Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands...well, if I'd known what that wand was going out into the world to do...."

He shook his head and then, to Harry's relief, spotted Hagrid.

"Rubeus! Rubeus Hagrid! How nice to see you again... Oak, sixteen inches, rather bendy, wasn't it?"

Robert: Don't you love being identified solely by your wand?

Xiomara: *You* haven't anything to worry about, laddybuck!

Minerva: XIOMARA!!!

Xiomara: Hah! Made you look!

Filius: Children...!

"It was, sir, yes," said Hagrid.

"Good wand, that one. But I suppose they snapped it in half when you got expelled?" said Mr. Ollivander, suddenly stern.

Pomona: That sounds so military, somehow.

"Er - yes, they did, yes," said Hagrid, shuffling his feet. "I've still got the pieces, though," he added brightly.

"But you don't *use* them?" said Mr. Ollivander sharply.

"Oh, no, sir," said Hagrid quickly. Harry noticed he gripped his pink umbrella very tightly as he spoke.

Alastor: To anyone who's paying attention, that should be a dead giveaway right there!

"Hmmm," said Mr. Ollivander, giving Hagrid a piercing look. "Well, now - Mr. Potter. Let me see." He pulled a long tape measure with silver markings out of his pocket. "Which is your wand arm?"

Pomona: When is he going to learn that children from Muggle families won't know what that means?

"Er - well, I'm right-handed," said Harry.

Pomona: Okay, well *some* of them won't.

"Hold out your arm. That's it." He measured Harry from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round his head. As he measured, he said, "Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Mr. Potter. We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard's wand."

Harry suddenly realized that the tape measure, which was measuring between his nostrils, was doing this on its own. Mr. Ollivander was flitting around the shelves, taking down boxes.

"That will do," he said, and the tape measure crumpled into a heap on the floor.

Pomona: When I was shopping for my wand, Mr. Ollivander forgot to say that until I yelped.

Robert: Merlin's beard, what was it trying to measure?

Pomona: I'll bet Xia can guess!

"Right then, Mr. Potter. Try this one. Beechwood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. Just take it and give it a wave."

Harry took the wand and (feeling foolish) waved it around a bit, but Mr. Ollivander snatched it out of his hand almost at once.

"Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try -"

Filius: Seven inches? Even *my* wand isn't that short! And Xia, don't try to make to make anything risqué out of that unless you're prepared to test your theory!

(General chorus of catcalls. Pomona blushes, but also looks a little annoyed. Xiomara just grins.)

Xiomara: I'll send my assistant to do the fieldwork.

Pomona: (Blushing deeper but also giggling.) Xia...!

Harry tried - but he hardly raised the wand when it, too, was snatched back by Mr. Ollivander.

"No, no - here, ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy. Go on, go on, try it out."

Harry tried. And tried. He had no idea what Mr. Ollivander was waiting for. The pile of tried wands was mounting higher and higher on the spindly chair, but the more wands Mr. Ollivander pulled from the shelves, the happier he seemed to become.

Minerva: Morgan's bones!

Robert: What?

Minerva: Do you suppose the only wand Harry is a match for is the one in the window?

Robert: Merlin's wand!

Minerva: Exactly!

"Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here somewhere - I wonder, now - yes, why not - unusual combination - holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

Filius: I suspect this is going to be the one, Minna. A good effort, though.

Harry took the wand. He felt a sudden warmth in his fingers. He raised the wand above his head, brought it swishing down through the dusty air and a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light on to the walls.

Minerva: Red and gold! Do you all hear that, RED AND GOLD!

Robert: Minna, slow, deep breaths.

Hagrid whooped and clapped and Mr. Ollivander cried, "Oh, bravo! Yes, indeed, oh, very good.

Well, well, well... how curious... how very curious..."

Pomona: Does that mean it's time for a Louis Carroll quote?

He put Harry's wand back into its box and wrapped it in brown paper, still muttering, "Curious... curious..."

Filius: Yes, we all are by now. Are you going to explain it?

"Sorry," said Harry, "but *what's* curious?"

Mr. Ollivander fixed Harry with his pale stare.

Xiomara: That stare is pretty curious for one thing.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather - just one other. It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother - why, its brother gave you that scar."

Robert: As the theme music rumbles portentously...

Harry swallowed.

"Yes, thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember... I think we must expect great things from you, Mr. Potter... After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things, terrible, yes, but great."

Minerva: Honestly! I don't believe in lying to children, but that doesn't mean you have to tell them *everything*! The way he put it, he might as well have said, "Congratulations, lad, you've been chosen as the next Dark Lord!" As if poor Harry didn't have enough on his mind just now!

Harry shivered. He wasn't sure he liked Mr. Ollivander too much. He paid seven gold Galleons for his wand, and Mr. Ollivander bowed them from his shop.

The late afternoon sun hung low in the sky as Harry and Hagrid made their way back down Diagon Alley, back through the wall, back through the Leaky Cauldron, now empty. Harry didn't speak at all as they walked down the road; he didn't even notice how much people were gawking at them on the Underground, laden as they were with all their funny-shaped packages, with the snowy owl asleep in its cage on Harry's lap.

Minerva: Don't Muggles know it's rude to stare?

Pomona: Some do.

Up another escalator, out into Paddington station; Harry only realized where they were when Hagrid tapped him on the shoulder.

"Got time fer a bit to eat before yer train leaves," he said.

He bought Harry a hamburger and they sat down on plastic seats to eat them. Harry kept looking around. Everything looked so strange, somehow.

Pomona: Get used to that, Harry. It'll look strange every summer when you first get back to the Muggle world.

"You all right, Harry? Yer very quiet," said Hagrid.

Harry wasn't sure he could explain. He'd just had the best birthday of his life - and yet - he chewed his hamburger, trying to find the words.

"Everyone thinks I'm special," he said at last.

Xiomara: Well, let's see. He defeated a powerful Dark wizard when he was only a baby, he survived the Avada Kedavra, he's a parselmouth. What do you think guys, anything special about him?

Minerva: He's survived ten years with the Dursleys.

Xiomara: Now *that* makes him special!

"All those people in the Leaky Cauldron, Professor Quirrell, Mr. Ollivander... but I don't know anything about magic at all. How can they expect great things? I'm famous and I can't even remember what I'm famous for. I don't know what happened when Vol -, sorry - I mean, the night my parents died."

Hagrid leaned across the table. Behind the wild beard and eyebrows he wore a very kind smile.

"Don' you worry, Harry. You'll learn fast enough. Everyone always starts at the beginning at Hogwarts, you'll be just fine. Just be yerself.

Pomona: He's barely finding out who "himself" *is*!

Filius: Who isn't, at eleven?

I know it's hard. Yeh've been singled out, an' that's always hard. But yeh'll have a great time at Hogwarts - I did - still do, 'smatter of fact."

Hagrid helped Harry on to the train that would take him back to the Dursleys, then handed him an envelope.

"Yer ticket fer Hogwarts," he said. "First o' September - King's Cross - it's all on yer ticket. Any problems with the Dursleys, send me a letter with yer owl, she'll know where to find me..."

Alastor: And what's to stop the Dursleys from killing his owl first thing?

See yeh soon, Harry."

Pomona: What? But how's he going to find the platform?

The train pulled out of the station. Harry wanted to watch Hagrid until he was out of sight; he rose in his seat and pressed his nose against the window, but he blinked and Hagrid had gone.

(Pause)

Minerva: Well *that* left a lot of loose ends!

Alastor: Such as, how did Hagrid disappear in a blink if he's not allowed to use magic?

Filius: And how is Harry supposed to take the Hogwarts Express when Hagrid didn't tell him how to find the platform?

Pomona: Well, that was only Chapter Five. There's a lot more story to go.

Minerva: Speaking of having a lot more to go, I have two more feet to write on this Transfiguration paper, and I know we all could use more work before the Potions exam.

(General grumbles of reluctant agreement. As people are digging out quills, re-opening textbooks and so on, Alastor takes the Book and quietly tucks it into his bag.)

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 12

Would you trust Alastor with the Book? CONSTANT VIGILANCE!

Disclaimer: It all belongs to J. K. Rowling, except my personal gratitude which she has to share in equal parts with notsosaintly and Dark Beta!

Scene: The *next* day. Slytherin Common Room. The gang is taking a break from studying. Alastor has rounded up some pumpkin juice and six glasses. Xiomara is out of the room for a minute; Filius and Pomona are digging into Mona's book bag after more chocolate frogs. Robert and Minerva are busy tucking the components of a project back into their book bags and talking quietly.

Robert: Well, think about it, Minna; the name is the same, the hair color is the same, and you are stud... (He stops and lowers his voice to nearly a whisper) *you are* studying to be an Animagus.

Minerva: (Also barely above a whisper.) But I've only been at it about a month, Robbie. There's no knowing what my animal form will turn out to be *if* I succeed at all!

Robert: You'll succeed. Well, if you turn out to be a wombat, I'll admit I was wrong, but I'm going to start looking for a nice little collar with a bell on it for your next birthday. And by the way, I do have a brother and two male cousins on my Da's side. Maybe the book means you'll end up with one of them.

Xiomara: (re-entering) I found it alright, Al, but you didn't tell me the Bloody Baron felt free to wander in and out of the girls' loo any time he pleased!

Alastor: I assumed if you met him, you'd be able to handle him, lass. Now, come take these glasses off my hands, you lot, I feel like a bloody barmaid!

Pomona: I hate to tell you, Al, but you don't have the figure for it!

Filius: Never mind the figure, does he have the book?

Alastor: What makes you think I'd have it?

Filius: Because A. Nobody else does, B. You and Xia are the only two of us who haven't read at least a chapter yet, and C. I saw you sneak it into your bag yesterday.

Alastor: (Pulls the book out of a pocket in his robes. It looks a bit more battered than it did last time we saw it.) I spent last night testing this thing for every curse, enchantment or booby-trap I know of. It seems to be clean.

Filius: Some of those tests are almost as alarming as the spells they're meant to guard against, Al. I hope you...

Alastor: I made sure to recant them all once I was sure the thing was clean. (He opens the book. There is a loud bang and a puff of smoke from the book.) Er, except for that one.

Pomona: Just for that, I vote Al to be the next one to read! That way if any more of his little "tests" are in there...

Minerva: I second the motion!

Alastor: All right, all right. Chapter Six: **The Journey From Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.**

Harry's last month with the Dursleys wasn't fun.

Robert: Why am I not surprised?

True, Dudley was now so scared of Harry he wouldn't stay in the same room, while Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon didn't shut Harry in his cupboard, force him to do anything, or shout at him - in fact, they didn't speak to him at all. Half terrified, half furious, they acted as though any chair with Harry in it were empty. Although this was an improvement in many ways, it did become a bit depressing after a while.

Minerva: But he's still in the bedroom with all the books, isn't he?

Harry kept to his room, with his new owl for company.

Minerva: And the owl too.

He had decided to call her Hedwig, a name he had found in a *History of Magic*. His school books were very interesting. He lay on his bed reading late into the night, Hedwig swooping in and out of the open window as she pleased.

Pomona: Along with all the flies and mosquitoes? Urgh!

Filius: I really hope Harry had the sense to bring the spiders up from the cupboard! He'll be needing them!

It was lucky that Aunt Petunia didn't come in to vacuum anymore, because Hedwig kept bringing back dead mice.

Minerva: Well, at least he'll be well fed. Er...

Xiomara: (aside to Robert) If you're planning to pursue this relationship... make sure *you* do all the cooking.

Every night before he went to sleep, Harry ticked off another day on the piece of paper he had pinned to the wall, counting down to September the first.

On the last day of August he thought he'd better speak to his aunt and uncle about getting to King's Cross station the next day,

Filius: Isn't that leaving things a little till the last minute?

so he went down to the living room where they were watching a quiz show on television. He cleared his throat to let them know he was there, and Dudley screamed and ran from the room.

All: (snicker)

"Er - Uncle Vernon?"

Uncle Vernon grunted to show he was listening.

Robert: Like a boar. Heredity in action.

"Er - I need to be at King's Cross tomorrow to - to go to Hogwarts."

Uncle Vernon grunted again.

"Would it be all right if you gave me a lift?"

Xiomara: Getting away from Vernon ought to give him a lift!

Grunt. Harry supposed that meant yes.

"Thank you."

He was about to go back upstairs when Uncle Vernon actually spoke.

"Funny way to get to a wizards' school, the train. Magic carpets all got punctures, have they?"

Robert: Yes, they hit some carpet tacks.

Pomona: (earnestly) Oh, are high taxes why they were so expensive before they were banned?

Alastor: The broomstick makers didn't like the foreign competition, so they got the duties raised.

Harry didn't say anything.

"Where is this school, anyway?"

Alastor: Why is he suddenly taking an interest?

"I don't know," said Harry, realizing this for the first time. He pulled the ticket Hagrid had given him out of his pocket.

"I just take the train from platform nine and three-quarters at eleven o'clock," he read.

Robert: Why not nine forty-five? Nine and three-quarters at nine and three-quarters, get it?

Minerva: Have you ever tried to get an eleven-year-old awake, kempt, fed and packed - not to mention the familiars! - in time to drive to the train station during the morning rush hour? I don't think so!

His aunt and uncle stared.

"Platform what?"

"Nine and three-quarters."

"Don't talk rubbish," said Uncle Vernon.

Filius: Banana peels! Apple cores! Discarded bits of parchment!

Pomona: I don't think that's quite what they mean by "talking rubbish", Flit.

Filius: I know but who could resist such an opening?

"There is no platform nine and three-quarters."

Alastor: Hah! Never assume what you see is all that's there, Vernon!

"It's on my ticket."

Alastor: Not that I'd consider a ticket sufficient evidence, either.

"Barking," said Uncle Vernon, "howling mad, the lot of them. You'll see. You just wait. All right, we'll take you to King's Cross. We're going up to London tomorrow anyway, or I wouldn't bother."

Xiomara: And we don't like you, either!

"Why are you going to London?" Harry asked, trying to keep things friendly.

Pomona: Ooh, good social instincts! Definitely a Hufflepuff!

"Taking Dudley to the hospital," growled Uncle Vernon. "Got to have that ruddy tail removed before he goes to Smeltings."

Pomona: A lion has a tail and a very fine tail,

And so has an elephant, and so has a whale,

And so has a crocodile, and so has a quail -

They've all got tails but me.

Xiomara: Mona, I hadn't realized you felt deprived. Just let me take care of the matter for you...(pulls out wand.)

All: NO!

Harry woke at five o'clock the next morning and was too excited and nervous to go back to sleep. He got up and pulled on his jeans because he didn't want to

walk into the station in his wizard's robes - he'd change on the train.

Xiomara: Even a Muggle might think he looked better in his robes than in Dudley's hand-me-downs.

Pomona: I don't know. Someone who looks sloppy in a "normal" way will still attract less attention than someone who looks well dressed in an "abnormal" way.

Alastor: A bit of mess is a good way to make sure nobody pays attention to you.

He checked his Hogwarts list yet again to make sure he had everything he needed, saw that Hedwig was shut safely in her cage, and then paced the room, waiting for the Dursleys to get up.

Filius: Hmph! He could have let the owl have a little more time to stretch her wings.

Two hours later, Harry's huge, heavy trunk had been loaded into the Dursleys' car, Aunt Petunia had talked Dudley into sitting next to Harry,

Minerva: Bribed him with sweets, probably.

Pomona: I'll bet conversation between those two has *tailed* off.

and they had set off.

Robert: If they get bored they can tell *tales*!

They reached King's Cross at half past ten. Uncle Vernon dumped Harry's trunk onto a cart and wheeled it into the station for him. Harry thought this was strangely kind

Alastor: Boy has good instincts.

until Uncle Vernon stopped dead, facing the platforms with a nasty grin on his face.

Alastor: If Vernon ever needed to disguise himself, all he'd have to do would be to look pleasant.

Xiomara: I think a Polyjuice potion would be easier!

"Well, there you are, boy. Platform nine - platform ten. Your platform should be somewhere in the middle, but they don't seem to have built it yet, do they?"

He was quite right, of course.

All: That's what you think!

There was a big plastic number nine over one platform and a big plastic number ten over the one next to it, and in the middle, nothing at all.

"Have a good term," said Uncle Vernon with an even nastier smile. He left without another word. Harry turned and saw the Dursleys drive away. All three of them were laughing.

Alastor: I wonder if they're planning on coming back for him after he's had a good scare or if they're hoping they've seen the last of him.

Harry's mouth went rather dry. What on earth was he going to do?

Pomona: Doesn't anyone plan ahead in the future? When I went to catch the train my first year, the instructions for getting onto the platform came with my letter! My parents were scared silly that I'd slam into the wall and break something.

Alastor: Somebody's testing Harry, I reckon. Wants to see how he'll handle it.

Robert: More likely the spells they use to reproduce all those letters recognized him as wizard-born and assumed he wouldn't need instructions and no one remembered to add a category for "wizard born but Muggle raised."

Alastor: With *Dumbledore* in charge, nobody thought of that? Right.

He was starting to attract a lot of funny looks, because of Hedwig. He'd have to ask someone.

He stopped a passing guard, but didn't dare mention platform nine and three-quarters.

The guard had never heard of Hogwarts and when Harry couldn't even tell him what part of the country it was in, he started to get annoyed, as though Harry was being stupid on purpose.

Getting desperate, Harry asked the guard for the train that left at eleven o'clock, but the guard said there wasn't one.

Pomona: That's hard to believe.

Minerva: But a good thing - who knows where Harry might have ended up?

Filius: I think he'd have sense enough not to settle into a seat until he'd found out for sure where the train was going.

Xiomara: I don't know...if the alternative was going back to the Dursleys...

In the end the guard strode away, muttering about time wasters. Harry was now trying hard not to panic. According to the large clock over the arrivals board, he had ten minutes left to get on the train to Hogwarts and he had no idea how to do it; he was stranded in the middle of a station with a trunk he could hardly lift, a pocket full of wizard money, and a large owl.

Minerva: You'd think Queen Boadicea could rise up and tell a first year how to get through now and then.

Pomona: Is that really true? I mean about Boadicea being buried under the platforms?

Robert: It's true, all right. Even the Muggles have legends about it! But she's buried deep enough that even if someone started digging I doubt they'd ever find her.

Filius: And even if she'd stayed on as a ghost, she might not know how to go through the gateway. There's no proof that she was a witch, much as we'd like to believe it.

Alastor: If she was a witch, why did the Roman Muggles win?

Hagrid must have forgotten to tell him something you had to do, like tapping the third brick on the left to get into Diagon Alley. He wondered if he should get out his wand and start tapping the ticket inspector's stand between platforms nine and ten.

Minerva: Not the right answer, but at least he's still thinking!

At that moment a group of people passed just behind him and he caught a few words of what they were saying.

" - packed with Muggles, of course - "

Robert: Packing with Muggles is unreliable. I always use bubble wrap.

Harry swung around. The speaker was a plump woman who was talking to four boys, all with flaming red hair.

All: WEASLEYS!

Filius: Once again, some things remain constant!

Minerva: You mean Constance!

Filius: Her too.

Robert: What do you think, Min, are these Connie Weasley's descendents?

Minerva: Or Peg's or Bryan's or Anne's or Will's or...

Xiomara: Hey, they know what causes that now.

Alastor: At least that's the *official* story.

Each of them was pushing a trunk like Harry's in front of him - and they had an owl.

Pomona: What's wrong with toads? Flit has two; I have one. They're very useful against cutworm and other garden pests.

Heart hammering, Harry pushed his cart after them. They stopped and so did he, just near enough to hear what they were saying.

Alastor: The boy's picked up quite a few useful skills already.

"Now, what's the platform number?" said the boys' mother.

"Nine and three-quarters!" piped a small girl, also red-headed, who was holding her hand, "Mom, can't I go..."

Pomona: ...to the loo?

Xiomara: ...to the Dark Side?

Robert: ...to Uranus?

"You're not old enough, Ginny, now be quiet.

Filius: That's a bit rude.

All right, Percy, you go first."

What looked like the oldest boy marched toward platforms nine and ten. Harry watched, careful not to blink in case he missed it - but just as the boy reached the dividing barrier between to the two platforms, a large crowd of tourists came swarming in front of him and by the time the last backpack had cleared away, the boy had vanished.

Pomona: I wonder if Hogwarts pays those tourists to obstruct the Muggles' view every year?

Xiomara: No, but maybe they should!

"Fred, you next," the plump woman said.

"I'm not Fred, I'm George," said the boy. "Honestly, woman, you call yourself our mother? Can't you tell I'm George?"

Robert: Want to bet?

"Sorry, George, dear."

"Only joking, I am Fred," said the boy, and off he went. His twin called after him to hurry up, and he must have done so, because a second later, he had gone - but how had he done it?

Now the third brother was walking briskly toward the barrier - he was almost there - and then, quite suddenly, he wasn't anywhere.

Xiomara: Sure, he was - he was on Platform nine-and-three-quarters!

There was nothing else for it.

"Excuse me," Harry said to the plump woman.

"Hello, dear," she said. "First time at Hogwarts?"

Pomona: Hogwarts? No, I was hoping you could direct me to the International Owl Fanciers Convention!

Ron's new, too."

She pointed at the last and youngest of her sons. He was tall, thin, and gangling, with freckles, big hands and feet, and a long nose.

"Yes," said Harry. "The thing is - the thing is, I don't know how to - "

"How to get onto the platform?" she said kindly, and Harry nodded.

Minerva: Does she interrupt everybody's questions or just children's?

"Not to worry," she said. "All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important.

Xiomara: "Don't be scared." Always worrisome advice.

Best to do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous. Go on, go now before Ron."

"Er - okay," said Harry.

He pushed his trolley around and stared at the barrier. It looked very solid.

Filius: Oh, that this too, too solid barrier would melt...

He started to walk toward it. People jostled him on their way to platforms nine and ten. Harry walked more quickly. He was going to smash right into that barrier and then he'd be in trouble - leaning forward over his cart, he broke into a heavy run - the barrier was coming nearer and nearer - he wouldn't be able to stop - the cart was out of control - he was a foot away - he closed his eyes ready for the crash -

It didn't come...he kept on running...he opened his eyes.

Robert: Just as he smashed into a cluster of Hogwarts faculty, breaking numerous limbs and causing his instant expulsion.

Filius: You don't think the teachers take the Express, do you?

Alastor: Not unless they're totally poverty stricken.

Minerva: When teachers do ride the Express, they get comp tickets.

A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people. A sign overhead said Hogwarts Express, eleven o'clock. Harry looked behind him and saw a wrought-iron archway where the barrier had been, with the words *Platform Nine and Three-Quarters* on it. He had done it.

All: Hurrah! Yea, Harry! (and so on.)

Smoke from the engine drifted over the heads of the chattering crowd, while cats of every color wound here and there between their legs.

Xiomara: Why aren't the cats in cages like the owls? Discrimination, I call it!

Minerva: Telling someone to put a cat in a cage will get you brought up on cruelty charges.

Pomona: Yes, it would be hard on the cat...

Minerva: Oh, it's not the cats the Ministry is worried about.

Owls hooted to one another in a disgruntled sort of way over the babble and the scraping of heavy trunks.

Xiomara: See, they don't like being caged either.

Robert: When you think about it, after the owl's been to Hogwarts once, there shouldn't be any need to take them on the train. Just turn them loose and tell them, "I'll see you at school."

The first few carriages were already packed with students, some hanging out of the window to talk to their families, some fighting over seats. Harry pushed his cart off down the platform in search of an empty seat. He passed a round-faced boy who was saying, "Gran, I've lost my toad again."

"Oh, *Neville*," he heard the old woman sigh.

Filius: That's all right, boy. They're out of fashion anyway. I just hope Scaramouche and Papagena don't find out about this!

Xiomara: Somehow I don't think your toads would much care that their species will someday be out of fashion as familiars, Flit.

Alastor: I don't know...you can never be sure how much an animal is taking in.

A boy with dreadlocks was surrounded by a small crowd.

Alastor: Right, what are dreadlocks?

Minerva: A common hairstyle in Jamaica. I think it has something to do with their religion.

"Give us a look, Lee, go on."

Robert: At what, his hair or his religion?

The boy lifted the lid of a box in his arms, and the people around him shrieked and yelled as something inside poked out a long, hairy leg.

Xiomara: Maybe they got one of those cats boxed after all.

Minerva: The minute he lifted the lid, a cat would erupt like Mount Vesuvius.

Harry pressed on through the crowd until he found an empty compartment near the end of the train. He put Hedwig inside first and then started to shove and heave his trunk toward the train door. He tried to lift it up the steps but could hardly raise one end and twice he dropped it painfully on his foot.

"Want a hand?" It was one of the red-haired twins he'd followed through the barrier.

Alastor: A hand? No, but he could use a new foot.

"Yes, please," Harry panted.

"Oy, Fred! C'mere and help!"

With the twins' help, Harry's trunk was at last tucked away in a corner of the compartment.

"Thanks," said Harry, pushing his sweaty hair out of his eyes.

"What's that?" said one of the twins suddenly, pointing at Harry's lightning scar.

"Blimey," said the other twin. "Are you -?"

"He *is*," said the first twin. "Aren't you?" he added to Harry.

Xiomara: Ah, so's your Mum!

"What?" said Harry.

"*Harry Potter*," chorused the twins.

"Oh, him," said Harry. "I mean, yes, I am."

Pomona: ...but we were expecting someone taller.

The two boys gawked at him, and Harry felt himself turning red. Then, to his relief, a voice came floating in through the train's open door.

"Fred? George? Are you there?"

"Coming, Mom."

With a last look at Harry, the twins hopped off the train.

Minerva: ...skipped down the platform...

Robert: ...and jumped at the chance to spread the news.

Harry sat down next to the window where, half hidden, he could watch the red-haired family on the platform and hear what they were saying.

Alastor: ...once again displaying excellent observational skills.

Minerva: Not everyone considers eavesdropping a required life-lesson, Al.

Alastor: They should.

Xiomara: Well, maybe old Dumbles was right to leave him with those Dursleys after all. He obviously learned his snooping skills from his Aunt Petunia.

Their mother had just taken out her handkerchief.

"Ron, you've got something on your nose."

The youngest boy tried to jerk out of the way, but she grabbed him and began rubbing the end of his nose.

Alastor: That's it, embarrass the lad in public.

Robert: Good thing she didn't spot Harry's scar, she'd have tried to rub that off too!

"*Mom* - geroff." He wriggled free.

"Aaah, has ickle Ronnie got somefink on his nosie?" said one of the twins.

"Shut up," said Ron.

Robert: What a comeback!

"Where's Percy?" said their mother.

"He's coming now."

The oldest boy came striding into sight. He had already changed into his billowing black Hogwarts robes, and Harry noticed a shiny silver badge on his chest with the letter *P* in it.

"Can't stay long, Mother," he said. "I'm up front, the prefects have got two compartments to themselves - "

Robert: Mentioned oh so casually...

"Oh, are you a *prefect*, Percy?" said one of the twins, with an air of great surprise.

Xiomara: We thought the *P* stood for Pompous Ass!

"You should have said something, we had no idea."

"Hang on, I think I remember him saying something about it," said the other twin.

Robert: Wait for it.

"Once - "

"Or twice - "

"A minute - "

"All summer - "

"Oh, shut up," said Percy the Prefect.

Minerva: Obviously that rapier wit runs in the family!

"How come Percy gets new robes, anyway?" said one of the twins.

Minerva: So there will be something to hand down to the next generation. I heard Will say there wasn't going to be enough left of his robes to pass on when his little brother starts at Hogwarts, and poor Connie has a cauldron that's been in the family since her great grandmother's day! The bottom is wearing awfully thin.

"Because he's a *prefect*," said their mother fondly. "All right, dear, well, have a good term - send me an owl when you get there."

She kissed Percy on the cheek and he left. Then she turned to the twins.

"Now, you two - this year, you behave yourselves. If I get one more owl telling me you've - you've blown up a toilet or - "

"Blown up a toilet? We've never blown up a toilet."

Alastor: (looking at Robert and Minerva) Didn't you two try to blow up a toilet in your second year?

Minerva: (wincing) Don't remind me! There was a hearing to determine whether I was misusing my scholarship! And if we hadn't been caught before we could do any real damage, things could have gone a lot worse! Robbie tried to take all the blame...

Robert: But you wouldn't let me.

Minerva: Well, how could I, Sir Chivalrous, when I was right there casting explosive spells beside you? Anyway, we've been *very* careful not to cross the line since then!

Pomona: How can you misuse a scholarship to blow up a toilet?

Minerva: Well, it was more a question of whether I was taking it seriously enough. Vandalizing school property made them think I didn't appreciate what I had.

Robert: Besides, it turned out that the joke wasn't very original. It's been Dumbledore - I mean, done before.

(All, except Minerva, stare at him as the implication sinks in.)

Xiomara: You're bloody *joking*!

Filius: Did he tell you that or did you dig into old detention records?

Minerva: Both, actually.

Pomona: Did they even *have* indoor toilets when Dumbledore was a student?

Minerva: Mona, he's not *that* old!

Robert: They did, but they had one less when *he* was finished! Anyway, the wizarding world has had indoor plumbing a lot longer than the Muggle world.

Minerva: More consistently, too. And we've always known better than to use lead. No offense, Mona - the Muggle world has come up with some amazing things - but reading about the plumbing in ancient Rome made my hair stand on end!

"Great idea though, thanks, Mom."

Minerva: Bad idea, lads, and Mum should learn to guard her tongue.

"It's *not* funny. And look after Ron."

"Don't worry, ickle Ronniekins is safe with us."

Alastor: Like he'd be safe with a couple of baby basilisks!

"Shut up," said Ron again. He was almost as tall as the twins already and his nose was still pink where his mother had rubbed it.

"Hey, Mom, guess what? Guess who we just met on the train?"

Pomona: The hero of this book!

Harry leaned back quickly so they couldn't see him looking.

"You know that black-haired boy who was near us in the station? Know who he is?"

"Who?"

Filius: Three guesses, who would be starting at Hogwarts this year who's famous enough to get us this excited?

"*Harry Potter!*"

Harry heard the little girl's voice.

"Oh, Mom, can I go on the train and see him, Mom, oh please..."

"You've already seen him, Ginny, and the poor boy isn't something you goggle at in a zoo.

Xiomara: Please do not feed or annoy the Harrys.

Robert: But if you want to make the glass disappear, that's ok.

Is he really, Fred? How do you know?"

"Asked him. Saw his scar. It's really there - like lightning."

Minerva: A poor simile, since lightning vanishes as soon as you've seen it.

"Poor *dear* - no wonder he was alone, I wondered. He was ever so polite when he asked how to get onto the platform."

Filius: Well, what were you expecting: "I destroyed Voldemort, and if you don't tell me how to get onto the platform *right now*, you're next"?

"Never mind that, do you think he remembers what You-Know-Who looks like?"

Pomona: Do your arithmetic! He wasn't even two years old!

Their mother suddenly became very stern.

"I forbid you to ask him, Fred. No, don't you dare. As though he needs reminding of that on his first day at school."

Alastor: As if he could *avoid* being reminded of that on *any* day!

"All right, keep your hair on."

Pomona: It's a wig?

A whistle sounded.

"Hurry up!" their mother said, and the three boys clambered onto the train. They leaned out of the window for her to kiss them good-bye, and their younger sister began to cry.

Xiomara: Cheer up, kid. Just think of all the girl-talks you can have this year, just you and your smother - I mean mother.

"Don't, Ginny, we'll send you loads of owls."

Xiomara: Heavily loaded, too.

Filius: They'd get the owls drunk? What rotters!

"We'll send you a Hogwarts toilet seat."

"George!"

Robert: Or possibly Fred.

"Only joking, Mom."

Minerva: No, he wasn't.

The train began to move. Harry saw the boys' mother waving and their sister, half laughing, half crying, running to keep up with the train

Minerva: (sternly) That could be dangerous!

until it gathered too much speed, then she fell back and waved.

Harry watched the girl and her mother disappear as the train rounded the corner. Houses flashed past the window. Harry felt a great leap of excitement. He didn't know what he was going to - but it had to be better than what he was leaving behind.

Filius: Hear, hear!

Alastor: As it happens, the lad's right, but that's a bloody big assumption to make, sight-unseen!

The door to the compartment slid open and the youngest redheaded boy came in.

"Anyone sitting there?" he asked, pointing at the seat opposite Harry. "Everywhere else is full."

Alastor: Actually there're plenty of seats. I just couldn't think of another excuse to come get a good look at you.

Harry shook his head and the boy sat down. He glanced at Harry and then looked quickly out of the window, pretending he hadn't looked. Harry saw he still had a black mark on his nose.

"Hey, Ron."

The twins were back.

"Listen, we're going down the middle of the train - Lee Jordan's got a giant tarantula down there."

Robert: Hey, one of Harry's old roommates got accepted too!

Xiomara: Now *that's* a familiar!

Alastor: Wouldn't want it getting *too* familiar, myself.

"Right," mumbled Ron.

"Harry," said the other twin, "did we introduce ourselves? Fred and George Weasley.

And this is Ron, our brother. See you later, then."

"Bye," said Harry and Ron. The twins slid the compartment door shut behind them.

"Are you really Harry Potter?" Ron blurted out.

Alastor: It couldn't hurt to make him show some identification.

Harry nodded.

"Oh - well, I thought it might be one of Fred and George's jokes," said Ron.

Alastor: Bright lad. Learned from experience, I'd wager.

"And have you really got - you know..."

He pointed at Harry's forehead.

Harry pulled back his bangs to show the lightning scar. Ron stared.

"So that's where You-Know-Who -?"

Alastor: Wasn't listening much when his mother was talking to the twins, was he?

"Yes," said Harry, "but I can't remember it."

"Nothing?" said Ron eagerly.

Minerva: Honestly, he was only a baby! What do they expect of him?

Pomona: Maybe they should ask him to remember a few past lives while they're at it?

Robert: Have you been talking with Sybil again?

"Well - I remember a lot of green light, but nothing else."

"Wow," said Ron. He sat and stared at Harry for a few moments, then, as though he had suddenly realized what he was doing, he looked quickly out of the window again.

Alastor: Maybe there are some scars on the landscape you can stare at, boy!

"Are all your family wizards?" asked Harry, who found Ron just as interesting as Ron found him.

"Er - yes, I think so," said Ron. "I think Mom's got a second cousin who's an accountant, but we never talk about him."

Minerva: Doesn't that sound suspiciously like the Dursleys in reverse?

"So you must know loads of magic already."

The Weasleys were clearly one of those old wizarding families the pale boy in Diagon Alley had talked about.

Minerva: Well...

Robert: Sort of.

Filius: They're highly respected in what / consider the best circles!

Pomona: Right!

"I heard you went to live with Muggles," said Ron. "What are they like?"

"Horrible - well, not all of them. My aunt and uncle and cousin are, though. Wish I'd had three wizard brothers."

"Five," said Ron. For some reason, he was looking gloomy. "I'm the sixth in our family to go to Hogwarts. You could say I've got a lot to live up to. Bill and Charlie have already left - Bill was Head Boy and Charlie was captain of Quidditch. Now Percy's a prefect. Fred and George mess around a lot, but they still get really good marks and everyone thinks they're really funny. Everyone expects me to do as well as the others, but if I do, it's no big deal, because they did it first.

Robert: See what your sisters are in for, Minna?

You never get anything new, either, with five brothers. I've got Bill's old robes, Charlie's old wand, and Percy's old rat."

Filius: Are rats in style in the 1990's?

Robert: Forget the rat, what are they doing buying Percy new robes but sending Ron to school with someone else's wand? You can make do with old robes if you have to, but your own wand...!

Alastor: Trying to keep the boy down, are they?

Ron reached inside his jacket and pulled out a fat gray rat, which was asleep.

"His name's Scabbers and he's useless, he hardly ever wakes up. Percy got an owl from my dad for being made a prefect,

Robert: An owl too? This is ridiculous!

but they couldn't aff - I mean, I got Scabbers instead."

Minerva: (Absently.) Mona, do you have any more chocolate frogs?

Ron's ears went pink. He seemed to think he'd said too much, because he went back to staring out of the window.

Alastor: Loose lips sink ships, boy.

Xiomara: Oh, yes. Once gossip pairs you with someone, it's a matter of pride to move on!¹

Alastor: Wasn't quite what I meant...

Harry didn't think there was anything wrong with not being able to afford an owl. After all, he'd never had any money in his life until a month ago, and he told Ron so, all about having to wear Dudley's old clothes and never getting proper birthday presents. This seemed to cheer Ron up.

Alastor: Misery loves company.

"...and until Hagrid told me, I didn't know anything about being a wizard or about my parents or Voldemort - "

Ron gasped.

All: (*GASP!*)

"What?" said Harry.

" You said You-Know-Who's name!" said Ron, sounding both shocked and impressed. "I'd have thought you, of all people -"

"I'm not trying to be *brave* or anything, saying the name," said Harry, "I just never knew you shouldn't. See what I mean? I've got loads to learn... I bet," he added, voicing for the first time something that had been worrying him a lot lately, "I bet I'm the worst in the class."

Xiomara: Take the bet, Ron! Harry can afford to lose a Galleon or two!

"You won't be. There's loads of people who come from Muggle families and they learn quick enough."

Pomona: And don't you forget it!

While they had been talking, the train had carried them out of London. Now they were speeding past fields full of cows and sheep. They were quiet for a time, watching the fields and lanes flick past.

Around half past twelve there was a great clattering outside in the corridor and a smiling, dimpled woman slid back their door and said, "Anything off the cart, dears?"

Harry, who hadn't had any breakfast, leapt to his feet,

Xiomara: See, if you'd let Hedwig fly a little longer, she could have brought you back a gopher or something!

Pomona/Filius: Bleagh!

but Ron's ears went pink again and he muttered that he'd brought sandwiches. Harry went out into the corridor.

He had never had any money for candy with the Dursleys, and now that he had pockets rattling with gold and silver he was ready to buy as many Mars Bars as he could carry - but the woman didn't have Mars Bars. What she did have were Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs, Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Licorice Wands, and a number of other strange things Harry had never seen in his life.

Pomona: Ohhh, I remember! There's nothing quite like your first sight of all those new kinds of treats!

Xiomara: A girl never forgets her first time, eh, Mona?

Pomona: (Too caught up in sweet dreams to catch the double entendre.) Mmmmm...

Not wanting to miss anything, he got some of everything and paid the woman eleven silver Sickles and seven bronze Knuts.

Minerva: Great Merlin! How dare they charge the poor boy such exorbitant prices?

Xiomara: Apparently the boy's not all that poor.

Ron stared as Harry brought it all back in to the compartment and tipped it onto an empty seat.

"Hungry, are you?"

"Starving," said Harry, taking a large bite out of a pumpkin pasty.

Ron had taken out a lumpy package and unwrapped it. There were four sandwiches inside. He pulled one of them apart and said, "She always forgets I don't like corned beef."

"Swap you for one of these," said Harry, holding up a pasty. "Go on - "

"You don't want this, it's all dry," said Ron.

Alastor: Well good, it'll be harder for anyone to slip a potion in undetected!

"She hasn't got much time," he added quickly, "you know, with five of us."

"Go on, have a pasty," said Harry, who had never had anything to share before or, indeed, anyone to share it with. It was a nice feeling, sitting there with Ron, eating their way through all Harry's pasties, cakes, and candies (the sandwiches lay forgotten).

"What are these?" Harry asked Ron, holding up a pack of Chocolate Frogs. "They're *notreally* frogs, are they?"

Pomona: For heaven's sake, Harry, we have chocolate rabbits in the Muggle world. *Arethey* real?

Robert: You do?

Pomona: Well, mostly around Easter.

He was starting to feel that nothing would surprise him.

Minerva: Robbie, you know what we've never done? Enchanted some First Years' chocolate frogs to make croaking sounds!

Robert: I like it!

"No," said Ron. "But see what the card is. I'm missing Agrippa."

"What?"

"Oh, of course, you wouldn't know - Chocolate Frogs have cards inside them, you know, to collect - famous witches and wizards. I've got about five hundred, but I haven't got Agrippa or Ptolemy."

Robert: You know who should *really* be on a card? Whoever invented Chocolate Frogs!

Pomona: Now *that's* genius!

Harry unwrapped his Chocolate Frog and picked up the card. It showed a man's face. He wore half-moon glasses, had a long, crooked nose, and flowing silver hair, beard, and mustache.

Underneath the picture was the name Albus Dumbledore.

Minerva: YES! There is justice in the world!

"So *this* is Dumbledore!" said Harry.

"Don't tell me you'd never heard of Dumbledore!" said Ron.

Filius: I'd have thought Harry's comment made it clear he *has* heard of him.

"Can I have a frog? I might get Agrippa - thanks - "

Harry turned over his card and read:

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

CURRENTLY HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTS

Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the Dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.

Minerva: Nicolas Flamel? He created the only known Sorcerer's Stone! Also sometimes called the Philosopher's Stone.

Xiomara: How do you know these things, Minna?

Minerva: I read.

Harry turned the card over and saw, to his astonishment, that Dumbledore's face had disappeared.

"He's gone!"

"Well, you can't expect him to hang around all day," said Ron. "He'll be back. No, I've got Morgana again and I've got about six of her...do you want it? You can start collecting."

Minerva: You can *never* have too many of Morgana!

Filius: Especially in that off-the-shoulder robe...

Xiomara: Well, now you know what to look for, for the Christmas Dance, Mona.

Pomona: *Xia!*

Ron's eyes strayed to the pile of Chocolate Frogs waiting to be unwrapped.

"Help yourself," said Harry. "But in, you know, the Muggle world, people just stay put in photos."

"Do they? What, they don't move at all?" Ron sounded amazed. "*Weird!*"

Minerva: Mona, if you hadn't shown us pictures of your family, I wouldn't have believed that.

Harry stared as Dumbledore sidled back into the picture on his card and gave him a small smile. Ron was more interested in eating the frogs than looking at the Famous Witches and Wizards cards, but Harry couldn't keep his eyes off them. Soon he had not only Dumbledore and Morgana, but Hengist of Woodcroft, Alberic Grunnion, Circe, Paracelsus, and Merlin. He finally tore his eyes away from the druidess Cliodna, who was scratching her nose, to open a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans.

Robert: Now it's going to get interesting!

"You want to be careful with those," Ron warned Harry. "When they say every flavor, they *mean* every flavor - you know, you get all the ordinary ones like chocolate and peppermint and marmalade, but then you can get spinach and liver and tripe. George reckons he had a booger-flavored one once."

All: Bleaaargh!

Ron picked up a green bean, looked at it carefully, and bit into a corner.

"Bleaaargh - see? Sprouts."

Pomona: Excuse me?

Filius: He didn't mean you, Mona.

They had a good time eating the Every Flavor Beans. Harry got toast, coconut, baked bean, strawberry, curry, grass, coffee, sardine, and was even brave enough to nibble the end off a funny gray one Ron wouldn't touch, which turned out to be pepper.

Minerva: I told you he was a Gryffindor!

The countryside now flying past the window was becoming wilder. The neat fields had gone. Now there were woods, twisting rivers, and dark green hills.

There was a knock on the door of their compartment and the round-faced boy Harry had passed on platform nine and three-quarters came in. He looked tearful.

"Sorry," he said, "but have you seen a toad at all?"

When they shook their heads, he wailed, "I've lost him! He keeps getting away from me!"

Filius: He heard he was out of fashion and hopped off in a huff.

"He'll turn up," said Harry.

Xiomara: But I think I've got a toad-flavored bean here, would you like it?

"Yes," said the boy miserably. "Well, if you see him..."

He left.

"Don't know why he's so bothered," said Ron. "If I'd brought a toad I'd lose it as quick as I could. Mind you, I brought Scabbers, so I can't talk."

The rat was still snoozing on Ron's lap.

Alastor: Secretly taking in every word they said...

"He might have died and you wouldn't know the difference," said Ron in disgust. "I tried to turn him yellow yesterday to make him more interesting, but the spell didn't work."

Pomona: Poor Scabbers. He always wanted to be a blond!

I'll show you, look..."

He rummaged around in his trunk and pulled out a very battered-looking wand. It was chipped in places and something white was glinting at the end.

"Unicorn hair's nearly poking out. Anyway - "

Xiomara: Why does that sound vaguely...

Pomona: Xia...!

He had just raised his wand when the compartment door slid open again. The toadless boy was back, but this time he had a girl with him.

Filius: Those *never* go out of fashion!

She was already wearing her new Hogwarts robes.

"Has anyone seen a toad? Neville's lost one," she said.

Filius: That's a pick-up line I've never tried. "Excuse me, Miss, can you help me find my toad?"

She had a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth.

"We've already told him we haven't seen it," said Ron, but the girl wasn't listening, she was looking at the wand in his hand.

(Xiomara smothers fit of giggles. The others ignore her.)

"Oh, are you doing magic? Let's see it, then."

She sat down. Ron looked taken aback.

"Er - all right."

He cleared his throat.

"Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow,

Turn this stupid, fat rat yellow."

Filius: That's a spell?

Robert: It's not even in Latin!

He waved his wand, but nothing happened. Scabbers stayed gray and fast asleep.

"Are you sure that's a real spell?" said the girl. "Well, it's not very good, is it? I've tried a few simple spells just for practice and it's all worked out for me. Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard -

Alastor: And how would she have heard this if she's Muggle-born?

I've learned all our course books by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough -

Xiomara: She's memorized her course books?

Robert: What sort of maniac would do a thing like that?

(All stare pointedly at Minerva)

Minerva: Oh, sod off.

I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you?"

She said all this very fast.

Harry looked at Ron, and was relieved to see by his stunned face that he hadn't learned all the course books by heart either.

Minerva: Well get cracking, boy! What have you been doing all summer?

"I'm Ron Weasley," Ron muttered.

"Harry Potter," said Harry.

"Are you really?" said Hermione. "I know all about you, of course - I got a few extra books for background reading, and you're in *Modern Magical History* and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*."

Pomona: Not to mention, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

Robert: Flourish and Blotts must have been out of that one.

"Am I?" said Harry, feeling dazed.

"Goodness, didn't you know, I'd have found out everything I could if it was me," said Hermione. "Do either of you know what House you'll be in? I've been asking around, and I hope I'm in Gryffindor, it sounds by far the best;

Minerva: You heard correctly!

I hear Dumbledore himself was in it, but I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad...

Filius: (Trying to keep a straight face) Er...not too bad, no.

Robert: It's a great life if yer don't weaken, mate!

Anyway, we'd better go and look for Neville's toad. You two had better change, you know, I expect we'll be there soon."

Alastor: And just why didn't she mention Slytherin in that list of "acceptable" houses? She's obviously got plenty of ambition and determination!

Xiomara: Not to mention, she's hard-working! If you're not a 'Puff, you ain't got the stuff!

And she left, taking the toadless boy with her.

"Whatever House I'm in, I hope she's not in it," said Ron.

He threw his wand back into his trunk. "Stupid spell - George gave it to me, bet he knew it was a dud."

Alastor: You got it from one of those pranksters and you *trusted* it? You're lucky it didn't turn *you* yellow!

"What House are your brothers in?" asked Harry.

"Gryffindor," said Ron. Gloom seemed to be settling on him again. "Mom and Dad were in it, too. I don't know what they'll say if I'm not. I don't suppose Ravenclaw *would* be too bad,

Filius: No, I don't think it would.

but imagine if they put me in Slytherin."

Alastor: Imagination is a wonderful thing.

"That's the House Vol - , I mean, You-Know-Who was in?"

Alastor: I wonder what year he'll start at Hogwarts? Has he been and gone already, or not started yet, or...

Pomona: Well, is there anyone named Voldemort in your house right now, Al? And would that be a first name or a last name?

Alastor: Nobody's born with a name like that, lass. He'll have changed it from something else. (Grimly.) If I find out his original name was Alastor Moody, I'm going to be *very* upset!

Minerva: Oh, now how likely is *that*, Al?

Alastor: That's the trouble, Minna. Evil can sneak in anywhere...

Others: DON'T SAY IT!

"Yeah," said Ron. He flopped back into his seat, looking depressed.

"You know, I think the ends of Scabbers' whiskers are a bit lighter," said Harry, trying to take Ron's mind off Houses. "So what do your oldest brothers do now that they've left, anyway?"

Harry was wondering what a wizard did once he'd finished school.

"Charlie's in Romania studying dragons,

Xiomara: Charlie's in Romania studying to be a charred crackling.

and Bill's in Africa doing something for Gringotts," said Ron.

Alastor: "Something"? Could he be a little less vague?

"Did you hear about Gringotts? It's been all over the *Daily Prophet*, but I don't suppose you get that with the Muggles - someone tried to rob a high security vault."

Harry stared.

"Really? What happened to them?"

Minerva: Well, for starters, the goblins forced them to eat a lot of dog-biscuit crumbs they'd got from somewhere...

"Nothing, that's why it's such big news. They haven't been caught. My dad says it must've been a powerful Dark wizard to get round Gringotts, but they don't think they took anything, that's what's odd. 'Course, everyone gets scared when something like this happens in case You-Know-Who's behind it."

Minerva: That dog next door bit me. Do you think You-Know-Who's behind it?

Xiomara: I fell off my broom. It's *got* to be a plot by You-Know-Who!

Alastor: Don't be too quick to limit your suspect list.

Harry turned this news over in his mind. He was starting to get a prickle of fear every time You-Know-Who was mentioned. He supposed this was all part of entering the magical world, but it had been a lot more comfortable saying

Robert: Moldy-shorts!

"Voldemort" without worrying.

"What's your Quidditch team?" Ron asked.

Filius: Tactfully changing the subject...

"Er - I don't know any," Harry confessed.

"What!" Ron looked dumbfounded. "Oh, you wait, it's the best game in the world - " And he was off, explaining all about the four balls and the positions of the seven players, describing famous games he'd been to with his brothers and the broomstick he'd like to get if he had the money.

He was just taking Harry through the finer points of the game when the compartment door slid open yet again, but it wasn't Neville the toadless boy, or Hermione Granger this time.

Alastor: Ah, expanding the suspect list...

Three boys entered, and Harry recognized the middle one at once: it was the pale boy from Madam Malkin's robe shop. He was looking at Harry with a lot more interest than he'd shown back in Diagon Alley.

Alastor: Not a good idea to pique their interest until you know their motives.

"Is it true?" he said. "They're saying all down the train that Harry Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, is it?"

"Yes," said Harry. He was looking at the other boys. Both of them were thickset and looked extremely mean. Standing on either side of the pale boy, they looked like bodyguards.

Robert: Oh, Merlin, I can see where this is going!

Minerva: I had my suspicions when Harry met him in the robe shop. You did too, didn't you Al?

Pomona: What? You're thinking these three are...

Filius: The latest incarnations of Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. Yes, Mona.

Xiomara: And again, some things remain constant.

"Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle," said the pale boy carelessly, noticing where Harry was looking.

Pomona: Sounds like you guys called it!

"And my name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."

Minerva: Draco? Poor lad. Trust the Malfoys to do that do a child.

Ron gave a slight cough, which might have been hiding a snigger. Draco Malfoy looked at him.

"Think my name's funny, do you?"

Minerva: No, I think it's tragic!

No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford."

Robert: A Malfoy speaks the truth! Call the Daily Prophet. This calls for a Special Edition!

He turned back to Harry. "You'll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort.

Minerva: Ach, crivens, what a wee snorter! * 2

(Others look at her blankly.)

Minerva: Oh, sorry. I must have been channeling there for a minute.

I can help you there."

Pomona: By going away?

He held out his hand to shake Harry's, but Harry didn't take it.

"I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks," he said coolly.

Pomona: As I was saying...

Draco Malfoy didn't go red, but a pink tinge appeared in his pale cheeks.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter," he said slowly. "Unless you're a bit politer you'll go the same way as your parents.

Filius: All right, I'll hex you very politely!

They didn't know what was good for them, either.

Xiomara: Fresh air, regular exercise...

Pomona: A balanced diet...

You hang around with riffraff like the Weasleys and that Hagrid, and it'll rub off on you."

Both Harry and Ron stood up.

"Say that again," Ron said, his face as red as his hair.

"Oh, you're going to fight us, are you?" Malfoy sneered.

Robert: (as Harry) No, I'm going to dodge past you and sprint the full length of the train with the three of you thundering hopelessly after me. Then, just before I reach the engine, I'm going to climb out a window onto the roof. Then I'm going to shout insults back in the window until you abandon all common sense and climb out after me. I will then go tearing along the roof of the moving train with you and your hulking goons panting and lumbering along in my wake. Then...

Minerva: Robbie, that's good! You should write your own book!

"Unless you get out now," said Harry, more bravely than he felt, because Crabbe and Goyle were a lot bigger than him or Ron.

Minerva: A lot bigger than *he* or Ron.

"But we don't feel like leaving, do we, boys? We've eaten all our food and you still seem to have some."

Goyle reached toward the Chocolate Frogs next to Ron - Ron leapt forward, but before he'd so much as touched Goyle, Goyle let out a horrible yell.

Xiomara: DON'T TOUCH ME, I'M *NOT* LIKE THAT!!!

All: XIA!

Scabbers the rat was hanging off his finger, sharp little teeth sunk deep into Goyle's knuckle -

Filius: Rat rings - the latest thing in accessories!

Robert: Flit, sometimes I wonder about you.

Crabbe and Malfoy both backed away as Goyle swung Scabbers round and round, howling, and when Scabbers finally flew off and hit the window,

Alastor: Scratch one rat.

all three of them disappeared at once. Perhaps they thought there were more rats lurking among the sweets, or perhaps they'd heard footsteps, because a second later, Hermione Granger had come in.

"What *has* been going on?" she said, looking at the sweets all over the floor and Ron picking up Scabbers by his tail.

All: OUCH!

"I think he's been knocked out," Ron said to Harry. He looked closer at Scabbers. "No - I don't believe it - he's gone back to sleep."

And so he had.

Filius: Now *that's* savoir-faire!

"You've met Malfoy before?"

Harry explained about their meeting in Diagon Alley.

"I've heard of his family," said Ron darkly. "They were some of the first to come back to our side after You-Know-Who disappeared. Said they'd been bewitched. My dad doesn't believe it. He says Malfoy's father didn't need an excuse to go over to the Dark Side."

Alastor: Now will that be Casius's son?

He turned to Hermione. "Can we help you with something?"

"You'd better hurry up and put your robes on, I've just been up to the front to ask the conductor, and he says we're nearly there. You haven't been fighting, have you? You'll be in trouble before we even get there!"

"Scabbers has been fighting, not us," said Ron, scowling at her.

Minerva: Ten points, Mr. Scabbers!

"Would you mind leaving while we change?"

"All right - I only came in here because people outside are behaving very childishly, racing up and down the corridors," said Hermione in a sniffy voice. "And you've got dirt on your nose, by the way, did you know?"

Robert: He's in training to be a Niffler.

Ron glared at her as she left. Harry peered out of the window. It was getting dark. He could see mountains and forests under a deep purple sky. The train did seem to be slowing down.

He and Ron took off their jackets and pulled on their long black robes. Ron's were a bit short for him, you could see his sneakers underneath them.

A voice echoed through the train: "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately."

Alastor: I always keep mine with me.

Others: We know.

Robert: And you're always late to the feast because of dragging it down to your dormitory.

Harry's stomach lurched with nerves and Ron, he saw, looked pale under his freckles. They crammed their pockets with the last of the sweets and joined the crowd thronging the corridor.

The train slowed right down and finally stopped. People pushed their way toward the door and out on to a tiny, dark platform. Harry shivered in the cold night air. Then a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students, and Harry heard a familiar voice:

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here! All right there, Harry?"

Hagrid's big hairy

(Pomona automatically claps a hand over Xiomara's mouth.)

face beamed over the sea of heads.

"C'mon, follow me - any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

Slipping and stumbling, they followed Hagrid down what seemed to be a steep, narrow path. It was so dark on either side of them that Harry thought there must be thick trees there. Nobody spoke much. Neville, the boy who kept losing his toad, sniffed once or twice.

Robert: That's it, lad, sniff him out!

"Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec," Hagrid called over his shoulder, "jus' round this bend here."

Xiomara: After a few years at Hogwarts we're *all* round the bend!

Pomona: In a good way, of course.

There was a loud "Ooooooh!"

The narrow path had opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid called, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore. Harry and Ron were followed into their boat by Neville and Hermione.

"Everyone in?" shouted Hagrid, who had a boat to himself.

Filius: It sounds like Hagrid would weigh a lot more than four First Years.

"Right then - FORWARD!"

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood.

Filius: And a girl with yellow eyes stood up in her boat to get a better look, overbalanced and shortly became the first in her year to meet the Giant Squid.

Xiomara: Morgan's bones, I'll never live that down!

"Heads down!" yelled Hagrid as the first boats reached the cliff; they all bent their heads and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbor, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

"Oy, you there! Is this your toad?" said Hagrid, who was checking the boats as people climbed out of them.

Alastor: He missed the ruddy thing on the train... and yet it somehow made it into one of the boats and turned up when they landed? Something's fishy here...

Minerva: Toads are amphibians, not fish.

Alastor: You know what I meant.

"Trevor!" cried Neville blissfully, holding out his hands.

Then they clambered up a passageway in the rocks after Hagrid's lamp, coming out at last onto smooth, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle.

They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge, oak front door.

"Everyone here? You there, still got yer toad?"

Filius: The toad's still here but Neville's gone missing!

Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

Alastor: And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the end of Chapter Six.

Minerva: What time is it?

Xiomara: About ten minutes to four.

Minerva: Oh, blast, I've got to go! I promised I'd help Tommy Riddle with his Transfiguration project.

Pomona: Who?

Alastor: Tommy Riddle. First year, one of mine. Really bright. Seems to be a pretty nice little kid.

Xiomara: Right then, we'll have to wait till tomorrow to hear anymore. But I may as well take the book, since I'm the only one left who hasn't read at least once.

Alastor: Oh no, you don't! You'd be peeking ahead trying to find out about that "Madam Hooch" person! I'll keep custody of it till tomorrow.

(Xiomara sticks her tongue out at him, and the kids gather up their bags and - for the moment - go their separate ways.)

* ¹ "Ships" Get it? Get it?

* ² If you don't get this one, read "Wee Free Men" by Terry Pratchett.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 12

Grab your brooms! Xiomara's reading!

Disclaimer: Mine? I wish!

Acknowledgements: notsosaintly and Dark Beta are tied for first place in the Totally Awesome Awards. (Er, does anyone actually say "totally awesome" anymore?)

Scene: Yet another day. It's a pleasant Friday afternoon, and the gang is all outside on the lawn, studying under a tree. Alastor abruptly puts his quill down.

Alastor: Well, that tears it. I've done my long-range chart five times now, and it keeps telling me I'm going to lose a buttock within the year!

Minerva: I trust you're not going to take that sitting down!

Alastor: Hah, bloody hah. I don't know why I signed up for bloody Divination in the first place.

Robert: I've always thought it was a bit of a half-arsed subject.

Minerva: I knew you were going to say that!

Xiomara: And which planet gave you that prophecy, Al?

Pomona: Don't answer that! Al, you do realize you've set yourself to be the butt of every joke for the next week?

Alastor: (Digging into his book-bag and pulling out the Book) This is called providing a distraction.

Xiomara: Ah! I've been waiting for that, but I wasn't about to sit up and beg. Everyone put your textbooks away. It's Recreation Time!

Xiomara: **Chapter Seven, The Sorting Hat**

The door swung open at once. A tall, black-haired witch in emerald-green robes stood there. She had a very stern face and Harry's first thought was that this was not someone to cross.

Minerva: Is this that cat-Animagus again?

"The first years, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid.

Robert: Sounds like it.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

She pulled the door wide. The entrance hall was so big you could have fit the whole of the Dursleys' house in it.

Xiomara: Except for the curly pink tail waving out of one window.

The stone walls were lit with flaming torches like the ones at Gringotts, the ceiling was too high to make out,

Xiomara: Who makes out on the ceiling?

Robert: Hey, you're the flying expert, Xia!

and a magnificent marble staircase facing them led to the upper floors.

They followed Professor McGonagall across the flagged stone floor. Harry could hear the drone of hundreds of voices from a doorway to the right - the rest of the school must already be here - but Professor McGonagall showed the first years into a small, empty chamber off the hall. They crowded in, standing rather closer together than they would usually have done, peering about nervously.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your Houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your House will be something like your family within Hogwarts.

Pomona: You ALL are my family!

Robert/Minerva: Awww!

Filius: Does that mean it would be incestuous if I asked you out, Mona?

Pomona: I'll think of you as a distant cousin, Flit.

You will have classes with the rest of your House, sleep in your House dormitory, and spend free time in your House common room.

Robert: And speaking of incestuous...

Xiomara: They could start to get a little sick of each other.

Pomona: And she forgot to mention that we also eat with our housemates.

"The four Houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each House has its own noble history

All: BUT MINE'S THE BEST!

and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your House points, while any rule-breaking will lose House points.

Robert: What if you triumph while you're rule-breaking?

Filius: I think it depends on who catches you.

At the end of the year, the House with the most points is awarded the House Cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours.

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting."

Her eyes lingered for a moment on Neville's cloak, which was fastened under his left ear,

Robert: Let's see; if it's fastened under his left ear, it means he's available, if it's under his right ear, he's spoken for?

and on Ron's smudged nose.

Harry nervously tried to flatten his hair.

Pomona: From what they've said, that wouldn't take magic, it would take a miracle!

"I shall return when we are ready for you," said Professor McGonagall. "Please wait quietly."

She left the chamber. Harry swallowed.

"How exactly do they sort us into Houses?" he asked Ron.

Robert: So much for waiting quietly.

Minerva: Well, she didn't say they had to be completely silent.

"Some sort of test, I think. Fred said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking."

Pomona: Oh, that would be a fine way to start a child's school career! Can you imagine how many Muggle-borns would turn around and go straight home?

Robert: I don't know, Mona. After hearing about that "Smeltings" place, I don't think anything in a wizarding school could be much worse!

Harry's heart gave a horrible jolt.

Robert: Which unleashed his untrained power...

Minerva: Causing a violent earthquake...

Pomona: Which brought the roof of the Great Hall crashing down...

Filius: Students and teachers alike dove under their tables...

A test? In front of the whole school? But he didn't know any magic yet - what on earth would he have to do? He hadn't expected something like this the moment they arrived. He looked around anxiously and saw that everyone else looked terrified, too.

Pomona: Funny, I was more curious than frightened. I guess I assumed they wouldn't throw anything at us that we couldn't handle.

Filius: Spoken like a true Hufflepuff!

No one was talking much except Hermione Granger, who was whispering very fast about all the spells she'd learned and wondering which one she'd need.

Robert: Merlin, is *she* in for a disappointment!

Harry tried hard not to listen to her. He'd never been more nervous, never, not even when he'd had to take a school report home to the Dursleys saying that he'd somehow turned his teacher's wig blue.

Filius: And it just *wasn't* her color!

He kept his eyes fixed on the door. Any second now, Professor McGonagall would come back and lead him to his doom.

Then something happened that made him jump about a foot in the air -

Pomona: Where he hovered, wondering how to get back down.

several people behind him screamed.

Robert/Minerva: COME DOWN FROM THERE!!!

"What the - ?"

He gasped. So did the people around him. About twenty ghosts had just streamed through the back wall. Pearly-white and slightly transparent, they glided across the room talking to one another and hardly glancing at the first years. They seemed to be arguing. What looked like a fat little monk was saying: "Forgive and forget, I say, we ought to give him a second chance - "

Robert: Who? This Mouldiwarp character? *1

"My dear Friar, haven't we given Peeves all the chances he deserves?"

Xiomara: Definitely! If I get hit with one more balloon full of ink...!

He gives us all a bad name and you know, he's not really even a ghost -

Pomona: He's not?

Minerva: No, a poltergeist was never a living person. It's a quasi-life form that grows out of an intense build-up of strong emotions, er, desires, and so on, usually associated with adolescents. In a place like Hogwarts, which has been full of *magical* adolescents for over a thousand years... Well, I don't think there's a single wizarding school in the world that doesn't have a poltergeist, and ours is more powerful and fully developed than most.

Filius: Simply more proof that Hogwarts is the best! Er, I think.

Robert: Minna, did you swallow the textbook again?

(Minerva sticks her tongue out at him.)

Pomona: That explains why he's so colorful when all the other ghosts are silvery and see-through. I've been wondering about that.

I say, what are you all doing here?"

Robert: Well, let's think. We're all about eleven; it's the start of the school year... What do you think we're doing here?

Alastor: Not always wise, making easy assumptions, lad. If you'll check history, you'll find spies as young as that. Or some who just looked like they were.

A ghost wearing a ruff and tights had suddenly noticed the first years.

Nobody answered.

Filius: Children, mind your manners and answer the nice ghost.

"New students!" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them. "About to be Sorted, I suppose?"

A few people nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old House, you know."

Pomona: He's such a sweetheart!

Xiomara: Our House has the best ghost!

"Move along now," said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

Professor McGonagall had returned. One by one, the ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.

"Now, form a line," Professor McGonagall told the first years, "and follow me."

Pomona: We're all going to play Follow the Leader. Won't that be fun?

Feeling oddly as though his legs had turned to lead, Harry got into line behind a boy with sandy hair,

Robert: He'd just gotten back from the beach?

with Ron behind him, and they walked out of the chamber, back across the hall, and through a pair of double doors into the Great Hall.

Harry had never even imagined such a strange and splendid place. It was lit by thousands and thousands of candles that were floating in midair

Minerva: If that spell ever malfunctioned, I'd hate to see the results!

Xiomara: Hmmm, you can get some interesting effects with hot wax...

Pomona: I know. I love batik prints... (Pause while she slowly realizes and turns red.) Xia!

Alastor: Beeswax, eh?

Xiomara: Mind your own!

over four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets.

Alastor: Golden goblins? What were they doing there?

Xiomara: Gob-*lets*, Al. Come on, you drink out of them all the time!

Alastor: Oh, right. Them.

At the top of the hall was another long table where the teachers were sitting. Professor McGonagall led the first years up here, so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them.

Alastor: But only after the teachers had had a chance to size up the new arrivals.

The hundreds of faces staring at them looked like pale lanterns in the flickering candlelight. Dotted here and there among the students, the ghosts shone misty and silver. Mainly to avoid all the staring eyes, Harry looked upward and saw a velvety black ceiling dotted with stars. He heard Hermione whisper, "It's bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in *Hogwarts, A History*."

It was hard to believe there was a ceiling there at all, and that the Great Hall didn't simply open on to the heavens.

Xiomara: After the earthquake, it did!

Harry quickly looked down again as Professor McGonagall silently place a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the stool she put a pointed wizard's hat. This hat was patched and frayed and extremely dirty. Aunt Petunia wouldn't have let it in the house.

Pomona: Why do I have the feeling the Hat wouldn't let Aunt Petunia into a House either?

Minerva: I wonder what would happen if they tried to wash the Hat?

Robert: After a thousand years? It would disintegrate completely!

***Maybe they had to try and get a rabbit out of it,* Harry thought wildly,**

Filius: One of those chocolate ones, Mona?

that seemed to be the sort of thing - noticing that everyone in the hall was now staring at the hat, he stared at it, too.

For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth - and the hat began to sing:

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

Alastor: A smarter hat wouldn't make that offer.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hats sleek and tall,

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can cap them all.

Pomona: Oooh! Pun!

There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,

Alastor: Sounds a bit like invasion of privacy, to me!

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,

Where dwell the brave at heart,

Their daring, nerve, and chivalry

Set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,

Where they are just and loyal,

Those patient Hufflepuffs are true

And unafraid of toil;

Pomona: And we labor in the soil!

Robert: Though the weather freeze or boil.

Minerva: And we'd never have a Goyle.

Pomona: Now, that's not true. If the Hat ever sorted one of the Goyles into Hufflepuff, we'd accept him. Or her.

Xiomara: Ahem!

Pomona: Oh, sorry, Xia. Go on.

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,

If you've a ready mind,

Where those of wit and learning,

Will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin

You'll make your real friends,

Those cunning folk use any means

To achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid!

And don't get in a flap!

You're in safe hands (though I have none)

For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The whole hall burst into applause as the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quite still again.

"So we've just got to try on the hat!" Ron whispered to Harry. "I'll kill Fred, he was going on about wrestling a troll."

Minerva: Why do children believe the most horrible threats anyone older can come up with? How likely is it that a school would force a First Year - a brandnew First Year no less - to wrestle a troll?

Alastor: Why do older siblings seem to take such pleasure in scaring the younger ones?

Minerva: That too!

Harry smiled weakly. Yes, trying on the hat was a lot better than having to do a spell, but he did wish they could have tried it on without everyone watching. The hat seemed to be asking rather a lot; Harry didn't feel brave or quick-witted or any of it at the moment. If only the hat had mentioned a House for people who felt a bit queasy, that would have been the one for him.

Minerva: That's all those snacks on the train taking their toll!

Professor McGonagall now stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said. "Abbott, Hannah!"

A pink-faced girl with blonde pigtails stumbled out of line, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes, and sat down. A moment's pause -

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat.

Pomona and Xiomara: YAY!!!

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. Harry saw the ghost of the Fat Friar waving merrily at her.

"Bones, Susan!"

Xiomara: So there are a few Bones left!

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat again, and Susan scuttled off to sit next to Hannah.

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

Filius/Robert: Well done, Terry Boot, whoever you are!

The table second from the left clapped this time; several Ravenclaws stood up to shake hands with Terry as he joined them.

"Brocklehurst, Mandy" went to Ravenclaw too, but "Brown, Lavender" became the first new Gryffindor,

Minerva: Her name is Lavender Brown?

Robert: Why not Lavender Blue?

Minerva: Dilly-dilly...^{*2}

and the table on the far left exploded with cheers; Harry could see Ron's twin brothers catcalling.

"Bulstrode, Millicent"

Pomona: NOOOOO!!!

then became a Slytherin. Perhaps it was Harry's imagination, after all he'd heard about Slytherin, but he thought they looked like an unpleasant lot.

Pomona: Well, after anyone named "Bulstrode" joined them... I certainly hope there's a Moody or two in Harry's year to balance things out!

He was starting to feel definitely sick now. He remembered being picked for teams during gym at his old school. He had always been last to be chosen, not because he was no good, but because no one wanted Dudley to think they liked him.

Pomona: They're *still* doing that in Harry's time? Don't Muggle teachers ever learn *any* sensitivity?

"Finch-Fletchley, Justin!"

Alastor: "Finch-Fletchley". Anyone recognize that name?

Xiomara: No, but it sounds so much like "Finch Fledgling," this chap must be for the birds!^{*3}

Others: (Groan.)

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

Sometimes, Harry noticed, the hat shouted out the house at once, but at others it took a little while to decide. "Finnigan, Seamus," the sandy-haired boy next to Harry in line, sat on the stool for almost a whole minute before the hat declared him a Gryffindor.

Minerva: And may he never shame us.^{*4}

"Granger, Hermione!"

Hermione almost ran to the stool and jammed the hat eagerly on her head.

Xiomara: Now *that's* confidence!

"GRYFFINDOR!" shouted the hat. Ron groaned.

Filius: Really? I would have pegged her as one of mine.

Robert: *Ours*.

A horrible thought struck Harry, as horrible thoughts always do when you're very nervous. What if he wasn't chosen at all? What if he just sat there with the hat over his eyes for ages, until Professor McGonagall jerked it off his head and said there had obviously been a mistake and he'd better get back on the train?

Xiomara: Can you imagine the fuss if that ever happened?

Minerva: I don't think it *could* happen.

Alastor: But if it did, they'd have to modify the child's memory, modify the family's memories...

Filius: Arrange for the child to get enrolled in a Muggle school a bit belatedly, with some reasonable excuse for why they were enrolling so late...

Robert: Find out how the locating spell could have gotten it wrong...

Alastor: And whether someone could have botched it up deliberately. And then there'd still be the worry over whether the kid had told a Muggle friend or two about being a wizard in spite of all the warnings to keep it quiet.

When Neville Longbottom, the boy who kept losing his toad, was called, he fell over on his way to the stool.

Xiomara: His toad tripped him!

The hat took a long time to decide with Neville. When it finally shouted, "GRYFFINDOR." Neville ran off still wearing it, and had to jog back amid gales of laughter to give it to "MacDougal, Morag."

Robert: If the Hat accepted this poor Neville kid, Harry's got nothing to worry about!

Malfoy swaggered forward when his name was called and got his wish at once: the hat had barely touched his head when it screamed,

Minerva: I'd scream too if I had to touch that little...

"SLYTHERIN!"

Malfoy went off to join his friends Crabbe and Goyle, looking pleased with himself.

There weren't many people left now.

"Moon"...

Alastor: "Moon"? What about "Moody"?

Pomona: Don't worry, Al, your grandchildren are probably already in second or third year.

"Nott"... "Parkinson"...

Alastor: Oh good! Basil Parkinson's all right. If his descendents are still Slytherins it should off-set the Malfoy influence.

then a pair of twin girls, "Patil" and "Patil"...,

Robert: "Patil" What kind of name is that?

Minerva: Pakistani, I think.

then "Perks, Sally-Anne"..., and then, at last -

"Potter, Harry!"

As Harry stepped forward, whispers suddenly broke out like little hissing fires all over the hall.

Pomona: Everyone form a bucket brigade!

"Potter, did she say?"

"The Harry Potter?"

Xiomara: Well, how many are there?

The last thing Harry saw before the hat dropped over his eyes

Robert: Well, at least we know he doesn't have a swelled head.

was the hall full of people craning to get a good look at him. Next second he was looking at the black inside of the hat. He waited.

"Hmm," said a small voice in his ear. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes - and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting... So where shall I put you?"

Alastor: He's a parselmouth, for Merlin's sake! Where do you *think* you should put him?!

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought, Not Slytherin, not Slytherin.

"Not Slytherin, eh?" said the small voice. "Are you sure?"

Alastor: No, he's not!

You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness,

Alastor: Exactly!

no doubt about that - no? well, if you're sure - better be GRYFFINDOR!"

Alastor: *WHAT?!* Do that over! The Sorting was fixed!

(Minerva folds her arms and looks very smug.)

Harry heard the hat shout the last word to the whole hall. He took off the hat and walked shakily toward the Gryffindor table. He was so relieved to have been chosen and not put in Slytherin, he hardly noticed that he was getting the loudest cheer yet. Percy the Prefect got up and shook his hand vigorously, while the Weasley twins yelled, "We got Potter! We got Potter!"

Alastor: Minna, gloating is never becoming!

Harry sat down opposite the ghost in the ruff he'd seen earlier. The ghost patted his arm, giving Harry the sudden, horrible feeling he'd just plunged it into a bucket of ice-cold water.

Pomona: That's one thing I really miss about school during the summer; If only I had one of the Hogwarts ghosts around in August!

He could see the High Table properly now. At the end nearest him sat Hagrid, who caught his eye and gave him the thumbs up. Harry grinned back. And there, in the center of the High Table, in a large gold chair, sat Albus Dumbledore.

(The whole group cheers. Other students on the lawn give them odd looks.)

Harry recognized him at once from the card he'd gotten out of the Chocolate Frog on the train.

Dumbledore's silver hair was the only thing in the whole hall that shone as brightly as the ghosts. Harry spotted Professor Quirrell, too, the nervous young man from the Leaky Cauldron. He was looking very peculiar in a large purple turban.

Minerva: Those things are a bear to put on! I wonder why he doesn't just wear a hat.

And now there were only four people left to be sorted. "Thomas, Dean," a Black boy even taller than Ron, joined Harry at the Gryffindor table. "Turpin, Lisa," became a Ravenclaw

Pomona: I wonder if she could be any descendant of Dick Turpin?

Filius: Who?

Pomona: Oh, right. He was a highwayman - a kind of bandit - who lived in around the 1730's.

Alastor: And how do you know so much about the history of bandits, my girl?

(Pomona sticks her tongue out at him.)

and then it was Ron's turn. He was pale green by now.

Filius: What, not emerald?

Alastor: Funny if he makes it into Slytherin. Teach him a lesson about judging...

Harry crossed his fingers under the table and a second later the hat had shouted,

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Xiomara: Why do I get the feeling that everybody who's anybody in this book...?

Harry clapped loudly with the rest as Ron collapsed into the chair next to him.

"Well done, Ron, excellent," said Percy Weasley pompously across Harry as "Zabini, Blaise," was made a Slytherin.

Professor McGonagall rolled up her scroll and took the Sorting Hat away.

Robert: Clutched in her teeth because she'd turned into a cat again?

Harry looked down at his empty gold plate. He had only just realized how hungry he was. The pumpkin pasties seemed ages ago.

Pomona: Small meals and often. Best way to make up for long-term deprivation.

Albus Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was beaming at the students, his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there.

Robert: (pouting) Gosh, I thought it was just us he liked!

"Welcome!" he said. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I'd like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!"

Xiomara: Makes more sense than some speeches I've heard!

"Thank you!"

Xiomara: You're welcome.

He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not.

"Is he - a bit mad?" he asked Percy uncertainly.

Minerva: Magnificently mad!

Pomona: Mad, Good and Comforting to Know! ^{*5}

Others: What?

Pomona: It's... well, I'll explain later.

"Mad?" said Percy airily. "He's a genius! Best wizard in the world! But he is a bit mad, yes. Potatoes, Harry?"

Harry's mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were now piled with food. He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, fries, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup, and, for some strange reason, peppermint humbugs.

Filius: So they're still doing that in the nineties? Not that I mind, but I've never quite understood it.

Alastor: Useful though. Helps clear your taste-buds out between dishes - easier to tell if anything's wrong with the food.

Xiomara: Al, only you would expect to get poisoned at a Hogwarts feast. And *don't* say "Constant Vigilance" either!

Filius: Now, I'd put the poison in the humbugs. They're so strongly flavored you wouldn't notice until too late...

(Alastor gives him a pointed look.)

The Dursleys had never exactly starved Harry, but he'd never been allowed to eat as much as he liked. Dudley had always taken anything that Harry really wanted, even if it made him sick.

Harry piled his plate with a bit of everything except the peppermints and began to eat.

Pomona: And what, pray tell, did he have against peppermints?

Robert: Maybe he'd been talking to Flit.

It was all delicious.

"That does look good," said the ghost in the ruff sadly, watching Harry cut up his steak.

"Can't you - ?"

"I haven't eaten for nearly four hundred years," said the ghost.

Pomona: I've always felt sorry for the ghosts about that. You don't suppose this is their Hell, do you?

Filius: What, hanging around the Great Hall and unable to eat? It would have to be the punishment for the "Naughty" types. Full-blown sinners would get something worse!

Minerva: Hanging around the Library and unable to read?

Robert: Oooh! Cruel!

"I don't need to, of course, but one does miss it. I don't think I've introduced myself? Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington at your service. Resident ghost of Gryffindor Tower."

"I know who you are!" said Ron suddenly. "My brothers told me about you -

Alastor: And you'd trust their word?

you're Nearly Headless Nick!"

"I would *prefer* you to call me Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-" the ghost began stiffly, but sandy-haired Seamus Finnigan interrupted.

"*Nearly* Headless? How can you be *nearly* headless?"

Xiomara: *Nearly* stupid? How can you be *nearly* stupid?

Sir Nicholas looked extremely miffed, as if their little chat wasn't going at all the way he wanted.

Pomona: Hah! He loves the attention!

"Like this," he said irritably. He seized his left ear and pulled. His whole head swung off his neck and fell onto his shoulder as if it was on a hinge. Someone had obviously tried to behead him, but not done it properly. Looking pleased at the stunned looks on their faces,

Pomona: (as Nick) What did I say?

Nearly Headless Nick flipped his head back onto his neck, coughed, and said, "So - new Gryffindors! I hope you're going to help us win the House championship this year? Gryffindors have never gone so long without winning. Slytherins have got the Cup six years in a row!

Alastor: Only to be expected.

The Bloody Baron's becoming almost unbearable - he's the Slytherin ghost."

Minerva: Al, gloating is never becoming!

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and saw a horrible ghost sitting there, with blank staring eyes, a gaunt face, and robes stained with silver blood. He was right next to Malfoy who, Harry was pleased to see, didn't look too pleased with the seating arrangements.

"How did he get covered in blood?" asked Seamus with great interest.

Alastor: I've been trying to find that out for years!

"I've never asked," said Nearly Headless Nick delicately.

When everyone had eaten as much as they could, the remains of the food faded from the plates, leaving them sparkling clean as before. A moment later the desserts appeared. Blocks of ice cream in every flavor you could think of, apple pies, treacle tarts, chocolate clairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, Jell-O, rice pudding...

Pomona: And it's *lovely*... oh, right, I did that one already.

As Harry helped himself to treacle tart, the talk turned to their families.

"I'm half-and-half," said Seamus. "Me dad's a Muggle. Mom didn't tell him she was a witch 'til after they were married. Bit of a nasty shock for him."

Minerva: I like a joke as well as anyone...

Others: We know!

Minerva: ...but *that's* going overboard!

The others laughed.

"What about you, Neville?" said Ron.

"Well, my gran brought me up and she's a witch," said Neville, "but the family thought I was all-Muggle for ages.

Minerva: "All Muggle"? But the Longbottoms are a wizarding family. If he had no magic, he'd be a Squib, not a Muggle...

Robert: His gran brought him up? I guess he must be another Voldemort orphan.

My Great Uncle Algie kept trying to catch me off my guard and force some magic out of me - he pushed me off the end of Blackpool pier once, I nearly drowned - but nothing happened until I was eight. Great Uncle Algie came round for dinner, and he was hanging me out of an upstairs window by the ankles when my Great Auntie Enid offered him a meringue and he accidentally let go.

Pomona: Even for a meringue, that's inexcusable!

Alastor: Are they sure it was an accident? Some families, if they think they've produced a Squib...

But I bounced - all the way down the garden and into the road. They were all really pleased, Gran was crying,

Minerva: She *should* have been bashing "Uncle Algie"!

she was so happy. And you should have seen their faces when I got in here - they thought I might not be magic enough to come, you see. Great Uncle Algie was so pleased he bought me my toad."

Filius: The hopping toad was meant to be in honor of the boy bouncing?

On Harry's other side, Percy Weasley and Hermione were talking about lessons ("I do hope they start right away, there's so much to learn, I'm particularly interested in Transfiguration, you know, turning something into something else, of course, it's supposed to be very difficult - ");

Xiomara: Which is exactly why you're so eager, you little show off!

Alastor: Nothing wrong with wanting to test herself.

"You'll be starting small, just matches into needles and that sort of thing - ").

Harry, who was starting to feel warm and sleepy, looked up at the High Table again. Hagrid was drinking deeply from his goblet. Professor McGonagall was talking to Professor Dumbledore. Professor Quirrell, in his absurd turban, was talking to a teacher with greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and Sallow skin.

Pomona: And this year's Most Charming Smile award goes to...

It happened very suddenly. The hook-nosed teacher looked past Quirrell's turban straight into Harry's eyes - and a sharp, hot pain shot across the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Ouch!" Harry clapped a hand to his head.

"What is it?" asked Percy.

"N-nothing."

The pain had gone as quickly as it had come. Harder to shake off was the feeling Harry had gotten from the teacher's look - a feeling that he didn't like Harry at all.

Alastor: The plot thickens.

"Who's that teacher talking to Professor Quirrell?" he asked Percy.

"Oh, you know Quirrell already, do you? No wonder he's looking so nervous, that's Professor Snape. He teaches Potions, but he doesn't want to - everyone knows he's after Quirrell's job. Knows an awful lot about the Dark Arts, Snape."

Robert: Snape. Well, there's another old wizarding family that's still around.

Minerva: Wasn't there a Snape in Ravenclaw?

Filius: Lavinia. She graduated last year. Brilliant girl, but dreadful hair problem.

Harry watched Snape for a while, but Snape didn't look at him again.

At last, the desserts too disappeared, and Professor Dumbledore got to his feet again.

"Ahem - just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered.

Minerva: And brushed and curried?

Robert: Quit stalling!

Xiomara: You two are unstable.

Filius: Still trotting out the same old chestnuts, I see.

Pomona: (Groans) He wins!

I have a few start-of-term notices to give you.

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our other students would do well to remember that as well."

Dumbledore's twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Weasley twins.

Robert: Didn't old Dippet look a bit pointedly at us when he mentioned that last fall?

Minerva: For the last three falls, Robbie. But he didn't twinkle!

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their House teams should contact Madam Hooch.

Xiomara: Hello?

"And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

Xiomara: Never mind the painful death. Get back to that part about "Madam Hooch"!

Harry laughed, but he was one of the few who did.

Pomona: Oooh, that'll make him look bad.

"He's not serious?" he muttered to Percy.

"Must be," said Percy, frowning at Dumbledore. "It's odd, because he usually gives us a reason why we're not allowed to go somewhere - the forest's full of dangerous beasts, everyone knows that. I do think he might have told us prefects, at least."

Xiomara: Sod all that! Why am I working at Hogwarts? I'm supposed to be playing professional Quidditch! Er, if that's me he was talking about...

Pomona: Maybe you did. And then you retired and started coaching.

"And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!" cried Dumbledore. Harry noticed that the other teachers' smiles had become rather fixed.

Dumbledore gave his wand a little flick, as if he was trying to get a fly off the end, and a long golden ribbon flew out of it, which rose high above the tables and twisted itself, snakelike, into words.

"Everyone pick their favorite tune," said Dumbledore, "and off we go!"

Xiomara: "Everyone pick your favorite tune??"

And the school bellowed:

"Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,

Teach us something please,

Whether we be old and bald

Or young with scabby knees,

Our heads could do with filling

With some interesting stuff,

For now they're bare and full of air,

Dead flies and bits of fluff,

Minerva: Speak for yourself!

So teach us things worth knowing,

Bring back what we've forgot,

Just do your best, we'll do the rest,

And learn until our brains all rot."

Filius: Delightful incentive!

Everybody finished the song at different times.

Filius: That's not the school song I remember learning!

Robert: It sounds like something Dumbles would come up with.

Pomona: It's certainly more fun than the stodgy old thing we've got now!

At last, only the Weasley twins were left singing along to a very slow funeral march.

Filius: In honor of the victims they had targeted for pranks this year?

Alastor: Aye, it's always the ones who think they're clever who give themselves away.

Dumbledore conducted their last few lines with his wand and when they had finished, he was one of those who clapped loudest.

Pomona: He must get an awful lot of fun out of being Headmaster.

"Ah, music," he said, wiping his eyes. "A magic beyond all we do here! And now, bedtime. Off you trot!"

The Gryffindor first years followed Percy through the chattering crowds, out of the Great Hall, and up the marble staircase. Harry's legs were like lead again, but only because he was so tired and full of food.

Alastor: Not that he'd recognize any of the enervating potions if he *had* been dosed, poor boy.

He was too sleepy even to be surprised that the people in the portraits along the corridors whispered and pointed as they passed, or that twice Percy led them through doorways hidden behind sliding panels and hanging tapestries.

Alastor: For Merlin's sake, pay attention, lad! Just because he seems friendly doesn't prove he's not leading you into an ambush!

They climbed more staircases, yawning and dragging their feet, and Harry was just wondering how much farther they had to go when they came to a sudden halt.

A bundle of walking sticks was floating in midair ahead of them, and as Percy took a step toward them they started throwing themselves at him.

Minerva: Didn't their mothers ever teach them that throwing yourself at a boy will only lose his respect?

Robert: (ruefully) I suppose your mother did?

Xiomara: (aside) Don't worry. She doesn't *always* listen to her Mum.

"Peeves," Percy whispered to the first years. "A poltergeist."

Filius: Really? We thought it was a natural phenomenon!

Xiomara: Trust me, there is *nothing* natural about Peeves!

He raised his voice,

"Peeves - show yourself!"

Xiomara: But don't take that too literally.

Pomona: Xia!

A loud, rude sound, like the air being let out of a balloon, answered.

Minerva: And there's another one who should lay off the haggis!

"Do you want me to go to the Bloody Baron?"

Xiomara: You don't want to know where we want you to go!

Filius: Poetry!

There was a pop, and a little man with wicked, dark eyes and a wide mouth appeared, floating cross-legged in the air, clutching the walking sticks.

"Oooooooh!" he said, with an evil cackle. "Ickle Firsties! What fun!"

Filius: That simple sentence would fill me with a lot more dread than the Sorting did, if I were a First Year!

He swooped suddenly at them. They all ducked.

"Go away, Peeves, or the Baron'll hear about this, I mean it!" barked Percy.

Peeves stuck out his tongue and vanished, dropping the walking sticks on Neville's head.

Pomona: Why do I have the feeling that poor Neville boy is going to be the butt of every joke?

Xiomara: Like Al, you mean?

Alastor: Blast, I thought I was off the hot-seat!

They heard him zooming away, rattling coats of armor as he passed.

Filius: An ordinary ghost would settle for rattling some chains, but Peeves just has to be different!

"You want to watch out for Peeves," said Percy, as they set off again. "The Bloody Baron's the only one who can control him, he won't even listen to us prefects.

Here we are."

At the very end of the corridor hung a portrait of a very fat woman in a pink silk dress.

Pomona: Fat? She just has big bones!

"Password?" she said.

"Caput Draconis,"

Robert: That's a new one!

said Percy, and the portrait swung forward to reveal a round hole in the wall. They all scrambled through it - Neville needed a leg up - and found themselves in the Gryffindor common room, a cozy, round room full of squashy armchairs.

Minerva: Hasn't changed then.

Percy directed the girls through one door to their dormitory and the boys through another.

Xiomara: Damn. Neither has that.

At the top of a spiral staircase - they were obviously in one of the towers - they found their beds at last: five four-posters hung with deep red, velvet curtains. Their trunks had already been brought up. Too tired to talk much, they pulled on their pajamas and fell into bed.

"Great food, isn't it?" Ron muttered to Harry through the hangings. "Get off, Scabbers! He's chewing my sheets."

Pomona: Maybe he needs acting lessons?

Robert: What?

Pomona: Oh - Muggle expression. "Chewing the scenery" means over-acting - especially in really dramatic, emotional scenes.

Harry was going to ask Ron if he'd had any of the treacle tart, but he fell asleep almost at once.

Alastor: Just tired, or drugged?

Perhaps Harry had eaten a bit too much,

Filius: For the first time in his life...

because he had a very strange dream. He was wearing Professor Quirrell's turban, which kept talking to him, telling him he must transfer to Slytherin at once, because it was his destiny.

Alastor: Intelligent turban!

Harry told the turban he didn't want to be in Slytherin;

Alastor: Harry, you haven't even tried it!

it got heavier and heavier; he tried to pull it off but it tightened painfully -

Minerva: Just grab one of the strips and unravel it!

and there was Malfoy, laughing at him as he struggled with it - then Malfoy turned into the hook-nosed teacher, Snape, whose laugh became high and cold - there was a burst of green light and Harry woke, sweating and shaking.

He rolled over and fell asleep again, and when he woke next day, he didn't remember the dream at all.

Xiomara: And so ends Chapter Seven.

Minerva: Sounds like Harry's out of the frying pan and headed toward the fire.

Pomona: Well, at least he has some idea of what's going on now.

Filius: Is it time for more buttocks jokes? I didn't get to make one earlier.

Alastor: Another chapter! Xia, give him the book - quickly!

* ¹ "Mouldiwarp" is an old word for "mole".

* ² Lavender blue, dilly-dilly,

Lavender green.

When you are king, dilly-dilly

I'll be your queen.

* ³ Does anyone still use the expression "For the birds"? (And for that matter, was anyone using it as early as the 1930's?)

* ⁴ For those who don't know, the name "Seamus" is pronounced like "shame us".

* ⁵ The original quote is "Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know". Said by Lady Caroline Lamb about her lover, Lord Byron.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 12

As the kids read on, they begin to learn more about Hogwarts' future... and their own.

Disclaimer: Except for Robert, everything here belongs to J. K. Rowling.

Acknowledgements: Without notsosaintly and Dark Beta, none of this would have been possible. Love ya' both!

Scene: About ten seconds after the last chapter ended. The six look at each other.

Xiomara: One more chapter?

Minerva: (looks uneasily at her textbook) Well...

Robert: Minna, I think you're far enough ahead that you can take that much time off.

Pomona: I want to know how Harry's first day of class goes!

Filius: And I need some elocution practice. Which means, I'd like to read, if nobody minds.

(Xiomara hands Filius the book.)

Filius: **Chapter Eight - The Potions Master.**

"There, look..."

"Where?"

Robert: There!

Minerva: Where?

Pomona: Here?

Filius: How?

Xiomara: What?

Alastor: (suspiciously) Who?

"Next to the tall kid with the red hair."

Minerva: Ah, Ron's become a landmark. None of his brothers achieved that!

"Wearing the glasses?"

Pomona: The kid with the red hair?

"Did you see his face?"

"Did you see his scar?"

Xiomara: Did you see his...

(Predictably, Pomona puts a hand over Xiomara's mouth.)

Whispers followed Harry from the moment he left his dormitory the next day. People lining up outside classrooms stood on tiptoe to get a look at him, or doubled back to pass him in the corridors again, staring. Harry wished they wouldn't, because he was trying to concentrate on finding his way to classes.

There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts:

Minerva: That's not true, there are only a hundred and twenty-seven!

Robert: Sounds like there's some remodeling due in the next few decades.

wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump.

Pomona: Halfway up the stairs

Isn't up,

And isn't down.

It isn't in the nursery,

And it isn't in the town.

And all sorts of funny thoughts

Run round my head:

"It isn't really

Anywhere!

It's somewhere else

Instead!"

Filius: Another quote from that Milne chap?

Pomona: You're learning!

Filius: I was a little worried about you when we went through the whole last chapter and you didn't quote him even once.

Pomona: (sheepishly) I couldn't come up with anything.

Then there were doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely,

Minerva: An excellent teaching device.

or tickled them in exactly the right place,

Xiomara: Another excellent teaching device.

Pomona: Xia!

and doors that weren't really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending.

Xiomara: (deep sigh) I always dreamed of being a door, but for a young wall from a poor background, there weren't many *openings*.

Filius: In the end, she became a little *unhinged*.

It was also very hard to remember where anything was, because it all seemed to move around a lot. The people in the portraits kept going to visit each other, and Harry was sure the coats of armor could walk.

Minerva: The Armor of Sir Belthanor walked into the Great Hall once.

Robert: Yes, but you were wearing it at the time.

The ghosts didn't help, either.

Minerva: Oh, I've known them to.

It was always a nasty shock when one of them glided suddenly through a door you were trying to open.

Alastor: It's a nastier shock when one of them glides suddenly through *you*!

Nearly Headless Nick was always happy to point new Gryffindors in the right direction,

Minerva: See?

but Peeves the Poltergeist was worth two locked doors and a trick staircase if you met him when you were late for class. He would drop wastepaper baskets on your head, pull rugs from under your feet, pelt you with bits of chalk, or sneak up behind you, invisible, grab your nose, and screech, "GOT YOUR CONK!"

Xiomara: Just grab a couple of feet lower and yell "GOT YOUR YONK!"

Filius: "Yonk"? Is that really a word?

Xiomara: No, but he'll understand it from the context. Besides, it sounds just enough like "yank" it ought to throw a scare into him!

Pomona: Peeves is afraid of Americans?

Even worse than Peeves, if that was possible, was the caretaker, Argus Filch.

Robert: He *can't* be worse than old Pringle!

Harry and Ron managed to get on the wrong side of him on their very first morning.

Filch found them trying to force their way through a door that unluckily turned out to be the entrance to the out-of-bounds corridor on the third floor. He wouldn't believe they were lost, was sure they were trying to break into it on purpose,

Filius: Good heavens, Al, he's more paranoid than you are!

Alastor: (ruefully) I try harder.

and was threatening to lock them in the dungeons when they were rescued by Professor Quirrell, who was passing.

Alastor: Interesting timing.

Filch owned a cat called Mrs. Norris,

Robert: AHEM! What was I saying about that, earlier?

a scrawny, dust-colored creature with bulging, lamp like eyes just like Filch's. She patrolled the corridors alone. Break a rule in front of her, put just one toe out of line, and she'd whisk off for Filch, who'd appear, wheezing,

Robert: See, he's not so bad he likes a good "wheeze" as well as anyone!

two seconds later. Filch knew the secret passageways of the school better than anyone (except perhaps the Weasley twins) and could pop up as suddenly as any of the ghosts. The students all hated him, and it was the dearest ambition of many to give Mrs. Norris a good kick.

Robert: Oh, now that's uncalled for!

Alastor: Makes you realize how useful an Animagus spy would be.

Minerva: (looks thoughtful)

And then, once you had managed to find them, there were the classes themselves. There was a lot more to magic, as Harry quickly found out, than waving your wand and saying a few funny words.

Filius: There is nothing *funny* about the True Speech!

Robert: This coming from the most whimsical little chap on the planet!

They had to study the night skies through their telescopes every Wednesday at midnight and learn the names of different stars and the movements of the planets. Three times a week they went out to the greenhouses behind the castle to study Herbology, with a dumpy little witch called Professor Sprout,

Pomona: What?

where they learned how to take care of all the strange plants and fungi, and found out what they were used for.

Pomona: Oh, good! Well, all except the "dumpy" part.

Easily the most boring class was

All: History of Magic!

History of Magic, which was the only one taught by a ghost.

Xiomara: What? Well that's new!

Professor Binns

Robert: Oh, Merlin!

Filius: As we said, some things are eternal!

had been very old indeed when he had fallen asleep in front of the staff room fire and got up next morning to teach, leaving his body behind him.

Pomona: You'd think dying would be enough to make him take a sabbatical, at least!

Minerva: Do you think we should suggest it to him?

Robert: Um... I don't know, Minna. "Excuse me, sir, but we think it would be a good idea for you to stop teaching after you die." If you can think of a way to say that without sounding rude, let me know!

Binns droned on and on while they scribbled down names and dates, and got Emeric the Evil and Uric the Oddball mixed up.

Robert: How could you mix up Uric the Oddball with *anyone* else?

Minerva: Put it this way, if I had to ask one of them to mind my sisters for an afternoon, I'd *definitely* go with Uric!

Alastor: If your sisters are much like you, lassie, Emeric might *deserve* them!

Robert: Hey, I was going to say that!

Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was a tiny little wizard

Filius: Huzzah!

who had to stand on a pile of books to see over his desk. At the start of their first class he took the roll call, and when he reached Harry's name he gave an excited squeak and toppled out of sight.

Filius: Now *that's* the way to hold the class's attention!

Professor McGonagall was again different.

Robert: Pay attention, Minna!

Harry had been quite right to think she wasn't a teacher to cross. Strict and clever, she gave them a talking-to the moment they sat down in her first class.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," she said.

Minerva: Well, she has *that* right!

"Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Filius: Where do they go?

Alastor: You don't want to know.

Then she changed her desk into a pig and back again.

Xiomara: So Dudley got a brief glimpse of Hogwarts?

Pomona: Oh, that's cruel!

They were all very impressed and couldn't wait to get started, but soon realized they weren't going to be changing the furniture into animals for a long time. After taking a lot of complicated notes, they were each given a match and started trying to turn it into a needle.

Minerva: Remember the first time I thought I'd done that successfully?

Robert: And you tried to use the needle to mend a tear in your robes...

Minerva: ...and it set them on fire!

By the end of the lesson, only Hermione Granger had made any difference to her match; Professor McGonagall showed the class how it had gone all silver and pointy and gave Hermione a rare smile.

Pomona: Did she also purr?

The class everyone had really been looking forward to was Defense Against the Dark Arts, but Quirrell's lessons turned out to be a bit of a joke.

Alastor: They won't be laughing when they face Dark curses and find they're unprepared.

His classroom smelled strongly of garlic, which everyone said was to ward off a vampire he'd met in Romania and was afraid would be coming back to get him one of these days. His turban, he told them, had been given to him by an African prince as a thank-you for getting rid of a troublesome zombie, but they weren't sure they believed this story. For one thing, when Seamus Finnigan asked eagerly to hear how Quirrell had fought off the zombie, Quirrell went pink and started talking about the weather;

Xiomara: That's because he stood there and stuttered at it until it went back to its grave out of sheer embarrassment!

for another, they had noticed that a funny smell hung around the turban,

Pomona: Dear Emily Post, How do you tell your teacher tactfully that his turban needs washing?

Xiomara: Who is Emily Post?

Pomona: Oh, she's what Muggles have instead of the Manners Witch.

and the Weasley twins insisted that it was stuffed full of garlic as well, so that Quirrell was protected wherever he went.

Xiomara: He'll be protected from a lot more than just vampires!

Minerva: I know! The only dates he'll ever get will be with girls who want to be Italian chefs!

Harry was very relieved to find out that he wasn't miles behind everyone else. Lots of people had come from Muggle families and, like him, hadn't had any idea that they were witches and wizards. There was so much to learn that even people like Ron didn't have much of a head start.

Robert: A head above, but not a head ahead.

Minerva: (Winces)

Friday was an important day for Harry and Ron. They finally managed to find their way down to the Great Hall for breakfast without getting lost once.

Robert: No, they got lost three times. But that's different.

"What have we got today?" Harry asked Ron

Pomona: It's usually porridge on Fridays, isn't it?

as he poured sugar on his porridge.

"Double Potions with the Slytherins,"

Pomona: Oh. Classes.

said Ron. "Snape's Head of Slytherin House. They say he always favors them we'll be able to see if it's true."

"Wish McGonagall favored us," said Harry. Professor McGonagall was head of Gryffindor House, but it hadn't stopped her from giving them a huge pile of homework the day before.

Minerva: What makes you think she doesn't favor you? She's obviously going all out to teach you everything she can!

Robert: Minna, only you would think that extra homework qualified as favoritism!

Just then, the mail arrived. Harry had gotten used to this by now, but it had given him a bit of a shock on the first morning, when about a hundred owls had suddenly streamed into the Great Hall during breakfast, circling the tables until they saw their owners, and dropping letters and packages onto their laps.

Pomona: I remember what that's like! I used to drape my napkin over my breakfast, just to be safe!

Hedwig hadn't brought Harry anything so far. She sometimes flew in to nibble his ear and have a bit of toast before going off to sleep in the owlery with the other school owls.

Minerva: Toast? Is he trying to make her sick? That's not proper food for a raptor!

Robert: I expect it's just to distract her from Scabbers.

This morning, however, she fluttered down between the marmalade and the sugar bowl and dropped a note onto Harry's plate. Harry tore it open at once. It said, in a very untidy scrawl:

Dear Harry,

I know you get Friday afternoons off, so would you like to come and have a cup of tea with me around three? I want to hear all about your first week. Send us an answer back with Hedwig.

Hagrid

Alastor: "Us"? Harry'd better watch out he's not outnumbered.

Robert: I expect Hagrid was including the animals.

Harry borrowed Ron's quill, scribbled *Yes, please, see you later* on the back of the note, and sent Hedwig off again.

It was lucky that Harry had tea with Hagrid to look forward to, because the Potions lesson turned out to be the worst thing that had happened to him so far.

Filius: Worse than ten years with the Dursleys?

Minerva: Worse than sleeping in a cupboard?

Alastor: Worse than almost being killed by a powerful Dark wizard?

Pomona: Worse than Mrs. Figg's chocolate cake?

At the start-of-term banquet, Harry had gotten the idea that Professor Snape disliked him. By the end of the first Potions lesson, he knew he'd been wrong.

Pomona: Well that's a relief.

Snape didn't dislike Harry he *hated* him.

Filius: Uh-oh.

Potions lessons took place down in one of the dungeons. It was colder here than up in the main castle, and would have been quite creepy enough without the pickled animals floating in glass jars all around the walls.

Pomona: Tsk. Giving alcohol to poor little animals.

Snape, like Flitwick, started the class by taking the roll call, and like Flitwick, he paused at Harry's name.

"Ah, yes," he said softly, "Harry Potter. Our new *celebrity*."

Filius: And then fell off his desk?

Draco Malfoy and his friends Crabbe and Goyle sniggered behind their hands.

Filius: It must be nice to have such a willing audience.

Snape finished calling the names and looked up at the class. His eyes were black like Hagrid's, but they had none of Hagrid's warmth. They were cold and empty and made you think of dark tunnels.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making," he began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort.

"As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic.

Pomona: I've wondered about that. With the right ingredients and instruction and everything, could a Muggle learn to make potions?

Filius: I read something about that once. No one seems to be sure. Every now and then someone suggests finding a Muggle who already knows about our world and giving them everything they need to brew something and trying the experiment, but somehow it never happens. Personally, I think it always falls through because people are *afraid* to find out what Muggles can do!

Alastor: They should be afraid *not* to find out! Ignorance is dangerous!

Others: We know. You've told us.

I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses...

Xiomara: And then he seized his cauldron and began kissing it passionately!

Alastor: I'd want to know what was in that cauldron!

Robert: No, you wouldn't.

I can teach you how to bottle fame,

Filius: Good morning, can I purchase a six-ounce bottle of Fame to go, please?

brew glory, even stopper death if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

Minerva: Well, that's charming!

Flitwick: If he's going to be a colleague of ours, maybe we should have a talk with him about motivating the students properly.

More silence followed this little speech. Harry and Ron exchanged looks with raised eyebrows. Hermione Granger was on the edge of her seat and looked desperate to start proving that she wasn't a dunderhead.

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Minerva: The Draught of the Living Death, of course!

Powdered root of what to an infusion of what?

Harry glanced at Ron, who looked as stumped as he was; Hermione's hand had shot into the air.

Minerva: Well done, that girl!

"I don't know, sir," said Harry.

Snape's lips curled into a sneer.

Pomona: ... thanks to the curling papers he puts on after his bath on Saturday.

"Tut, tut fame clearly isn't everything."

Filius: Hmm, do I detect a note of envy here?

He ignored Hermione's hand.

"Let's try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

Xiomara: Well, first you bend over...

Pomona: (warningly) Xia...!

Xiomara: ...and cut the goat open...

Robert: Just make sure it's not Dumbles' sister-in-law before you cut!

Hermione stretched her hand as high into the air as it would go without her leaving her seat, but Harry didn't have the faintest idea what a bezoar was. He tried not to look at Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were shaking with laughter.

"I don't know, sir."

"Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming, eh, Potter?"

Harry forced himself to keep looking straight into those cold eyes.

Minerva: He's a Gryffindor, all right!

He *had* looked through his books at the Dursleys', but did Snape expect him to remember everything in *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fung?*

Snape was still ignoring Hermione's quivering hand.

Minerva: I *hate* it when a teacher does that!

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

Alastor: That's a trick question, lad.

Minerva: Try giving the *girl* a chance to answer, you greasy-haired donkey! Let me tell you, if I really do end up working with this man, he's going to get a large piece of my mind! Frequently!

At this, Hermione stood up, her hand stretching toward the dungeon ceiling.

"I don't know," said Harry quietly. "I think Hermione does, though, why don't you try her?"

Minerva/Xiomara/Pomona: WELL SAID, HARRY!!!

A few people laughed; Harry caught Seamus' eye, and Seamus winked. Snape, however, was not pleased.

"Sit down," he snapped at Hermione.

Robert: Sit down yourself!

Minerva: Preferably on a bee!

"For your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons.

Pomona: Mind you, it didn't save the goat from being cut open.

Robert: That wasn't done with poison.

As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite. Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

Robert: We're too busy watching the Duel-of-the-Eyes!

There was a sudden rummaging for quills and parchment. Over the noise, Snape said, "And a point will be taken from Gryffindor House for your cheek, Potter."

Filius: Does that mean he should turn the other one?

Things didn't improve for the Gryffindors as the Potions lesson continued. Snape put them all into pairs and set them to mixing up a simple potion to cure boils.

He swept around in his long black cloak,

Xiomara: Sounds like an overgrown bat!

Alastor: Ah, so *that's* who Quirrell's worried about!

watching them weigh dried nettles and crushed snake fangs, criticizing almost everyone except Malfoy, whom he seemed to like.

Xiomara: Bad hygiene, bad temper and now bad taste!

He was just telling everyone to look at the perfect way Malfoy had stewed his horned slugs when clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. Neville had somehow managed to melt Seamus' cauldron into a twisted blob, and their potion was seeping across the stone floor, burning holes in people's shoes.

Filius: Uh-oh, I bet he added the porcupine quills before he took the cauldron off the fire.

Within seconds, the whole class was standing on their stools while Neville, who had been drenched in the potion when the cauldron collapsed, moaned in pain as angry red boils sprang up all over his arms and legs.

"Idiot boy!" snarled Snape, clearing the spilled potion away with one wave of his wand. "I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?"

Filius: See?

Neville whimpered as boils started to pop up all over his nose.

Minerva: (ruefully) Sounds like how I spent most of my Third Year!

"Take him up to the hospital wing," Snape spat at Seamus. Then he rounded on Harry and Ron, who had been working next to Neville.

Pomona: Well, at least he can't blame this one on Harry!

"You Potter

Pomona: Uh-oh...

why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Gryffindor."

Minerva: Oh now that's inexcusable!

This was so unfair that Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Ron kicked him behind their cauldron.

Xiomara: Kicked him in the cauldron?

Robert: Somebody should kick *Snape* in the cauldron!

"Don't push it," he muttered, "I've heard Snape can turn very nasty."

Robert: He's already turned!

As they climbed the steps out of the dungeon an hour later, Harry's mind was racing and his spirits were low. He'd lost two points for Gryffindor in his very first week why did Snape hate him so much?

Alastor: Dark secrets to be revealed...

"Cheer up," said Ron, "Snape's always taking points off Fred and George. Can I come and meet Hagrid with you?"

Alastor: Better than no one if Harry needs someone to watch his back.

Pomona: You still don't trust Hagrid, Al?

At five to three they left the castle and made their way across the grounds. Hagrid lived in a small wooden house on the edge of the forbidden forest. A crossbow and a pair of galoshes were outside the front door.

Pomona: John had Great Big Waterproof Boots on;

John had a Great Big Waterproof Hat;

John had a Great Big Waterproof Mackintosh

And that (said John) Is That.

There, two in one chapter! It averages out!

Filius: Well done, Mona!

When Harry knocked they heard a frantic scrabbling from inside and several booming barks. Then Hagrid's voice rang out, saying, 'Back, Fang back.'

Hagrid's big, hairy face appeared in the crack as he pulled the door open.

"Hang on," he said. "Back, Fang."

Pomona: There's no such thing as a back fang. Fangs grow toward the front. It's all molars in back.

He let them in, struggling to keep a hold on the collar of an enormous black boarhound.

Robert: Now if only he'd set Fang on Binns!

Minerva: That's "really big pig" boarhound, Robbie, not "a few words before we eat" bore-hound.

Robert: All right, set him on Dudley.

There was only one room inside.

Pomona: Um...

Robert: Don't ask, Mona.

Hams and pheasants were hanging from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire, and in the corner stood a massive bed with a patchwork quilt over it.

"Make yerselves at home," said Hagrid,

Filius: We can make room on the ceiling.

Xiomara: (as Hagrid) Sorry, Harry, din't have time to lay in the spiders.

letting go of Fang, who bounded straight at Ron and started licking his ears. Like Hagrid, Fang was clearly not as fierce as he looked.

Alastor: That's what they want you to think.

"This is Ron," Harry told Hagrid, who was pouring boiling water into a large teapot and putting rock cakes onto a plate.

Xiomara: Guess what family he comes from?

"Another Weasley, eh?" said Hagrid, glancing at Ron's freckles. "I spent half me life chasin' yer twin brothers away from the forest."

Minerva: The twins have been in at Hogwarts, what, five years?

Alastor: So Hagrid's only ten? That'd bear some checking into if I had my way.

The rock cakes were shapeless lumps with raisins that almost broke their teeth,

Minerva: Rock cakes that really live up to their name!

but Harry and Ron pretended to be enjoying them as they told Hagrid all about their first lessons. Fang rested his head on Harry's knee and drooled all over his robes.

Xiomara: Sounds like my last date!

Harry and Ron were delighted to hear Hagrid call Filch "that old git."

"An' as fer that cat, Mrs. Norris,

Robert: Did he say "as *fur* that cat"?

I'd like ter introduce her to Fang sometime.

Pomona: They'd make such a cute couple!

D'yeh know, every time I go up ter the school, she follows me everywhere?

Can't get rid of her Filch puts her up to it."

Minerva: Filch, nothing! She's after the dormice in his pockets!

Harry told Hagrid about Snape's lesson. Hagrid, like Ron, told Harry not to worry about it, that Snape liked hardly any of the students.

Pomona: This Snape fellow needs a cheering charm!

Minerva: This Snape fellow needs a kick in the...

Robert: I thought we'd already established that!

"But he seemed to really *hate* me."

"Rubbish!" said Hagrid. "Why should he?"

Yet Harry couldn't help thinking that Hagrid didn't quite meet his eyes when he said that.

Alastor: That gives too much away. *A really* accomplished liar can look you right in the eye while he's handing you a load of dragon dung!

"How's yer brother Charlie?" Hagrid asked Ron.

Xiomara: Speaking of dragon dung...

"I liked him a lot great with animals."

Harry wondered if Hagrid had changed the subject on purpose.

Alastor: Next time you have tea with Hagrid, slip him some Veritaserum!

While Ron told Hagrid all about Charlie's work with dragons, Harry picked up a piece of paper that was lying on the table under the tea cozy.

Alastor: Well, snooping is also useful.

It was a cutting from the *Daily Prophet*:

GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on 31 July, widely believed to be the work of Dark wizards or witches unknown.

Gringotts goblins today insisted that nothing had been taken. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied the same day.

"But we're not telling you what was in there, so keep your noses out if you know what's good for you," said a Gringotts spokesgoblin this afternoon.

Alastor: That's a goblin, all right!

Harry remembered Ron telling him on the train that someone had tried to rob Gringotts, but Ron hadn't mentioned the date.

"Hagrid!" said Harry, "that Gringotts break-in happened on my birthday! It might've been happening while we were there!"

Pomona: (as Harry) They were trying to steal my cake!

Filius: The fiends!

There was no doubt about it, Hagrid definitely didn't meet Harry's eyes this time. He grunted and offered him another rock cake. Harry read the story again *The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied earlier that same day*. Hagrid had emptied vault seven hundred and thirteen, if you could call it emptying, taking out that grubby little package.

Minerva: Well, when he took it out, the vault was empty, wasn't it?

Had that been what the thieves were looking for?

As Harry and Ron walked back to the castle for dinner, their pockets weighed down with rock cakes they'd been too polite to refuse,

Filius: Don't go swimming!

Harry thought that none of the lessons he'd had so far had given him as much to think about as tea with Hagrid. Had Hagrid collected that package just in time?

Alastor: And how did he know? Did he have inside information?

Where was it now?

Robert: Hidden in Hagrid's beard!

Alastor: The last place anyone would look!

And did Hagrid know something about Snape that he didn't want to tell Harry?

Alastor: Well, that's bloody obvious. The question is, *what*?

Filius: And we come to the end of Chapter Eight.

Minerva: And I've really *got* to get back to this report.

(General grumbles of reluctant agreement. Filius tucks the book into his bag as all six go back to their various texts and charts.)

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 12

As our story continues, the Splendid Six get more tantalizing glimpses of future inventions, both magical and Muggle... and future dangers to the wizarding world.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR.

Acknowledgements: Hail to the mighty Dark Beta! All honor to the great notsosaintly!

Scene: You guessed it, it's the Next Day! The gang is now hanging out in the Gryffindor Common room, staring blankly at the pages of their textbooks and obviously in need of a break.

Filius: Well, somebody say it! It's time for another chapter! (He pulls a miniaturized book from his bag and taps it with his wand. It grows to full size and is now recognizable as The Book.)

Minerva: Guys, Robbie and I were talking. You know how we were going to wait a while and read some more before we tried telling anyone about this? About how - if this book is right - this Voldemort person is going to take power and kill so many people? But they haven't said much more about that, have they?

Alastor: There's a lot they don't say. As if they're hoping we'll get so caught up in the story, we'll forget about how it could affect us.

Robert: Which leaves the question, what do we do about this?

Xiomara: Who do we tell? And what do we tell them?

Minerva: That's "Whom." And the answer is Dumbledore, of course.

Filius: And I guess we should give him the book and explain how we got it.

Pomona: And tell him it's very important that he read it.

Robert: But maybe we should read the rest of it first.

Alastor: Is that so you'll have all the facts or are you just caught up in the story?

Robert: A little of both, actually. Whose turn is it to read?

Filius: Minna's, I think. (Hands her the book.)

Minerva: **Chapter Nine: The Midnight Duel**

Harry had never believed he would meet a boy he hated more than Dudley, but that was before he met Draco Malfoy. Still, first-year Gryffindors only had Potions with the Slytherins, so they didn't have to put up with Malfoy much.

Alastor: Harry should have a little more sympathy for the other Slytherins who do have to put up with him!

Or at least, they didn't until they spotted a notice pinned up in the Gryffindor common room that made them all groan. Flying lessons would be starting on Thursday - and Gryffindor and Slytherin would be learning together.

"Typical," said Harry darkly. "Just what I always wanted. To make a fool of myself on a broomstick in front of Malfoy."

Robert: Thank you, Mr. Negativity.

Pomona: Why is Malfoy so important?

He had been looking forward to learning to fly more than anything else.

Minerva: So enjoy it and ignore the little twit! And try to use this as a chance to meet some of the nicer Slytherins! Oh, good Lord, I've begun talking to the boy as if he were here in front of me!

"You don't know that you'll make a fool of yourself," said Ron reasonably. "Anyway, I know Malfoy's always going on about how good he is at Quidditch, but I bet that's all talk."

Alastor: I don't know. The best way to make people underestimate you is to pose as a braggart.

Xiomara: Not necessarily. That Neville boy is getting himself rather thoroughly underestimated.

Malfoy certainly did talk about flying a lot. He complained loudly about first years never getting on the house Quidditch teams and told long, boastful stories that always seemed to end up with him narrowly escaping Muggles in helicopters.

Filius: What's a helicopter?

Pomona: Sort of the latest version of an autogyro.

Filius: Ah. Er, what's an autogyro?^{*1}

Pomona: Um... I'll explain later.

He wasn't the only one, though: the way Seamus Finnigan told it, he'd spent most of his childhood zooming around the countryside on his broomstick. Even Ron would tell anyone who'd listen about the time he'd almost hit a hang glider on Charlie's old broom.

Alastor: Hang? Glider? How bad are things going to get?!

Pomona: I don't know - "hang glider" is a new one on me!^{*2}

Everyone from wizarding families talked about Quidditch constantly. Ron had already had a big argument with Dean Thomas, who shared their dormitory, about soccer. Ron couldn't see what was exciting about a game with only one ball where no one was allowed to fly.

Pomona: (giggles)

Filius: What?

Pomona: I just wonder if it's actually in the rulebook for soccer. "Players are not permitted to fly during the game."

Xiomara: I can think of several exciting games to play with just one ball.

(Pause.)

Xiomara: Mona, you didn't even squeak!

Pomona: I've given up.

Xiomara: (Pouts.) You're taking all the fun out of it!

Harry had caught Ron prodding Dean's poster of West Ham soccer team,

Xiomara: In the hams?

trying to make the players move.

Xiomara: /d move!

Filius: Yes, but that was a bit more South than West.

Neville had never been on a broomstick in his life, because his grandmother had never let him near one. Privately, Harry felt she'd had good reason, because Neville managed to have an extraordinary number of accidents even with both feet on the ground.

Xiomara: Well, maybe he'll be less clumsy in the air. I was!

Alastor: And I don't recall Neville falling out of his boat on the way across the lake, either.

(Xiomara sticks her tongue out at him.)

Hermione Granger was almost as nervous about flying as Neville was. This was something you couldn't learn by heart out of a book - not that she hadn't tried. At breakfast on Thursday she bored them all stupid with flying tips she'd gotten out of a library book called *Quidditch Through the Ages*.

Neville was hanging on to her every word,

Xiomara: That won't work laddie - try hanging on to the broomstick, it's safer!

desperate for anything that might help him hang on to his broomstick later,

Pomona: "Stick-To-It" gel worked for me. Of course, then I had to carry the broomstick around with me for two days...

but everybody else was very pleased when Hermione's lecture was interrupted by the arrival of the mail.

Harry hadn't had a single letter since Hagrid's note, something that Malfoy had been quick to notice, of course. Malfoy's eagle owl was always bringing him packages of sweets from home, which he opened gloatingly at the Slytherin table.

Filius: How exactly does one open something gloatingly?

Pomona: Never mind that, how can I get adopted by the Malfoy family?

Filius: You can't. But if you want some homemade sweets, I'm sure I can arrange something.

Others: Awww!

A barn owl brought Neville a small package from his grandmother. He opened it excitedly and showed them a glass ball the size of a large marble, which seemed to be full of white smoke.

"It's a Remembrall!" he explained. "Gran knows I forget things - this tells you if there's something you've forgotten to do. Look, you hold it tight like this and if it turns red - oh..." His face fell, because the Remembrall had suddenly glowed scarlet, "...you've forgotten something..."

Xiomara: Either that or it remembers the dream you had last night, and it's blushing!

Neville was trying to remember what he'd forgotten when Draco Malfoy, who was passing the Gryffindor table, snatched the Remembrall out of his hand.

Pomona: (as Neville) That was it! I forgot to punch Malfoy!

Harry and Ron jumped to their feet. They were half hoping for a reason to fight Malfoy,

Minerva: (sniff) Half-wits!

but Professor McGonagall, who could spot trouble quicker than any teacher in the school, was there in a flash.

Robert: She was on him like a tabby cat on a... er, mouse?

Filius: Rat?

Alastor: Ferret?

Pomona: Guinea pig?

"What's going on?"

"Malfoy's got my Remembrall, Professor."

Scowling, Malfoy quickly dropped the Remembrall back on the table.

"Just looking," he said, and he sloped away with Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

Filius: "Sloped" away?

Alastor: The boy's a slippery slope, all right.

At three-thirty that afternoon, Harry, Ron, and the other Gryffindors hurried down the front steps onto the grounds for their first flying lesson. It was a clear, breezy day, and the grass rippled under their feet as they marched down the sloping lawns toward a smooth, flat lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the forbidden forest, whose trees were swaying darkly in the distance.

Filius: Opened gloatingly, swaying darkly, this book uses some of the oddest adverbs!

The Slytherins were already there, and so were twenty broomsticks

Alastor: Wait - twenty? Are they expecting some students we haven't heard about?

lying in neat lines on the ground. Harry had heard Fred and George Weasley complain about the school brooms, saying that some of them started to vibrate if you flew too high, or always flew slightly to the left.

Xiomara: I've been accused of that a few times.

Their teacher, Madam Hooch, arrived. She had short, gray hair, and yellow eyes like a hawk.

(Everyone makes a show of staring at Xiomara's eyes)

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she barked. "Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

Harry glanced down at his broom. It was old and some of the twigs stuck out at odd angles.

Pomona: Just like his hair! They were meant for each other!

"Stick out your right hand over your broom," called Madam Hooch at the front, "and say 'Up!'"

"UP!" everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once, but it was one of the few that did.

Minerva: Harriet's very good on a broom.

Xiomara: We know. We've all seen her.

Hermione Granger's had simply rolled over on the ground, and Neville's hadn't moved at all. Perhaps, brooms, like horses, could tell when you were afraid, thought Harry; there was a quaver in Neville's voice that said only too clearly that he wanted to keep his feet on the ground.

Pomona: Er, how does Harry know anything about horses? I doubt if the Dursleys ever took him riding.

Robert: Well, there're enough of them about on the street, aren't there?"³

Madam Hooch then showed how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, and walked up and down the rows correcting their grips. Harry and Ron were delighted when she told Malfoy he'd been doing it wrong for years.

Xiomara: But because he was just a young boy, she did not add that doing it wrong had been a habit of the Malfoy men for generations.

Pomona: Er, are we still talking about broom riding, here?

Xiomara: Bravo, Mona! You're learning!

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," said Madam Hooch. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle - three - two - "

But Neville, nervous and jumpy and frightened of being left on the ground,

Minerva: A minute ago, he was frightened of being in the air.

pushed off hard before the whistle had touched Madam Hooch's lips.

"Come back, boy!" she shouted,

Xiomara: "Come back, boy"? Is that the best I can do?

but Neville was rising straight up like a cork shot out of a bottle - twelve feet - twenty feet. Harry saw his scared white face look down at the ground falling away,

Pomona: Don't look down, that's the worst thing you can do!

saw him gasp, slip sideways off the broom and - WHAM - a thud and a nasty crack and Neville lay facedown on the grass in a heap.

Robert: (grimly) First tragedy in the book.

Alastor: Second. Harry's parents were the first.

His broomstick was still rising higher and higher, and started to drift lazily toward the forbidden forest and out of sight.

Madam Hooch was bending over Neville, her face as white as his.

"Broken wrist," Harry heard her mutter.

"Come on, boy - it's all right, up you get."

Pomona: A broken wrist is your idea of all right, Xia?

Xiomara: Well, considering it could have been his neck...!

She turned to the rest of the class.

"None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing!

Pomona: Everybody, let's play Statues!

You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come on, dear."

Neville, his face tear-streaked, clutching his wrist, hobbled off with Madam Hooch, who had her arm around him.

No sooner were they out of earshot than Malfoy burst into laughter.

All: (Snort in disgust)

"Did you see his face, the great lump?"

The other Slytherins joined in.

Alastor: They bloody didn't! I bet his two sidekicks joined in, and the rest looked embarrassed, but all Harry will remember is that "the Slytherins laughed"!

Filius: Cheer up, Al. I'll bet somewhere among them is at least one Slytherin who's laughing along while privately plotting out a way to take Malfoy down!

Alastor: Well, of course they're *all* plotting to take him down. That's beside the point.

"Shut up, Malfoy," snapped Parvati Patil.

"Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?" said Pansy Parkinson, a hard-faced Slytherin girl.

Filius: ...cracking a walnut on her cheek...

"Never thought *you'd* like fat little crybabies, Parvati."

Pomona: (snorts) I'd like to see how *she'd* react to falling twenty feet, and breaking her wrist!

"Look!" said Malfoy, darting forward and snatching something out of the grass. "It's that stupid thing Longbottom's gran sent him."

The Remembrall glittered in the sun as he held it up.

"Give that here, Malfoy," said Harry quietly. Everyone stopped talking to watch.

Xiomara: Cat fight!

Minerva: Not without me!

Malfoy smiled nastily.

"I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find - how about - up a tree?"

Robert: Then, Professor McGonagall can climb up and bat it down out of the branches!

Minerva: (primly) A Remembrall is *not* a cat toy!

"Give it *here!*" Harry yelled, but Malfoy had leapt onto his broomstick and taken off. He hadn't been lying, he *could* fly well. Hovering level with the topmost branches of an oak he called, "Come and get it, Potter!"

Xiomara: And once again, I bite my tongue.

Pomona: And we're very grateful.

Harry grabbed his broom.

"No!" shouted Hermione Granger. **"Madam Hooch told us not to move - you'll get us all into trouble."**

Harry ignored her. Blood was pounding in his ears.

Xiomara: They say you shouldn't fly when you're angry.

He mounted the broom and kicked hard against the ground and up, up he soared; air rushed through his hair, and his robes whipped out behind him - and in a rush of fierce joy he realized he'd found something he could do without being taught - this was easy, this was *wonderful*.

He pulled his broomstick up a little to take it even higher, and heard screams and gasps of girls back on the ground and an admiring whoop from Ron.

He turned his broomstick sharply to face Malfoy in midair. Malfoy looked stunned.

Alastor: Hah! The price of underestimating your opponent!

"Give it here," Harry called, "or I'll knock you off that broom!"

"Oh, yeah?" said Malfoy, trying to sneer, but looking worried.

Harry knew, somehow, what to do. He leaned forward and grasped the broom tightly in both hands, and it shot toward Malfoy like a javelin. Malfoy only just got out of the way in time;

Xiomara: See? That's why you shouldn't fly when you're angry!

Pomona: Flight Frenzy. I've heard about that.

Harry made a sharp about-face and held the broom steady. A few people below were clapping.

Minerva: Because Harry almost skewered Malfoy or because Malfoy managed to escape?

Alastor: Either way, you'd never get them to admit it, lass.

"No Crabbe and Goyle up here to save your neck, Malfoy," Harry called.

The same thought seemed to have struck Malfoy.

Filius: Right between the eyes.

"Catch it if you can, then!" he shouted, and he threw the glass ball high into the air and streaked back toward the ground.

Harry saw, as though in slow motion, the ball rise up in the air and then start to fall. He leaned forward and pointed his broom handle down - next second he was gathering speed in a steep dive, racing the ball - wind whistled in his ears, mingled with the screams of people watching - he stretched out his hand - a foot from the ground he caught it, just in time to pull his broom straight, and he toppled gently onto the grass with the Remembrall clutched safely in his fist.

"HARRY POTTER!"

His heart sank faster than he'd just dived. Professor McGonagall was running toward them. He got to his feet, trembling.

Robert: *Tremble before the wrath of the dreaded Tabby From Hell!*

(This time, even Minerva snickers.)

"*Never* - in all my time at Hogwarts - "

Robert: (as Minerva) Not since the time I dove off the roof of the Astronomy Tower with my broom, and was only two stories from the ground before I managed to pull up...

Minerva: Oh, sod off, Robbie.

Professor McGonagall was almost speechless with shock, and her glasses flashed furiously, " - how *dare* you - might have broken your neck - "

"It wasn't his fault, Professor - "

"Be quiet, Miss Patil - "

Pomona: (looking at Minerva) How rude!

"But Malfoy - "

"That's *enough*, Mr. Weasley. Potter, follow me, now."

Harry caught sight of Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle's triumphant faces as he left, walking numbly

Filius: Walking numbly. There's another one!

in Professor McGonagall's wake as she strode toward the castle. He was going to be expelled, he just knew it. He wanted to say something to defend himself, but there seemed to be something wrong with his voice. Professor McGonagall was sweeping along without even looking at him; he had to jog to keep up. Now he'd done it. He hadn't even lasted two weeks. He'd be packing his bag in ten minutes. What would the Dursleys say when he turned up on the doorstep?

Alastor: Word of advice, lad. Trade on your name, and find someone in the wizarding world to take you in.

Up the front steps, up the marble staircase inside, and still Professor McGonagall didn't say a word to him. She wrenched open doors and marched along corridors with Harry trotting miserably behind her. Maybe she was taking him to Dumbledore. He thought of Hagrid, expelled but allowed to stay on as gamekeeper. Perhaps he could be Hagrid's assistant. His stomach twisted as he imagined it, watching Ron and the others becoming wizards while he stumped around the grounds carrying Hagrid's bag.

Professor McGonagall stopped outside a classroom. She opened the door and poked her head inside.

"Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, could I borrow Wood for a moment?"

Robert: Can't you find some on the edge of the Forest?

Minerva: I think "Wood" is a person, Robbie.

Wood? Thought Harry, bewildered; was Wood a cane she was going to use on him?

Minerva: No, it's a person!

But Wood turned out to be a person,

Minerva: See?

a burly fifth-year boy who came out of Flitwick's class looking confused.

Filius: If they're coming out of my class looking confused, I'd better overhaul my lesson plan!

"Follow me, you two," said Professor McGonagall, and they marched on up the corridor, Wood looking curiously at Harry.

"In here."

Professor McGonagall pointed them into a classroom that was empty except for Peeves, who was busy writing rude words on the blackboard.

"Out, Peeves!" she barked.

Alastor: Barked? I thought they said she was a cat.

Robert: Yes, but he's one of her pet peeves.

Filius: Mighty Goddess, give me strength!

Peeves threw the chalk into a bin, which clanged loudly, and he swooped out cursing. Professor McGonagall slammed the door behind him and turned to face the two boys.

"Potter, this is Oliver Wood. Wood - I've found you a Seeker."

Minerva: Ah-HAH!

Pomona: So don't say I never did anything for you!

Wood's expression changed from puzzlement to delight.

Robert: I thought it would remain wooden.

"Are you serious, Professor?"

"Absolutely," said Professor McGonagall crisply.

Pomona: ...and with a bit of vinegar.

"The boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it. Was that your first time on a broomstick, Potter?"

Harry nodded silently. He didn't have a clue what was going on, but he didn't seem to be being expelled, and some of the feeling started coming back to his legs.

"He caught that thing in his hand after a fifty-foot dive," Professor McGonagall told Wood. "Didn't even scratch himself. Charlie Weasley couldn't have done it."

Wood was now looking as though all his dreams had come true at once.

Xiomara: Except the one about the redheaded twins on the Astronomy Tower.

Filius: What, Fred and George? That conjures up some interesting images!

"Ever seen a game of Quidditch, Potter?" he asked excitedly.

"Wood's captain of the Gryffindor team," Professor McGonagall explained.

"He's just the build for a Seeker, too," said Wood, now walking around Harry and staring at him. "Light - speedy - we'll have to get him a decent broom, Professor - a Nimbus Two Thousand or a Cleansweep Seven, I'd say."

Xiomara: Cleansweep's a new company. Remind me to buy stock in it.

"I shall speak to Professor Dumbledore and see if we can't bend the first-year rule. Heaven knows, we need a better team than last year *Flattened* in that last match by Slytherin, I couldn't look Severus Snape in the face for weeks..."

Filius: That just shows you have taste!

Professor McGonagall peered sternly over her glasses at Harry.

"I want to hear you're training hard, Potter, or I may change my mind about punishing you."

Alastor: In other words, he's being blackmailed into playing?

Then she suddenly smiled.

"Your father would have been proud," she said. "He was an excellent Quidditch player himself."

"You're *joking*."

Filius: No, but I actually did hear a good one the other day about a pureblood, a werewolf and a badger Animagus...

It was dinnertime. Harry had just finished telling Ron what had happened when he'd left the grounds with Professor McGonagall. Ron had a piece of steak and kidney pie halfway to his mouth, but he'd forgotten all about it.

"*Seeker*?" he said. "But first years *never* - you must be the youngest house player in about - "

" - a century," said Harry, shoveling pie into his mouth. He felt particularly hungry after the excitement of the afternoon. "Wood told me."

Robert: So first-years were allowed in, what is it, 1891?

Minerva: Madge MacFarlane, a child prodigy. She was nine-and-a-half when she started at Hogwarts.

Ron was amazed, so impressed, he just sat and gaped at Harry.

"I start training next week," said Harry. "Only don't tell anyone, Wood wants to keep it a secret."

Alastor: Too late. Two can keep a secret... if one of them is dead. We're up to three here...

Fred and George Weasley now came into the hall, spotted Harry, and hurried over.

"Well done," said George in a low voice. "Wood told us. We're on the team too - Beaters."

Alastor: ... five...

"I tell you, we're going to win that Quidditch cup for sure this year," said Fred.

"We haven't won since Charlie left, but this year's team is going to be brilliant. You must be good, Harry, Wood was almost skipping when he told us."

Minerva: Skipping what? Words?

Robert: Rope?

Alastor: Out?

"Anyway, we've got to go, Lee Jordan reckons he's found a new secret passageway out of the school."

"Bet it's that one behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy that we found in our first week. See you."

(Robert and Minerva look at each other.)

Alastor: Oh, Merlin!

Xiomara: You mean you two hadn't used that one already? (Winks.) I've found it very convenient.

Fred and George had hardly disappeared when someone far less welcome turned up: Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Having a last meal, Potter? When are you getting the train back to the Muggles?"

Robert: Isn't the Hogwarts Express a Special?

Minerva: No, it runs twice a day, six days a week. Mostly empty at this end, of course.

"You're a lot braver now that you're back on the ground and you've got your little friends with you," said Harry coolly. There was of course nothing at all little about Crabbe and Goyle, but as the High Table was full of teachers, neither of them could do more than crack their knuckles and scowl.

Alastor: The boy's got a certain basic sense of tactics. If only he'd gotten into the right House!

"I'd take you on anytime on my own," said Malfoy. "Tonight, if you want. Wizard's duel. Wands only - no contact.

Pomona: ... since I'm *sure* you've got cooties!

Filius: Cooties?

Pomona: Muggle thing.

What's the matter? Never heard of a wizard's duel before, I suppose?"

"Of course he has," said Ron, wheeling around. "I'm his second, who's yours?"

Malfoy looked at Crabbe and Goyle, sizing them up.

"Crabbe," he said.

Alastor: And this rejection so offended Goyle that he began plotting the downfall of the entire Malfoy line...

"Midnight all right? We'll meet you in the trophy room; that's always unlocked."

Xiomara: And there are still trophies left?

Robert: You don't want to know what happened to the last person who tried to walk off with one.

Xiomara: Do tell!

Minerva: (Shudders.) You *really* don't want to know. Let's just say, Old Pringle had goblins in to consult on the security.

When Malfoy had gone, Ron and Harry looked at each other.

"What *is* a wizard's duel?" said Harry. "And what do you mean, you're my second?"

"Well, a second's there to take over if you die," said Ron casually, getting started at last on his cold pie. Catching the look on Harry's face, he added quickly, "But people only die in proper duels, you know, with real wizards. The most you and Malfoy'll be able to do is send sparks at each other.

Minerva: And fortunately there's not much that can catch fire in the trophy room.

Neither of you knows enough magic to do any real damage. I bet he expected you to refuse, anyway."

"And what if I wave my wand and nothing happens?"

Robert: Then stick it up Malfoy's nose!

"Throw it away and punch him on the nose," Ron suggested.

Robert: That could work too.

"Excuse me."

They both looked up. It was Hermione Granger.

"Can't a person eat in peace in this place?" said Ron.

Xiomara: Watch that mouth, or you'll be eating in *pieces* in this place!

Hermione ignored him and spoke to Harry.

"I couldn't help overhearing what you and Malfoy were saying - "

"Bet you could," Ron muttered.

Filius: Actually, without an ear-blocking charm, it's very hard not to hear.

Xiomara: And now she'll want to know why no one chose *her* as a second - what? Girls aren't good enough?

" - and you *mustn't* go wandering around the school at night, think of the points you'll lose Gryffindor if you're caught, and you're bound to be. It's really very selfish of you."

"And it's really none of your business," said Harry.

Pomona: Um... considering it's her house, so by definition she'd lose the points too...

"Good-bye," said Ron.

All the same, it wasn't what you'd call the perfect end to the day, Harry thought, as he lay awake much later listening to Dean and Seamus falling sleep (Neville wasn't back from the hospital wing). Ron had spent all evening giving him advice such as "If he tries to curse you, you'd better dodge it, because I can't remember how to block them."

Xiomara: Well, it'll be good practice for the Bludgers.

There was a very good chance they were going to get caught by Filch or Mrs. Norris, and Harry felt he was pushing his luck, breaking another school rule today. On the other hand, Malfoy's sneering face kept looming up out of the darkness - this was his big chance to beat Malfoy face-to-face. He couldn't miss it.

Minerva: Yes you can. Wait till later and beat him on the Quidditch pitch!

Xiomara: Minna, Malfoy won't *be* on the Quidditch pitch. Harry is the first first-year to play Seeker in...

Minerva: Yes, well, wait a few years until he *is* on his team! Harry's had a real triumph, he shouldn't foul things up now!

"Half-past eleven," Ron muttered at last, "we'd better go."

They pulled on their bathrobes, picked up their wands, and crept across the tower room, down the spiral staircase, and into the Gryffindor common room. A few embers were still glowing in the fireplace, turning all the armchairs into hunched black shadows. They had almost reached the portrait hole when a voice spoke from the chair nearest them. "I can't believe you're going to do this, Harry."

Filius: Even the chairs know his name!

Xiomara: In a few years, his bed should have some interesting stories to tell the rest of the furniture!

Pomona: (resignedly) Oh, Xia...

Robert: I just hope the toilets don't start talking to him.

Others: Bleagh!

A lamp flickered on. It was Hermione Granger, wearing a pink bathrobe and a frown.

Filius: They don't really accessorize.

Xiomara: I wonder about you sometimes, Flit.

" You!" said Ron furiously. "Go back to bed!"

"I almost told your brother," Hermione snapped, "Percy - he's a prefect, he'd put a stop to this."

Xiomara: How To Make an Enemy for Life.

Harry couldn't believe anyone could be so interfering.

"Come on," he said to Ron. He pushed open the portrait of the Fat Lady and climbed through the hole.

Hermione wasn't going to give up that easily. She followed Ron through the portrait hole, hissing at them like an angry goose.

"Don't you *care* about Gryffindor, do you *only* care about yourselves, I don't want Slytherin to win the House Cup,

Alastor: I do.

and you'll lose all the points I got from Professor McGonagall for knowing about Switching Spells."

Filius: Then switch them back!

"Go away."

"All right, but I warned you, you just remember what I said when you're on the train home tomorrow, you're so - "

But what they were, they didn't find out. Hermione had turned to the portrait of the Fat Lady to get back inside and found herself facing an empty painting. The Fat Lady had gone on a nighttime visit and Hermione was locked out of Gryffindor tower.

"Now what am I going to do?" she asked shrilly.

Filius: Use your intelligence, my girl, you'll come up with something!

"That's your problem," said Ron. "We've got to go, we're going to be late."

Pomona: Oh, my ears and whiskers!

Filius: Milne?

Pomona: Lewis Carroll.

They hadn't even reached the end of the corridor when Hermione caught up with them.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"You are *not*."

"D'you think I'm going to stand out here and wait for Filch to catch me? If he finds all three of us I'll tell him the truth, that I was trying to stop you, and you can back me up."

"You've got some nerve - " said Ron loudly.

Minerva: Yes, Gryffindors are noted for that.

"Shut up, both of you!" said Harry sharply. "I heard something."

It was a sort of snuffling.

Pomona: A Heffalump! Or a Woozle!

"Mrs. Norris?" breathed Ron, squinting through the dark.

It wasn't Mrs. Norris. It was Neville. He was curled up on the floor, fast asleep, but he jerked suddenly awake as they crept nearer.

Alastor: Considering what wanders the halls at night, it's a good thing the boy has *some* survival instincts.

"Thank goodness you found me! I've been out here for hours, I couldn't remember the new password to get in to bed."

"Keep your voice down, Neville. The password's 'Pig snout' but it won't help you now, the Fat Lady's gone off somewhere."

Robert: "Hogwarts"... "pig snout"... how could you forget that?

"How's your arm?" said Harry.

"Fine," said Neville, showing them. "Madam Pomfrey mended it in about a minute."

"Good - well, look, Neville, we've got to be somewhere, we'll see you later - "

"Don't leave me!" said Neville, scrambling to his feet, "I don't want to be here alone, the Bloody Baron's been past twice already."

Alastor: A good example of my previous statement.

Ron looked at his watch and then glared furiously at Hermione and Neville.

"If either of you get us caught, I'll never rest until I've learned that Curse of the Bogies Quirrell told us about, and used it on you."

Hermione opened her mouth, perhaps to tell Ron exactly how to use the Curse of the Bogies,

Alastor: Aaarrrrgh! NEVER give your opponent the advantage!

but Harry hissed at her to be quiet and beckoned them all forward.

Robert: Does Hermione understand Parseltongue?

Filius: Perhaps Harry was hissing in Angry Goose this time?

They flitted along corridors striped with bars of moonlight from the high windows. At every turn Harry expected to run into Filch or Mrs. Norris, but they were

lucky.

Alastor: Or were they? Where *is* the caretaker?

They sped up a staircase to the third floor and tiptoed toward the trophy room.

Malfoy and Crabbe weren't there yet. The crystal trophy cases glimmered where the moonlight caught them. Cups, shields, plates, and statues winked silver and gold in the darkness. They edged along the walls, keeping their eyes on the doors at either end of the room. Harry took out his wand in case Malfoy leapt in and started at once. The minutes crept by.

"He's late, maybe he's chickened out," Ron whispered.

Alastor: ...and we are *not* having another round of bird-puns.

Robert: You just couldn't swallow it, eh, Al?

Pomona: Sparrow us!

Alastor: I'm still looking for subjects to try out that new lock-jaw curse on, you know.

Then a noise in the next room made them jump. Harry had only just raised his wand when they heard someone speak - and it wasn't Malfoy.

"Sniff around, my sweet, they might be lurking in a corner."

Minerva: If any man told *me* to "sniff around, my sweet", I'd box his ears for him!

Xiomara: Hey, haven't I told you, taking things in the naughtiest way possible *is* my job?

It was Filch speaking to Mrs. Norris. Horrorstruck, Harry waved madly at the other three to follow him as quickly as possible; they scurried silently toward the door, away from Filch's voice. Neville's robes had barely whipped round the corner when they heard Filch enter the trophy room.

"They're in here somewhere," they heard him mutter, "probably hiding."

"This way!" Harry mouthed to the others and, petrified, they began to creep down a long gallery full of suits of armor.

Filius: If they were petrified, they couldn't creep anywhere!

They could hear Filch getting nearer. Neville suddenly let out a frightened squeak and broke into a run - he tripped, grabbed Ron around the waist, and the pair of them toppled right into a suit of armor.

Pomona: Goodness, and I thought that sort of behavior was reserved solely for heroines of romantic fiction!

Xiomara: Even I hadn't suggested anything between Neville and Ron.

Pomona: What?

The clanging and crashing were enough to wake the whole castle.

"RUN!" Harry yelled, and the four of them sprinted down the gallery, not looking back to see whether Filch was following - they swung around the doorpost and galloped down one corridor and another, Harry in the lead,

Pomona: ...and, rounding the post, it's Lightning Blaze in the lead, Beanpole second, by a head, Bluestocking^{*4} third... and...

without any idea where they were or where they were going - they ripped through a tapestry and found themselves in a hidden passageway, hurtled along it and came out near their Charms classroom, which they knew was miles from the trophy room.

Minerva: Only about half a mile, as the ghost floats. Longer if you have to pay attention to the walls.

"I think we've lost him," Harry panted, leaning against the cold wall and wiping his forehead.

Pomona: Lost, stolen or stayed,

James James Morrison's Mother

Seems to have been mislaid.

Neville was bent double, wheezing and spluttering.

"I - *told* - you," Hermione gasped, clutching at the stitch in her chest, "I - told - you."

"We've got to get back to Gryffindor tower," said Ron, "quickly as possible."

"Malfoy tricked you," Hermione said to Harry. "You realize that, don't you? He was never going to meet you - Filch knew someone was going to be in the trophy room, Malfoy must have tipped him off."

Alastor: Well spotted, lass. Even the Slytherins know never to trust a Malfoy! *Especialy*, the Slytherins, now that I think of it.

Harry thought she was probably right, but he wasn't going to tell her that.

"Let's go."

It wasn't going to be that simple.

Minerva: It never is.

They hadn't gone more than a dozen paces when a doorknob rattled and something came shooting out of a classroom in front of them.

Pomona: One last shooting star, that missed the party, ten years ago?

It was Peeves. He caught sight of them and gave a squeal of delight.

"Shut up, Peeves - please - you'll get us thrown out."

Peeves cackled.

"Wandering around at midnight, Ickle Firsties? Tut, tut, tut.

Xiomara: And Hermione snapped, "You leave my tuts out of this!"

Minerva: Xia, she's only eleven!

Alastor: All the more reason!

Robert: And that's not how it's pronounced, Xia.

Naughty, naughty, you'll get caughty."

Xiomara: No I won't!

Robert: And can your Milne chap match that bit of verse, Mona?

Pomona: Not on his worst day!

"Not if you don't give us away, Peeves, please."

Robert: Begging won't work.

Minerva: (sighing) We know.

"Should tell Filch, I should," said Peeves in a saintly voice, but his eyes glittered wickedly. "It's for your own good, you know."

Alastor: That's never been his motive before.

"Get out of the way," snapped Ron, taking a swipe at Peeves - this was a big mistake.

Robert: I'll say!

Minerva: Mm-hmm.

"STUDENTS OUT OF BED!" Peeves bellowed, "STUDENTS OUT OF BED DOWN THE CHARMS CORRIDOR!"

Ducking under Peeves, they ran for their lives, right to the end of the corridor where they slammed into a door - it was locked.

"This is it!" Ron moaned, as they pushed helplessly at the door, "We're done for! This is the end!"

Filius: Of the corridor, certainly.

Minerva: (closing the book briefly) There are still a lot of chapters left, so we can hope for the best.

They could hear footsteps, Filch running as fast as he could toward Peeve's shouts.

"Oh, move over," Hermione snarled. She grabbed Harry's wand, tapped the lock, and whispered, '*Alohomora*'!"

Minerva: Excellent work, for a beginner.

Robert: And with a strange wand.

Alastor: Where'd she get hold of *that* spell?

The lock clicked and the door swung open - they piled through it, shut it quickly, and pressed their ears against it, listening.

"Which way did they go, Peeves?" Filch was saying. "Quick, tell me."

"Say 'please.'"

"Don't mess with me, Peeves, now *where did they go?*"

"Shan't say nothing if you don't say please," said Peeves in his annoying singsong voice.

Minerva: I know what's coming.

Alastor: How do you know?

Robert: Al, we *all* know what's coming and that includes you!

"All right - *please*."

"NOTHING! Ha haaa! Told you I wouldn't say nothing if you didn't say please! Ha ha! Haaaaaa!"

Minerva: I can't believe this Filch-man walked right into that!

And they heard the sound of Peeves whooshing away and Filch cursing in rage.

Filius: Well, he wouldn't be cursing in joy, now would he?

"He thinks this door is locked," Harry whispered. "I think we'll be okay - *getoff*, Neville!" For Neville had been tugging on the sleeve of Harry's bathrobe for the last minute. "*What?*"

Harry turned around - and saw, quite clearly, what. For a moment he was sure he'd walked into a nightmare - this was too much, on top of everything that had happened so far.

Alastor: ... including a decade with the Dursleys.

They weren't in a room, as he had supposed. They were in a corridor. The forbidden corridor on the third floor. And now they knew why it was forbidden.

Pomona: Uh-oh.

They were looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog that filled the whole space between ceiling and floor. It had three heads.

Pomona: A Cerberus?

Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes; three noses, twitching and quivering in their direction; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs.

Robert: And it was clearly thinking, "Hmm, a snack for each mouth and one for the road!"

It was standing quite still, all six eyes staring at them, and Harry knew that the only reason they weren't already dead was that their sudden appearance had taken it by surprise, but it was quickly getting over that, there was no mistaking what those thunderous growls meant.

Alastor: So now he speaks Cerberus as well as Parseltongue?

Harry groped for the doorknob - between Filch and death, he'd take Filch.

Robert: The Bloody Baron might be a different matter.

They fell backward - Harry slammed the door shut, and they ran, they almost flew, back down the corridor. Filch must have hurried off to look for them somewhere else, because they didn't see him anywhere, but they hardly cared - all they wanted to do was put as much space as possible between them and that monster. They didn't stop running until they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady on the seventh floor.

"Where on earth have you all been?" she asked, looking at their bathrobes hanging off their shoulders and their flushed, sweaty faces.

"Never mind that - pig snout, pig snout," panted Harry.

Filius: And the same to you, sir!

And the portrait swung forward. They scrambled into the common room and collapsed, trembling into armchairs.

It was a while before any of them said anything. Neville, indeed, looked as if he'd never speak again.

"What do they think they're doing, keeping a thing like that locked up in a school?" said Ron finally. "If any dog needs exercise, that one does."

Pomona: (giggling) You can tell he's related to Charley, can't you? They almost got eaten, and his first concern is that the dog doesn't have enough running room!

Hermione had got both her breath and her bad temper back again.

"You don't use your eyes, any of you, do you?" she snapped. "Didn't you see what it was standing on?"

Minerva: It's paws, I should hope!

Filius: The back of a giant turtle?

"The floor?" Harry suggested. "I wasn't looking at its feet, I was too busy with its heads."

"No, *not* the floor. It was standing on a trapdoor. It's obviously guarding something."

She stood up, glaring at them.

"I hope you're pleased with yourselves. We could all have been killed - or worse, expelled.

Minerva: Now there's a girl who has her priorities straight!

Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to bed."

Ron stared after her, his mouth open.

Filius: (as Ron) What a woman!

"No, we don't mind," he said. "You'd think we dragged her along, wouldn't you?"

But Hermione had given Harry something else to think about as he climbed back into bed. The dog was guarding something... What had Hagrid said? Gringotts was the safest place in the world for something you wanted to hide - except perhaps Hogwarts.

It looked as though Harry had found out where the grubby little package from vault seven hundred and thirteen was.

Alastor: Took him long enough.

* ¹ Sort of an early version of a helicopter.

* ² The Flexkite - the earliest precursor to the hang glider - was invented by the NASA technician Francis Rogallo in 1948.

* ³ There were still a fair number of horses in general use in the 1930s.

* ⁴ If you didn't know, "Bluestocking" was an old-fashioned term for a scholarly, educated woman.

Chapter Ten

Chapter Ten:

The usual disclaimers and acknowledgements still apply.

Summary: ... And on we go.

Scene: same as before, about thirty seconds later.

Filius: Do we have time for another chapter?

Pomona: Do we have time for a snack?

(She is digging into her bag, when Aaron Weasley, a sixth-year Prefect enters. He has a little of Percy's broomstick-up-his-butt stuffiness, as well as a little of Fred and George's casual arrogance. He surveys the group, looking at Alastor just a moment too long.)

Aaron: Miss Duncan, I'd like a word with you, please.

Minerva: "Miss Duncan"? And I haven't even done anything - that I know of. I'll be back in a moment, everyone. (She gets up and goes over to Aaron.)

Aaron: (Quiet, but fierce - and possibly not *quite* quiet enough) What is that Slytherin doing in here?

Minerva: (Giving him the Look that will one day make students quail) If you mean my friend, Alastor, he's here because I invited him.

Aaron: Did you let him hear the password?

Minerva: (bristling further) I know the rules, "Mr. Weasley". They all wait, at least ten paces down the hall. I whisper the password to the Fat Lady. Then, when she opens the entrance, I ask her to wait while my friends catch up and come in. It's a bit silly - my friends are all perfectly trustworthy.

Aaron: If he's so bloody "trustworthy," how did he end up in Slytherin? I don't mind so much about you bringing the others here, but...

(Behind them, Robert has noticed the argument getting intense. He gets up and comes to stand beside Minerva.)

Minerva: (practically spitting her fury) If you object to who I invite here...

Robert: (coolly, without taking his eyes off Aaron) That's "whom."

Minerva: ...I suggest you take it up with Professor Dippet! Or maybe with Alastor's Head of House!

(She turns her back on a thoroughly outraged Aaron, and stalks back to the rest of the group.)

Robert: (nodding, briefly, to Aaron) What she said.

(He follows Minerva back and rejoins the group. Aaron stares after them for a moment and then stalks away.)

Pomona: Well said, Minna! And you too, Robbie! For that, you shall have almonds! (She pulls a large bag of nuts out of her book bag) In fact, almonds all around!

(She opens the bag and they all start helping themselves.)

Alastor: That Weasley lad won't get far if he doesn't learn how to speak so he can't be heard from more than three feet away.

Xiomara: (through a mouthful of almonds) Probably taking the belief that snakes are deaf to an extreme degree.*¹

Alastor: (pleased) Hah! You may have something, there, Xia! Now then: We've got rid of the twerp, we've got something to nosh - did I remember to say "Thanks," Mona? - The only question remaining is...

Filius: ...what's the catch and who's behind it?

Alastor: (looking down his nose - which, let's face it, isn't too hard in Filius' case) ...who's going to read?

Robert: Well, if Minna's had a chapter, then I think it's my turn again. (Minerva hands him the book.) All right

Chapter Ten: Halloween.

Malfoy couldn't believe his eyes when he saw that Harry and Ron were still at Hogwarts the next day,

Minerva: Well they'd hardly pack two eleven-year-olds off in the middle of the night, even if they had been expelled!

looking tired but perfectly cheerful. Indeed, by the next morning Harry and Ron thought that meeting the three-headed dog had been an excellent adventure, and they were keen to have another one.

Pomona: Boys!

Minerva: I don't know. It does sound rather fun.

In the meantime, Harry filled Ron in about the package that seemed to have been moved from Gringotts to Hogwarts, and they spent a lot of time wondering what could possibly need such heavy protection.

Filius: Literally heavy. How much does a Cerberus weigh?

Robert: I don't know, but if you'll put him on the scales, I'll read it out.

"It's either really valuable or really dangerous," said Ron.

"Or both," said Harry.

Alastor: Of course both! Anything really valuable is dangerous to have around!

But as all they knew for sure about the mysterious object was that it was about two inches long, they didn't have much chance of guessing what it was without

further clues.

Pomona: It's smaller than a breadbox...

Neither Neville nor Hermione showed the slightest interest in what lay underneath the dog and the trapdoor. All Neville cared about was never going near the dog again.

Pomona: I like Neville - he's got sense!

Hermione was now refusing to speak to Harry and Ron, but she was such a bossy know-it-all that they saw this as an added bonus.

Minerva: Hmph! Boys!

All they really wanted now was a way of getting back at Malfoy, and to their great delight, just such a thing arrived in the mail about a week later.

Robert: Hermione had ordered a book entitled, "How to Get Back At Malfoy, in Six Easy Lessons."

As the owls flooded into the Great Hall as usual, everyone's attention was caught at once by a long, thin package carried by six large screech owls. Harry was just as interested as everyone else to see what was in this large parcel, and was amazed when the owls soared down and dropped it right in front of him, knocking his bacon to the floor.

Pomona: I hope the owl got that bacon for a tip.

Robert: Especially since they *tipped* it off?

Others: (Groan.)

They had hardly fluttered out of the way when another owl dropped a letter on top of the parcel.

Harry ripped open the letter first, which was lucky, because it said:

DO NOT OPEN THE PARCEL AT THE TABLE.

It contains your new Nimbus Two Thousand, but I don't want everybody knowing you've got a broomstick or they'll all want one.

Pomona: ... like the fly in your soup.

Robert/Minerva: Muggles make soup out of *flies*?!

Alastor: They're doing it again.

Pomona: I'll explain later.

Oliver Wood will meet you tonight on the Quidditch field at seven o'clock for your first training session.

Xiomara: a.m. or p.m.?

Professor M. McGonagall

Harry had difficulty hiding his glee as he handed the note to Ron to read.

"A Nimbus Two Thousand!" Ron moaned enviously. "I've never even *touched* one."

Xiomara: Neither have I!

Pomona: But as soon as they're invented, I'll bet you'll be one of the first!

They left the hall quickly, wanting to unwrap the broomstick in private before their first class, but halfway across the entrance hall they found the way upstairs barred by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy seized the package from Harry and felt it.

Minerva: I bet he rattles the presents under the tree too.

"That's a broomstick," he said, throwing it back to Harry with a mixture of jealousy and spite on his face.

Xiomara: He knows the shape of a broomstick - he's brighter than I thought!

"You'll be in for it this time Potter, first years aren't allowed them."

Minerva: A sweeping statement.

Xiomara: Boooo!

Robert: Right, Harry's trying to pull a fast one here, that's why he's carrying it up the stairs in plain sight!

Filius: Well, how *do* you hide a broomstick in a hurry?

Alastor: *Where* do you hide a broomstick in a hurry?

Pomona: Why is the broomstick in a hurry?

Ron couldn't resist it.

"It's not any old broomstick," he said, "it's a Nimbus Two Thousand. What did you say you've got at home, Malfoy, a Comet Two Sixty?" Ron grinned at Harry. "Comets look flashy,

Robert: Ooooh! And you say *my* puns are bad!

but they're not in the same league as the Nimbus."

"What would you know about it, Weasley, you couldn't afford half the handle," Malfoy snapped back. "I suppose you and your brothers have to save up twig by twig."

Pomona: Oh, yes, they've collected an entire blue spruce and they're starting on an alder.

Before Ron could answer, Professor Flitwick appeared at Malfoy's elbow.

"Not arguing, I hope, boys?" he squeaked.

Robert: Oh, no, Professor. We're into open warfare now!

"Potter's been sent a broomstick, Professor," said Malfoy quickly.

Minerva: See, there's the opening salvo.

"Yes, yes, that's right," said Professor Flitwick, beaming at Harry. "Professor McGonagall told me all about the special circumstances, Potter. And what model is it?"

Filius: Why do I get the feeling I enjoyed that? Er, *amgoing* to enjoy that? Whatever.

"A Nimbus Two Thousand, sir," said Harry fighting not to laugh at the look of horror on Malfoy's face. "And it's really thanks to Malfoy here that I've got it," he added.

Harry and Ron headed upstairs, smothering their laughter at Malfoy's obvious rage and confusion.

Minerva: What? I'm offended! I got it for him! Er, if that teacher really is me, that is.

"Well, it's true," Harry chortled as they reached the top of the marble staircase, "if he hadn't stolen Neville's Remembrall I wouldn't be on the team..."

"So I suppose you think that's a reward for breaking rules?" came an angry voice from just behind them.

Xiomara: No, I think that's a reward for being the best damn Seeker Professor McTabby ever saw in all her nine lives!

Minerva: Of course, I could be accused of favoritism, here. Er, if it is me.

Robert: What I want to know is, who paid for that broom! If you're that rich, Minna, I definitely hope it's you and that I'm the McGonagall...

Minerva: (blushing) Shut it, laddie!

Hermione was stomping up the stairs, looking disapprovingly at the package in Harry's hand.

"I thought you weren't speaking to us?" said Harry.

"Yes, don't stop now," said Ron, "it's doing us so much good."

Hermione marched away with her nose in the air.

Robert: Levio nose!

Filius: Wingardium Levi-nose-a!

Harry had a lot of trouble keeping his mind on his lessons that day. It kept wandering up to the dormitory where his new broomstick was lying under his bed, or straying off to the Quidditch field where he'd be learning to play that night. He bolted his dinner that evening without noticing what he was eating,

Alastor: Hasn't the boy learned *anything*? You start getting too preoccupied to pay attention to what you're ingesting, they could slip *anything* into your food or drink!

Pomona: I would *never* get *that* preoccupied!

and then rushed upstairs with Ron to unwrap the Nimbus Two Thousand at last.

"Wow," Ron sighed, as the broomstick rolled onto Harry's bedspread.

Even Harry, who knew nothing about the different brooms, thought it looked wonderful. Sleek and shiny, with a mahogany handle, it had a long tail of neat, straight twigs and Nimbus Two Thousand written in gold near the top.

Xiomara: I want one!

As seven o'clock drew nearer, Harry left the castle and set off in the dusk toward the Quidditch field. He'd never been inside the stadium before.

Xiomara: That should be the *first* thing a student explores! Not some boring corridor with a three-headed dog! *They* don't play Quidditch! *²

Hundreds of seats were raised in stands around the field so that the spectators were high enough to see what was going on. At either end of the field were three golden poles with hoops on the end. They reminded Harry of the little plastic sticks Muggle children blew bubbles through, except that they were fifty feet high.

Xiomara: What?

Pomona: It's sort of a toy. You take some wire and make a loop at one end, then you mix up some soapy water and... well, maybe next time I go home I can bring one back to show you. *³

Too eager to fly again to wait for Wood, Harry mounted his broomstick and kicked off from the ground. What a feeling - he swooped in and out of the goal posts and then sped up and down the field. The Nimbus Two Thousand turned wherever he wanted at his slightest touch.

"Hey, Potter, come down!"

Xiomara: Don't wanna!

Oliver Wood had arrived. He was carrying a large wooden crate under his arm.

Robert: As appropriate to his name!

Harry landed next to him.

"Very nice," said Wood, his eyes glinting. "I see what McGonagall meant... you really are a natural. I'm just going to teach you the rules this evening, then you'll be joining team practice three times a week."

Xiomara: Wahoo! Harry, you lucky boy!

Minerva: I am so jealous!

He opened the crate. Inside were four different-sized balls.

"Right," said Wood. "Now, Quidditch is easy enough to understand, even if it's not too easy to play. There are seven players on each side. Three of them are called Chasers."

"Three Chasers," Harry repeated, as Wood took out a bright red ball about the size of a soccer ball.

Pomona: And, oh! Father Christmas, if you love me at all,

Bring me a big, red, India-rubber ball!

Minerva: Xiomara, Don't. Say. A. Word!

Xiomara: Word. So, there. (Sticks out tongue.)

"This ball's called the Quaffle," said Wood.

Xiomara: Hence the phrase, "He can play with my Quaffle anytime!"

Pomona: Xia!

Xiomara: Thank you, thank you! I live for your reaction!

"The Chasers throw the Quaffle to each other and try and get it through one of the hoops to score a goal. Ten points every time the Quaffle goes through one of the hoops. Follow me?"

Alastor: Not if I don't know where you're going.

"Three Chasers throw the Quaffle and put it through the hoops to score," Harry recited. "So - that's sort of like basketball on broomsticks with six hoops, isn't it?"

Robert: What's basketball?

Pomona: Exhausting!

"What's basketball?" said Wood curiously.

"Never mind," said Harry quickly.

"Now, there's another player on each side who's called the Keeper - I'm Keeper for Gryffindor.

Robert: And don't you forget it!

Xiomara: He sounds like a "keeper" to me!

I have to fly around our hoops and stop the other team from scoring."

Xiomara: Prude!

"Three Chasers, one Keeper," said Harry who was determined to remember it all. "And they play with the Quaffle. Okay, got that. So what are they for?" He pointed at the three balls left inside the box.

"I'll show you now," said Wood. "Take this."

He handed Harry a small club, a bit like a short baseball bat.

Alastor: Right, what's a baseball bat?

Pomona: It's sort of like - well - like an extra-long Quidditch bat. (Sees the way he's looking at her.) Don't blame me. It's an American thing.

"I'm going to show you what the Bludgers do," Wood said. "These two are the Bludgers."

He showed Harry two identical balls, jet black and slightly smaller than the red Quaffle. Harry noticed that they seemed to be straining to escape the straps holding them inside the box.

Pomona: Oh, poor things!

Robert: Did she just say "poor things" about a couple of vicious Bludgers?

Minerva: I think she did, but I'm pretending not to notice.

"Stand back," Wood warned Harry. He bent down and freed one of the Bludgers.

At once, the black ball rose high in the air and then pelted straight at Harry's face. Harry swung at it with the bat to stop it from breaking his nose,

Alastor: A strategy he'd never dared try with Dudley.

and sent it zigzagging away into the air - it zoomed around their heads and then shot at Wood, who dived on top of it and managed to pin it to the ground.

"See?" Wood panted, forcing the struggling Bludger back into the crate and strapping it down safely.

Pomona: Break time's over. Everyone back in your box!

Filius: (as a Bludger) Awww, do *we* have to?

Robert: (as the other Bludger) Psst! Don't start any trouble in front of the little chap. You*know* he's a Snitch!

Xiomara: Groooooaaan!

"The Bludgers rocket around, trying to knock players off their brooms. That's why you have two Beaters on each team - the Weasley twins are ours - it's their job to protect their side from the Bludgers and try and knock them toward the other team. So - think you've got all that?"

"Three Chasers try and score with the Quaffle; the Keeper guards the goal posts; the Beaters keep the Bludgers away from their team," Harry reeled off.

"Very good," said Wood.

"Er - have the Bludgers ever killed anyone?" Harry asked, hoping he sounded offhand.

Alastor: And once again, the lad is good at assessing risks.

"Never at Hogwarts. We've had a couple of broken jaws but nothing worse than that. Now, the last member of the team is the Seeker. That's you. And you don't have to worry about the Quaffle or the Bludgers - "

Alastor: Bit of an optimist, is he?

" - unless they crack my head open."

"Don't worry, the Weasleys are more than a match for the Bludgers - I mean, they're like a pair of human Bludgers themselves."

Minerva: We've noticed.

Wood reached into the crate and took out the fourth and last ball. Compared with the Quaffle and the Bludgers, it was tiny, about the size of a large walnut. It was bright gold and had little fluttering silver wings.

Xiomara: That's a Snitch all right. I'd know it anywhere!

"This," said Wood, "is the Golden Snitch, and it's the most important ball of the lot. It's very hard to catch because it's so fast and difficult to see. It's the Seeker's job to catch it. You've got to weave in and out of the Chasers, Beaters, Bludgers, and Quaffle to get it before the other team's Seeker, because whichever Seeker catches the Snitch wins his team an extra hundred and fifty points, so they nearly always win. That's why Seekers get fouled so much.

Alastor: *Now* he tells the poor lad!

A game of Quidditch only ends when the Snitch is caught, so it can go on for ages - I think the record is three months, they had to keep bringing on substitutes so the players could get some sleep.

"Well, that's it - any questions?"

Pomona: Besides "How do I get out of this?"

Harry shook his head. He understood what he had to do all right, it was doing it that was going to be the problem.

Robert: I doubt it.

"We won't practice with the Snitch yet," said Wood, carefully shutting it back inside the crate, "it's too dark, we might lose it. Let's try you out with a few of these."

He pulled a bag of ordinary golf balls out of his pocket and a few minutes later, he and Harry were up in the air, Wood throwing the golf balls as hard as he could in every direction for Harry to catch.

Pomona: Is Wood part Muggle? If not, where does he get the golf balls?

Filius: He does a lot of "golf" hunting? What does a "golf" look like anyway?

Pomona: (Giggling) Flit!

Harry didn't miss a single one, and Wood was delighted. After half an hour, night had really fallen and they couldn't carry on.

Pomona: They could always make the balls glow in the dark.

Xiomara: Let it be known that I am biting my tongue hard enough to draw blood - and have been for the last three paragraphs!

Pomona: XIA! You know perfectly well that I was talking about *Quidditch* balls!

Filius: I still want to know something about this "golf" creature.

Minerva: I'll explain later, Flit. The "creature" is native to Scotland.

"That Quidditch cup'll have our name on it this year," said Wood happily as they trudged back up to the castle. "I wouldn't be surprised if you turn out better than Charlie Weasley, and he could have played for England if he hadn't gone off chasing dragons."

Minerva: Has anyone ever tried playing Quidditch on dragons instead of broomsticks?

(pause)

Alastor: Minna, it must be damn frightening inside your head!

Perhaps it was because he was now so busy, what with Quidditch practice three evenings a week on top of all his homework, but Harry could hardly believe it when he realized that he'd already been at Hogwarts two months. The castle felt more like home than Privet Drive ever had.

Filius: Why am I not surprised?

His lessons, too, were becoming more and more interesting now that they had mastered the basics.

On Halloween morning they woke to the delicious smell of baking pumpkin wafting through the corridors.

Pomona: Maybe the boys and Hermione can patch things up over a nice plate of pumpkin pie. Er, who are all those people and why have they all suddenly started arguing with each other? * 4

Minerva: What people?

Filius: Are you all right, Mona?

Pomona: Sorry. I just got the oddest flash.

Even better, Professor Flitwick announced in Charms that he thought they were ready to start making objects fly, something they had all been dying to try since they'd seen him make Neville's toad zoom around the classroom.

Pomona: Oh Flit, you didn't! Er, I mean won't! Er ... well, poor Trevor!

Xiomara: Maybe he enjoyed it.

Robert: Ha, ha, flies! You didn't expect me up here, did you! * 5

Minerva: Maybe he'll get a chance at that Muggle soup some time.

Pomona: Minna, we're going to have a long talk later on.

Professor Flitwick put the class into pairs to practice. Harry's partner was Seamus Finnigan (which was a relief, because Neville had been trying to catch his eye).

Minerva: Poor Neville.

Ron, however, was to be working with Hermione Granger. It was hard to tell whether Ron or Hermione was angrier about this. She hadn't spoken to either of them since the day Harry's broomstick had arrived.

Pomona: You know, some people would say the symbolism frightened her off.

Xiomara: Hey, that was my line!

Pomona: No, really. A lot of Freudian psychologists in the Muggle world... er, well, it's complicated. Remind me to explain later.

"Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of his pile of books as usual. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too - never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest."

Pomona: (sings) Buffalo Gals, won't you come out tonight!

Minerva: Ah, you've been looking into the magical beasts of the colonies!

It was very difficult. Harry and Seamus swished and flicked, but the feather they were supposed to be sending skyward just lay on the desktop. Seamus got so impatient that he prodded it with his wand and set fire to it - Harry had to put it out with his hat.

Pomona: If anyone was feeling faint, they've been cured. * 6

Ron, at the next table, wasn't having much more luck.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" he shouted, waving his long arms like a windmill.

"You're saying it wrong," Harry heard Hermione snap. "it's Wing-gar-dium Levi-o-sa, make the 'gar' nice and long."

Alastor: Oh, Merlin.

Filius: What"

Alastor: I just got an image of how Hermione will meet her end. Her last living words, spoken to a deadly enemy, will be "You're saying it wrong. It's *Aa-da Ke-da-vra*, make the middle syllables nice and long." * 7

"You do it, then, if you're so clever," Ron snarled.

Hermione rolled up the sleeves of her gown, flicked her wand, and said "Wingardium Leviosa!"

Filius: And Ron rose gently into the air.

Xiomara: I don't think she'll be having that affect on him for another year or two.

Their feather rose off the desk and hovered about four feet above their heads.

"Oh, well done!" cried Professor Flitwick, clapping. "Everyone see here, Miss Granger's done it!"

Filius: I think I'm in love!

Ron was in a very bad mood by the end of class.

Minerva: The male ego strikes again.

Robert: Hey, now, we're not *all* gits!

"It's no wonder no one can stand her," he said to Harry as they pushed their way into the crowded corridor, "she's a nightmare, honestly."

Pomona: The one where you suddenly realize you've come to class naked?

Alastor: The one where something's chasing you but you feel like you're running through jelly?

Someone knocked into Harry as they hurried past him. It was Hermione. Harry caught a glimpse of her face - and was startled to see that she was in tears.

Filius: Oh, the one where you've just said something cruel about someone and realize a moment too late that they were standing right behind you! That's a classic!

"I think she heard you."

"So?" said Ron, but he looked a bit uncomfortable. "She must've noticed she's got no friends."

Minerva: Which is exactly why your comment hurt so much, you red-headed rhino-hide!

Hermione didn't turn up for the next class and wasn't seen all afternoon. On their way down to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast, Harry and Ron overheard Parvati Patil telling her friend Lavender that Hermione was crying in the girls' bathroom and wanted to be left alone. Ron looked still more awkward at this, but a moment later they had entered the Great Hall, where the Halloween decorations put Hermione out of their minds.

Minerva: I've always suspected most boys only have room for one thought as a time.

(All three boys throw almonds at Minerva while Pomona and Xiomara giggle.)

Xiomara: I know what that one thought is, too.

Pomona: Quidditch?

Xiomara: Riiiiight.

A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceiling while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles in the pumpkins stutter.

Filius: Stutter? I didn't even know candles could talk!

The feast appeared suddenly on the golden plates, as it had at the start-of-term banquet.

Pomona: Two thousand live bats in the *dining* hall?

Xiomara: Let's hope they're housebroken!

Pomona: Not that guano is a bad thing, in its place. But its place is in my vegetable patch, not in my salad!

Harry was just helping himself to a baked potato when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore's chair, slumped against the table, and gasped, "Troll - in the dungeons - thought you ought to know."

Filius: Why? It's too late to send him an invitation to the feast.

Robert: What was Professor Quirrell doing in the dungeons during the feast?

Minerva: Oh, just trolling for anything interesting.

(Groans)

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

Pomona: Quick! Find Seamus and a feather!

(Xiomara is clearly biting her tongue, yet again.)

There was an uproar.

Robert: Funny how you never hear of a "downroar."

Minerva: Or an "upwhisper."

It took several purple firecrackers exploding from the end of Professor Dumbledore's wand to bring silence.

"Prefects," he rumbled, "lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

Percy was in his element.

Filius: What element is that?

Minerva: Probably Earth. It seems to suit him.^{*8}

Xiomara: What about Air? He is a bit windy.

"Follow me! Stick together, first years! No need to fear the troll if you follow my orders! Stay close behind me, now. Make way, first years coming through! Excuse me, I'm a prefect!"

All: We know.

"How could a troll get in?" Harry asked as they climbed the stairs.

"Don't ask me, they're supposed to be really stupid," said Ron.

Minerva: ... and could never get into Hogwarts, even in a Special Education Program!

"Maybe Peeves let it in for a Halloween joke."

Robert: Even we wouldn't go *that* far!

They passed different groups of people hurrying in different directions. As they jostled their way through a crowd of confused Hufflepuffs, Harry suddenly grabbed Ron's arm.

Xiomara: Are they implying that we're easier to confuse than the other houses?

"I've just thought - Hermione."

"What about her?"

"She doesn't know about the troll."

Robert: Something Hermione doesn't know about. Mark this date!

Alastor: *If* she really doesn't know. The thing got in somehow and it's all too easy to blame everything on the Poltergeist.

Ron bit his lip.

"Oh, all right," he snapped. "But Percy'd better not see us."

Minerva: Why don't they just tell Percy?

Filius: They'd get Hermione in trouble.

Minerva: I don't see why. All she did - knowingly, at least - was to miss a feast. There's no rule against that!

Pomona: Maybe not a rule, but it's against all laws of nature!

Ducking down, they joined the Hufflepuffs going the other way, slipped down a deserted side corridor, and hurried off toward the girls' bathroom. They had just turned the corner when they heard quick footsteps behind them.

"Percy!" hissed Ron, pulling Harry behind a large stone griffin.

Peering around it, however, they saw not Percy but Snape.

Alastor: Not much of an improvement.

He crossed the corridor and disappeared from view.

"What's he doing?" Harry whispered. "Why isn't he down in the dungeons with the rest of the teachers?"

"Search me."

Alastor: Why, are you hiding something?

Quietly as possible, they crept along the next corridor after Snape's fading footsteps.

"He's heading for the third floor," Harry said, but Ron held up his hand.

Minerva: He's going to sic the Cerberus on the troll! Good thinking!

"Can you smell something?"

Robert: Sorry, it's the haggis again.

Harry sniffed and a foul stench reached his nostrils, a mixture of old socks and the kind of public toilet no one seemed to clean.

And then they heard it - a low grunting, and the shuffling footfalls of gigantic feet.

Pomona: It's Crabbe and Goyle! Run!

Ron pointed - at the end of a passage to the left, something huge was moving toward them. They shrank into the shadows and watched as it emerged into a patch of moonlight.

It was a horrible sight. Twelve feet tall, its skin was a dull, granite gray, its great lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched on top like a coconut.

Robert: Anyone for coconut shies?

It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. The smell coming from it was incredible. It was holding a huge wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.

Minerva: That sounds fairly typical.

The troll stopped next to a doorway and peered inside. It wagged its long ears, making up its tiny mind,

Filius: I twiddle my thumbs.

Pomona: Yes, but your brain is bigger.

then slouched slowly into the room.

"The key's in the lock," Harry muttered. "We could lock it in."

Alastor: Why is there a lock on the *outside* of a restroom door?

"Good idea," said Ron nervously.

They edged toward the open door, mouths dry, praying the troll wasn't about to come out of it. With one great leap, Harry managed to grab the key, slam the door and lock it.

" Yes!"

Alastor: Something's wrong. That was too easy.

Flushed with their victory, they started to run back up the passage, but as they reached the corner they heard something that made their hearts stop - a high, petrified scream - and it was coming from the chamber they'd just chained up.

Xiomara: What could scare a troll that badly?

"Oh, no," said Ron, pale as the Bloody Baron.

"It's the girls' bathroom!" Harry gasped.

Filius: It stopped to powder its nose?

"Hermione!" They said together.

Alastor: Hermione scared the troll? I knew there was something about that girl!

It was the last thing they wanted to do, but what choice did they have? Wheeling around, they sprinted back to the door and turned the key, fumbling in their panic. Harry pulled the door open and ran inside.

Hermione Granger was shrinking against the wall opposite, looking as if she was about to faint.

Robert: Hermione sounds more like you all the time, Minna. She memorizes her textbooks, she gets attacked in the bathroom by trolls...

Minerva: It wasn't a troll, it was just Angelique Bulstrode.

Pomona: There's a difference?

Xiomara: And Minna didn't shrink against the wall or faint, either, as I recall. She got clobbered, but she went down fighting!

Minerva: For a while, I wasn't sure I was ever going to get up again!

The troll was advancing on her, knocking the sinks off the wall as it went.

Minerva: Come on, girl, tell it off!

Robert: It must be breaking some rules by being there!

Filius: Can it pronounce a spell correctly?

Xiomara: Can it pronounce *anything* correctly?

"Confuse it!" Harry said desperately to Ron, and, seizing a tap, he threw it as hard as he could against the wall.

Pomona: Make it study Arithmancy!

Robert: What's confusing about that?

Pomona: Pheh! Ravensclaws!

The troll stopped a few feet from Hermione. It lumbered around, blinking stupidly, to see what had made the noise. Its mean little eyes saw Harry. It hesitated, then made for him instead, lifting its club as it went.

"Oy, pea-brain!" yelled Ron from the other side of the chamber,

Minerva: ...and the troll turned around and said, "How did you know my name?"

and he threw a metal pipe at it.

Minerva: (sings) ... I hear the pipes a-calling....

The troll didn't even seem to notice the pipe hitting its shoulder, but it heard the yell and paused again, turning its ugly snout toward Ron instead, giving Harry time to run around it.

"Come on, run, *run*!" Harry yelled at Hermione, trying to pull her toward the door, but she couldn't move, she was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror.

Minerva: Get hold of yourself, girl! Are you a Gryffindor or not?!

The shouting and the echoes seemed to be driving the troll berserk.

Xiomara: I thought berserk was a troll's natural state.

It roared again and started toward Ron, who was nearest and had no way to escape.

Harry then did something that was both very brave and very stupid:

Alastor: Hard to tell the difference sometimes.

He took a great running jump and managed to fasten his arms around the troll's neck from behind. The troll couldn't feel Harry hanging there, but even a troll will notice if you stick a long bit of wood up its nose, and Harry's wand had still been in his hand when he'd jumped - it had gone straight up one of the troll's nostrils.

Pomona: Well, *that'll* clear the sinuses!

Filius: Sounds like he remembered your advice about Draco, Robbie.

Howling with pain, the troll twisted and flailed its club, with Harry clinging on for dear life; any second, the troll was going to rip him off or catch him a terrible blow with the club.

Hermione had sunk to the floor in fright; Ron pulled out his own wand - not knowing what he was going to do he heard himself cry the first spell that came into his head: "*Wingardium Leviosa*!"

Filius: ...and Hermione floated up out of the troll's reach.

Pomona: ...and the troll floated up into the air where it couldn't hit anything.

Robert: ...and the troll's wretched, reeking trousers floated upward until they gave the troll a "wedgie".

The club flew suddenly out of the troll's hand, rose high, high up into the air, turned slowly over - and dropped, with a sickening crack, onto it's owner's head.

Alastor: Aye, that could work.

The troll swayed on the spot and then fell flat on its face, with a thud that made the whole room tremble.

Harry got to his feet. He was shaking and out of breath. Ron was standing there with his wand still raised, staring at what he had done.

It was Hermione who spoke first.

"Is it - dead?"

Alastor: Well, has its ghost risen yet?

Pomona: Can a troll become a ghost?

Minerva: Actually, there is a legend about a mountain haunted by the ghost of a long-dead troll.

"I don't think so," said Harry, "I think it's just been knocked out."

He bent down and pulled his wand out of the troll's nose. It was covered in what looked like a lumpy gray glue.

"Urgh - troll boogers."

He wiped it on the troll's trousers.

Filius: That will only make it dirtier!

A sudden slamming and loud footsteps made the three of them look up.

Pomona: Up? Footsteps on the ceiling?

They hadn't realized what a racket they had been making, but of course, someone downstairs must have heard the crashes and the troll's roars. A moment later, Professor McGonagall had come bursting into the room, closely followed by Snape, with Quirrell bringing up the rear. Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper, and sat quickly down on a toilet, clutching his heart.

Xiomara: He must've had the haggis too.

Robert/Minerva: We were trying not to say it.

Filius: They're doing it again.

Snape bent over the troll. Professor McGonagall was looking at Ron and Harry. Harry had never seen her look so angry. Her lips were white.

Robert: I know that look!

Minerva: Oh shut up, Robbie.

Hopes of winning fifty points for Gryffindor faded quickly from Harry's mind.

"What on earth were you thinking of?" said Professor McGonagall, with cold fury in her voice.

Pomona: Drills?

Xiomara: They just told us. He was thinking of winning fifty points for Gryffindor!

Harry looked at Ron, who was still standing with his wand in the air. "You're lucky you weren't killed. Why aren't you in your dormitory?"

Filius: Because we can't be in two places at once?

Snape gave Harry a swift, piercing look. Harry looked at the floor. He wished Ron would put his wand down.

Then a small voice came out of the shadows.

Alastor: House elf?

"Please, Professor McGonagall - they were looking for me."

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione had managed to get to her feet at last.

"I went looking for the troll because I -

Pomona: I thought maybe it would be my friend, since no one else would! I have it on good authority that I'm a nightmare and nobody can stand me.

Minerva: Ouch.

I thought I could deal with it on my own - you know, because I've read all about them."

Ron dropped his wand. Hermione Granger, telling a downright lie to a teacher?

Minerva: It's better than admitting she was in there crying! That's just humiliating!

"If they hadn't found me, I'd be dead now. Harry stuck his wand up its nose and Ron knocked it out with its own club. They didn't have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they arrived."

Minerva: Whether this woman is me or not, she's not fool enough to swallow that story!

Harry and Ron tried to look as though this story wasn't new to them.

"Well - in that case..." said Professor McGonagall, staring at the three of them, "Miss Granger, you foolish girl, how could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?"

Robert: Or maybe... she is?

(Minerva leans over and knocks her head on the table.)

Hermione hung her head. Harry was speechless. Hermione was the last person to do anything against the rules, and here she was, pretending she had, to get

them out of trouble. It was as if Snape had started handing out sweets.

Alastor: Except when Hermione tells a lie, you don't have to palm it and have it analyzed.

"Miss Granger, five points will be taken from Gryffindor for this," said Professor McGonagall.

Minerva: For taking on a troll and not taking me with you!

Robert: She obviously knows something's fishy or she'd be taking a lot more points.

"I'm very disappointed in you.

Minerva: I'm disappointed I didn't get a chance to kick some troll!

If you're not hurt at all, you'd better get off to Gryffindor tower. Students are finishing the feast in their houses."

Pomona: And Hermione hasn't eaten anything since lunch! She's *really* lucky the boys came! Imagine being killed by a troll on an empty stomach!

Alastor: Mona... you need to sort out your priorities!

Hermione left.

Professor McGonagall turned to Harry and Ron.

"Well, I still say you were very lucky, but not many first years could have taken on a full-grown mountain troll. You each win Gryffindor five points.

Minerva: Only five? What wrong with me?!

Professor Dumbledore will be informed of this. You may go."

They hurried out of the chamber and didn't speak at all until they had climbed two floors up. It was a relief to be away from the smell of the troll, quite apart from anything else.

"We should have gotten more than ten points," Ron grumbled.

Minerva: I agree!

Robert: She probably doesn't want them to think taking risks like that is clever.

Alastor: Got an agenda of her own, I'll wager. Never trust a cat.

(Minerva hisses at him, then looks startled and embarrassed.)

"Five, you mean, once she's taken off Hermione's."

"Good of her to get us out of trouble like that," Ron admitted. "Mind you, we *did* save her."

Robert: True.

"She might not have needed saving if we hadn't locked the thing in with her," Harry reminded him.

Robert: Also true.

They had reached the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Pig Snout,"

Pomona: Horse face!

Robert: Dragon breath!

Xiomara: Muggle brain!

All: (As if that one really hurt) Ooohh!

Pomona: Hey!

Alastor: They really should change the password more often.

they said and entered.

The common room was packed and noisy. Everyone was eating the food that had been sent up. Hermione, however, stood alone by the door, waiting for them.

Pomona: *Now* they can have that pumpkin pie - *who* are all you people???

There was a very embarrassed pause. Then, none of them looking at each other, they all said "Thanks," and hurried off to get plates.

But from that moment on, Hermione Granger became their friend. There are some things you can't share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them.

Robert: And so ends Chapter Ten.

Minerva: I hate to say it, but two chapters are about as much of a break as we can justify.

(Some grumbles as they all pick up their textbooks again.)

Pomona: Say, let's all study in Hufflepuff's Common Room tomorrow.

Xiomara: The portal guardian might make a fuss, but so far, none of our Prefects have objected.

Alastor: Biding their time, I shouldn't wonder.

Pomona: (giggles) Al! We're Hufflepuffs! We're not that sneaky!

Alastor: (ominously) That's what you'd like us to believe!

Xiomara: A *Slytherin* thinks Hufflepuffs are sneaky!

Pomona: Al, that's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said about our House!

(General laughter as the scene ends.)

* ¹ There seems to be some argument about this, but "snakes rely on vibrations, rather than hearing" appears to be the most common theory.

* ² Then again, we could have the makings of the next great family movie, here - "Harry Potter Meets Air Bud."

* ³ According to Dark Beta (who's amazingly well-read and would know about these things) in the Nineteen Thirties, you wouldn't go out and buy a bubble-blowing set at a toy store. You'd make it yourself at home. I'd never have thought of that, if she hadn't pointed it out!

* ⁴ If you don't get it, remember that "HMS Pumpkin Pie" is the official "ship" name for those poor deluded souls who still insist, in the face of all the evidence, that Harry and Hermione are meant to end up together. Arguments frequently break out about this. Pomona seems to be getting flashes that might qualify her to train as a seer if she weren't so focused on Herbology.

* ⁵ Nobody expects the Toadish Inquisition!

* ⁶ For anyone who doesn't know, burning feathers under someone's nose used to be a standard means of reviving them from a faint ("Wonky" or otherwise.)

* ⁷ I can't take the credit for this one. It was created by **angelic*devil** and posted on Fiction Alley, in the "Famous Last Words" thread. Plagiarism? Who, me?

* ⁸ The "Four Elements" were Earth, Air, Fire and Water and were supposed to have a direct bearing on both a person's physical health and their character.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 12

An old-fashioned word for "pages" is "leaves." Harry's talents are beginning to blossom, and he's ready to strike at the root of evil. So, plant yourself in a chair, and listen. Pomona's reading.

Chapter Eleven:

I'm not J.K. Rowling.

Many, many thanks to Dark Beta and notsosaintly!

The author wishes to apologize for the complete lack of A. A. Milne quotes (or any decent substitutes) in this chapter. Nothing fit nothing. I'm disillusioned. Life has ceased to be worth... oh, forget this nonsense. On with the chapter!

SUMMARY: An old-fashioned word for "pages" is "leaves." Harry's talents are beginning to blossom, and he's ready to strike at the root of evil. So, plant yourself in a chair, and listen. Pomona's reading.

Scene: The next day. The kids are in the corridor near the entrance to the Hufflepuff common room. While the others wait the required ten paces back, Pomona and Xiomara come up to a suit of armor on a short dais set against the wall.

Pomona: Badger, badger, badger.

(The visor opens and a deep hollow voice booms out from the suit.)

Armor: MUSHROOM! *¹

(A panel of the wall with the dais and armor attached to it slides aside to reveal the entrance to the Hufflepuff common room. The other kids come forward.)

Xiomara: Thanks. Now, please stay open long enough for our friends to come in.

(Robert, Filius and Minerva enter. As Alastor starts to follow, the armor suddenly bellows...)

Armor: A SNAKE! A SNAKE! AAAHHHHH!

Pomona: Oh, calm down. He's with us.

Xiomara: Honestly, we went through this last time!

(They head into the Hufflepuff common room and sit down.)

Minerva: Well, what first? Potions, Transfiguration, or Defense?

Pomona: What about "The Near Future of the Wizarding World"?

Filius: There's no such... oh, I see. Who's got it? I know I don't.

Alastor: (As if exposing suspicious behavior) I saw Robbie give it to Mona, yesterday.

Xiomara: Not touching that... not touching that!

Robert: Oooh! Nothing gets past you, Al!

(Pomona pulls the book out of her bag and opens it.)

Pomona: **Chapter Eleven: Quidditch**

As they entered November, the weather turned very cold. The mountains around the school became icy gray and the lake like chilled steel.

Filius: In appearance, or texture?

Minerva: If it's frozen, both.

Every morning the ground was covered in frost. Hagrid could be seen from the upstairs windows defrosting broomsticks on the Quidditch field, bundled up in a long moleskin overcoat, rabbit fur gloves, and enormous beaverskin boots.

Xiomara: They would have to have been "dam" big beavers!

(Moment of silence)

Filius: (Carefully) Was that a pun, Xia?

Xiomara: I'll leave it to you to decide.

Pomona: Come to think of it, you'd need a pretty big mole, too.

Filius: Or lots of them.

Robert: Well, one of my cousins on the McPhee side has a pretty big one.

Minerva: Er, different kind of mole, I think, Robbie.

The Quidditch season had begun. On Saturday, Harry would be playing in his first match after weeks of training: Gryffindor versus Slytherin. If Gryffindor won, they would move up into second place in the House championship.

Alastor: By cheating!

Minerva: (Gives him a Look.)

Hardly anyone had seen Harry play because Wood had decided that, as their secret weapon, Harry should be kept, well, secret.

Xiomara: Interesting concept.

But the news that he was playing Seeker had leaked out somehow,

Alastor: I wouldn't let those twins in on anything I wanted to keep under wraps!

Pomona: Oh, I don't know. They say, "Three can keep a secret, if two are red."

Alastor: That's "*dead*", Mona.

Pomona: Oh. Right.

and Harry didn't know which was worse people telling him he'd be brilliant or people telling him they'd be running around underneath him holding a mattress.

Xiomara: I'd go for the mattress, myself.

Robert: We know.

Xiomara: No, I meant... ah, very good. I'll get you for that.

Filius: May I watch?

It was really lucky that Harry now had Hermione as a friend. He didn't know how he'd have gotten through all his homework without her, what with all the last-minute Quidditch practice Wood was making them do. She had also lent him *Quidditch through the Ages*, which turned out to be a very interesting read.

Pomona: Well, if you like Quidditch, I suppose.

Xiomara: (Sincerely shocked) Mona!

Pomona: Gotcha!

Harry learned that there were seven hundred ways of committing a Quidditch foul

Robert/Minerva: DUCK!

and that all of them had happened during a World Cup match in 1473; that Seekers were usually the smallest and fastest players,

Xiomara: Not much bigger than the Snitch. Cuts down on air resistance.

Pomona: Flit, have you ever thought of playing Seeker?

Filius: No, thanks! Any time I get near a Quidditch pitch, someone tries to use me as a Quaffle!

and that most serious Quidditch accidents seemed to happen to them; that although people rarely died playing Quidditch, referees had been known to vanish and turn up months later in the Sahara Desert.

Minerva: The referee at last Saturday's game needed to dry out.

Robert: But not quite so *literally*, Minna.

Hermione had become a bit more relaxed about breaking rules since Harry and Ron had saved her from the mountain troll, and she was much nicer for it.

Robert: Reminds me of someone we know.

Alastor: Breaking rules leading to social acceptance... is this a lesson we really want to teach?

The day before Harry's first Quidditch match the three of them were out in the freezing courtyard during break, and she had conjured them up a bright blue fire that could be carried around in a jam jar.

Filius: I hope that jar is heat-proof!

They were standing with their backs to it, getting warm,

Xiomara: ... when suddenly, they all three realized their robes were on fire.

when Snape crossed the yard.

Xiomara: So they set him on fire, too!

Harry noticed at once that Snape was limping.

Pomona: And suspected, at once, that his Potions master had been moonlighting as a dance hall host!

Others: "Huh?" "A *what?*" (etc.)

Pomona: Must be a Muggle thing.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved closer together to block the fire from view; they were sure it wouldn't be allowed.

Unfortunately, something about their guilty faces caught Snape's eye.

Alastor: They'd have done better to just stay still. And there's a trick to sort of *thinking* yourself inconspicuous, but it's probably beyond a first year.

Minerva: Have you *met* some of the first years this year?!

He limped over. He hadn't seen the fire, but he seemed to be looking for a reason to tell them off anyway.

Xiomara: Why am I not surprised?

"What's that you've got there, Potter?"

Minerva: And did you bring enough for everyone?

It was *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Harry showed him.

"Library books are not to be taken outside the school,"

Minerva: *What??*

said Snape. "Give it to me. Five points from Gryffindor."

Minerva: That's never been a rule. What is he on about?

"He's just made that rule up," Harry muttered angrily as Snape limped away. "Wonder what's wrong with his leg?"

Xiomara: Obviously, he hurt himself pulling that rule out of his...

(Pomona puts her hand over Xiomara's mouth.)

Pomona: Ouch! (Shakes her hand. Xiomara grins, toothily.)

"Dunno, but I hope it's really hurting him," said Ron bitterly.

Xiomara: What I said.

The Gryffindor common room was very noisy that evening. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat together next to a window.

Alastor: Always have an eye on the exit.

Minerva: Do you know how far above the ground that window is?

Robert: And first years haven't learned self-levitation, yet!

Hermione was checking Harry and Ron's Charms homework for them. She would never let them copy ("How will you learn?"), but by asking her to read it through, they got the right answers anyway.

Minerva: That's only useful if she makes sure they understand *why* it's the right answer.

Harry felt restless.

Minerva: As he realizes that he's not learning material that he'll need later on.

Robert: Somehow, I doubt it.

He wanted *Quidditch Through the Ages* back, to take his mind off his nerves about tomorrow. Why should he be afraid of Snape?

Alastor: He's a full-grown wizard, he hates you unreasonably, and he's probably in with this Moldy-fellow.

Pomona: Not to mention that grades on a curve?

Robert: But Harry *defeated* Moldy-Wart! A mere minion should hold no terrors for him.

Minerva: And he's a Gryffindor!

Pomona: Oh, well, in *that* case...

Getting up, he told Ron and Hermione he was going to ask Snape if he could have it.

Alastor: Oh, he'll let you have it, all right!

"Better you than me," they said together, but Harry had an idea that Snape wouldn't refuse if there were other teachers listening.

Alastor: A budding political strategist!

He made his way down to the staffroom and knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again. Nothing.

Perhaps Snape had left the book in there? It was worth a try.

Alastor: Thief!

Robert: Hey, it's Harry's book. He's just stealing it back.

Filius: Actually, it belongs to the library.

Minerva: Books belong to the world!

He pushed the door ajar and peered inside and a horrible scene met his eyes.

Snape and Filch were inside, alone.

Xiomara: Um...

Snape was holding his robes above his knees.

Xiomara: *WHOO!*

One of his legs was bloody and mangled. Filch was handing Snape bandages.

Xiomara: So they like it rough, do they?

Minerva: *Enough*, Xia!

"Blasted thing," Snape was saying. "How are you supposed to keep your eyes on all three heads at once?"

Alastor: And if you try to make something out of *that*, Xia, get used to looking over your shoulder.

Xiomara: What, all six shoulders at once?

Harry tried to shut the door quietly, but

"POTTER!"

Snape's face was twisted with fury as he dropped his robes quickly to hide his leg. Harry gulped.

"I just wondered if I could have my book back."

"GET OUT! *OUT!*"

Pomona: Damned spot!

Filius: Ah! Now there's a Muggle reference I understand!

Harry left, before Snape could take any more points from Gryffindor. He sprinted back upstairs.

Robert: Legged it, in fact.

"Did you get it?" Ron asked as Harry joined them. "What's the matter?" In a low whisper, Harry told them what he'd seen.

"You know what this means?" he finished breathlessly.

Filius: Yes! Having seen Snape's bare leg, you are now going to have to marry him!

All: Yeeagh!!!

"He tried to get past that three-headed dog at Halloween! That's where he was going when we saw him he's after whatever it's guarding! And I'd bet my broomstick *he* let that troll in, to make a diversion!"

Robert: No, it's just that his cousin always wanted to go to Hogwarts so he thought maybe he could sneak him in.

Xiomara: And *never* bet your broomstick, Harry! Even a "sure thing" can turn around and bite you on the bristles!

Hermione's eyes were wide.

"No he wouldn't," she said. "I know he's not very nice, but he wouldn't try to steal something Dumbledore was keeping safe."

"Honestly, Hermione, you think all teachers are saints or something," snapped Ron.

Filius: Well, / intend to be!

"I'm with Harry. I wouldn't put anything past Snape. But what's he after? What's that dog guarding?"

Minerva: This is just a guess, but... the Philosopher's Stone?

Pomona: No, the Sorcerer's Stone.

Minerva: Which is the same thing.

Robert: Not that I've met many Sorcerers with a philosophical bent.

Harry went to bed with his head buzzing with the same question. Neville was snoring loudly, but Harry couldn't sleep.

Alastor: ...because of Neville's snoring.

He tried to empty his mind he needed to sleep, he had to, he had his first Quidditch match in a few hours but the expression on Snape's face when Harry had seen his leg wasn't easy to forget.

Pomona: Focus on the face, Harry. It'll help keep your mind off the sight of his *leg*! Now *that's* what I call traumatic!

The next morning dawned very bright and cold. The Great Hall was full of the delicious smell of fried sausages

Pomona: They're making me hungry for breakfast!

Minerva: At three-thirty in the afternoon?

Alastor: You should never seek to know how laws or sausages are made.

Filius: (As ominously as possible in his high little voice) Sausages: The Darkest Art of All!

(General laughter)

and the cheerful chatter of everyone looking forward to a good Quidditch match.

"You've got to eat some breakfast."

Pomona: Most important meal of the day!

"I don't want anything."

Pomona: He's *mad*!

"Just a bit of toast," wheedled Hermione.

"I'm not hungry."

Harry felt terrible. In an hour's time he'd be walking onto the field.

Xiomara: That should make you feel wonderful!

Minerva: Before his very first match, Xia?

"Harry, you need your strength," said Seamus Finnigan. "Seekers are always the ones who get clobbered by the other team."

Xiomara: Which makes having a full stomach a tricky proposition.

"Thanks, Seamus," said Harry, watching Seamus pile ketchup on his sausages.

By eleven o'clock the whole school seemed to be out in the stands around the Quidditch field. Many students had binoculars. The seats might be raised high in the air, but it was still difficult to see what was going on sometimes.

Ron and Hermione joined Neville, Seamus, and Dean the West Ham fan

Robert: It'd be more euphonious if his name were "Dan".

up in the top row. As a surprise for Harry, they had painted a large banner on one of the sheets Scabbers had ruined. It said *Potter for President*,

Filius: President?

Pomona: It's what the Americans have instead of a Prime Minister.

Minerva: How did the Americans get into this?

Pomona: Don't ask me. Ask the author.

and Dean, who was good at drawing, had done a large Gryffindor lion underneath. Then Hermione had performed a tricky little charm so that the paint flashed different colors.

Xiomara: The puce and olive-green version was particularly striking.

Filius: (shudders)

Meanwhile, in the locker room, Harry and the rest of the team were changing into their scarlet Quidditch robes (Slytherin would be playing in green).

Alastor: Does this really need to be said?

Wood cleared his throat for silence.

"Okay, men," he said.

"And women," said Chaser Angelina Johnson.

Robert: And undecideds.

Xiomara: There has never been a Zabini on any Quidditch team at Hogwarts.*²

"And women," Wood agreed. "This is it."

"The big one," said Fred Weasley.

"The one we've all been waiting for," said George.

Xiomara: This early in the year?

"We know Oliver's speech by heart," Fred told Harry, "we were on the team last year."

Xiomara: If the team captain's not much for new plans, maybe that explains their losing streak.

"Shut up, you two," said Wood. "This is the best team Gryffindor's had in years."

Xiomara: Without *me* on it? Impossible!

(General response of "Hear! Hear!" and "Absolutely!" etc.)

We're going to win. I know it."

He glared at them all as if to say, "Or else."

Filius: Ah, the Incentive System.

"Right. It's time. Good luck, all of you."

Alastor: Against Slytherin, you'll need it!

Harry followed Fred and George out of the locker room and, hoping his knees weren't going to give way, walked onto the field to loud cheers.

Madam Hooch was refereeing. She stood in the middle of the field waiting for the two teams, her broom in her hand.

Pomona: ...and she was the best darned referee of her generation!

Xiomara: Thank you!

"Now, I want a nice fair game, all of you," she said, once they were all gathered around her. Harry noticed that she seemed to be speaking particularly to the Slytherin Captain, Marcus Flint, a fifth year. Harry thought Flint looked as if he had some troll blood in him.

Minerva: That's impossible! Humans and trolls can't inter-breed, even with magic!

Robert: Well, then, Snape's cousin must be adopted.

Minerva: Or Snape, himself, is. A Trollish upbringing could explain a lot.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the fluttering banner high above, flashing *Potter for President* over the crowd. His heart skipped.

Robert: And danced.

Filius: And did cartwheels!

He felt braver.

"Mount your brooms, please."

Harry clambered onto his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Madam Hooch gave a loud blast on her silver whistle.

Robert: We can be fairly sure *she's* not a werewolf, then.

Alastor: *If* it's real silver. I wouldn't trust it without checking.

Xiomara: I'm still right here, you know.

Alastor: And is there anything you'd like to tell us?

Xiomara: (winks) Meet me in the Astronomy Tower next full moon and we'll talk.

Alastor: Talk that's good. But no snarling, growling, howling, ripping, tearing...

Fifteen brooms rose up, high, high into the air. They were off.

"And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too "

"JORDAN!"

Minerva: There's a time and a place...

Robert: There's a brave man!

"Sorry, Professor."

The Weasley twins' friend, Lee Jordan, was doing the commentary for the match, closely watched by Professor McGonagall.

Alastor: Isn't he the one with the dreaded locks?

Pomona: Dread locks, Al.

Alastor: Still, could be related to a gorgon... on his mother's side, of course.

Xiomara: Not touching that!

"And she's really belting along up there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood's, last year only a reserve back to Johnson and no, the Slytherins have taken the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes Flint flying like an eagle up there

Filius: Going in circles and starting at the ground?

Robert: Watching for rats?

he's going to score, stopped by an excellent move by Gryffindor Keeper Wood and the Gryffindors take the Quaffle that's Chaser Katie Bell of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field and OUCH that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a Bludger

Pomona: Has anyone ever had permanent brain damage from playing Quidditch?

Robert: Well, a fair number of players go into politics when they retire.

Pomona: (absently) Say, does anyone feeling like making a pan of fudge?

Quaffle taken by the Slytherins that's Adrian Pucey speeding off toward the goal posts, but he's blocked by a second Bludger sent his way by Fred or George Weasley, can't tell which

Minerva: Can anyone?

nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, anyway, and Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead and off she goes she's really flying dodges a speeding Bludger the goal posts are ahead come on, now, Angelina Keeper Bletchley dives misses GRYFFINDORS SCORE!"

Robert: Say, Minna... ?

Minerva: Yes?

Robert: Never mind.

Gryffindor cheers filled the cold air, with howls and moans from the Slytherins.

Xiomara: What, no werewolf comments? They are howling, you know.

Alastor: What, no raunchy innuendo? They are moaning, you know.

"Budge up there, move along."

"Hagrid!"

Robert: And when *he* says "budge up" you'd better budge up!

Ron and Hermione squeezed together to give Hagrid enough space to join them.

Filius: Alas, they'd hoped to have the entire bench to themselves.

"Bin watchin' from me hut," said Hagrid, parting a large pair of binoculars around his neck, "But it isn't the same as bein' in the crowd.

Filius: No indeed! No chance of going deaf and you won't get butterbeer spilled on you either.

No sign of the Snitch yet, eh?"

"Nope," said Ron. "Harry hasn't had much to do yet."

"Kept outta trouble, though, that's somethin'," said Hagrid, raising his binoculars and peering skyward at the speck that was Harry.

Filius: Keeping out of trouble seems to be a full-time occupation for this boy.

Xiomara: And he's been slacking off on the job!

Way up above them, Harry was gliding over the game, squinting about for some sign of the Snitch. This was part of his and Wood's game plan.

"Keep out of the way until you catch sight of the Snitch," Wood had said. "We don't want you attacked before you have to be."

Alastor: Too bad no one told that to Volde-whatsit.

When Angelina had scored, Harry had done a couple of loop-the-loops to let off his feelings. Now he was back to staring around for the Snitch. Once he caught sight of a flash of gold, but it was just a reflection from one of the Weasleys' wristwatches,

Robert: A Weasley wearing a gold wristwatch? I thought they were poor?

Filius: Put a Glamour on it, maybe?

and once a Bludger decided to come pelting his way, more like a cannonball than anything, but Harry dodged it and Fred Weasley came chasing after it.

"All right there, Harry?" he had time to yell, as he beat the Bludger furiously toward Marcus Flint.

Xiomara: (as Harry) What? Don't I *look* all right?

"Slytherin in possession," Lee Jordan was saying, "Chaser Pucey ducks two bludgers, two Weasleys,

Pomona: And a partridge in a pear tree!

and Chaser Bell,

Pomona: I stand corrected.

and speeds toward the wait a moment was that the Snitch?"

A murmur ran through the crowd as Adrian Pucey dropped the Quaffle, too busy looking over his shoulder at the flash of gold that had passed his left ear.

Pomona: A Weasley wrist-watch?

Filius: Time flies.

Harry saw it. In a great rush of excitement he dived downward after the streak of gold. Slytherin Seeker Terence Higgs had seen it, too. Neck and neck they hurtled toward the Snitch all the Chasers seemed to have forgotten what they were supposed to be doing as they hung in midair to watch.

Alastor: They're jeopardizing the whole mission... er, game!

Harry was faster than Higgs he could see the little round ball, wings fluttering, darting up ahead he put on an extra spurt of speed

WHAM! A roar of rage echoed from the Gryffindors below Marcus Flint had blocked Harry on purpose, and Harry's broom spun off course, Harry holding on for dear life.

Alastor: (Indignant) That's the sort of thing that gives all of Slytherin a bad name!

"Foul!" screamed the Gryffindors.

Alastor: Damn right, foul!

Madam Hooch spoke angrily to Flint and then ordered a free shot at the goal posts for Gryffindor. But in all the confusion, of course, the Golden Snitch had disappeared from sight again.

Down in the stands, Dean Thomas was yelling, "Send him off, ref! Red card!"

Filius: Red card?

Pomona: Some kind of soccer reference, I think. I've never paid that much attention to sports. I get all the exercise I need, fighting carnivorous weeds.

Xiomara: Not all the exercise you'd need if you were on the team.

Pomona: Watch it!

"What are you talking about, Dean?" said Ron.

"Red card!" said Dean furiously. "In soccer you get shown the red card and you're out of the game!"

Pomona: There you go.

"But this isn't soccer, Dean," Ron reminded him.

Hagrid, however was on Dean's side.

"They oughta change the rules. Flint coulda knocked Harry outta the air."

Xiomara: Or knocked the *air* out of *Harry*!

Filius: Hry. Interesting name.

Others: Huh?

Filius: Well, if you take the "air" out of "Harry"...

Others: (Look around for things to throw at him.)

Lee Jordan was finding it difficult not to take sides.

"So after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating "

"Jordan!" growled Professor McGonagall.

Minerva: Well, it sounded pretty good to *me*!

"I mean, after that open and revolting foul "

Pomona: THE FOWL ARE REVOLTING!

Filius: CHICKENS OF THE WORLD, UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE, BUT YOUR STUFFING!

"Jordan, I'm warning you "

Robert: And trust me, when *she* warns you, you *stay* warned!

"All right, all right. Flint nearly kills the Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone, I'm sure,

Alastor: You'd be surprised...

so a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinnet, who puts it away, no trouble, and we continue play, Gryffindor still in possession."

It was as Harry dodged another Bludger, which went spinning dangerously past his head, that it happened. His broom gave a sudden, frightening lurch.

Xiomara: And doesn't *that* line just sit up and beg for a double entendre

Alastor: But only a chap could do it justice, lassie.

Xiomara: Okay, all kidding aside, when your, um, *broom* gives a sudden lurch, is it frightening?

Pomona: Xia!

Alastor/Robert/Filius: *Frequently!*

Robert: Especially when you're standing up and speaking in class!

Filius: There's a reason I carry a large textbook around with me, and it's not just because I'm a Ravenclaw!

For a split second, he thought he was going to fall. He gripped the broom tightly with both his hands and knees.

Robert: ...which you can't do when you're standing up, speaking in class.

Minerva: Well, you *could*, but I hate to think how many points you'd lose!

Xiomara: You'd have everyone's attention, though.

He'd never felt anything like that.

Pomona: *Don't*, Xia!

It happened again. It was as though the broom was trying to buck him off. But Nimbus Two Thousands did not suddenly decide to buck their riders off.

Xiomara: ...though *some* riders must tempt them.

Harry tried to turn back toward the Gryffindor goal posts he had half a mind to ask Wood to call time-out and then he realized his broom was completely out of his control. He couldn't turn it. He couldn't direct it at all. It was zigzagging through the air, and every now and then making violent swishing movements that almost unseated him.

Xiomara: You don't think the broom's a bit *bent*?

Lee was still commenting.

"Slytherin in possession

Minerva: Slytherins are possessed?

Alastor: Watch it.

Flint with the Quaffle passes Spinnet passes Bell hit hard in the face by a Bludger, hope it broke his nose only joking, Professor Slytherins score oh no..."

Xiomara: "Oh no?" Another example of "not taking sides."

Pomona: They really shouldn't let someone commentate whose House is playing.

The Slytherins were cheering. No one seemed to have noticed that Harry's broom was behaving strangely. It was carrying him slowly higher, away from the game, jerking and twitching as it went.

"Dunno what Harry thinks he's doing," Hagrid mumbled.

Minerva: Well, I'm glad *someone's* noticed!

He stared through his binoculars. "If I didn' know better, I'd say he'd lost control of his broom...but he can't have..."

Minerva: Exactly why not? The Hereditary Potter Sense of Quidditch?

Pomona: And brooms do go wrong sometimes.

Xiomara: There are no bad brooms, only bad riders.

Alastor: You can do things to brooms with Dark Magic, though.

Suddenly, people were pointing up at Harry all over the stands. His broom had started to roll over and over, with him only just managing to hold on.

Filius: Roll over! Sit! Stay!

Then the whole crowd gasped. Harry's broom had given a wild jerk and Harry swung off it. He was now dangling from it, holding on with only one hand.

Pomona: (closes her eyes and repeats through gritted teeth) It's only a story. It's only a story...

"Did something happen to it when Flint blocked him?" Seamus whispered.

"Can't have," Hagrid said, his voice shaking. "Can't nothing interfere with a broomstick except powerful Dark magic no kid could do that to a Nimbus Two Thousand."

Alastor: Ah-hah! About time that Voldie person showed his hand!

Xiomara: Let's hope that's all he shows!

Pomona: Bleagh!

At these words, Hermione seized Hagrid's binoculars, but instead of looking up at Harry, she started looking frantically at the crowd.

Alastor: Gets right to the heart of the problem. Good instincts, that girl!

"What are you doing?" moaned Ron, gray-faced.

Filius: Hmm, gray and flaming orange... not the best combination but it doesn't actually clash...

"I knew it," Hermione gasped, "Snape look."

Ron grabbed the binoculars. Snape was in the middle of the stands opposite them. He had his eyes fixed on Harry and was muttering nonstop under his breath.

"He's doing something jinxing the broom," said Hermione.

Filius: Rather a leap of logic, there.

"What should we do?"

Pomona: (sings) When in trouble,

Filius: (sings) When in trouble,

Pomona: (still singing) When in doubt,

Filius: (following right along) When in doubt,

Pomona: Run around in circles,

Filius: Run around in circles,

Pomona: Scream and shout!

Filius: Scream and shout!

Robert (to Minerva): And they say *we're* strange!

"Leave it to me."

Before Ron could say another word, Hermione had disappeared.

Pomona: Poof!

Ron turned the binoculars back on Harry. His broom was vibrating so hard, it was almost impossible for him to hang on much longer. The whole crowd was on its feet, watching, terrified, as the Weasleys flew up to try and pull Harry safely onto one of their brooms, but it was no good every time they got near him, the broom would jump higher still.

Xiomara: Catch me if you can!

They dropped lower and circled beneath him, obviously hoping to catch him if he fell.

Minerva: Where's that mattress, now that he needs it?

Marcus Flint seized the Quaffle and scored five times without anyone noticing.

Alastor: A bit dirty, but effective. Not actually cheating unlike some of his other stunts.

"Come on, Hermione," Ron muttered desperately.

Hermione had fought her way across to the stand where Snape stood, and was now racing along the row behind him; she didn't even stop to say sorry as she knocked Professor Quirrell headfirst into the row in front.

Minerva: Rude, but I guess in the circumstances...

Reaching Snape, she crouched down, pulled out her wand, and whispered a few, well-chosen words. Bright blue flames shot from her wand onto the hem of Snape's robes.

Xiomara: See? I knew they'd set him on fire sooner or later!

It took perhaps thirty seconds for Snape to realize that he was on fire.

Pomona: ... and get out his bag of marshmallows.

Xiomara: *cough*foodonthebrain*cough*.

Pomona: I heard that.

A sudden yelp told her she had done her job. Scooping the fire off him into a little jar in her pocket,

Minerva: Now there's a practical girl! I always carry at least one extra jar for emergencies. I always have a piece of string, too.*³

Pomona: I wonder if that's the same jar of fire the kids were keeping warm with, earlier?

she scrambled back along the row Snape would never know what had happened.

Alastor: ...until a few years later, when he read a certain book...

It was enough. Up in the air, Harry was suddenly able to clamber back on to his broom.

All: (Cheers)

Xiomara: Sounds as if he's mastered the one-handed midair remount! Not bad for a first year!

"Neville, you can look!" Ron said. Neville had been sobbing into Hagrid's jacket for the last five minutes.

Robert: Harry saved Neville's Remembrall and made a friend for life.

Alastor: Not a very useful one, though.

Harry was speeding toward the ground when the crowd saw him clap his hand to his mouth as though he was about to be sick

Xiomara: I *knew* he shouldn't have had breakfast!

he hit the field on all fours coughed and something gold fell into his hand.

Alastor: Gold? What *did* he end up eating for breakfast?

Pomona: You don't suppose that, somehow, Harry is a Philosopher's Stone,*himself*, do you?

"I've got the Snitch!" he shouted, waving it above his head, and the game ended in complete confusion.

"He didn't catch it, he nearly swallowed it," Flint was still howling twenty minutes later,

Robert: Flint is a werewolf too?

but it made no difference Harry hadn't broken any rules and Lee Jordan was still happily shouting the results Gryffindor had won by one hundred and seventy points to sixty. Harry heard none of this, though. He was being made a cup of strong tea back in Hagrid's hut, with Ron and Hermione.

Minerva: Strong tea on an empty stomach? I hope Hagrid puts a lot of milk and sugar in that!

"It was Snape," Ron was explaining, "Hermione and I saw him. He was cursing your broomstick, muttering, he wouldn't take his eyes off you."

"Rubbish," said Hagrid, who hadn't heard a word of what had gone on next to him in the stands.

Filius: You'd think with ears that size...

Minerva: Well, that's the problem. We all sound like midges to a giant.

"Why would Snape do somethin' like that?"

Xiomara: Decrease the overpopulation in the classrooms?

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another, wondering what to tell him. Harry decided on the truth.

Alastor: He is so young!

"I found out something about him," he told Hagrid. "He tried to get past that three-headed dog on Halloween. It bit him. We think he was trying to steal whatever it's guarding."

Hagrid dropped the teapot.

All: (in unison) CRASH!

"How do you know about Fluffy?" he said.

All: *Fluffy?*

"*Fluffy?*"

"Yeah he's mine bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year

Minerva: Considering Cerberuses are usually used to guard the world of the Dead, I'd have a few questions about that "Chappie" if I were Hagrid!

Alastor: Now you're catching on, lassie. Trust No One!

I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the "

"Yes?" said Harry eagerly.

"Now, don't ask me anymore," said Hagrid gruffly. "That's top secret, that is."

Pomona: Is there such a thing as *bottom* secret?

Xiomara: Oh, what I could do with that!

"But Snape's trying to *steal* it."

"Rubbish," said Hagrid again. "Snape's a Hogwarts teacher, he'd do nothin' of the sort."

Robert: No point to it. Hogwarts pays quite well.

"So why did he just try and kill Harry?" cried Hermione.

Minerva: His homework was late again?

The afternoon's events certainly seemed to have changed her mind about Snape.

"I know a jinx when I see one, Hagrid, I've read all about them!

Robert: Why am I not surprised?

You've got to keep eye contact, and Snape wasn't blinking at all, I saw him!"

Minerva: Serpents don't. I thought we'd already established that.

"I'm tellin' yeh, yer wrong!" said Hagrid hotly. "I don' know why Harry's broom acted like that, but Snape wouldn' try an' kill a student! Now, listen to me, all three of yeh yer meddlin' in things that don' concern yeh.

Pomona: Um... since Harry was nearly killed a couple of hours ago, I think that does concern them.

It's dangerous. You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guardin', that's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel "

Minerva: Aha!

"Aha!" said Harry, "so there's someone called Nicolas Flamel involved, is there?"

Minerva: Well, if we had any doubts left about what the little package was...

Hagrid looked furious with himself.

Alastor: He should!

(Pause)

Filius: Well, don't leave us in suspense, Mona! Read on!

Pomona: I can't. Well, I *could*, but that was the end of the chapter.

Filius: Really? That's a bit abrupt.

Alastor: No point in wasting words. Say what you mean to say, and then stop.

Minerva: Well, in that case, I guess we should start our homework.

(With general sighs, and grumbling, they open their text books.)

*¹ If you don't get it, click the link and watch the meme.

<http://www.badgerbadgerbadger.com/>

*² Yes, I know, but it took us six books to find out for sure.

*³ Once again, if you don't get the reference, read "Wee Free Men" by Terry Pratchett.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 12

Constant Vigilance - It's Alastor's turn again!

Scene: Three days later. The Sensational Six are prowling around under a tree, near the Lake. They appear to be searching for something.

Filius: And you're sure this was the last place you saw it, Mona?

Pomona: Absolutely. I was digging *One Hundred and One Fun Things to Do With Carnivorous Plants* out of my bag, and I *know* I saw the *Sorcerer's Stone* book in there! When I put the *Carnivorous Plants* book away, I didn't notice the other one but I wasn't really looking for it. I mean, where would it have gone? But that was three days ago and I haven't been able to find it, since!

Alastor: Did anyone come by, or speak to you, while you were reading?

Pomona: A couple of my Housemates walked by and waved, but they weren't close enough to take anything from my bag, even if they'd wanted to!

Minerva: Well, it didn't just crawl out of your bag and walk away!

Robert: Actually, there have been cases of magical books that...

(Suddenly a huge tentacle rears up out of the water, perhaps twenty feet out from shore. It hurls something toward the group.)

Alastor: DUCK!

(The others throw themselves to the ground. Xiomara, however, leaps about three feet in the air and intercepts the pass.)

Sound-of-Someone-Catching-a-Very-Wet-Book-Traveling-Fast: SPLAT!

Alastor: ARE YOU *MAD*, GIRL?! THAT COULD HAVE BEEN ANYTHING!!!

Minerva: What is it?

Xiomara: It looks like a copy of... "Hazy Splatter and the Sorcerer's Blur."

Alastor: Ah-HAH!

Pomona: I didn't even know the Giant Squid could read!

Minerva: Here, put it down and let me see what I can do with it. (She pulls out her wand and points it at the book. *Aridus!*)

(The book flies open and the wet pages begin to separate from each other and blow back and forth, as if in a constantly shifting wind. The air around the book begins to shimmer as if hot, and after a minute, steam begins to rise. The kids watch, clearly approving Minerva's skill.)

Robert: I think it's nearly dry. (Pause.) Minna, ease up! It's starting to scorch!

(Minerva finishes the spell with a last flourish of her wand, and the book lies open on the grass, bone dry, faintly scorched around the edges but still mostly legible.)

Alastor: Next time, keep your bag tied shut.

Pomona: Unless the Squid knows how to undo lacings!

Xiomara: Well, if it ever tries to undo your robes, *run!* Unless, of course, you like that sort of thing.

Pomona: XIA!!!

Filius: Ahem! Well, since we have it back, shall we have a chapter or two?

(General agreement. They all settle on the grass.)

Pomona: Whose turn is it to read?

Alastor: Mine, I think. (He pulls out his wand and runs it over the book. When no warning spells are activated, he picks it up.) Chapter Twelve: **The Mirror of Erised.**

Christmas was coming.

Pomona: ... the goose was getting fat?

One morning in mid-December, Hogwarts woke to find itself covered in several feet of snow.

The lake froze solid

Xiomara: And Alastor Moody had to escort Arachne Malfoy to the next ball.

Alastor: No, Xia, I said that would happen when *Hell* froze solid, not just the lake.

Xiomara: Oh. Right.

and the Weasley twins were punished for bewitching several snowballs so that they followed Quirrell around, bouncing off the back of his turban.

Robert: Ooh, good one!

(He and Minerva look speculatively at each other.)

The few owls that managed to battle their way through the stormy sky to deliver mail had to be nursed back to health by Hagrid before they could fly off again.

Pomona: That's why I stopped sending Christmas cards.

No one could wait for the holidays to start. While the Gryffindor common room and the Great Hall had roaring fires, the drafty corridors had become icy and a bitter wind rattled the windows in the classrooms. Worst of all were Professor Snape's classes down in the dungeons,

Pomona: That's one good thing about wizard's robes you can wear winter woolens under them and nobody knows.

Filius: (trying to leer and only managing to look cute and cuddly) Oooh? Do tell, my dear, do tell.

Xiomara: Winter woolens excite you, Flirt I mean, Flit?

Pomona: (blushing) Xia!

Minerva: In a Highland winter, we *all* lust after woolens!

where their breath rose in a mist before them and they kept as close as possible to their hot cauldrons.

"I do feel so sorry," said Draco Malfoy, one Potions class,

Robert: ...for having been born a Malfoy. How may I atone for the sins of my forebears?

"for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they're not wanted at home."

Minerva: (snorts) As if any Malfoy ever felt sorry for anyone!

He was looking over at Harry as he spoke.

Xiomara: Bit of a shocker if he up and invited Harry to come home with *him*!

Alastor: If he does, Harry'd better run for it.

Crabbe and Goyle chuckled. Harry, who was measuring out powdered spine of lionfish, ignored them.

Robert: Smart boy.

Malfoy had been even more unpleasant than usual since the Quidditch match. Disgusted that the Slytherins had lost, he had tried to get everyone laughing at how a wide-mouthed tree frog would be replacing Harry as Seeker next.

Xiomara: Right, now *that* was funny!

Then he'd realized that nobody found this funny,

Xiomara: I stand corrected.

because they were all so impressed at the way Harry had managed to stay on his bucking broomstick.

Pomona: Ride 'em, Harry! (The others look at her oddly.) What? It's an American expression! Haven't you lot ever read any of the American novelists?

So Malfoy, jealous and angry, had gone back to taunting Harry about having no proper family.

It was true that Harry wasn't going back to Privet Drive for Christmas.

Robert: It was also true that he was very, *very* happy about this.

Professor McGonagall had come around the week before, making a list of students who would be staying for the holidays, and Harry had signed up at once. He didn't feel sorry for himself at all; this would probably be the best Christmas he'd ever had.

Minerva: Those are the ones I feel sorry for.

Robert: The ones that have a better time staying at school than they would going home?

Minerva: Right and there are one or two in almost every year.

Ron and his brothers were staying, too, because Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were going to Romania to visit Charlie.

Minerva: ... having decided that a Christmas spent among dragons would be more peaceful than another Christmas with the twins.

When they left the dungeons at the end of Potions, they found a large fir tree blocking the corridor ahead.

Robert: Right. Own up, you lot. Who dropped a pinecone with all that magic lying around?

Pomona: I don't think you can say '*pinecone*' if it grew into a *fir* tree, Robbie.

Robert: Fir-cone?

Pomona: Ah-hah! Someone had been playing "Pooh-sticks"!

Minerva: What?

Pomona: Winnie-the-Pooh.

Two enormous feet sticking out at the bottom and a loud puffing sound told them that Hagrid was behind it.

Alastor: Ah-hah! So he's the culprit!

"Hi, Hagrid, want any help?" Ron asked, sticking his head through the branches.

Xiomara: How much help could an eleven-year-old offer a half-giant?

Filius: What, you haven't heard the fable of the lion and the weasel?

Pomona: I thought it was a mouse.

Robert: Not in the wizarding world all the mice got changed into something else.

(There is a frozen moment where everyone tries to keep a straight face and not to look at Filius.)

Filius: (pretending not to notice) Weasels are more resilient.

"Nah, I'm all right, thanks, Ron."

"Would you mind moving out of the way?" came Malfoy's cold drawl from behind them.

Minerva: Why, Draco? Don't you like climbing trees?

Robert: (as Draco) Malfoys don't like *anything* in our way, Peasant!

Pomona: Pheasant? I hear they taste like chicken.

"Are you trying to earn some extra money, Weasley? Hoping to be gamekeeper yourself when you leave Hogwarts, I suppose

Pomona: It might not be a bad job, actually.

Filius: I'm not sure you'd like it, Mona. Too many animals, not enough plants.

that hut of Hagrid's must seem like a palace compared to what your family's used to."

Filius: If young Malfoy's ever been in either building, I'll eat my hat!

Ron dived at Malfoy just as Snape came up the stairs.

"WEASLEY!"

Xiomara: Bellow that loud enough and about twelve different people will answer.

Alastor: Only twelve? I'd like to know where the rest are hiding. And why?

Ron let go of the front of Malfoy's robes.

"He was provoked, Professor Snape," said Hagrid, sticking his huge hairy face out from behind the tree. "Malfoy was insultin' his family."

Robert: And not even very imaginatively!

Minerva: Talk about adding insult to injury!

"Be that as it may, fighting is against Hogwarts rules, Hagrid," said Snape silkily.

"Five points from Gryffindor, Weasley, and be grateful it isn't more. Move along, all of you."

Filius: I'm letting you off easy because it's nearly Christmas.

Pomona: Bah, humbug.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle pushed roughly past the tree, scattering needles everywhere and smirking.

Pomona: Until a dryad leaned out from the branches and kicked the one bringing up the rear! And *in* the rear, too!

"I'll get him," said Ron, grinding his teeth at Malfoy's back, "one of these days, I'll get him "

Xiomara (as Draco): Professor, Weasley's chewing on me!

"I hate them both," said Harry, "Malfoy and Snape."

Robert: Well, at least he doesn't discriminate.

"Come on, cheer up, it's nearly Christmas," said Hagrid. "Tell yeh what, come with me an' see the Great Hall, looks a treat."

Alastor: Careful! It could be a trick!

Filius: I think you're at least one holiday behind, Al.

So the three of them followed Hagrid and his tree off to the Great Hall, where Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick were busy with the Christmas decorations.

Filius: And the Great Hall looked magnificent we both have such excellent taste, after all!

"Ah, Hagrid, the last tree put it in the far corner, would you?"

The hall looked spectacular.

Minerva: You were right, again, Flit!

Festoons of holly and mistletoe hung all around the walls, and no less than twelve towering Christmas trees stood around the room, some sparkling with tiny icicles, some glittering with hundreds of candles.

Pomona: Minna was involved, and there was no tartan?

Robert: Hold me, I'm scared!

Minerva: Oh, sod off, or I'll turn you into something!

Xiomara: Have you heard about the witch who bit a chap on the ear while he was driving, and he turned into a motel?

"How many days you got left until yer holidays?" Hagrid asked.

Robert: Er... excuse me, but don't you *work* at Hogwarts? Shouldn't you *know* that?

"Just one," said Hermione. "And that reminds me Harry, Ron, we've got half an hour before lunch, we should be in the library."

Xiomara: (as Hermione) Harry, Ron, we've got three hours after lunch, two hours after dinner, and eight hours after breakfast. We really should be in the library.

"Oh yeah, you're right," said Ron, tearing his eyes away from Professor Flitwick, who had golden bubbles blossoming out of his wand and was trailing them over the branches of the new tree.

Filius: Oh, I like the sound of that!

Xiomara: I bet I could come up with enough innuendo for that paragraph to paint Mona's face red for the rest of her life!

Filius: No need, Xia. Sometimes golden balls are... just golden balls.

"The library?" said Hagrid, following them out of the hall. "Just before the holidays? Bit keen, aren't yeh?"

(Everyone stares at Minerva, who turns up her nose at the lot of them.)

"Oh, we're not working," Harry told him brightly. "Ever since you mentioned Nicolas Flamel we've been trying to find out who he is."

Alastor: For Merlin's sake, boy you don't tell them you're looking!

"You *what*?" Hagrid looked shocked. "Listen here I've told yeh drop it. It's nothin' to you what that dog's guardin'."

Minerva: If it's guarding some of the "G"s Hagrid's dropped over the years, he should ask for them back!

"We just want to know who Nicolas Flamel is, that's all," said Hermione.

"Unless you'd like to tell us and save us the trouble?" Harry added. "We must've been through hundreds of books already and we can't find him anywhere just give us a hint

Pomona: Is it bigger than a breadbox?

I know I've read his name somewhere."

"I'm sayin' nothin'," said Hagrid flatly.

Alastor: Maybe he's finally learning!

"Just have to find out for ourselves, then," said Ron,

Minerva: That is the best way to learn.

and they left Hagrid looking disgruntled and hurried off to the library.

Robert: Wait were *they* disgruntled, or just Hagrid?

They had indeed been searching books for Flamel's name ever since Hagrid had let it slip, because how else were they going to find out what Snape was trying to steal?

Pomona: When they found out what Snape was going to "steel," they planned to report it to a "Copper." See? I can do bad puns, too!

Xiomara: And in all their adventures, Harry "lead" the way.

Robert: I'm sure they can "iron" out any problems they encounter.

Minerva: You have the "brass" to make that claim?

Xiomara: Well, we all know I'm a bit of an "ore."

Filius: Enough! You've all proven your "metal."

Alastor: "Alloy," there, Mates! (Everyone groans.) One question what's a "Copper"?

Pomona: "Copper" is a slang word for "Policeman," which is basically a Muggle Auror. And by the way, that last pun really "smelt"!

The trouble was, it was very hard to begin, not knowing what Flamel might have done to get himself into a book. He wasn't in *Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century*, or *Notable Magical Names of Our Time*, he was missing, too, from *Important Modern Magical Discoveries* and *A Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry*.

Minerva: I haven't read any of those. I wish they'd hurry up and get written!

And then, of course, there was the sheer size of the library; tens of thousands of books, thousands of shelves; hundreds of narrow rows.

Minerva: (sighs dreamily)

Hermione took out a list of subjects and titles she had decided to search while Ron strode off down a row of books and started pulling them off the shelves at random.

Filius: A personality test in miniature!

Harry wandered over to the Restricted Section.

Minerva (proudly): Yes, that's our Harry!

He had been wondering for a while if Flamel wasn't somewhere in there.

Pomona: And if so, did he have permission?

Unfortunately, you needed a specially signed note from one of the teachers to look in any of the restricted books, and he knew he'd never get one.

Minerva: That shows a lack of imagination, Harry.

These were the books containing powerful Dark Magic never taught at Hogwarts, and only read by older students studying advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"What are you looking for, boy?"

Pomona: It's not "Boy." It's "Boy-Who-Lived"!

"Nothing," said Harry.

Filius: He should have said, "I'm not sure. I just hope I'll know it when I find it."

Alastor: Really? I'll be keeping my eye on *you*, laddie.

Madam Pince the librarian brandished a feather duster at him.

"You'd better get out, then. Go on out!"

Minerva: (dangerously) *Never* chase me away from a book!

Wishing he'd been a bit quicker at thinking up some story,

Robert: Yes, Harry, what happened?

Harry left the library. He, Ron, and Hermione had already agreed they'd better not ask Madam Pince where they could find Flamel. They were sure she'd be able to tell them, but they couldn't risk Snape hearing what they were up to.

Minerva: Shouldn't a librarian be like a Healer? Keep things absolutely confidential?

Filius: It's a good idea, Minna, but I'm not sure it works that way.

Xiomara: Wasn't there a "Pince" at the sorting this year?

Robert: Irma. One of mine. Poor little kid looks like a malnourished vulture chick. Do you think it could be the same person?

Harry waited outside in the corridor to see if the other two had found anything, but he wasn't very hopeful. They had been looking for two weeks, after all, but as they only had odd moments between lessons it wasn't surprising they'd found nothing. What they really needed was a nice long search without Madam Pince breathing down their necks.

Alastor: Or circling above them?

Filius: That would make it hard to focus! Speaking of vultures, did I ever tell you lot about the time an eagle tried to carry me off?

Pomona: (shudders) Yes, and don't tell us again! That story gave me nightmares!

Robert: Anyway, I think the dreaded Vulture Librarian only eats dead poets.

Filius: Oh, you've met the library ghosts? The Dead Poets' Society.

Five minutes later, Ron and Hermione joined him, shaking their heads. They went off to lunch.

"You will keep looking while I'm away, won't you?" said Hermione. "And send me an owl if you find anything."

Pomona: Even if it takes ill? That's not very nice.

"And you could ask your parents if they know who Flamel is," said Ron. "It'd be safe to ask them."

Alastor: Are you sure about that?

"Very safe, as they're both dentists," said Hermione.

Pomona: That explains a *lot* about Hermione!

Once the holidays had started, Ron and Harry were having too good a time to think much about Flamel. They had the dormitory to themselves and the common room was far emptier than usual, so they were able to get the good armchairs by the fire. They sat by the hour eating anything they could spear on a toasting fork bread, English muffins, marshmallows

Pomona: What? No sausages?

and plotting ways of getting Malfoy expelled, which were fun to talk about even if they wouldn't work.

Ron also started teaching Harry wizard chess. This was exactly like Muggle chess except that the figures were alive, which made it a lot like directing troops in battle. Ron's set was very old and battered. Like everything else he owned, it had once belonged to someone else in his family in this case, his grandfather. However, old chessmen weren't a drawback at all. Ron knew them so well he never had trouble getting them to do what he wanted.

Filius: Old chessmen never die!

Xiomara: They just get "mated" less often!

Pomona: Flit, how *could* you hand her a straight-line like that?

Harry played with chessmen Seamus Finnigan had lent him, and they didn't trust him at all. He wasn't a very good player yet and they kept shouting different bits of advice at him, which was confusing. "Don't send me there, can't you see his knight? Send *him*, we can afford to lose *him*."

Pomona: Must make him feel so loved!

Robert: The chessman, or Harry?

On Christmas Eve, Harry went to bed looking forward to the next day for the food and the fun, but not expecting any presents at all.

Filius: He was just glad of his "presence" at Hogwarts.

(Groans)

Pomona: "... but, oh, Father Christmas, if you love me at all,

Send me a big, red India-rubber ball!

When he woke early in the morning, however, the first thing he saw was a small pile of packages at the foot of his bed.

Alastor: Makes a good object lesson. If they can leave presents, they can leave worse.

Robert: Hippogriff heads!

Xiomara: Better than the whole Hippogriff!

Minerva: Try getting one of those down the chimney!

"Merry Christmas," said Ron sleepily as Harry scrambled out of bed and pulled on his bathrobe.

"You, too," said Harry. "Will you look at this? I've got some presents!"

"What did you expect, turnips?" said Ron, turning to his own pile, which was a lot bigger than Harry's.

Robert: For Harry, turnips would be an improvement.

Minerva: I hope Ron appreciates how fortunate he is.

Harry picked up the top parcel. It was wrapped in thick brown paper and scrawled across it was To Harry, from Hagrid. Inside was a roughly cut wooden flute. Hagrid had obviously whittled it himself.

Robert: And Harry began to play, and Scabbers and all his little friends came running!

Harry blew it it sounded a bit like an owl.

Pomona: Inspiring him to compose the Owl Concerto in the key of G-Minor, beginning his illustrious career as... (Sees them all looking at her.) Well, *it could* happen!

A second, very small parcel contained a note.

***We received your message and enclose your Christmas present. From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia* Taped to the note was a fifty-pence piece.**

Pomona: Not bad. He could take a friend to the Cinema with that, and still have a bit left over for a snack.

Filius: Unless the way prices seem to have gone up in the 90's is true for the Muggle world too.

"That's friendly," said Harry.

Alastor: As friendly as a Dementor's Kiss!

Minerva: For those Muggles, it was!

Ron was fascinated by the fifty pence.

"*Weird!*" he said, "What a shape! This is *money*?"

Pomona: Exactly what I said, the first time I saw a Sickle!

"You can keep it," said Harry, laughing at how pleased Ron was. "Hagrid and my aunt and uncle so who sent these?"

"I think I know who that one's from," said Ron, turning a bit pink and pointing to a very lumpy parcel. "My mom. I told her you didn't expect any presents

Minerva: Well that's a bit embarrassing for Harry, isn't it?

and oh, no," he groaned, "she's made you a Weasley sweater."

All: Awwwww!

Harry had torn open the parcel to find a thick, hand-knitted sweater in emerald green and a large box of homemade fudge.

"Every year she makes us a sweater," said Ron, unwrapping his own, "and mine's *always* maroon."

Filius: Maroon? With bright red hair? I think Dudley's Smeltings uniform was in better taste!

"That's really nice of her," said Harry, trying the fudge, which was very tasty.

Robert: Didn't they say the Minister of Magic is someone named Fudge?

Xiomara: I wonder if *he's* tasty.

His next present also contained candy a large box of Chocolate Frogs from Hermione.

Minerva: I wonder what he got them?

This only left one parcel. Harry picked it up and felt it. It was very light. He unwrapped it.

Something fluid and silvery gray went slithering to the floor where it lay in gleaming folds.

Alastor: Get back! Don't let it touch you!

Ron gasped.

"I've heard of those," he said in a hushed voice, dropping the box of Every Flavor Beans he'd gotten from Hermione.

Pomona: A dentist's child giving her friends candy. Sublimation in action.

Filius: Sub-*what*?

Pomona: Er, I'll explain later.

"If that's what I think it is they're really rare, and*really* valuable."

"What is it?"

Robert: Well, it's a safe bet it's not a Sorcerer's Stone.

Harry picked the shining silvery cloth off the floor. It was strange to the touch, like water woven into material.

Filius: Well, you'd never have to worry about getting it wet!

"It's an Invisibility Cloak," said Ron, a look of awe on his face. "I'm sure it is try it on."

Minerva: You're joking!

Robert: An Invisibility Cloak?

Xiomara: Harry's got a wealthy friend, somewhere!

Alastor: The question is, who is this person and why are they sending expensive gifts in secret, instead of coming forward and sponsoring him openly?

Harry threw the cloak around his shoulders and Ron gave a yell.

"It *is*! Look down!"

Harry looked down at his feet, but they were gone.

Alastor: Invisibility Cloak, or discorporation cape? I've got a bad feeling about this.

Xiomara: You *always* have a bad feeling about things, Al.

Alastor: And I'm usually right!

He dashed to the mirror. Sure enough, his reflection looked back at him, just his head suspended in midair, his body completely invisible.

Xiomara: How to get a *head* in the world!

Others: Boooo!

He pulled the cloak over his head and his reflection vanished completely.

Robert: And suddenly Ron felt strangely alone...

"There's a note!" said Ron suddenly. "A note fell out of it!"

Harry pulled off the cloak and seized the letter. Written in narrow, loopy writing he had never seen before were the following words:

Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you.

Use it well.

A Very Merry Christmas to you.

There was no signature.

Alastor: Arrgh! Get that thing tested thoroughly before you wear it any more, Harry! Mysterious cloaks from anonymous givers... (winds down to a grumble.)

Pomona: After all, look what happened to the Princess of Corinth! ^{† 1}

Alastor: What?

Pomona: Don't ask!

Harry stared at the note. Ron was admiring the cloak.

"I'd give *anything* for one of these," he said. "*Anything*."

Alastor: Uh-oh. Now we know *his* price!

What's the matter?"

Minerva: Goodness, I don't know. I've just received a very rare and valuable gift from an anonymous giver and told that it once belonged to the dead father I never knew. Why would I have anything on my mind?

"Nothing," said Harry. He felt very strange. Who had sent the cloak? Had it really once belonged to his father?

Before he could say or think anything else, the dormitory door was flung open and Fred and George Weasley bounded in. Harry stuffed the cloak quickly out of sight.

Alastor: Always good to have an edge they don't know about. Let's just hope Ron keeps his mouth shut.

Filius: I don't think the Weasley twins count as enemies, Al.

Alastor: Are you sure enough to bet Harry's life?

He didn't feel like sharing it with anyone else yet.

"Merry Christmas!"

Pomona: Happy Chanukah!

"Hey, look Harry's got a Weasley sweater, too!"

Fred and George were wearing blue sweaters, one with a large yellow F on it, the other a G.

Alastor: But I'll bet they weren't wearing the right ones.

"Harry's is better than ours, though," said Fred, holding up Harry's sweater. "She obviously makes more of an effort if you're not family."

Alastor: Maybe Harry should run a few tests on that sweater, too. How much does he really know about Ron's mother or even if the sweater really came from Ron's mother! It's obviously no secret that the woman makes them for her own children every year *anyone* could have made one in the same style, enchanted it to do who-knows-what to the boy and just slipped the package in with the others! Fred even said it's better made maybe by someone who was a little better at knitting?

"Why aren't you wearing yours, Ron?" George demanded. "Come on, get it on, they're lovely and warm."

"I hate maroon," Ron moaned halfheartedly as he pulled it over his head.

Pomona: She always forgets he hates maroon, she always forgets he hates corned beef...

Alastor: She's up to something, that Weasley woman!

"You haven't got a letter on yours," George observed.

Minerva: ...so there's no reason you and Harry can't simply trade.

"I suppose she thinks you don't forget your name. But we're not stupid we know we're called Gred and Forge."

Xiomara: (glares at Robert & Minerva) If you two start calling yourselves Mobbie and Rinna, there's going to be trouble!

"What's all this noise?" Percy Weasley stuck his head through the door, looking disapproving.

Robert: It's called "fun." Ever hear of it?

He had clearly gotten halfway through unwrapping his presents as he, too, carried a lumpy sweater over his arm, which Fred seized.

Alastor: Convenient that the sweaters are already lumpy. He could hide just about anything under it, and no one would look twice.

"P for prefect! Get it on, Percy, come on, we're all wearing ours, even Harry got one."

"I don't want " said Percy thickly, as the twins forced the sweater over his head, knocking his glasses askew.

Minerva: Can't he just shrink it, the way Harry did with Dudley's sweater?

"And you're not sitting with the prefects today, either," said George. "Christmas is a time for family."

Robert: Or in this case, a time to prank family members unmercifully.

They frog-marched

Pomona: Chocolate-frog-marched?

Minerva: I *toad* you we were rubbing off on her!

Filius: Don't say I am-*phibian*, when I'm not!

Percy from the room; his arms pinned to his side by his sweater.

Harry had never in all his life had such a Christmas dinner. A hundred fat, roast turkeys; mountains of roast and boiled potatoes; platters of chipolatas;

Alastor: Aren't those the South American goat-sucking things?

Robert: No that's "Chupacabras", Al.

tureens of buttered peas, silver boats of thick, rich gravy and cranberry sauce

Pomona: Someone, pass me a napkin. I'm starting to drool.

and stacks of wizard crackers every few feet along the table. These fantastic party favors were nothing like the feeble Muggle ones the Dursleys usually bought, with their little plastic toys and their flimsy paper hats inside.

Minerva: Wait they're wearing their brand-new sweaters to *eat* in? I hope they're up on their stain-removing spells!

Filius: If they aren't, the Hogwarts house-elves will be.

Harry pulled a wizard cracker with Fred and it didn't just bang, it went off with a blast like a cannon and engulfed them all in a cloud of blue smoke, while from the inside exploded a rear admiral's hat and several live, white mice.

Pomona: What shall I call

My dear little dormouse?

His eyes are small,

But his tail is e-nor-mouse.

Minerva: (Licks her lips absentmindedly.)

Up at the High Table, Dumbledore had swapped his pointed wizard's hat for a flowered bonnet,

(They all stare at each other, for a moment, and then, explode into laughter.)

and was chuckling merrily at a joke Professor Flitwick had just read him.

Flaming Christmas pudding followed the turkey.

Robert: Uh-oh! Should someone warn the turkey that it's being followed, Al?

Alastor: Sod off.

Percy nearly broke his teeth on a silver Sickle embedded in his slice. Harry watched Hagrid getting redder and redder in the face as he called for more wine, finally kissing Professor McGonagall on the cheek, who, to Harry's amazement, giggled and blushed, her top hat lopsided.

Minerva: Right. It's not me.

Robert: Are you sure, Minna?

Xiomara: Well, let's test it. Flit, Robbie, Al, all three of you take turns kissing Minna and we'll see if she blushes.

Minerva: Xia, if you want to be finding salamanders in your broom-bristles from now till the day you graduate...!

When Harry finally left the table, he was laden down with a stack of things out of the crackers, including a pack of non-explodable, luminous balloons, a Grow-Your-Own-Warts kit, and his own new wizard chess set.

Filius: So, *no one* will know the rules, then?

The white mice had disappeared and Harry had a nasty feeling they were going to end up as Mrs. Norris's Christmas dinner.

Xiomara: Which reminds me what did he give Hedwig?

Harry and the Weasleys spent a happy afternoon having a furious snowball fight on the grounds. Then, cold, wet, and gasping for breath, they returned to the fire in the Gryffindor common room, where Harry broke in his new chess set by losing spectacularly to Ron. He suspected he wouldn't have lost so badly if Percy hadn't tried to help him so much.

Minerva: *Please*, don't let this boy grow up to be Minister of Magic!

After a meal of turkey sandwiches, crumpets, trifle, and Christmas cake,

Pomona: I wonder how hurt my parents would be if I stayed at school over next Christmas.

everyone felt too full and sleepy to do much before bed except sit and watch Percy chase Fred and George all over Gryffindor tower

Xiomara: Moooooiiiing... verrrrry... sloooowwwwly.

because they'd stolen his prefect badge.

It had been Harry's best Christmas day ever. Yet something had been nagging at the back of his mind all day. Not until he climbed into bed was he free to think about it: the Invisibility Cloak and whoever had sent it.

Ron, full of turkey and cake and with nothing mysterious to bother him,

Minerva: ... except why his mother could never remember that he disliked corned beef and maroon...

fell asleep almost as soon as he'd drawn the curtains of his four-poster. Harry leaned over the side of his own bed and pulled the cloak out from under it.

His father's... this had been his father's.

Alastor: You'll take the word of an anonymous letter, lad?

He let the material flow over his hands, smoother than silk, light as air *Use it well*, the note had said.

He had to try it, now. He slipped out of bed and wrapped the cloak around himself. Looking down at his legs, he saw only moonlight and shadows. It was a very funny feeling.

Use it well.

Xiomara: Yes, we caught that part.

Alastor: I'd like to know what this anonymous letter-writer considers using it well.

Suddenly, Harry felt wide-awake. The whole of Hogwarts was open to him in this cloak. Excitement flooded through him as he stood there in the dark and silence. He could go anywhere in this, anywhere, and Filch would never know.

Alastor: Careful there, lad. Many a good wizard's been brought down by overconfidence!

Ron grunted in his sleep. Should Harry wake him? Something held him back his father's cloak he felt that this time the first time he wanted to use it alone.

He crept out of the dormitory, down the stairs, across the common room, and climbed through the portrait hole.

"Who's there?" squawked the Fat Lady.

Xiomara (as Harry): Sorry, didn't mean to put my hand there.

Harry said nothing. He walked quickly down the corridor.

Where should he go? He stopped, his heart racing, and thought. And then it came to him. The Restricted Section in the library. He'd be able to read as long as he liked,

Minerva: Rapture!

Robert: I couldn't agree more!

as long as it took to find out who Flamel was. He set off, drawing the Invisibility Cloak tight around him as he walked.

The library was pitch-black and very eerie. Harry lit a lamp to see his way along the rows of books. The lamp looked as if it was floating along in midair, and even though Harry could feel his arm supporting it, the sight gave him the creeps.

Pomona: Levio Lux!

Filius: I think that would be Levio Lumen, actually.

Pomona: Really? Well, no wonder I can never get the lamp to hover while I'm working on Night-Blooming Dragons' Teeth!

The Restricted Section was right at the back of the library. Stepping carefully over the rope that separated these books from the rest of the library, he held up his lamp to read the titles.

Alastor: Great Merlin! They still haven't improved the security in that section?

Minerva/Robert: And after we went to all the trouble of pointing out its lapses, too!

Pomona: You're doing it, again.

They didn't tell him much. Their peeling, faded gold letters spelled words in languages Harry couldn't understand. Some had no title at all.

Alastor: Nine times out of ten, that's a trap. Your curiosity gets the better of you, you open the book to see what it is... and you're never the same again. *If* you don't disappear altogether.

One book had a dark stain on it that looked horribly like blood.

Alastor: Case in point.

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck prickled. Maybe he was imagining it, maybe not, but he thought a faint whispering was coming from the books, as though they knew someone was there who shouldn't be.

Alastor: Get out of there, boy! Get out, *now!*

He had to start somewhere. Setting the lamp down carefully on the floor, he looked along the bottom shelf for an interesting-looking book. A large black and silver volume caught his eye. He pulled it out with difficulty, because it was very heavy, and, balancing it on his knee, let it fall open.

A piercing, bloodcurdling shriek split the silence the book was screaming!

Minerva: YOU'RE DOG-EARING MY PAGES, YOU BRUTE! WHAT KIND OF BOOK DO YOU THINK I AM?

Harry snapped it shut, but the shriek went on and on, one high, unbroken, earsplitting note. He stumbled backward and knocked over his lamp, which went out at once. Panicking, he heard footsteps coming down the corridor outside stuffing the shrieking book back on the shelf, he ran for it. He passed Filch in the doorway; Filch's pale, wild eyes looked straight through him, and Harry slipped under Filch's outstretched arm and streaked off up the corridor, the book's shrieks still ringing in his ears.

He came to a sudden halt in front of a tall suit of armor.

Robert: Climb in, Harry! He'll never think to look for you there!

Alastor: He will if he's had any proper Auror training.

Xiomara: Al, how many school caretakers have had Auror training?

Alastor: Maybe more of them should.

He had been so busy getting away from the library, he hadn't paid attention to where he was going. Perhaps because it was dark, he didn't recognize where he was at all. There was a suit of armor near the kitchens, he knew, but he must be five floors above there.

Xiomara: Which explained why this suit of armor looked so much thinner than the other one.

"You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night, and somebody's been in the library Restricted Section."

Harry felt the blood drain out of his face. Wherever he was, Filch must know a shortcut, because his soft, greasy voice was getting nearer, and to his horror, it was Snape who replied, "The Restricted Section? Well, they can't be far, we'll catch them."

Pomona: Filch has a greasy voice, Snape has greasy hair... honestly, you could fry dinner for six on these two!

Filius: Somehow, I don't think anyone would want to eat it, Mona.

Harry stood rooted to the spot as Filch and Snape came around the corner ahead. They couldn't see him, of course, but it was a narrow corridor and if they came much nearer they'd knock right into him the cloak didn't stop him from being solid.

Alastor: So it wasn't a disincorporation cape, after all.

Pomona: Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt....

Alastor: Careful what you wish for, lassie. There are some potions that can do that!

Pomona: Bleagh!

He backed away as quietly as he could. A door stood ajar to his left.

Xiomara: Well, which was it? A door, or a jar?

Pomona: Another jar? Hermione must have left it behind.

It was his only hope. He squeezed through it, holding his breath, trying not to move it,

Robert: Trying not to move his breath?

and to his relief he managed to get inside the room without their noticing anything. They walked straight past, and Harry leaned against the wall, breathing deeply, listening to their footsteps dying away. That had been close, very close. It was a few seconds before he noticed anything about the room he had hidden in.

Alastor: And why was the door left open?

Pomona: Well, you can't expect anyone to roam all over the castle and check every single door, can you?

Alastor: It's exactly that kind of lax attitude that leaves holes in security, lass.

It looked like an unused classroom. The dark shapes of desks and chairs were piled against the walls, and there was an upturned wastepaper basket but propped against the wall facing him was something that didn't look as if it belonged there, something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way.

It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.*

Xiomara: Well the same to you, you rude piece of glass!

Minerva: Why do I feel as though I *almost* know what that means?

Filius: Actually, I think I do know.

Pomona: Well? Tell! Tell!

Filius: Read it backwards.

Pomona: "Ishow no tyo urfac ebu tyo... " Er, is this Japanese?

Minerva: Of course! "I show not your face, but your heart's desire!" You have to change the spacing in the letters, too!

Robert: So this mirror shows people their heart's desire?

Alastor: What's the good of *that*, unless they can reach in and grab it?

Pomona: Well, it could be useful if you're trying to decide what you want out of life.

(Robert glances briefly at Minerva, who doesn't notice.)

Pomona: You don't suppose it's in the castle, *now*, do you?

(All six kids look at each other.)

His panic fading now that there was no sound of Filch and Snape, Harry moved nearer to the mirror, wanting to look at himself but see no reflection again. He stepped in front of it.

He had to clap his hands

Pomona: ...to show he believed in fairies?

Filius: Er, what?

Pomona: Peter Pan.

Xiomara: Which House is he in?

Pomona: Never mind.

to his mouth to stop himself from screaming. He whirled around.

Filius: Proving, once again, that reflection leads to revolution.

(Groans)

His heart was pounding far more furiously than when the book had screamed for he had seen not only himself in the mirror, but a whole crowd of people standing right behind him.

Robert: Hurry it up, lad, there's a line for the mirror!

But the room was empty. Breathing very fast, he turned slowly back to the mirror.

There he was, reflected in it, white and scared-looking, and there, reflected behind him, were at least ten others. Harry looked over his shoulder but still, no one was there. Or were they all invisible, too? Was he in fact in a room full of invisible people and this mirror's trick was that it reflected them, invisible or not?

Alastor: And they wonder why I'm paranoid!

He looked in the mirror again. A woman standing right behind his reflection was smiling at him and waving.

Xiomara: Lucky boy!

He reached out a hand and felt the air behind him. If she was really there, he'd touch her, their reflections were so close together, but he felt only air she and the others existed only in the mirror.

She was a very pretty woman. She had dark red hair and her eyes *her eyes are just like mine*, Harry thought,

Filius: A Tiresian^{* 2} Mirror, showing Harry what he would look like if he were female?

Minerva: He'd have red hair?

Pomona: Weird! Who'd make something like that?

Alastor: You'd be surprised...

Minerva: In China, there's a very tragic story of the Spring of the Drowned Maiden...

Robert: I thought we'd already established that this thing shows people their heart's desire. If Harry's heart's desire is to be a woman, this is the first we've heard of it!

Xiomara: It might improve his life, though.

edging a little closer to the glass. Bright green exactly the same shape, but then he noticed that she was crying; smiling, but crying at the same time. The tall, thin, black-haired man standing next to her put his arm around her. He wore glasses, and his hair was very untidy. It stuck up at the back, just as Harry's did.

Pomona: Now, it's starting to make sense!

Harry was so close to the mirror now that his nose was nearly touching that of his reflection.

"Mom?" he whispered. "Dad?"

Pomona: That'd be *my* best guess.

They just looked at him, smiling. And slowly, Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror, and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry's knobbly knees Harry was looking at his family, for the first time in his life.

Alastor: If it's showing him *all* his blood relatives, then Petunia and Dudley should be in there somewhere too.

Xiomara: So much for *that* joyous reunion!

Minerva: It could be just his direct ancestors.

Robert: Or if it's showing his heart's desire, that wouldn't include those two.

The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.

Minerva: (wryly) My family has that effect on me, sometimes.

How long he stood there, he didn't know. The reflections did not fade and he looked and looked until a distant noise brought him back to his senses. He couldn't stay here, he had to find his way back to bed. He tore his eyes away from his mother's face, whispered, "I'll come back," and hurried from the room.

* * *

"You could have woken me up," said Ron, crossly.

"You can come tonight, I'm going back, I want to show you the mirror."

"I'd like to see your mom and dad," Ron said eagerly.

Pomona: And your sisters, and your cousins, and your aunts!^{† 3}

"And I want to see all your family, all the Weasleys, you'll be able to show me your other brothers and everyone."

"You can see them any old time," said Ron. "Just come round my house this summer. Anyway, maybe it only shows dead people. Shame about not finding Flamel, though.

Filius: If they wanted to find him badly enough, would he show up in the Mirror?

Have some bacon or something, why aren't you eating anything?"

Harry couldn't eat. He had seen his parents and would be seeing them again tonight.

Pomona: *Eat*, Harry! Or your parents will want to know why you're so thin!

He had almost forgotten about Flamel. It didn't seem very important anymore. Who cared what the three-headed dog was guarding? What did it matter if Snape stole it, really?

Minerva: That's a rather odd attitude to take all of a sudden.

Alastor: It's that mirror! It was enchanted!

Robert: Well, we knew that.

"Are you all right?" said Ron. "You look odd."

What Harry feared most was that he might not be able to find the mirror room again. With Ron covered in the cloak, too, they had to walk much more slowly the next night. They tried retracing Harry's route from the library, wandering around the dark passageways for nearly an hour.

Minerva: Well, that's one way to get your exercise?

"I'm freezing." Said Ron. "Let's forget it and go back."

"No!" Harry hissed. "I know it's here somewhere."

They passed the ghost of a tall witch gliding in the opposite direction, but saw no one else. Just as Ron started moaning that his feet were dead with cold,

Robert: Will they be ghosts, too?

Xiomara: Beware the spectral feet of... Ron? Doesn't sound very ominous, somehow.

Harry spotted the suit of armor.

"It's here just here yes!"

Xiomara: Oh, what I could do with that line!

Pomona: Don't bother.

They pushed the door open. Harry dropped the cloak from around his shoulders and ran to the mirror.

There they were. His mother and father beamed at the sight of him.

"See?" Harry whispered.

"I can't see anything."

"Look! Look at them all...there are loads of them..."

Xiomara: They're as bad as the Weasleys!

"I can only see you."

"Look in it properly, go on, stand where I am."

Harry stepped aside, but with Ron in front of the mirror, he couldn't see his family anymore, just Ron in his paisley pajamas.

Filius: Which fond though he was of Ron *was not* his heart's desire!

Ron, though, was staring transfixed at his image.

Pomona: "Who's the fairest of them all?"

Alastor: And *where* did you read *that* nasty bit of Wizarding history, lass? *I know* Binns doesn't get into it with the fifth years!

Pomona: No, but you'd be surprised what can turn up in Muggle children's stories!

"Look at me!" he said.

"Can you see all your family standing around you?"

"No I'm alone but I'm different

Robert: For a Weasley, being alone *would* be different!

I look older and I'm Head Boy!"

"What?"

"I am I'm wearing the badge like Bill used to and I'm holding the House Cup and the Quidditch cup I'm Quidditch captain, too!"

Minerva: Where would he get the *time* for all that??

Ron tore his eyes away from this splendid sight to look excitedly at Harry.

"Do you think this mirror shows the future?"

Minerva: In which, Harry's relatives all return from the dead?

Robert: *That* could get ugly.

"How can it? All my family are dead let me have another look "

"You had it all to yourself last night, give me a bit more time."

"You're only holding the Quidditch cup, what's interesting about that?

Xiomara: "What's interesting about that?" Are you *mad*?

I want to see my parents."

Robert: (sings) I want to see my lass, who lives in Hexhamshire!

Minerva: And what lass would this be, eh?

Robert: The one who lives in Hexhamshire! Weren't you listening?

"Don't push me "

Minerva: How rude!

A sudden noise outside in the corridor put an end to their discussion. They hadn't realized how loudly they had been talking.

"Quick!"

Ron threw the cloak back over them as the luminous eyes of Mrs. Norris came round the door. Ron and Harry stood quite still, both thinking the same thing did the cloak work on cats? After what seemed an age, she turned and left.

Robert: I wonder what Mrs. Norris would see in the mirror?

Minerva: Mice!

Pomona: You don't think she'd see Filch transformed into a handsome tomcat?

Alastor: That... was a mental image I didn't need, lass.

"This isn't safe she might have gone for Filch, I bet she heard us. Come on."

And Ron pulled Harry out of the room.

The snow still hadn't melted the next morning.

Xiomara: Does it ever, between Christmas and New Year's?

"Want to play chess, Harry?" said Ron.

"No."

"Why don't we go down and visit Hagrid?"

"No...you go..."

"I know what you're thinking about, Harry,

Alastor: Ah-hah! So Ron is an Occlumens! And how exactly did he acquire *that* skill at such a young age?

that mirror. Don't go back tonight."

"Why not?"

"I dunno, I've just got a bad feeling about it and anyway, you've had too many close shaves already.

Robert: ...for someone who hasn't even got whiskers, yet.

Minerva: He's got *that* right!

Filch, Snape, and Mrs. Norris are wandering around. So what if they can't see you? What if they walk into you? What if you knock something over?"

"You sound like Hermione."

Filius: Wait till his voice changes.

"I'm serious, Harry, don't go."

But Harry only had one thought in his head,

Pomona: Chocolate! Oh, wait, that's me.

which was to get back in front of the mirror, and Ron wasn't going to stop him.

Minerva: Then who is?

That third night he found his way more quickly than before.

Pomona: You know, some Muggle scientists are finding that if you put a rat in the same maze over and over, it learns to find its way to the cheese faster every time.

Alastor: That comparison may be a bit too apt, lass.

He was walking so fast he knew he was making more noise than was wise, but he didn't meet anyone.

And there were his mother and father smiling at him again, and one of his grandfathers nodding happily. Harry sank down to sit on the floor in front of the mirror. There was nothing to stop him from staying here all night with his family. Nothing at all.

Minerva: Wouldn't that get rather frustrating? Just smiling and waving?

Robert: Like waving from shipboard, or through a train window.

Except

"So back again, Harry?"

Harry felt as though his insides had turned to ice. He looked behind him. Sitting on one of the desks by the wall was none other than Albus Dumbledore.

Harry must have walked straight past him, so desperate to get to the mirror he hadn't noticed him.

Alastor: Foolish boy.

"I I didn't see you, sir."

Robert: We never would have guessed!

"Strange how nearsighted being invisible can make you," said Dumbledore, and Harry was relieved to see that he was smiling.

"So," said Dumbledore, slipping off the desk to sit on the floor with Harry, "you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

"I didn't know it was called that, sir."

Minerva: Didn't you ever work out what the words meant, Harry?

Filius: Since Harry found that thing, I don't think he's been working much of anything out.

"But I expect you've realized by now what it does?"

"It well it shows me my family "

"And it showed your friend Ron himself as Head Boy."

"How did you know ?"

"I don't need a cloak to become invisible," said Dumbledore gently.

Robert: That's our Dumbles!

Minerva: Professor? Are you here now?

(There is a soft sound that might be a chuckle or might simply be wind in the trees. The six all look at each other then shrug and shake their heads.)

All: Nah.

"Now, can you think what the Mirror of Erised shows us all?"

Harry shook his head.

Xiomara: Whatever you don't have enough of?

"Let me explain. The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Does that help?"

Harry thought. Then he said slowly, "It shows us what we want...whatever we want..."

"Yes and no," said Dumbledore quietly. "It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts.

Filius: What would be my deepest desire? Unlimited knowledge? True love? A few extra inches? *Inheight*, Xia. A chance to do a lot of good in the world?

Xiomara (with no hesitation or doubt): Wings!

Pomona (dreamily): Acres and acres of fertile soil and a thousand different kinds of seeds and bulbs... And some big hunks of exotic cheese.

Robert: (Looks at Minerva silently. She either doesn't get the point or doesn't choose to.)

You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you. Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.

Alastor: Damn dangerous weapon, in the wrong hands.

Pomona: What happens if two people stand right side-by-side?

Filius: Didn't Ron and Harry already try that?

Minerva: Maybe it's a very narrow mirror?

Pomona: What use would that be?

"The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Harry, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. If you ever ~~do~~ run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, why don't you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed?"

Harry stood up.

"Sir Professor Dumbledore? Can I ask you something?"

"Obviously, you've just done so," Dumbledore smiled. "You may ask me one more thing, however."

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

Filius: (as Dumbledore) I see a whole school full of students and every single one of them *in bed at the proper time, HARRY.*

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

Harry stared.

Pomona: He may have a point. Wasn't Ron moaning about cold feet, earlier?

"One can never have enough socks," said Dumbledore. "Another Christmas has come and gone and I didn't get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books."

Minerva: And you're complaining? Ron's right, Professor, you're mad!

It was only when he was back in bed that it struck Harry that Dumbledore might not have been quite truthful. But then, he thought, as he shoved Scabbers off his pillow, it had been quite a personal question.

Xiomara: It certainly was!

Alastor: I'd've wondered why the lad was so keen to know, if I'd been old Dumbles!

Minerva: I wonder if we'll ever see what Hermione's deepest desire is.

Robert: I know what mine would be if I looked right now.

Others: What?

Robert: Another chapter!

*¹ <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1852241896/002-6726463-8194430?v=glance&n=283155>

*² <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~loxias/tiresias.htm>

*³ Slightly paraphrased from "H.M.S. Pinafore" by Gilbert and Sullivan